

Memories

by Bob Hollingsbee

MY EARLIEST memories of the Dover Express are of a tiny office in Snargate Street, the size of an average sitting room, but longer than it was wide. The only difference between it and a shop was that it had frosted glass on the pavement side, a bit like an old style bookies' office, although the small window that opened, at the top, had clear glass in it so that we could peep out and see what was going on outside.



An exterior view. 1960

In that office worked six to eight people. The Editor, Norman Sutton, a wartime Home Guard officer, ex-Buffs, and the father of Terry Sutton, sat at right angles to the window at his own desk next to the till. Next to him, facing the frosted glass window were Eddie Hollingsbee, my father, who was chief reporter and covered county cricket, having been a keen follower of Kent cricket for 30 years, and Stan Wells, the sports editor/reporter and part-time photographer. Stan Wells, who became extremely well known both

through his sports reporting and his part-time work with Southern Television, went on to briefly succeed Mr Sutton as editor, when Norman Sutton retired, aged 68, in 1964. That was the year my father, who was only 51, died. (He had been forced to retire through ill health after over 25 years with the Express.)

Next, on the reporting side, came Terry Sutton and George Pepper. George also covered sport, particularly Snowdown football, and was a keen cricketer. George succeeded Stan Wells, as editor, after Stan died suddenly, collapsing in the office. Stan had steered the paper through its transition to front page news and pictures. (His widow, Thelma, of River, went on to give years of service to the paper in a secretarial capacity.)

In addition to the reporting staff there was Mr Overton, a retired schoolmaster of at least 70, with a gammy leg, who was the proof reader. There was also an office boy and, for several months, while I was learning the ropes and finding my feet, it was my lot to carry out this job, which included tasks like taking classified advertisements at a small public counter in a 4ft wide passage way leading from the street door. This was separated from the newsroom by a frosted glass partitions. The counter had a hinged flap one side, so that staff could come and go. The walls, as I recall, were dark brown to hip level and cream above, yellowed with nicotine. This was



The reception area referred to in the text

also the place where we would sell the papers on a Friday morning and where readers would drop in with stories, tips-offs, tittle-tattle, old pictures or to tell us of their life stories, amazing adventures, wartime experiences and so on.

Starting in a small way, both my father and Stan Wells had set out to modernise the presentation of news, and get away from the old style where everything, except the photographs, was presented in single columns down the pages. This began with special features. Front page news and pictures only appeared a few times on major occasions, such as the General Strike, back in the mid 1920s, when briefly, the Express became a daily paper, and also in 1953 on the occasion of the Coronation, and in 1958 when the Queen and Prince Philip came to Dover.

Display advertisements were dealt

with by the printing works' boss Charlie Buzan who was also a compositor, as was his brother Alfred. Both brothers each gave over 50 years service to the paper, as, I believe, did one or two others on the printing side. There was no advertising manager as such, in those days. Classifieds would be accepted until lunch time on Thursday, publication day then being Friday. Charlie Buzan, who joined the firm in 1910, also dealt with the newsagents coming in for their papers soon after they came off the old rotary press very early Friday morning.

One of my early jobs was holding copy, which means reading it out loud to the part-time proof reader, who would check it with galley proofs from the linotype operators. This task most of us chipped in to do, at various times, during the week. I am sure this improved my English grammar, and that of a succession of junior reporters over the years, as we became captive students of the retired schoolmaster, who would revel in the Times newspaper crossword every day.

There was a succession of office boys who stayed until they got a better job, or failed to make the grade. Now and again one would be taken on as a junior reporter, as I was.

There was no full time photographer until some years after I joined the paper. Journalists Stan Wells, Terry Sutton and George Pepper, turned their hands to taking the occasional news and feature photographs. And one junior reporter, Terry Morris, used to take quite a few photographs to supplement the news pictures submitted by local professionals, like Kent Photos in King Street, Whorwells in Bench Street, Hudson's Photo Service of London Road, and occasionally, Ray Warner in Townwall Street.

In the old office there was always a blue haze of cigarette smoke from about shoulder high when seated. Heating, in winter, was by a barely guarded electric



Editorial staff (left to right): the late Stan Wells, the late Norman Sutton, and a youthful Terry Sutton

bar fire, which I always thought was a bit of a fire hazard but was useful to those who smoked(!) which was practically everyone except Terry and myself. Occasionally one or two reporters would adjourn to one of several cafes nearby for a cup of tea or something to eat, midmorning or afternoon.

