

# 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

where he suffered a nervous breakdown and was discharged in February 1917. Following his return to England he made a good recovery and just five weeks before the accident he started work as a tram driver having never driven a tram before. It became clear that he had made a mistake by not switching the engine off at the appropriate place and time and, due to his lack of experience, was unable to rectify the situation.

Nine members of the Bissenden family came from all over England for the centenary presentation including Albert Bissenden's grandsons David and Alan. Following the

presentations the family members, accompanied by the Chairman of the Dover Society – Derek Leach and Lorraine Sencicle – the Dover Historian gathered at the place where the accident occurred. There, beneath the Dover Society plaque, after a short but moving speech given by David the two brothers laid a bouquet in memory of those killed and injured that day 100 years ago.

Although seating on tram 20 was for 48 passengers on the day of the accident it was evident that the tram was seriously overloaded, the number of passengers given as being 70, a factor which exacerbated the number of casualties.

## Refurbishment Committee

### Jeremy Cope

Matters with which we have been concerned included:-

Old St James' Church - the tidy ruin. Not so tidy or cared for but we understand this is now on DDC's to do list. We were grateful for DDC's Mandy Pile organising the clearance of rubbish from the William Muge site in Harold Street although it now requires attention again Jim Pople is prompting. We are very pleased that the A roads roadside litter is much reduced - thanks to DDC. The lesson to all of us is if there are litter problems do contact DDC - they can hardly sort things out if they do not know about them.

Jenny Olpin and Mike Weston had a positive meeting with KCC Rights of Way and Pam Brivio (DTC and Walkers are Welcome) to press the case of improvements to the walk from the Bleriot Memorial to the Cliff Path. The main problem is the danger of walkers using Upper Road which has fast cars aplenty and virtually no safe roadside paths - a recipe for an accident. A safe way already exists but

this needs to be properly signposted and hopefully we will make progress. Mike also prepared a plan of a walk (including the Bleriot / cliff section) which would encircle the Castle. This could include the "Zig Zag" with information boards to record matters of historical and other interest. Again this was positively received but now begins the work.

The Discovery Centre has had an unloved look of recent times but is undergoing improvements. One effect has been a reduction in the number of adult education courses but KCC tell us that once the improvements are in place the shortage will be rectified. To be monitored.

Jenny and John Cotton regularly meet with the local Chief Inspector of Police - any problems please contact Jenny - details on the front inside cover.

Have we any volunteers for the committee? You can contact me - again details on the front inside cover.