

River Tram Plaque 29th January 2015

Derek Leach

The following is the speech given by our Chairman Derek Leach on the unveiling of the latest Dover Society plaque.

Good morning and welcome everybody, especially the Chairman of River Parish Council, Clive Taylor, some fellow parish councillors, residents of Crabble Mill and Mill Race, Malcolm Mitchell of Smith Woolley Perry, who manage the site on behalf of Crabble Mill Developments and John Hill who kindly erects our plaques free of charge.



Women had taken on many male jobs during the war, including Lottie Scrase, aged 27, the conductress of the tram. Unfortunately, for her she had volunteered to take another woman's shift and died as a result. She was engaged to be married so her wedding ring was buried with her.

To mark the Millennium in 2000 The Dover Society erected 10 plaques in Dover to commemorate certain events and people. Since then we have added several more, but this is our first plaque outside the town.

Dover Corporation owned the town's tram system, which was only the second in the country when the mayor drove the first tram in 1897. In 1905 the system was extended to River, along what is now Lewisham Road to its terminus. In those days and until the end of 1936, when buses replaced the trams, the people of Dover packed the trams to get to work, to go shopping and to ride into the River countryside.

But in 1917 tragedy struck when, on 19 August 1917, a heavily loaded tram on its way to the River terminus careered down the hill into River, crashing into the wall of the Crabble Rag Mill and overturning. Eleven people were killed and 61 injured, one of whom later died. Our new plaque marks that tragic spot commemorating the worst tram accident in Britain.

Several servicemen were amongst the dead and injured. Albert Hallam, a teenage soldier stationed in Dover, was a passenger. He was thrown from the top deck and landed on a sailor who was killed, but who cushioned Albert's fall and saved his life, although he was injured.

A hero that day was Trooper Gunner. As the tram gathered speed he dashed forward and jammed both feet on one of the sets of brakes. It did not stop the tram and both feet had to be amputated. He spent the rest of his life in a wheelchair, no army pension was paid as he was not on duty, but he received the Albert Medal for bravery and a modest pension from a hero's fund.

My dear friend Lillian Kay was another passenger that day. She, aged 3, and her mother and father were travelling to see her grandfather, the Riverdale House gardener, as they did every week. However, when it reached Buckland Bridge, Mother insisted on getting off and walking the rest of the way. Apparently the previous Saturday it had been top heavy and wobbling as it went down the hill into River. She did not want to risk it again.

Walking along Crabble Avenue they heard the crash. Father and a policeman were first on the scene. Mother knocked on a door in Crabble Road, handed over Lillian to whoever opened the door and ran to help. What a lucky escape for Lillian who lived until she was almost 99!

Much of the blame fell on the tram driver, Albert Bissenden, who tried but failed to stop the tram and jumped clear before it crashed. He had been discharged from the wartime army because he had suffered a nervous breakdown and had only passed his tram driving test 19 days previously. At the inquest, many possible causes were explored, for instance, that the tram capacity was 48 but there were over 70 people on board - not uncommon apparently - but the decision of the coroner was 'death by misadventure' due to the inexperience and lack of judgement of the driver.

£13000 was paid out by the Corporation in compensation and the council rates had to be increased by 1/6 in the £ (7.5p) to pay for it.

So the brief wording of this plaque conceals what was a tragedy for many individuals and their families. Let us spend a moment in silence to remember this incident and its consequences.

Crabble Tram Accident - 19th August 1917

A detailed and complete article on the tram accident can be read on The Dover Historian. Privately owned and run by Lorraine Sencicle with her husband Alan this web site contains a large collection of historical articles from the town of Dover, England. All are well researched, well written and interesting articles. There are also articles on the many Dovers throughout the world. I highly recommend a visit to The Dover Historian, to do so go to <http://doverhistorian.com>

Editor

Please help... Magna Carta!

As part of the 2015 celebrations of the signing of Magna Carta 800 years ago an exhibition including Magna Carta is touring the country. It is hoped to bring the exhibition to Dover for the month of September, probably in the Town Hall. Dover Museum would be responsible for the arrangements, but we shall need quite a few volunteers over the month to 'mind' the exhibition. Could you please give a few hours in September?

If so, please contact Derek Leach on 823926 or email derekriverdale@btinternet.com and he will put you on the list and give you more information during the year.

Friends of Dover Museum

The Friends have now changed both the time and venue of their meetings which should prove more attractive to both existing and potential members.

Meetings are now taking place at The Silver Screen Cinema, Market Square, Dover CT16 1PH, on the second Wednesday of the month at 2.30 pm. There is usually a talk with slides or film about a local historical subject.

There are various categories of membership - for example, senior joint membership is £20 - and visitors are always welcome, admission £3.

For further information please contact
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