

Dover Harbour & Langdon Prison

◆◆◆ by Colin Friend ◆◆◆

FOR MANY CENTURIES before the 1800s successive authorities had planned to develop Dover Harbour in Kent for military purposes owing to its geographical position in England and its closeness to the mainland of Europe. It would have made good harbour of refuge, but as it was open to the elements costly major works would have been necessary, thus only piecemeal minor improvements were made as they were needed, rather than as part of large scale planning for the future. It therefore seemed to good to be true when in 1883 it was at last appreciated that Dover was important to the country's defences and worthy of major expenditure.

The aim is to show the excitement of a long awaited project which had national interests mixed with local ambitions and the moral issue of using prisoners to build the harbour.

19th January 1883: The report in the *Dover Express* was the first real indication of a firm government decision to build a harbour of refuge at Dover together with the unconfirmed speculation that a prison might possibly be built at the rear of the castle. To allay any fear among its readers that the prison might be permanent the paper suggested that it could be used as a barracks for soldiers once the harbour was built. The plans had to go forward for approval in the coming session, but it needed only a commission of enquiry, not a government act.

The arguments for a National Harbour go back to the 1840s and were considered again in 1874-5 when it was proposed that 350 acres of harbour be built at a cost of £970,000, and of these 111 acres should have at least a depth of 4 fathoms of water and 85 acres 5 fathoms, but the planned size was

raised to 425 acres with an increase in costs, so scheme was dropped. The matter was raised again in 1883 because of developing military technology and the need to bunker coal burning ships, especially warships.

There was much discussion as to the location of a national harbour as other places around the coast would have welcomed such a development, for there was no harbour between Portsmouth and Sheerness that could supply navy ships and provide refuge in times of trouble. Filey, Yorkshire had a claim for such a harbour to protect the fishing fleet and control the North Sea. Dover had a claim on account of its civilian passenger traffic and the prospect of larger funds as it could request more shipping tolls. The weakness in its claim, however, was the suggested use of convict labour to reduce construction costs, whereas Filey already had prison facilities nearby, Dover if it was chosen, would involve the building of a prison.

A stretch of sea known as the Downs between Deal and the Goodwin Sands which provided shelter for ships would prove useless with the new type of naval warfare involving torpedo boats. This put Dover in a stronger position as it was impracticable to build on the Goodwin Sands. The responsibility for building a harbour of refuge appears to have been laid upon a Mr Druce the resident engineer of the Board of Trade at Dover. It was he who suggested the Langdon site east of Dover Castle for a prison as it was empty and owned by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners. It was also suggested that a small contingent of convicts would be stationed at Rye or Dungeness where the ingredients of concrete were abundant and could be loaded onto barges and ferried to

Dover. So that they could erect sheds for the manufacturer of concrete blocks at its base it was proposed to stabilise the cliff face to prevent landslides. The estimate of the cost of 900 convicts employed for twelve years would be £790,000 exclusive of prison costs. More estimates had to be calculated for the assembly of the gathering of shingle to be stacked up against the base of the concrete blocks to form a breakwater.

These estimates can be substantiated from Dover Harbour Board documents and Treasury minutes dated 17th July 1883, a letter to the board from the treasury confirms the cost of the scheme, but also suggests that a larger scheme would be more cost effective because of the use of the convict labour. The new larger scheme came from a smaller committee appointed by a Sir W Harcourt and projected a total expenditure of £1,040,000 a higher figure but with a much larger harbour it meant it would be cost effective and a longer term of building sixteen years. The responsibility of the convicts would be transferred from the Home Office to the Admiralty for the sixteen years until the harbour was built.

26th January 1883: Excitement was now growing as another article on the harbour of refuge was published, with a plan harbour similar to that submitted by Mr Druce in the Harbour Board archives.

Mr Druce's evidence to the parliamentary commission changed from his earlier report in view of the different construction method to be used. The earlier plan was for a solid breakwater which would involve employing divers, but if concrete blocks were used they could be lowered by workmen. Shingle would be brought up from Rye with the workforce housed in a small prison set up two miles from the town. He warned, however, of the likelihood of ague and a much sickness due to the proximity of marshland. Mr Druce was again questioned about the use shingle. Would it silt up the harbour? No came the

reply as Dover has a strong eddy tide where the Channel tides met those from the North Sea. That was why the Eastern Arm was being built to protect the harbour from this eddy.

The harbour construction at this stage was estimated to need a thousand convicts which will achieve a saving of £130,000, excluding the prison building costs. Mr Druce had two options: to run the blocks on a rail system and tip them from wooden staging posts or to transport them by barge and lower them from there. The convicts would be used to make the blocks and then to construct the Eastern Arm, depositing them until they reached six feet above water level, the height being adjusted with the aid of cranes to produce a shape similar to a railway embankment.

The Dover Harbour Board, according to the press report was in favour of the use of convict labour and had given the following reasons as to why Dover should be selected for a national harbour; these suggestions were submitted to the committee on the 18th April 1882.

- 1 Such works have been declared essential to the safety of the country by several committees of the Houses of Commons from 1830 to the present time.
- 2 That an important portion of the work has already been carried out at the government's expense.
- 3 That fortifications at Dover, now almost complete, afford protection to the harbour.
- 4 That the French authorities are very actively engaged in the construction of harbours of great capacity at Calais and Boulogne.
- 5 No harbour exists on the English coast between Portsmouth and Sheerness at which ships of HM Navy can be supplied with coal and stores or at which troops can be embarked or landed.

