

IMPRESSIONS OF DOVER...

...a Belgian's Miscellany

Fr. Peter Sherrad

In July Dover was host to M. Roger Gallant, a Belgian who has visited the town many times since his first visit 76 years ago. On this occasion he was greeted by the Town Mayor, Councillor Diane Smallwood and the Chairman of Dover District Council, Councillor Bernard Butcher. Both presented him with tokens to commemorate his long association with the town. The Mayor and the Town Sergeant, Brian Walker then gave him a tour of the Town Council Offices, the Mayors' Chamber and showed him the town's civic regalia. While in the town M. Gallant addressed the Rotary Club of South Foreland and provided them with an insight into the changes to the town since he first set foot on the Admiralty Pier. He also offered some personal reflections on the state of the town today compared with all those years ago.

When he first came to Dover he was eleven years old (he now celebrates the fact he is 87 years *young!*). His father, Henri, a postman who served on the Ostend mail boat, arrived every day with mail for the United Kingdom returning with mail to Europe and the East. John James McKeen was his daily postal contact in Dover. John received the mail at the Admiralty Pier for onward carriage



Post arrives at Admiralty Pier (c.1932-3)

to either British or foreign destinations. Through this regular contact at the then Marine Station the two men became friends and Roger has continued that friendship with five generations of John's family.

In his address Roger compared the vast differences between Dover in 1932 and 2008. He recalled that the mail boats all arrived at the Admiralty pier. There were few ferries and no drive-on drive-off facilities. Pre-war vehicles were lifted on and off by crane. Nearby in the pier district was much housing and a big community existed. A feature of Dover



M. Roger Gallant with Councillor Bernard Butcher

life was the tramway system and the trams that ran from the pier community up Snargate Street into the town and beyond. Before the war the town was a very busy place and M. Gallant listed the types of work available in the town over the years he has known it. In addition to the nearby coalmines and the town's local engineering works he recalled a paper mill, timber yard and brewery, and on the east of the harbour a big metal breaker's yard. Pre-war the character of the town was markedly different for there were many small streets in Dover and many, many, small good and interesting shops. Of particular note was the elegant seafront where there were large houses, very large hotels and bandstands in public gardens. He described a town that was vibrant and busy and noted there were many properties near the seafront, which was a busy place where people would walk and enjoy themselves. French mail boats included the *Côte d'Azur* and the *Côte d'Argent* and he retained the impression that the harbour was a busy place although not as developed as today.

On several of his summer visits Roger stayed with John McKeen and his family in the High Street and it was due to these visits he had the chance to learn English. It was fascinating to hear from an outsider, but frequent visitor to the town, descriptions of pre-war Dover and it was clear to him it was a different world. As Dorvians know only too well, the war caused much damage to the town through a combination of shelling and bombing so that many areas he knew well in the 1930s were destroyed. The seafront and community immediately behind it was transformed, as the large grand hotels and so much property was subsequently demolished and not rebuilt. In the process so much of the character of the town and

port he knew in his pre-war visits was lost irretrievably and was a matter of great personal regret. In addition he thought that the loss was compounded by the fact that on subsequent visits since the war Dover had not made much progress in redeveloping and recovering something of the spirit that existed in the town pre-war. In some areas the town continues to look sad and appears to be still awaiting development - over 60 years after the war!

By contrast M. Gallant reminded his listeners that Ostend, Dunkirk and Calais, amongst others on the continent, had all suffered much damage in the conflict but they had responded to the challenge and as a result were now busy modern, developed and were places where people visited and stayed. He clearly found it strange that Dover had not been more comprehensively redeveloped and rebuilt after the war but recognised there had been some piecemeal development but much of the character of Dover had been lost. Many pre-war industries, activities and communities had disappeared, now under roads or simply lost and the trams that once hurried their way through the town were long gone. The sea front had been developed, principally with The Gateway flats, and looks nice with its promenade. The port traffic had grown but he lamented the fact that in the case of the Belgian ferries they had gone completely. After the war the first two roll-on roll-off berths at the Eastern Docks were created.

One of the early car ferries was the Belgian *Princesse Josephine Charlotte*, extremely small compared with today's ferries but it served well between Ostend and Dover for many years. In the heyday of passenger ferries it was usual, in the summer months, to see three or four

Ostend passenger ferries at the Admiralty Pier. Many carried the names of members of the Belgian Royal Family - *Koning Baudouin, Koningin Astrid, Koningin Fabiola, Prins Philippe, Prins Laurant and Princesse Marie Esmerelda* for example.

For a while a fast jetfoil service ran between Ostend and Dover, very practical to meet trains at Ostend. It used as its Dover base the converted structure of an old Belgian ferry moored alongside the Admiralty pier, and that reminded him of the Marine Station in Dover so close to the dock and sometimes very grey! Now there are no trains at the Marine Station or ferries between Ostend and Dover, although there is a service to Ramsgate from Ostend by TransEuropean Ferries. The loss of the Dover Ostend route, which had existed for 151 years from 1846 to 1997, was a great pity but in practical terms one can now drive from Calais to Ostend on a direct motorway.

Pre-war Dover, with its many pubs, churches, lanes and shops was very good and since the war Dover has not managed to recapture that character. It is now a place passed through to and from the port. He did add a note of consolation - we could relax - the White Cliffs and Castle remain as permanent reminders of Dover's worldwide fame!

M. Gallant provided an interesting perspective on Dover's fortunes over three quarters of a century and gave his listeners much food for thought before he proffered other reminiscences from his long life including the departure from England of King Edward VII with Mrs. Simpson but as he said that is another story.