Office desks were no more than mahogany benches with chests of drawers or single drawers underneath and Terry Sutton believes some of the timber and drawers may have come from the ill-fated sailing ship 'Preussen', wrecked off Dover in 1910. I always understood two swivel chairs, with red leather seats, wooden arms and curved backs, and with cast iron, tripod-like bases, also came from the 'Preussen.' Somewhat top-heavy the chairs tended to fall over with a crash when you stood up. One, at least, of these chairs, which has survived decades of use, but only because it was rescued from a skip after an office clearance and was given a 'home' by a member of staff. This was after the office move to Castle Street, when our printing works closed down and the old building was demolished to make way for a

roundabout at the junction of a widened York Street with Snargate Street and Townwall Street. The roundabout linked the two dual carriageways of York Street and Townwall Street.

Behind the Snargate Street office counter a door led into a dimly lit passage to the printing works, part of which had no direct daylight. Other passages led to various offices, linotype machines and printing presses, and the foundry for producing the hot metal for the linotype

machines and for casting the curved printing plates. These plates were locked onto a venerable rotary press used to print the paper, at the back of the building. Thanks to John Bavington Jones' interest in history there was a very good local history library, in an office latterly shared by works manager Charlie Buzan and George Pilgrim, a young accountant. Then there was a massive collection of bound newspapers, back to the 1700s, in attic rooms, plus a small darkroom, and bundle after bundle of loose issues of the paper going back to the beginning of the First World War.

The office was like a rabbit warren, spread over three floors. Somewhere in the centre, was a small alleyway or courtyard open to the sky. The office was converted from a row of old, weather boarded cottages, extending behind Weir's chemist shop next door, on the corner of Chapel Lane. Later the chemist's shop was absorbed as well to extend editorial space.

The paper in my early days had classifieds on front and back. Curiously, the number of pages in the paper each week was decided by measuring up the

number of column inches of all the news, pictures and advertisements, using, would you believe, a piece of string(!) and then working out how many pages were needed to include everything. The dimensions of the paper depended on the width of the reels of newsprint in stock. And the number of pages the paper had each week depended on whether the old rotary press, believed to date from before the First World War, could print the required number of pages. It could only print 16 pages or multiples of 16. One week the paper could be what we call a tabloid, like today's paper, the next week a broadsheet, like the Daily Telegraph! By the early 1960s advertising was increasing at such a rate it was evident a more modern press with more flexibility was required. A 32-page paper in 1960 would not have been economical. Since that time we have grown in size so much that 100 pages has been exceeded on numerous occasions.

In our Centenary year, 1958, sales were at the 17,000 mark and grew steadily after the change to front page news, reaching a peak of just on 20,000, in the 1970s. Our sister paper, the Folkestone Herald peaked at nearer 21,000. With the competition of local radio, local television, free newspapers, changed life-styles and interests, these figures, sadly, have been greatly reduced.

It is something of a tradition with local papers to have long-serving employees, but few, I am sure, could have exceeded the record of the Dover Express. Apart from those already mentioned, the Jones family - father, two sons and a great-grandson - was associated with the paper over a period of more than 70 years, clocking up about 140 years service. The owner and editor for decades was local historian John Bavington Jones, whose life in journalism lasted 51 years, yet his working life had begun underground as a miner, when he was a teenager. Also both of his sons, Oliver and Russell, each became editor in turn,

the editor's chair finally being vacated by the Jones family when Russell died in 1949. Terry Sutton's father Norman took over in 1949. Norman and Terry each gave over 45 years service. And my late father and I have given about 75 years between us. The late Bill Wright and Alf Buzan, on the printing side, each gave 60 years service.

The Dover Express was an independent, family-owned paper for 97 years until 1968. Then plans for a new road cutting through the printing works and offices, and poor compensation arrangements in those days, forced a merger with F.J. Parsons Ltd, publishers of the Folkestone Herald and a chain of newspapers in Sussex. As a result, since 1969 the Dover express has not been printed in Dover. The merger marked my first contact with the staff of the Herald and its former midweek paper, the Folkestone & Hythe Gazette. The make-up of Dover Express pages was done at the old Herald printing works in The Bayle at Folkestone and it became my job to oversee these.

A succession of other mergers followed, some good, some bad. I have lost count of the number. One led to a link-up with papers in Medway, Sittingbourne and Thanet, another to the launch of a new paper in Canterbury. Perhaps the most devastating was the takeover by Adscene, owners mainly of a chain of free papers. This ultimately led to massive cutbacks in staff to make the company more attractive to shareholders. Modernisation and the use of computers led to redundancy for most of the old printing staff and was one of the early results of mergers. Another was the switching of sub-editors, including myself, to the Folkestone office. Eventually, it led also to a joint editor for the Dover and Folkestone papers and only one sports editor. Now the papers are run by a newspaper group, which has more paid-for papers and the future for the Dover express looks more encouraging.