

# DOVER AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY - 1900

## *Terry Sutton's summary of his talk*

As we approach the turn of another century and enter a new Millennium, it is interesting to look back to see what life in Dover was like at the beginning of this century, in and around 1900.

The closing years of the last century and the early ones of this were probably among the most prosperous that Dover has known. Dover was still a recognised holiday resort and an important garrison town. Great harbour works were in progress, cross-Channel traffic was beginning to flourish and big things were being predicted as the outcome of recent discoveries of iron ore and coal deposits in the district.

Although the promise was never fully realised the town prospered and expanded rapidly under the influence of these events and discoveries. In the nine years between 1891 and the turn of the century the population of Dover increased by almost ten thousand to a total of 43,000, of whom three thousand were soldiers based in the town. (As a matter of interest the population of Dover today is around 32,000.)

A century earlier (in 1800) the population of Dover was only around 9,000 and the town itself clustered around the waterfront and a little way up the valley of the Dour.

To meet the growing population at the end of the 19th century, the building industry was

working at full pressure providing new homes at a rate never exceeded before or since. In 1891 there were 5,809 inhabited houses in Dover. By the turn of the century the number had risen to 7,442 of which almost one thousand had been brought into occupation during the last year. But the 40,000 civilians in Dover in 1900 were living in much more confined space than its residents occupy today. The town was only just beginning to spread out from the



Dover Sea Front, circa 1900

waterfront and the immediate area around the central valley. Most of the new houses were being constructed to the north and to the east, on the Castle Estate and Barton areas with some development in Folkestone Road.

The growth of the population and the prosperity of Dover fully justified the decision to extend the borough boundaries in 1897 when five hundred acres were added to the town, although the acreage was only half of what it is today.

Elms Vale Road, then known as Elms Road, had been developed on one side only, as far as Eaton Road, and there was no Church Road to connect it with Folkestone Road. Stanhope Road, off Barton Road, was only a footpath. Cherry Tree Lane had just been widened and "promoted" to an Avenue. Worthington Street had been, until



Entrance to Worthington Lane from Biggin Street, 1897



**Bottle and Gandy's Grocers shop, Snargate Street, 1897**

a few years earlier, a mere lane.

These developments were all part of a general trend which was changing Dover's centre of gravity.

In 1900 Snargate Street was still a main shopping centre and there was eager demand for commercial premises there. But Cannon Street and Biggin Street were growing in importance and, after a great deal of controversy on the part of the town council, had been widened a few years earlier. Until then, in parts, this section of the main street had been only fourteen feet wide.

Those occupying homes on the new estates were finding it a long trek to get to work, for the majority of employment, as now, was towards the sea front, the Pier District and in the docks.

The horse omnibus had been in use on the untarred and dusty roads between Buckland



**Lewisham Road, River, circa 1903**

and the Pier since 1881, when the Dover-Deal coach ceased. Toll gates had only recently been removed from Folkestone Road, Castle Hill and at Crabble.

But the widening of the main street in the 1890s and the establishment of the local electric light company, whose works were in Park Place near what is now the police station, permitted the introduction of a new form of locomotion - the electric tram - in 1897. The first motor car had been seen on the streets of Dover a year earlier, in 1896, and a report in the Dover Express told how it halted in the Market Square and then drove off, leaving behind a cloud of smoke and a nasty smell. Like many others, the editor of the Express did not think such a contraption would ever become popular.



**Newly assembled trams in London Road, 1898**

Following Terry's talk, which contained plenty of amusing anecdotes and examples of the prices of items on sale in 1900 taken from old copies of the Dover Express, the Chairman read out a list of all the offices held by Terry and wondered how he had time to attend to them all. Lesley Gordon asked a question about the availability of back copies of old newspapers, the Dover Express and other local publications, and was told that fortunately many go back 150 years and some almost 200 years.

After other questions from the floor, Margaret Robson gave a vote of thanks and the Chairman thanked the speakers and all who had helped to make the evening a success.