M. Gallant in Belgian army uniform 1940

M. Gallant was born in 1921 at Ostend. In 1939, drafted into a Belgian infantry regiment, he fought alongside his colleagues at the River Lys when the Germans invaded Belgium. This delayed them for several crucial days and gave 220,000 British and 110,000 French soldiers the opportunity to escape from Dunkirk. The nature of the fighting over these days was often hand-to-hand and cost the Belgian army about 2,500 men and the Germans about the same. The 'miracle' of Dunkirk came at a high human cost. Taken prisoner, M. Gallant was sent to camp, near Königsberg in



*German labour camp work party, Berlin 1944
(M. Gallant bottom row, 2nd from left)*

Prussia, and had to help make roads. Later held in a labour camp in Berlin, with harsh military guards, the prisoners had to build shelters or bunkers working 12 hours a day 7 days a week. Food was scarce and conditions were awful. It was difficult to describe the horrible street fights he often witnessed and the execution by hanging of German deserters, even on the day of the capitulation. Along with his fellow prisoners, he had to help to clean the roads and pick up the corpses.

After liberation, by the Russians, he returned home to Belgium by walking, riding on Russian and American lorries and by train packed together with others in open wagon trucks. Despite this, it was the nicest trip of his life, for he regained his freedom after having lived for some 18 months in circumstances that were difficult to describe. There was almost constant bombing by allied air forces, 213 hours out of a total of 234 hours. He was later to find out his two cousins, in the RAF as Mosquito pilots, took part in many of these raids. In 1945 weighing only 54 kilos, very thin for a man of six foot, he had returned home to find his mother had died the previous year.

Subsequently employed by the Post Office in the Belgian Congo he said here he spent the best years of his life. By 1960 he had been promoted as General Director of the Post Services in the Belgian Congo. That year, after independence, he returned to Belgium and resumed his postal career there. However, he returned to Africa for a number of visits including to Ruanda-Burundi before the beginning of the genocide. His last visit, in 1976, was just after Bokassa was crowned Emperor of the Central Africa Republic in Bangui. An enormous budget was spent for this

festivity but in 1979 he was deposed after being accused of cannibalism and his chef testified that he had been made to sauté a corpse in Pernod and onions!

M. Gallant's postal career took him, in 1973, to help the Government of Saigon, South Vietnam. Two days before he was due return home, a Vietcong bayoneted him in the stomach and seriously wounded him. He was 'repaired' in Belgium and, after a year, he returned but the fall of Saigon on 30th April 1975 ended this. He managed to leave Saigon on the last helicopter with the U.S. Marines, landing safely on the aircraft carrier *USS Midway*, part of the American 7th fleet based in Manila. After the fall of Saigon he and his wife took care of four Vietnamese children as refugees in Belgium until they were re-united with their parents several years later and the whole family remain living in Belgium. Two years after the reunification he was invited by the communist government to create a Post programme for the whole of Vietnam. It was his third trip to Vietnam and he was very surprised to be received in Hanoi by a military honour! He was the first United Nations Observer expert returning after the war. One evening as he was peacefully walking on the street he was attacked by a Vietnamese with a dagger; he defended himself and was only wounded lightly. The offender had made a mistake thinking he had attacked a Russian; he was arrested and sentenced to be executed the next day. M. Gallant was invited to the execution and when he did he requested the man's life be spared and, after a long delay, his wish was granted. He left Vietnam with many memories but visited again as a tourist twenty years later and also in 2005 and was pleasantly surprised to see how the country had changed in such a short time. Development was

spectacular and there was more security. He retains good memories of these, essentially friendly, people. What surprised him was that he never heard a word of reciprocal hate due to their experiences. He even met up once again with the man who had stabbed him and whose life he saved.

M. Gallant provided his audience with a fascinating talk on his long life, his experiences and impressions of Dover over 75 years and, having been received by the Mayor of Dover and the Chairman of Dover District Council he ended his visit with a celebratory dinner at Cullins Yard. Here he was greeted by proprietor Jim Gleeson, with members of the fourth generation of the family he first came to Dover to visit in 1932. Earlier he had been photographed with members of the fifth generation. He was extremely happy with the reception he received in Dover and very much appreciated the interest and attention he received from the

many people he met during his visit. He hopes to maintain his links with the town and revisit again in future years.

There can be few 87 year olds who have been interned in Berlin in the last 18 months of the war and imprisoned in the Congo for refusing to endorse corrupt practices, bayoneted in the stomach and stabbed in the side in Vietnam and who philosophically state that life is a comedy, a pantomime, and who harbour no enmity whatsoever against those who have been responsible for some of the things that

have happened to them. He provides an object lesson for those who have antipathy and prejudice towards others in their lives. After all he says, when patting his stomach, 'all inside here is plastic - the best insurance against Cancer'!



M. Roger Gallant

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SOCIETY PROJECTS

Report by Jeremy Cope

RIVER DOUR

The Dour volunteer working parties run by White Cliffs Countryside Project have operated through the summer months from April until October. The work undertaken has been the invaluable job of clearing the rubbish from the river and without this effort the river would almost disappear under a layer of litter and

rubbish. Most people passing by express their appreciation of what is being done but it is Dovorians who are the litterlouts, no doubt a minority, but still enough to anger the rest of us. I believe I am the only Society member to join the working parties and I would urge you to sign on next year. You do not have to work the whole day, I work for only 2-3 hours a