

# *Some Memories of Dover Harbour* <sup>147</sup>

## *1915-39*

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MY MOTHER had the sea in her blood. Her father, a shipwright, had a small boat that took a sail and, she told us many a time, at the age of ten or eleven she accompanied her Dad on fishing trips to the east of the Eastern Arm. It was "Lena, you'll be in the boat with me this evening". Sometimes, after missing the tide, it was a case of using the oars until the tide had slackened and they were able to re-enter the harbour.

During gales, after school, my mother used to take us to the Admiralty Pier to witness the wonder and fury of the sea. On New Year's Eve we would be awakened and taken to the garden at Maxton to hear the thrilling sounds of all the ships' hooters and fog horns blasting out a welcome to the New Year. When Royalty arrived at Dover in the royal yacht we would be taken (if after school) to the top of the hill to witness her arrival and to count the twenty-one gun salute.

Regattas were wonderful events. Annually on a summer Wednesday evening – early closing day – the whole population arose and made its way to the sea front. Trams were loaded to overflowing, pavements thick with walkers, whole families together and the air full of excitement. Sailing races started around noon, doing circuits of the harbour, but from about half past one the delicate racing shells began their events and their flashing coloured blades, depicting their origins, propelled them to and fro across the blue waters. In later years speed boats took part and Bruce Johnston, a nationally-known owner, took part.

Nearer the shore such events as the "Duck Hunt" took place, where heavy, cumbersome ships' lifeboats, propelled by several rowers, tried to corner a cheeky chappie in a little skiff, while he, dexterously, with oar at the stern, circled in and out of reach, until at last they pelted him with flour bags. On the Promenade Pier, athrong with people, was the "Greasy Pole" competition. A flag at the end of the pole enticed teams of strong men to compete but few survived the gap between pier and flag and, as many a competitor, after contortions, lost his balance and crashed into the sea, another would take his place.

On the promenade barrows parked on the railway lines sold fruit, ice cream, noisy be-ribboned hooters, coloured paper mops, monkeys on elastic, confetti at a penny a bag, and the essential 'ticklers' at tuppence each.

Finally thousands stood still for the fireworks display from the Prince of Wales Pier, "Oohs" and "Aahs" permeating the night air as fantastic colours and images lit the scene. Afterwards began the trek home. Special trams queued for the tired, happy

148 throngs but most walked. What a day! The coloured strings of lights would go out and peace enveloped the scene of such a wonderful family occasion. An early memory of mine is of the seaplanes, small structures wheeled out from the seaplane sheds, across the road, down the apron and into the water, there to start engines and skim across the water before take-off. This was, maybe, just after the 1914-18 war, for which they had been stationed in Dover.

There was the Feu de Joi on the King's birthday annually, every regiment marching with bands to the Sea' Front, the troops strung along the whole length of the promenade from Clock Tower to jetty and then that marvellous sound of the rifles, firing continuously, without a break, hundreds and hundreds of staccato explosive, cracking reports, each a birthday greeting, then the cheers of schoolchildren who had been marched down to witness this expression of loyalty.

And all this while, one could tell the state of the tides by sighting the keel of the sunken monitor, the *Glatton*. This naval vessel, loaded with munitions for the Western Front, had anchored west of the Eastern Entrance. A fire broke out and the duty crew fought the blaze. Men on shore leave were ordered, by megaphone, cinema screen and police notices, to return at once. Alas, the fire could not be controlled and to save the town the Admiral gave the order to torpedo the ship and to sink her. Some 150 men went down with her and she remained there, obstructing the Eastern Entrance, for two decades. Only ships of shallow draught could manoeuvre past her sunken hulk and at low tide her low, grey, whale-like keel could be seen. Eventually just before the 1939-45 war she was brought to the west jetty of the Camber where she was broken up by the Stanlee Shipbreaking Company.

Until the *Glatton* was removed, cross-Channel boats, and, for a time liners, used the Western Entrance, doing huge U-turns in order to reverse through the entry to the Admiralty Pier quayside. Unsophisticated stern-only screws failed to get quite alongside, so ropes, leading to thick hawsers, were heaved from deck to shore. Skilful throwing and wondrous catching was needed. The shore force pulled in the hawser, attached it to a bollard and the ship's auxiliary engines pulled the boat sideways to the quayside. As the fenders touched, so the shore force, the porters, came into action. Like monkeys they jumped aboard, scrambled up ropes and moved rapidly round the waiting passengers, even before the ramps had been fixed. Quickly they made deals to move baggage ashore to the customs and to the boat train. Such hustle and bustle, running and shouting; the object to be first; first to the Customs, first to the boat train, porters hoping for generous tips to supplement their poorly-paid weekly income.

When the "Golden Arrow" service was instituted groups of children from local schools were allowed aboard the *Canterbury*. My biggest surprise was to see the thick carpeting in all the rooms. We were only used to door mats! However, passengers on the "Golden Arrow" were treated like royalty, VIP's and millionaires – and some were!

Once, when I was fourteen, to my great joy I was told to go down to the Marine Station with the van driver, to look after the van and the horse while the driver was

delivering. We went to the forecourt by the Lord Warden and parked at the end of the platform between sets of railway lines. Old Mac went off and I held the horse's head. The horse was enormous: I dreaded the advent of a train. But they came and went, snorting, hissing, clattering, smoking and my old horse was quiet as a mouse. Wonderful – especially as he rarely went down to the station. Each train was just a few feet away from us. I was proud of him!

On foggy days a gun was fired intermittently and fog horns blasted mournfully into the grey atmosphere. Every time a gun went off the seagulls left the comfort of cliff ledge, wailing and sighing.

One really delightful sight was that of the red-sailed barges, battling against tide and wind, as they came, through the Eastern Entrance, into the sanctuary of the harbour. They carried grain and had only three crew; skipper, mate and cabin boy. The herring boats, with tallish smoke stacks, belching out black smog, came dipping and leaping, into the haven of the Granville Dock, where they discharged their catches to waiting lorries and made ready for sea again. I somehow thought they were the real sailors, their every trip fraught with danger. If you were lucky a shilling would get you a basket of herrings. But herring have to be followed and after a week or two they were all gone.

I remember in Spring, above the Packet Yard, a beautiful red fox would lie, sunning herself, or himself, in the warming sunshine. To me the sight of him expressed all the desires of the world that we live peacefully together. Man and Nature ◇

## *The Millennium Project for Dover – Update*

Since our last report on this matter, a Steering Committee of five members has been set up and has formulated a comprehensive statement of objectives for the Project, together with a detailed brief for the proposed working group.

The aim is to prepare a bid to the Millennium Commission by Easter 1995. It is estimated that the cost of this will be in the region of £50,000. It is intended that the bid will be made by Dover as a whole and funded jointly by local concerns.

As a result of the Dover Society Questionnaire and with reference to Millennium Commission guidelines, it is thought that the project should consist of a 'package' of different inter-linked elements all based around the WELCOME TO BRITAIN theme with a strong European flavour.

More news in the next issue. ED.