

From Joe Harman's files...

FREEMEN OF DOVER

by Derek Leach

Joe Harman was admitted as a Freeman of Dover on 28 July 1989 by marrying the right girl! His wife's father, Arthur Cloke, was a Freeman and whilst it was not possible for the daughter of a Freeman to claim this ancient privilege, her husband could, provided that she was born 'free' i.e. born after her father was made a Freeman. Sons of Freeman could claim the privilege once they were 21 and had been born 'free' in Dover. It could also be claimed by those completing an apprenticeship to a Freeman. Joe Harman's right can be traced back to 1715 after which it was passed on from generation to generation. Failure by any generation to claim the Freedom deprived succeeding generations of the privilege. It was also possible to buy it for £20, which before 1836 was important because only Freeman were allowed to trade in the town. The ability to purchase was abolished in 1933.

The Freedom could also be conferred as an honour by the town on men who rendered special service to the town or to the country, such as the 72 Dovorians made Honorary Freeman for volunteering to serve in the Boer War, Lord Montgomery and Sir Winston Churchill. The Freedom of Dover goes back to Saxon times when the monarch, in exchange for



ship service, granted Dover certain privileges. Ship service meant that Dover was obliged to provide for 15 days each year 20 ships each manned by 21 men either to carry the king's army across the Channel or to wage naval warfare when their ships would be fitted with castles. These men were Dover Freeman who 'worked the Passage' (i.e. carried people and goods across the Channel) or fished for a living. The privileges granted included

the Barony which is still exercised at coronations when Barons from Dover and the other Cinque Ports carry a symbolic canopy to protect the monarch. More importantly, the men (sorry not the ladies) of Dover were granted personal liberty, their own courts, possession of land and to trade free of the king's taxes. Other privileges included the right to sell shrimps and fish in the town on Sundays and to graze sheep on the sidewalks! During the tram era Freeman could ride without paying! Until 1835 Freeman elected the Mayor and until 1920 they also had a special parliamentary vote.

In 1953 the Mayor and Corporation invited the 63 surviving Hereditary Freeman and the 26 Honorary Freeman to a lunch at the Town Hall to mark the coronation of Elizabeth II. Of these 47 Hereditary and 15 Honorary Freeman attended, including eight survivors of the

Dovorians made Honorary Freemen for volunteering to serve in the Boer War and two holders of the Victoria Cross. Joe Harman's father-in-law, Arthur Cloke, was one of those invited. Another lunch was held in 1963 attended by 45 Hereditary Freemen.

With the reorganisation of local government in 1974 and the demise of the Borough Council of Dover, Dover town lost its ancient right to admit Honorary Freemen. This was tested in 1989 when the Dover Charter Trustees wished to make Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, an Honorary Freeman. The Act setting up the Dover Charter Trustees gave powers to appoint 'officers of dignity' but apparently excluded the appointment of Honorary Freemen.

Fortunately, the ability to admit new Hereditary Freemen survived the 1974 reorganisation, although authority was vested in Dover District Council. Having applied unsuccessfully in 1972 to the old Borough, Joe tried again in 1989 and was subsequently added to the roll of Dover Freemen by Paul Watkins, Chairman of Dover District Council. Joe signed the following declaration:

I do sincerely promise and declare that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, her heirs and lawful successors, and the Charters, Liberties, Free Customs, Decrees and Ordinances, of the whole Ports and of the Liberties and Precincts thereof and especially this town of Dover which to my power I will well and truly maintain and keep.

I will be obedient and assistant to the Chairman for the time being as well in keeping the Queen's Majesty's Peace as also observing all good Orders and Decrees heretofore made or to be made for the most benefit and better Government of this Town which belong to a Freeman thereof.

Joe received the following certificate:

THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT
JOSEPH GEORGE HARMAN
of 23 St. Radigund's Road, Dover
was by virtue of his right by marriage
and having made the declaration
required by law admitted as a Freeman
of the Town of Dover on 26 July 1989
and his name added to the
Roll of Freemen.

Dear Joe, who loved Dover so much, is no longer with us. I wonder how many Freemen there are left? I also wonder how many people may still be eligible to claim the ancient Freedom of Dover?

1953 Freemen's Lunch

