

# GLIMPSES OF THE PAST

*Some snippets of Dover History*

## THE CZARS OF RUSSIA CAME TO DOVER

by Martyn C. Webster

DOVER has seen the comings and goings of the great and powerful since time immemorial, thanks of course, to the unique geographical and strategic situation of our town. Previous articles in this journal have reported upon the arrivals of Louis XVIII (1813) and Napoleon III (1858 & 1871), but neither these nor any other can surely have been more remarkable than those of two Czars of all the Russias (1814 & 1874). Indeed, when President Vladimir Putin made a state visit to the United Kingdom earlier in 2003, much was made of the fact that it was the first of its kind for a Russian Head of State in 129 years.

What were the circumstances then that led to the setting foot on Dover's shores of these two high and mighty potentates, Alexander I (reigned 1801-1825) and Alexander II (reigned 1855-1881)?

In the first instance, and noted in the diary of Thomas Pattenden, local schoolmaster, on 3rd June 1814 there arrived at Dover from Boulogne together with Count Metternich and the King of Prussia, His Imperial Majesty Czar Alexander I of Russia, all three hot-foot from the signing of the Treaty of Paris (which temporarily put an end to the war with Napoleon Bonaparte). Unfortunately there are no local newspaper reports of the

time to give us more detail. Pattenden records however, that "the regal party stayed in Dover before proceeding from the town to London GQ en troupe". What an occasion that must have been and a life-long memory for all those who witnessed it, but more was to come.

In the second instance, for the arrival of Alexander I's nephew Alexander II on 13th May 1874, we are spoiled for the minutest of details by the report which appeared in the edition of the 'Dover Express' of Friday 15th May 1874.

Ironically the Czar's disembarkation at Dover had never been intended. However, his yacht, the 'Dervaja' in conveying him to England had gone aground on a mud bank off Flushing in Holland causing it to miss the tide for the scheduled morning arrival at Gravesend where all the celebrations had been prepared. It was only at ten o'clock on the Wednesday morning in May that Dover had been alerted by telegram of the change of plan for an arrival that same afternoon.

The consternation all this must have caused can only be imagined. A reception by the Mayor and Corporation had to be arranged hurriedly. An address was prepared on vellum 'finished off with a



How the Illustrated London News depicted the Tsar's unexpected arrival in Dover after his yacht had run aground off Holland. From Dover, he made a hectic dash by train to Windsor

pendulous seal of the hue and size of a Chichester lobster'. The townsfolk were informed by the town crier in order to provide a local welcome in numbers appropriate for such a lofty personage. Not only was the Czar expected but also a royal train, bearing, to greet him, the Prince of Wales, Prince Arthur of Connaught and, most importantly, the Czar's recently-married 21-year-old daughter Marie, Duchess of Edinburgh.

The royal train duly arrived at

3.45pm in order to be in time for the imperial yacht, which was expected at 4.00pm. Yet still plans went awry. There was an interminable wait for everyone involved until nearly 6 o'clock, when finally the yacht came into sight. Throughout this time their Royal Highnesses, the Mayor and Corporation had to hide themselves in the Lord Warden Hotel while the Dover Garrison (9th & 90th Regiments, 7th Fusiliers, the Royal Artillery and the Kent Militia) were marshalled on the

Admiralty Pier, overseen by crowds of restless spectators.

In due course, a gun salute from the Castle signalled the arrival of the "Dervaja", its tender the "Livadia" and their escort HMS Galataea.

It is not clear what the weather was like that day, but probably because of wind and tide, the yacht berthed at the landing stage on the western, seaward, side of the Admiralty Pier and not, as more usually, on the harbour side. Confusion reigned again, as it took two or three attempts of manoeuvring and the raising of a staysail forward to cant the vessel alongside. The lack of skilled handling of a vessel of 340 feet length in deep water was noted by commentators in unfavourable comparison to that of the British Royal Yacht. Only then was the newspaper report able to describe the object of all this excitement in full flow...

"The Emperor who had been standing on the bridge, or the starboard paddle-box, threw off the roquelaure (cloak), in which His Majesty's person had been enveloped, and displayed the magnificent uniform of a Russian general, over which was the dark blue ribbon of the Garter. The people who packed the promenade on the top of the pier, cheered loudly as soon as they recognised the Czar who graciously acknowledged the reception..."

The British Royal greeters then boarded the 'Dervaja' proceeded by the Duchess of Edinburgh who hastened aboard to embrace her father effusively in full view of the public. After an official exchange in

the saloon of the yacht, the whole party then came ashore to a full gun salute from the Castle and the playing of the Russian national hymn on the pier.

Before climbing into the Royal carriage, where a bouquet from Queen Victoria had been placed on the seat, and reaching it by way of a crimson carpet, the Czar was presented to Dover's Mayor and Corporation in their full regalia. They handed His Majesty the specially (and hastily) prepared address. Also entraining at this time was a Russian suite of 80 persons together with some 18 or 20 tons of Imperial baggage manhandled by a team of Russian sailors. So much weighty luggage in fact that the train had to subsequently stop awhile at Staplehurst en route to London so that the axles could be checked. So, for Dover, an unexpected day's role in history had been played out in a short, fleeting moment after an agonising wait. With only the train smoke emerging from Shakespeare Tunnel left to show for it, they were all gone.

Had there been any elderly person among the spectators, who had also witnessed the earlier Czar's arrival? Is there among us anyone whose grandparent may have known such a witness? A tantalising thought.

And the Czars themselves?

Alexander I died mysteriously in 1825 in the Crimea. Alexander II was assassinated by a bomb in 1881. Both are buried at the St. Peter & Paul Fortress, St. Petersburg. Sic transit gloria mundi.