

## THE SAD STORY OF HENRY MATSON

by Terry Sutton

ALL for the want of a wooden peg a bride was lost. That's the sad story of proud Henry Matson, landowner and Dover churchwarden. It's a tale of the 17th century as Dover settled down soon after the Restoration of the Monarchy. Henry Matson, it is claimed, could have married virtually any of the young maidens of the town but his eyes were firmly fixed on coy Elizabeth Stokes, the charming daughter of master mariner and six times mayor William Stokes. One day, while the chattering classes waited for Henry to propose, he was taking his regular walk along one of Dover's piers. Absentmindedly he let slip his gold knobbed cane which slid through a hole in the pier's wooden decking where a peg-a-trunnel should have been. And down into the sea went Henry's gold knobbed cane. Not surprisingly church warden Henry Matson forgot himself and let forth a terrible oath. Just at that moment sweet Elizabeth Stokes and her mother were strolling along the pier and they heard the dreaded words. That was enough for Elizabeth. That was the end of any possible friendship. Why a man who could swear could do anything in the future. And it wasn't long before Elizabeth married another.

Poor old Henry, it is recorded, from that day never smiled. He never tried again his fate as a suitor and, as he grew older, he visited his attorney. After making provision for a few

relatives, Henry's will bequeathed all his estates at Capel, Westcliffe, Coldred and at Digges Place, Barham, to the Warden and Commissioners of Dover Harbour.

There was one condition. The Commissioners, on a set date every year, were to patrol the piers, discover any treacherous trunnel holes and have them immediately blocked up to prevent other gentlemen's canes suffering the same fate. Henry Matson lived till the year 1720 when he was buried in the churchyard of the Church of St James, where he had been a faithful churchwarden. His lawyers told the harbour commissioners about Henry's curious will and so, once a year, they strolled the piers together to carry out their duties by plugging a few holes here and there. And then they went along to enjoy a real feast, at the expense of the Matson estate. As the years rolled by the pier duties began to be forgotten but the annual Trunnel Feast continued. In time, however, probably interrupted by war, even the Trunnel Feast fell into disuse. Eventually, it is recorded, Matson's lands were sold off and the income used to improve the condition of Dover Harbour. I occasionally take walks along Dover's piers and don't find many holes. So perhaps the loss of Henry's cane, and his unrequited love, has had some impact.

*References: Annals of Dover - J. Bavington Jones & Dover Express 25 December 1903)*