

*The following article was submitted by our Chairman Derek Leach.
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Living at Shakespeare Halt

Dennis Russell

My wife Hazel and I lived at Number 2 Railway Cottages, Shakespeare Halt for six and a half years in the 1950s. The halt was mainly for workers maintaining the railway line, but it was also used by locals and was a request stop.

The 1840s were the golden age of railway building in Britain. Tracks were laid all over Britain; some were very successful, others made investors bankrupt. In 1843 the line from Folkestone to Dover was under construction, but there was a big problem blocking the route between the Abbots Cliff Tunnel and the Shakespeare Cliff Tunnel. This was Round Down Cliff. The railway company had two options; tunnel through it or make a cutting through it. Both were very expensive and unattractive. Instead, it was decided to demolish the cliff. Shafts 70 feet deep were driven into the base of the cliff and 18,500 tons of gunpowder inserted. There was no loud bang, merely a low rumbling noise, followed by 500 feet of cliff collapsing and a huge wave of chalk flowing into the sea. The Shakespeare plateau was born. The explosion was said to be the largest in the world at that time, moving 400,000 cubic yards of chalk to form fifteen and a half acres of land. One block of chalk weighing 30 tons blocked the Shakespeare Tunnel. The explosion apparently saved 200 men two years hard labour. As a result the line was completed and opened on 7 February 1844.

In our time living there we always knew it as Shakespeare Colliery because of the coal mine that was once there. Coal was found in East Kent in late Victorian times and mines were established at several places such as



Shakespeare Halt c1950

Snowdown, Betteshanger, Tilmanstone and Chislet. In 1886 Sir Edward Watkin, using the engineers and machinery of the Submarine Continental Railway Company, tried his luck at Shakespeare and bore holes struck coal at 1157 feet. By 1892 a 4 feet thick seam of coal was found. Shafts were dug named Brady and Simpson, but water was a problem until powerful pumps were installed. In 1897 eight men were drowned. A huge underground water reservoir had been breached. The two shafts were sealed, but exploration continued with coal being found again in 1903. By 1905 only 12 tons of coal had been mined at a cost of £125,000 a ton! Leney's Phoenix Brewery bought some of the first coal and advertised their Dover Pale Ale as 'Brewed by Kent Coal', but the quality was poor - the coal not the beer! By 1907 only eight tons a day was being produced, less than the colliery needed to operate its engines and boilers. The colliery went into receivership in 1909, work recommenced in 1910, but the pit closed for good in 1915. All for the best perhaps bearing in mind the terrible working conditions underground - dangerous, wet and dark.

How did I meet my wife Hazel? I blame it on the Germans and my mother-in-law! The Germans fired a shell across the Channel during the Second World War and 58 seconds later it landed close to Hazel's Mum's house, leaving a crater in the road with gas escaping. My Dad, a policeman, was sent to guard the hole. Mrs Gillette, Hazel's Mum, made him cups of tea and that's how the family friendship began. One day I found myself in Mrs Gillette's house. She had four daughters and one of them, Hazel, was about my age, quiet and intelligent. I took a strong fancy to her and asked if she would come to the pictures with me. She agreed and so our courtship started and in due course I asked her to marry me. She agreed - well, I did say that she was intelligent! My Mum and Dad were delighted, but in those days you had to ask the girl's parents for permission. Shaking, knees knocking and with a dry throat I managed it. After thinking for a moment, the Dad said yes. As he turned away, I thought I heard a muttered voice say, 'Thank God, two down, one to go!' We were married on 21st August 1948 at St. Mary's Church, honeymooned on the Isle of Wight and returned with only £20 to my name. We put our name down for a council house (I am still on the waiting list!) and in the meantime rented a semi-basement flat in Folkestone Road, which was not very nice. Our daughter was born a year later with no sign of the council house.

