

When Coal Dust Threatened Dover's Playground

Terry Sutton

Take a stroll along Dover sea front and it's hard to remember the days when, each day, a freight train smoked its way along the roadway a few feet from the promenade. With a man walking in front waving a red flag.

The background to the sea front railway was a controversy that had its roots in 1923 when Dover Harbour Board and Southern Railway gained authorisation to operate it along Dover sea front to carry loads to the Eastern Docks.

The trouble was no one thought of making a restriction on how much, or the type of load, that could be carried along the sea front road. One trainload a day was the norm. In the autumn of 1931 Southern Railway began constructing a coal bunker on the Eastern Arm to supply coal-burning ships and to load up vessels with export coal.

Strange to believe today but there had been a fenced railway track along Dover sea front since 1917, laid for the Admiralty, to carry war materiel from the west of the harbour to the east. The Admiralty recycled the old railway track that years before carried chalk on the cliff top railway for harbour construction.

After the 1914-18 war, in 1923, official authorisation for the sea front track was to be given in a clause in a Parliamentary Act, the main aim of which was to sanction the construction of a Channel ferry. With progress of the Parliamentary Bill, the railway company surprised everyone by revealing it proposed to start carrying coal on the sea front railway to supply the new coal bunker



Seafront Railway © Dover Museum

on the Eastern Arm. Immediately there was a local outcry.

Swift action was taken by Dover borough council which, in February 1932, passed a resolution to oppose the Bill in Parliament and the following month the mayor and a deputation of councillors met the general manager of Southern Railway to plead with him not to carry out the coal threat. The mayor and his team came back to Dover with the terrible news that the railway company proposed to operate coal trains along the sea front for 14 hours a day carrying up to 800,000 tons of coal a year.

On April 15th Southern Railway carried out its threat and the first coal trains began rumbling along the sea front rail track. Dover folk just could not believe it and there were soon complaints of coal dust being blown about on windy days. No longer was the sea front the pride of the town, Dover's favourite playground, where, every summer, crowds flocked to watch rowing and sailing regattas. No longer, with coal dust blowing about, was it a pleasant place to promenade.

Anger built up in the town, soon to be expressed in Parliament when the Bill came



Dover Seafront Train Unloading Coal

before a Commons' committee on April 19th. The chairman announced he and his committee were impressed by two petitions received, one from the people of Dover, and he suggested Dover Corporation, Dover Harbour Board and Southern Railway meet to come up with a compromise. The three agreed but after they met Southern Railway announced it was sticking to its guns and still aimed to transport annually up to 800,000 tons of coal along the sea front. The House of Commons' committee expressed regret that no agreement had been reached but the Bill was passed.

Dover was not finished yet. Dover Corporation and Dover Harbour Board joined forced and decided to oppose the Bill in the House of Lords. A petition signed by 17,000 opposing the railway company was sent to the Lords along with opposition by Dover Chamber of Commerce. Residents of East Cliff and those living on the sea front sent in their separate petition of opposition.

At that stage Dover Harbour Board came up with a peace plan. It offered to contribute £40,000 towards the cost of constructing a railway tunnel from the Dover-Deal rail loop to the Eastern Docks through which trains could operate carrying coal. Dover Corporate leapt at the idea and offered to contribute £20,000. There was no immediate reaction from Southern Railway. (If the tunnel had been built it could today answer much of

Dover's port orientated road traffic problems. At one stage Dover Harbour Board even planned to promote a Parliamentary Bill for the construction of the tunnel).

Debating the issue continued in the House of Lords and on June 16 it was announced a clause would be inserted in the Bill restricting the annual amount of coal that could be carried to 300,000 tons-much less than required by Southern Railway.

This, in effect, proved the death knell to the whole idea. To make the enterprise pay Southern Railway needed to make greater use of the railway line carrying coal and from the middle of July to the end of September that year only 12,000 tons of coal were carried along the sea front. But the coal that was carried caused a lot of mess with coal dust blown over people and over sea front properties.

Gradually the coal trade for the Eastern Arm, at least at that stage, petered out and Dover got used to its one train a day running along the sea front.

It was used at times during the Second World War and, when peace returned, a diesel engine, hauling six trucks, would regularly trundle along the sea front at a walking pace with a man in front carrying a red flag to warn pedestrians.

The flag bearer often had to divert to the beach to find a motorist who had parked blocking the line. More often there was a tumble after a cyclist caught the front wheel of his or her bike in the railway track.

The final day of Dover's sea front railway came on December 31st in 1964 when the last load of three oil wagons were hauled to the Eastern Docks. And, it is claimed, carrying the wages for workers at Parker Pens factory then at the Eastern Docks.

Dover's Tram Tragedy Remembered

Peter Sherred

On Saturday 19 August 2017 at Crabble Corn Mill River in the presence of the Chairman of Dover District Council, Councillor Sue Chandler, the Dover Society organised a centenary memorial presentation honouring the people who died and those who were injured, some quite seriously, in the Crabble tram accident of 1917. The accident took place during the Great War of 1914-1918 on Sunday 19th August 1917 at Crabble Road River and occurred when an out of control tram hit the northern parapet of the River Dour Bridge. The tram had overturned at the bottom of the second bend on Crabble Road and the upper deck smashed into the wall. Eleven people were killed (including the tram's experienced conductress Lottie Scrase) and 51 civilians plus 9 military personnel were injured. The site of the crash is marked by a blue Dover Society plaque. The Crabble tram accident of 1917 remains one of the worst on record. The subsequent coroner's verdict recorded 'the deaths were caused by the tram-car running away and overturning, and that the accident was caused through by the error of judgement and inexperience of the driver of the car, and that the deceased's met their deaths through misadventure'.

The centenary presentation was given by members of the Dover Tales led by Barry O'Brien, supported by Ray Newsam, Caroline Fox-Betts and Stephanie and Chris Precious whose oral presentation of the tragedy was accompanied by Paul Cheneour on the flute. The script was drawn from and inspired by various reports and correspondence published at the time of the crash. Additionally, the Dover Tales members gave three other pieces including one about the



Crabble Road Tram accident 1917. Dover Museum

Christmas Eve 1914 bomb dropped on Leyburne Road, another inspired by childhood memories of a River resident and a further one was an adaptation of a Dalmatian Fairy Tale in acknowledgement of Dover's twinning with Split in Croatia.

Because of the nature of the route into River, combining significant bends and a steep gradient, tram drivers on this route pre-war were all experienced drivers for whom it was usual at the top of Crabble Road to stop the tram and turn the control key to the off position in order to cut the power supply. This automatically slowed trams down and because the main brakes were rheostatic, electrical braking using a load resistance, they could only be applied if the power was cut off. For whatever reason that Sunday, on that run, the driver did not stop and turn off the control key. This meant that the tram was on full power from the top of the incline. The driver of the No 20 tram on the afternoon of Sunday 19 August 1917 was a local man, Albert James Bissenden, who had volunteered at the outbreak of World War I and became a private in the Army ordnance corps, subsequently being sent to Egypt