

OCTOBER MEETING

1st Talk

Thirty Years of Bover on the Hover

A talk by Captain Brian Laverick Smith reported by Terry Sutton

The autumn and winter programme of talks and other events kicked off in fine style on Monday evening, October 22nd, with a witty presentation by Captain Brian Laverick Smith who was one of the pilots who used to "fly" hovercraft out of Dover.

His talk, *Thirty years of Bover on the Hover*, described the birth of hovercraft and the first hovercraft Channel crossing by an SRN1, the Townsend Thoresen passenger-only venture from the Camber at the Eastern Docks, the arrival at Dover of the SRN6 craft to be succeeded in 1968 by the car-carrying SRN4, The Princess Margaret.

"I had great fun working on the hovercraft. There was a great social atmosphere on the fun craft. We, the pilots, thought we had died and gone to heaven," said Captain Smith.

He recalled that at one stage it was planned to build a bridge from the international hoverport at the western end of the harbour across the harbour waters to link with the railway (near the Marine Station) to provide speedy passenger access to the craft. He also recalled the noise from the hovercraft drifted from the hoverport over the town resulting in complaints from residents of The Gateway. That prevented the introduction of night flights.

Captain Smith demonstrated with film why it was necessary for the 300-ton craft to arrive in Dover harbour at speed. If the craft came into the £15 million hoverport at a slower speed it created a far greater wash that was liable to damage yachts and other craft.

One amusing incident was when young passengers on the craft, concerned about the safety of a resting seagull on the hoverpad in front of the craft, demanded delay in departure until the bird had been shifted. This delayed other ferry movements throughout the port and, he suggested, cost the company £500 in the useless burning of fuel. Trips to the Goodwin Sands, by hovercraft, were also recalled with one occasion when they feared they had left a member of the Women's Institute stranded on the sands. But the flap was over when it was discovered there had only been a miscount in numbers who had gone out on the trip.

Captain Smith regretted the ending of hovercraft operations at Dover, blaming increasing fuel prices, inflation, the opening of the Channel Tunnel, the 1990 arrival of the Seacats (Hoverspeed Great Britain and Hoverspeed France) and lack of investment by the owners. The former Dover craft are now laid-up in a museum at Lee-on-Solent where, he said, the pilots meet each year for a reunion and the telling of yarns about the old days.