

Dover Harbour: BRITAIN'S OLDEST PORT

A TALK BY MARK FROST

----- SHEILA R COPE -----

As part of the Dover Festival, Mark Frost, of Dover Museum, gave a broad "overview" of the development of Dover Harbour in a talk at the Silver Screen Cinema on the evening of 4 June. This was followed by an opportunity to view the current exhibition in the Museum. Although the Society has been fortunate in the past to have received several illustrated accounts by experts about the harbour development, a number of our members were present, proving that we welcome opportunities to widen our knowledge about the industry which is the lifeblood of the town. Mark showed us copies of maps which we could later study upstairs, glass of wine in hand, and in his talk gave his view of the development of the harbour from the Bronze Age until the present day.

THE DISCOVERY of the BRONZE AGE BOAT, reinforcing that of the Langdon Bay wreck with its cargo of scrap metal from France, demonstrated that Dover has been a cross-Channel port for at least 3,000 years. It is likely that ships were once able to sail far up the Dour to find shelter but that tree felling on surrounding hills caused the river to silt up. So traces of Roman quays have been found at Stembrook, Bench Street and near the site of the present bus garage, but by Saxon and Norman times, from 400 AD, useful jetties were restricted to the river mouth.

In 1295 a French raid levelled the town and by 1306 a protective wall had been built around it and across the river which thereby became blocked to ships. Vessels could tie up only to the outside of the wall - precarious in bad weather - and to the Wyke, a shingle beach which formed to the west of the town in front of a pool fed by underground streams. In time this (Archcliffe Pool) was used as a harbour and Snar Gate was rebuilt to give access through the town wall to the Western beach rather than the seashore. Be-

cause such an area of refuge was some distance from the town a guard tower was built in 1495 and then in 1518 a second tower was attempted by John Clark, Master of the Maison Dieu, together with a short pier to protect the pool, now known as Paradise Pent, from the sea. The structure initiated the process of silting up which became such an irksome and expensive problem for over three centuries. Henceforth shingle which had formerly been swept by currents past Dover would be deposited in whatever harbour was created.

Efforts to solve the problem began with a pier overseen by John Thompson, Clark's successor, which was abandoned in 1551 after four attempts. There was another ambitious project planned and carried out by Thomas Digges from 1583-86 to build a massive wall with sluices through which the shingle would be forced out. Henry VIII had proposed enclosing the whole harbour - too advanced for Tudor technology - and Elizabeth I had recognised the need for an effective port on the south coast. Tolls of

3d per ton on every ship entering English ports for seven years helped to pay for 500 carts of earth and chalk a day to be brought to Dover and 1000 men to work on the wall. This construction, held together with faggots and withies, created the new Pent and became the basis of the existing Western Dock. The old Paradise Pent was dug out too.

In 1616, following complaints about maintenance, the Harbour Board was set up and as a result of land being leased to provide revenue the Pier district with its warehouses, banks and breweries soon rivalled the town in size. Although there was always a shortage of money an appeal to the Government in 1660 to improve harbour access led to some renovations. The Crosswall was constructed across Great Paradise creating an inner basin and an outer harbour. Archcliffe Pool dried up and was built upon. In 1699 £30,000 was allocated to scour the harbour and in 1719 the Pier Heads were rebuilt. A gate was added to the wall of the Great Pent in 1733 and the Castle Jetty was constructed in 1752 so that ships could use the Eastern side of the bay.

The outbreak of war with France in 1793 focused attention on the strategic importance of Dover and James Moon and Sir Henry Oxenham began eighteen years of improvements which produced wet and dry docks in a tidal harbour, new clock and compass towers on the Crosswall and stone quays. In 1834, Telford's plan, completed in 1838 by James Walker, created a tidal harbour doubled in size. Nevertheless, packet ships were obliged to anchor offshore and goods and passengers were unloaded by means of rowing boats.