- 6 That Dover is the headquarters of the south eastern military district; the troops for the garrisons at Dover or Shorncliffe are at present sent by rail to Portsmouth for embarkation or landing, whereas they could land or embark at Dover if a sheltered harbour existed there. The cost of railway carriage now incurred should be credited to the maintenance of the works at Dover. Dover is in direct railway communication with Woolwich and all government depots by rail and water.
- 7 That an important continental traffic has long been established at Dover and is susceptible of large increase if greater facility is afforded.
- 8 That a moderate charge on such traffic would produce revenue which would pay a small rate of interest on the outlay for the harbour.
- 9 If the enlarged harbour is amalgamated with the present Dover Harbour the surplus income of the Harbour Board would contribute to the cost of maintaining the large harbour
- 10 The Dover Harbour Board has been and is now desirous of constructing accommodation for larger steamers for continental traffic (in combination with the South Eastern and London, Chatham and Dover Railway companies) but has been prevented by the government declaring their intention of proceeding with larger and more important works.
- 11 Accommodation for a large number of Convicts can be provided forthwith on government property at Dover.
- 12 That preliminary work suitable for convict labour can be found in the preparation of space for future work between cliff and the shore.
- 13 Land now in hand, belonging to the Ecclesiastical commissioners, is available for the employment of convicts if (for lack of material or stress

of weather) the work on the breakwater is temporarily suspended.

- 14 Material for the manufacture of concrete blocks can be found at Rye, which is accessible from Dover by water or railway.

This argument produced by the Harbour Board showed that there was a definite need a national harbour but the case for using convict labour might have been met with resistance from the unions at the time, since a slump in trade had begun and they were in disagreement with each other over demarcation lines. This must have suited the government as it would not have wanted a united union policy against the use of convicts at that time.

18th January 1884: The newspaper showed Mr Denne a builder based at Walmer eight miles up the coast winning the tender for building the prison. Within a few hours of getting the news he was on the scene with the co-ordinator Major Hardiman looking at the site spread over three acres above the cliffs at the Eastern Heights. The contract worth £25000 caused migrants from various parts of the country to seek work and some found lodgings in St Margaret's and other localities nearby.

The boundary fence of the prison was to be fifteen feet high and three quarters of a mile in length with the bricks carted across from the Deal road near the Lone Tree spot where a light tramway was to be constructed. In addition to the accommodation it was suggested that a tunnel be made from the cliff top so that the prisoners could have easy access to the harbour while building was in progress.

The Harbour was eventually built, but without much prison labour. The prison itself, disused by the late 1890s was converted to military quarters as promised. It was not until 1897 that the real work of enclosing the bay with the Eastern Arm had began. The Admiralty Pier had been

started in 1847 and finished in 1871. This meant that little progress was being made by the time when, in the 1890's, different contractors had taken over. Messrs S Pearson and Son had taken over from Messrs Coode and Son and Matthews under the engineer in charge Major Pilkington C.B.R.E. The opening did not take place

until the 15th October 1909 and that year heralded a new threat, this time from the air. The first crossing of the English Channel by plane was accomplished by Bleriot in July. Hence the long awaited building of the harbour apparently coincided with the beginning of its redundancy.

B.O.O.K R.E.V.I.E.W.S

New Dover Books!!! Two new books by Derek Leach will be available soon with signed copies for Dover Society members if ordered direct from Derek.

Caring for Dover's Poor should be available by August 2006. It attempts to trace from the 12th century to modern times how Dover's poor were cared for – or not – by religious institutions, the town authorities and charities as well as the impact of the various poor laws and the workhouse system. Education of the poor and slum clearance are also covered in the 130 pages. The price is not fixed at the time of going to press but should not exceed £12.

Dover Harbour, Royal Gateway The first edition was commissioned by Dover Harbour Board to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the granting of its royal charter by King James I in October 1606 and was limited to 2,000 copies not available to the general public. The first copy of the book was presented to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth during her visit to the port on 20 July 2005. Packed with illustrations, the book traces the development of Dover's harbour from earliest times to the present day interwoven with details of arrivals, departures and official visits by members of our Royal Family through the centuries.

A second edition in softback format will be available for sale from 1 December in time for Christmas, but, as only 500 copies will be available, advance orders will be taken by Derek Leach. The price will not exceed £20 for this full colour coffee table style book of 130 large pages.

Both books can be ordered from Derek Leach, 24 Riverdale, River, Dover CT17 0QX telephone 01304 823926. The books should also be on sale at the usual local outlets: W H Smith - Dover, Dover Museum, Tyler's of Deal and Albion Books, Canterbury.

About the Author Born in 1938, Derek spent his working life in Customs and Excise, moving to the Dover area in 1974. As a senior manager in Dover he had a close working relationship with the Harbour Board. Awarded the OBE in 1995, he retired in 1998.

A retirement aim was to write and publish a book about some aspect of Dover's fascinating history. His first effort, *The Life and Times of a Dovorian – Lillian Kay*, was a great success and he has since followed this with four more as well as helping to produce three similar books for The Dover Society.

