

Goodbye Hover

Terry Sutton took the trip on the last hovercraft flight from Dover on 1st October

It was the end of an era. Sad for some but not a day too soon for many living on Dover sea front. It was the final cross-Channel flight of the Dover-based hovercraft and the one to make the trip was *The Princess Margaret* which inaugurated the service more than 30 years ago.

Hovercraft operators Hoverspeed had decided to call it a day for the two Dover hovercraft, put them in honourable retirement and replace them with more "cost efficient" Seacat catamarans.

The date for the last flights was Sunday, 1 October, and former crew members travelled to Dover for the occasion. They had many stories to tell, some from the very first days in the summer of 1968 when British Rail Hovercraft (Seaspeed) began car-carrying services across the Dover Strait, at first to Le Portel near Boulogne and later to Calais.

Some of us who went on that very last flight remember the sunny morning in July 1959 when inventor Christopher Cockerell and two colleagues made the pioneer hovercraft crossing of the Channel to land the SRN 1 on Dover beach.

Some of us recall the abortive attempt by Townsend Thoresen to operate a passenger only SRN 6 from the Eastern docks to Calais. But many more remember the early SRN 4 days of Seaspeed at Dover when so many flights were cancelled because of the hovercraft's ripped skirts - the

flexible material that was designed to retain downward pressure of the air.

Not forgotten was the competition between Seaspeed at Dover and Hoverlloyd at Pegwell Bay, Ramsgate and the eventual merger of the two companies to become Hoverspeed, based at Dover.

The *Princess Margaret* and her sister craft the *Princess Anne* must have carried nearly 20 million passengers across the Dover Strait. The only death loss was when, in high winds, one of the craft crashed into the breakwater and four passengers were swept away through the damaged superstructure.

Now the days of cross-Channel hovercraft are over. Owners, Sea Containers, Hoverspeed's parent company, is offering the two hovercraft for sale for seven million US dollars.

A new era, of high speed Seacats, has begun. Those who have for years put up with the noisy, fuel-smelly hovercraft are delighted. But I, and many others, will be sorry to see the end of a British invention that was never exploited to the full.

Out with the old....

