

# MARCH MEETING

## *Samphire Hoe* *from Abbot's to Shakespeare Cliff*

A talk by Paul Holt reported by Alan Lee

The first speaker at the March meeting was Paul Holt, the Senior Project Officer for the White Cliffs Countryside Park at Samphire Hoe. Owing to a technical problem Paul was without the use of any visual aids. Without them he still delivered a most enthralling talk detailing the history of the area over the years.

In the nineteenth century Abbot's Cliff and Shakespeare railway tunnels were under construction but between these, and blocking the route, was Round Down cliff. The Royal Engineers, contracted to demolish this obstacle, drove three shafts 70ft into the base of the cliff and packed them with 18,500 pounds of gunpowder. On 26th January 1843 large crowds witnessed the detonation, by electricity, which shifted 400,000 cubic yards of chalk. This formed 15.5 acres of 'new land, which became known as the 'Great Fall' and at the time was said to be the largest man-made explosion in the world. This may or may not have been true.

The first Channel Tunnel began near Abbot's cliff in August 1880 and was 74ft

deep and 897 yards long, but was closed in 1881. A new shaft, sunk later that year near the Dover end of Shakespeare tunnel, had by 1882, when work stopped again, reached 500 yards out under the sea with a total length of 1052 yards. One earlier idea had been to build the tunnel out of ice so that, if the French invaded, a switch would be flicked, the tunnel would melt and become flooded.

During this same period in the 1880's a 130ft high skeleton lighthouse had been built above Shakespeare cliff. That was demolished in 1913.



Round Down cliff and the 'Great Fall'



Skeleton Lighthouse above Shakespeare Cliff Colliery



*Shakespeare Colliery*

The Kent Coalfield Syndicate took over the tunnel workings in 1896 and by November the first pit, Brady, had reached a depth of 300ft. This filled with water and on 4th March 1897 eight men were unfortunately drowned. The second pit, Simpson, and the number 3 pit were then sunk. The first coal seam was struck on 25th September 1903 but by March 1905 only 12 tons of coal had been mined at a cost of £125,000 per ton. Lenley's Phoenix Brewery purchased some of the first commercial coal from the pit and advertised their Dover Pale Ale as brewed by Kent Coal. This soon ceased as the coal was of such poor quality. Shakespeare colliery closed in 1909, reopened in 1910, finally closed in 1915 and anything useable was sold for scrap in 1918.

The Channel Steel Company formed in 1917 to mine iron ore on the site was not a success either but it was only wound up in the early 1950's.

Lydden Spout rifle range was established on the top of the Dover end of Abbots cliff in 1914. During WWII gun batteries and observation posts were added here and all along the cliffs.

Although inhospitable, this area has, over many years, been home to many people.

The Gatehouse family lived there the longest. William rented the foreshore between Abbot's and Shakespeare cliff and with his wife and five children lived in a hut. Whilst there they had another three children, one, Charlie, when employed on the Channel Tunnel, always above ground, cut the first sods for the workings in 1880. The family grew their own crops and William won many prizes for

his figs and carnations at the Dover Floral and Fruit Exhibition. The 'soil' made up of clinker from the trains mixed with seaweed and manure was great for growing. Later Charlie supplied the Lord Warden Hotel with new potatoes as they used to be ready three weeks earlier when grown at the base of the cliff. He also climbed the cliff to take peregrine falcon chicks, raised them and sold them as hunting birds. He remained on site as caretaker for many years until given his



*Charlie Gatehouse*

cards in 1950 at the age of 88. When he died in 1951, his coffin was taken to Dover by train and he was interred in Charlton Cemetery. His widow continued to live in the house at Shakespeare until she moved in the mid 1950's. The house was then demolished. This ended 100 years of the Gatehouse family living on the foreshore.

On the railway's completion in 1844 a bungalow and two cottages were built and were made available to railway workers for rent. In 1871 Thomas W Fagg and his family lived in one and his Uncle Thomas Tunbridge and his family lived in the other. The son, also Thomas Fagg, and his family then continued to live there until he was fatally injured in the Abbot's cliff tunnel on 13th January 1903. He died in the Royal Victoria Hospital in Dover on 26th January.

The bungalow was occupied at different times by various families these included the Russells, and the Barnes.

Another structure, the 'Cabin' was built in 1919 by ex-naval men returning from the war. In 1937 this was moved to a position on higher ground. Mainly constructed with driftwood it grew in size as more driftwood became available.

Located at the base of the cliff there were tents and huts occupied by different people including the Tee, Russell, Pascall, O'Neil, Holt and Chandler families.

On the site of the old colliery the railway company built a wooden platform known as Shakespeare Halt. Although primarily for the use of railway maintenance workers it was also used as a request stop by the local people.

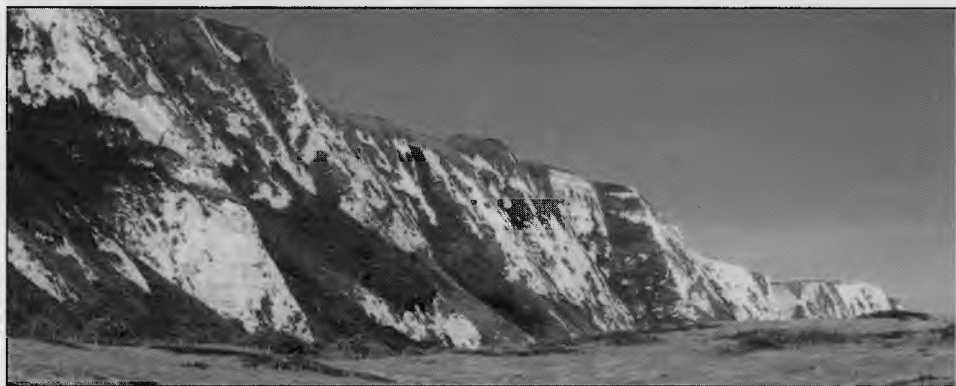
After another failed attempt in the 1970's the Channel Tunnel was finally completed and it carried its first tourist shuttle on 22nd December 1994.

The soft chalk marl, which formed the spoil from the Channel Tunnel workings was landscaped and seeded and renamed Samphire Hoe when opened to the public on 17th July 1997. The area is now a designated coastal country park and visited by over 110,000 people a year.

*Editor's note:*

For a more in depth history of this area I recommend the following:

*Shakespeare Cliff - A People's History 1843 to 1973.* This is available price £4 from the site office at Samphire Hoe or from local bookshops.



*Samphire Hoe today*