

CHARLES NORRIS BECKER

Town Crier of Dover

• • • *by Derek Leach* • • •

Recently David Atwood loaned me a small book of 23 pages entitled, 'The True History of the Life and Times of Charles Norris Becker, Town Crier for Dover' and printed by the Dover Express in 1912 when Charles was 78 years old and still Town Crier after 44 years.

He was born at 25 Commercial Quay on 27 February 1834. His father was a guard on a Dover to London coach that left Dover at 6pm and reached the City at 6am! Charles relates that on one trip the coach was loaded with contraband, but father heard that Customs men knew about it and so the goods were offloaded at Wootton and the subsequent Customs search found nothing. Father was not so lucky later when he and some others hired a boat, loaded it with smuggled goods, sailed it to London and were arrested on arrival. He was fined £4,700 or 18 months in jail, serving his sentence in Dover Castle prison! With the coming of the railway in 1844 father lost his coach job and with a wife and five children to feed he opened a greengrocer's shop at 164 Snargate Street.

Charles started work for 3s 6d a week at another greengrocer's in Bench Street when he was 12, but soon moved on to Winter's in Snargate Street as an assistant pastry cook for 4s a week. After being up all night making hot cross buns

for Good Friday he asked for a raise and was promptly sacked! Nothing daunted, Charles became a tailor's assistant at Killick and Back's in Market Square for 5s 6d, but he messed up a pair of trousers, resulting in a box round the ears, which made him fall over and knock two teeth out, as well as the sack again! He then became a butcher's boy at Mrs Wood's in Worthington Street for 5s a week plus food, but the business was taken over and Charles was no longer required.

Somewhat disappointed with his career in Dover, Charles tried his luck in London, but soon returned to Dover and became an assistant to Mr Harding, a dyer in Castle Street, for 7s a week. Throughout this history Charles makes no secret of his liking for girls, but one of his approaches backfired when he received a slap for asking for a kiss when delivering a parcel. He describes a visit to Dover Races at Swingate before indulging in an affair with a sailor's wife. Hearing that the sailor was coming home, Charles went back to London for several more adventures with young ladies.

Returning to Dover yet again, he turned down the chance of a lift on a sailing hoy to walk home. Staying the night at Chatham and Canterbury, he reached Dover at the same time as the hoy! His

situation improved when he rejoined Mr Harding at 16s a week. After more romances he settled down at the age of 27 when he married Sally Tutt, a dressmaker, at Old St. James Church and rented a house at 1 Trevanion Street. Disaster came when he asked for a raise as he was married and was told by bachelor Mr Harding that he 'had no business to be married!' Sacked again, he became a temporary porter at 16s a week at the station, but tips increased his money to 30s a week. This job only lasted nine months. He then took a general shop and house at 28 London Road, but moved two years later, in 1864, to 52 Biggin Street where he sold tobacco, sweets and newspapers.

Mr Marsh, the Town Crier, lived next door. When he became ill Charles 'cried' for him for two years until he died and was then appointed crier himself in 1869. Income was supplemented by sticking up posters around the town. At this time he went to see Wollaston Knocker, the Town Clerk, to take up his Freemanship. With things going well his wife died leaving him with a four year old daughter, but after a few months he married again - a widow with an adopted son living at 1 Priory Hill. They moved to yet another shop at 59 Biggin Street and two years later to 122 Snargate Street. By this time he also had a smart horse and cart for his poster sticking work. Following the death of his second wife, he married yet again in 1882 and honeymooned in Tunbridge Wells and Hastings.

Another move took him to 5 Snargate Street where he seemed to buy and sell

anything and everything, but burnt his fingers when he bought eight 5s shares in the Dover Promenade Pier Company. He fared much better with property, buying 30 Council House Street for £350 and letting it for £30 a year. Number 14 Park Street was his next home, which he bought for £450 with no shop, but still with a poster business and his town crier job. Later, he sold the poster business for £375 and bought 10 Lorne Road for himself at a cost of £300 and let 14 Park Street. Still not content he bought 130 Buckland Avenue and stayed there, selling the Council House Street and Park Street properties.

Charles belonged to the United Bill-Posters Association which took him to meetings all over the country and gave him the opportunity to see things like the Giant's Causeway, the Boat Race and the Derby. Although his 5s bet on the Derby should have brought him winnings, the bookmaker absconded and Charles vowed never to gamble again! He also saw a man hanged at the Old Bailey.

His history concludes by telling his readers that his grandfather, Peter Becker, was a First Lieutenant in the Dover Volunteers in 1790 and kept the Mulberry Tree by the entrance to Shakespeare Cliff tunnel where apparently much smuggling went on. It was Peter who arranged for steps to be built down the cliff to the inn and named Peter Becker steps.

After 23 pages Charles' story ends with not one word about his town crier duties - what a pity!