

Rogue... or Local Hero?

by Terry Sutton

I have never been able decide if Sir William Crundall, thirteen times mayor of Dover, was a hero who devoted his life to improving the town or a rogue who was more interested in feathering his own nest. He was certainly a hard worker throughout his 86 years, making a huge impact on Dover, the town where he was born on Midsummer's Day.

William (1846-1934) left school when he was 14 and started work, receiving £5 a week for a 10 hour day. He soon became involved with his father's timber business and toiled in Dover docks where he gained the inspiration of an expanding future for the port. His vision was of a great seaborne trade for Dover.

In his youth he was an active oarsman and later a volunteer officer with the East Kent Rifles (later a battalion of The Buffs). He retired from the unit in 1878 with the rank of captain.

In 1883 he was elected to Dover Town Council, representing Castle Ward, at a time when elections were fought between Conservatives and Liberals, the latter often having a majority. Young William Crundall, leading a group of other Conservatives, decided to change that. But, in his early years in local government, he ran into a problem. He was nominated for Castle Ward and his papers described him as a timber merchant, which he was not at that stage. He was not then in partnership with his father. So his nomination was declared invalid. Three years later, then in partnership with his father, he put up against John Finnis, another timber merchant, and won the seat which he retained until his retirement from local government in 1913.

He was first elected mayor in 1886,

again in the following two years and it was during his time as mayor in 1883-89 that he received his knighthood. There followed other years as mayor, 13 times in total, creating a record in Dover's history never yet beaten.

Sir William, always to be seen with a rose in his button hole, seemed to have his finger in every pie and he had widespread influence. It was during his time in office that the main street, from the Market Square to Worthington Street (as we see it today), was widened, despite strong opposition. Other streets in the town centre were also widened with the frontages rebuilt.

By this time he was an extensive landowner and he pushed through big housing development schemes on the Castle and Barton estates, none of which did his pocket any harm. He was responsible for bringing electric lighting to Dover in 1893 which he and his fellow shareholders later sold to Dover Corporation. He was a pioneer in introducing electric trams to Dover, made possible by his street widening policy. Dover Technical Institute and the School of Art were built during one of his years as mayor. His wife Lady Crundall laid the foundation stone that can still be seen in Ladywell.

He was a member of Dover Harbour Board for nearly 50 years and became its chairman. He persuaded the Board to invest more heavily in the port. A poll tax



Sir William Crundall
© Dover Museum

on cross-Channel passengers was his idea and this provided funds for the Prince of Wales' Pier. He also saw to it that the Admiralty Pier was widened.

One of his most ambitious moves was to visit Germany's Kaiser at Potsdam Palace when he talked him into making Dover a port of call for the Hamburg America Line. He schemed with Councillor Ryeland of George Hammond in attracting other liner business to Dover.

Sir William was the senior magistrate in Dover for many years, having been appointed when only 33 years old. By 1922 he was a Deputy Lieutenant of Kent. He was a popular President of the Governors of the Royal Victoria Hospital for more than 20 years.

All this time his business interests were expanding. He was Governing Director of William Crundall and Co, timber merchants, which in time had branches in London and other towns.

The decision to transfer the Duke of York's Royal Military School to Dover followed his offer to provide a suitable site at Guston. One can be sure his company was then in a prime position to provide the timber. Strangely the town's leading newspaper the Dover Express, founded with Liberal leanings, became a strong advocate of Sir William and his Conservative-backed policies. What was his influence on the editor?

Just before Sir William died, while suffering from a fatal chill, as chairman of Dover Harbour Board he



*"Lady Crundall" with the Prince of Wales Pier behind.
Courtesy of Mr david Dixon.*

convened a meeting of the board at his home, Woodside, the property that still stands at the bottom of Whitfield Hill. He died in February 1934 still making plans to create a bigger and better Dover. There's no doubt Dover progressed greatly while he was pulling the strings, and so did his timber company and land-owning enterprises!

Today, in local government, such a link would not be permitted. Those with a financial interest are debarred from taking part in any debate on such issues. Today's codes of conduct can stifle input by those with personal knowledge on the subject.

Rogue or hero? If he did make a small fortune because he ran the town, good luck to him. At least Dover progressed through his enthusiasm, enterprise and business acumen.

*One thing still puzzles me. Why was Dover-born Sir William cremated at Golders Green? Was it the nearest crematorium available? His last wish was to be cremated.



*Sir William Crundall
Courtesy of Mr david Dixon.*