The advent of railways (South Eastern via Folkestone in 1844 and London, Chatham and Dover in 1861) heralded real changes. In 1847 James Walker had started the Western Arm, later the Admiralty Pier, by lowering massive

stone blocks into a wooden framework. Though incomplete, within four years it was long enough to take packet ships alongside so that at least the shingle problem was being overcome. Rail lines were laid along the Arm and eventually ships berthed on either side and trains could stop at any berth. By the 1890s, however, paddle steamers could go straight to London and the Harbour Board decided to develop commercially. Another pier to the east – eventually the Prince of Wales – was begun in 1893. The Admiralty obtained parliamentary assent to develop Dover as a harbour of refuge for the Navy. So the Admiralty Pier was extended, and the Eastern Arm of nearly 3,000ft and the Breakwater of 4,000ft were built. At this stage the cliffs at the eastern end were cut back creating a platform. In the meantime by 1904 transatlantic liners were berthing at the Prince of Wales Pier, but unfortunately also hitting the harbour entrance and when the Hamburg-Amerika line moved to Southampton others followed suit. The new harbour was too small to contain the whole fleet but on outbreak of war in 1914 it was handed over to the Navy and became base to the Dover Patrol.

When the Harbour Board resumed control in 1923, small businesses became established at the eastern end and the Camber was leased to Captain Townsend whose "Artificer" could carry fifteen cars and twelve drivers from the Eastern Arm from 1928. This was mainly the heyday of rail with the Golden Arrow luxury service operating from 1929 and in 1936 the steam powered train ferry dock was established at Western Docks.

After the war sailings resumed in 1948. Those who were in Dover then may remember the Golden Arrow steaming behind Shakespeare beach and cars being loaded by crane in Granville Dock, but rapid change was imminent. Much of the Pier district had already disappeared pre-war and was finally cleared for freight.

In 1950 the first drive-on ferries, Halladale and Lord Warden were introduced and in 1953 two ramps at the Camber in the Eastern Docks were opened. As Parker Pens and other businesses including coal bunkering were cleared in the 1960s, a third double berth was erected which could load and unload simultaneously. Already the first drive-through ferry was in use and Eastern docks gained supremacy. Sand and shingle were brought

in to reclaim land for the arrival of the hovercraft in 1968 and for the construction of a new hoverport at the Western end by 1978. Dover became the world's busiest passenger port. Innovations continued. Now we have the new cruise liner terminal and Admiralty Pier comes into prominence again ... yet from time to time the dredger's services are still essential to the harbour.

The Exhibition

comprises many maps, pictures, models and other memorabilia arranged chronologically from the Bronze Age boat to the projected Western Docks development. There are copies of maps showing proposed and actual improvements including John Thompson's of 1538 and (probably) Digges' of 1595 and impressive plans of Dover and the Harbour drawn around 1641 by William Eldred, Master Gunner at the Castle. Pictures by William Burgess are well represented - "Improving the Pent" for example. Another picture attracting attention was "Dover Harbour, 1856" painted by Henry Pether and showing Wellington Dock by moonlight with the Compass House and the Clock House designed by James Moon.

Moon's large, detailed, take-apart model of proposed new work in 1815 is quite fascinating, so different in technique from that showing the Eastern Docks re-development in 1966/67.

Many examples of channel craft are shown in model form ranging in size from the 'Fly', a small naval cutter with light draft famous from 1763-71 as a passenger, mail packet and customs boat, to the 'Pride of Dover' representing recent ferries. I noticed the 'Lady Brassey', DHB's tug, which in 1940 played an essential part in the Dunkirk evacuation. A reminder of the first War was the memorial to the men of the trawler and minesweeping patrol 1914-19 who, in sinking submarines, were subject to fierce attack themselves.

The display would be incomplete without the original copy of the Royal Charter granted to Dover Harbour by James I in 1606. Its bulk contrasts with the video and many photographs of the old Pier district and demonstrates the modernisation of boats and installations throughout this century. Please see this excellent Museum exhibition soon. There will be time for another visit before it closes on 15 September.

Helpers Wanted at Crabble Mill

Helpers are needed in these areas - to share the work on a rota or "when needed" basis.

- 1) **Café**, serving teas and snacks in daytime or cooked suppers in evening.
- 2) **Shop**, serving visitors with souvenirs and tour tickets.
- 3) **Tour Guides**, for tourists, school groups or evening groups (training given).
- 4) **Milling and Maintenance**, for the

technically minded (Training given).

- (5) **Administration**, office work, marketing and fund-raising (all year round)

Interested in finding out more? Ring the Trust Secretary, Ian Killberry, 01304 362569 or call at the Mill in Lower Road, River when it is open.