I had joined the railway company as a locomotive cleaner in 1944 and by 1950 was a locomotive stoker. I saw a notice advertising a railway company house to rent, Number 2 Railway Cottages, Shakespeare Halt, for 4s 6d (23 pence) a week. Hazel thought it was a joke but we caught a bus to the Ropewalk and walked to the cliffs above Lydden Spout and looked down. Hazel's first reaction was to go straight home but we decided to take a look.

How could we get down? We went down the 366 steps of Akers Steps - the first three flights were just like a ladder. There were two tin and wooden bungalows joined together and both called No. 2. An elderly couple, Mr. and Mrs. Smith were living in one of them. Mrs Smith made us welcome with tea and cake and explained the benefits of the place: a garden, plenty of seaweed for fertiliser and you could keep chickens and pigs. She showed us round the vacant cottage, a tiny place with two rooms upstairs and two down, but we decided to apply for it.

Moving to Shakespeare was rather unusual. We put a railway goods waggon into the shunting yard at Dover Priory station and loaded it up with our stuff. The waggon was then delivered to a siding at Shakespeare. Job done and we moved in. There were drawbacks! I had to get to work somehow. I had some choices: climb the 366 steps, which was possible if the weather was reasonable; walk along the foreshore, but only if the tide was out; or walk through the railway tunnel. That became the preferred route, but dangerous. It only took 15 minutes, but you had to avoid the frequent steam trains by dodging into the galleries or holes in the tunnel walls, which were 110 sleepers apart. If you were between these safety points, the safest thing to do was to lie down facing the train. The tunnel was usually full of smoke if there was no wind; you knew when a train was coming because the smoke would move ahead of the train. There were also drawbacks to living in the cottage: a bucket toilet and no gas, electricity, dustman, fire brigade or coalman. I improved things quite a bit with a thunder box away from the cottage and then a cesspit and flush toilet.

All this was offset by the advantages. It was quiet and nice to go to sleep lulled by the sound of surf less than 100 yards away. The biggest was the cheap living. Of course,

normal deliveries were not possible, but the railway platelayers were very good to us delivering letters and milk from Dover Priory when they were dropped off on the 7am train. We had an enormous coal store and the 3 cwt that we moved in with looked pathetic in it. This was soon remedied, although a bit naughty. Steam trains used a lot of coal transported in their coal tenders and as a stoker I thought I could drop some off in passing, but my roster meant that I would not be passing for three weeks. I told my mates. Mysteriously, coal arrived, then more and more. It could not be left on the track and if I wasn't at home, Hazel had to shift it with her wheelbarrow when she heard the engine's whistle, which was the signal that coal was being dropped off. Poor Hazel, she had more muscle on her arms than me. Once Mrs Smith's coal store was full and all the outhouses, I had to say, 'No more, please!' I even considered disguising it as chalk by white washing it.

Paraffin for our cottage lighting was a problem that was soon solved. On the little halt there was a paraffin lamp on each side. Every day the lampman at Dover Priory had to walk out to attend to the lamps, which was time consuming and a pain. It was not long before he made a deal with me: if I would look after the lamps, he would deliver paraffin every week for us to attend to the lamps with enough left over for our own lamps. This task fell to Hazel and she was soon spotted by train crews. Joking, I told them that Hazel was supplied with cap, waistcoat and uniform; some believed it!

What about food? In the 1950s eggs were still very scarce and I took Mrs Smith's advice and kept chickens, up to 35 at one time. During spring and summer I hardly had to feed them. I would let them out in the morning and they had the whole colliery site to roam in where there was plenty of insects and green stuff. The beach and rocks were favourite where they picked amongst



Den Russell

the seaweed for tiny shrimp-like creatures called Sand-hoppers. As dusk fell they would come home to roost, rushing to the meal troughs, but quickly losing interest with their crops already full. I bought myself a gun and put rabbits on our menu; our dog, Nellie, had a rabbit two or three times a week. My driver was Jim Watkins and for our meal breaks I supplied rabbit legs and he provided the pickles. Jim was a great storyteller and would tell outrageous tales with a straight face and people believed him.

I also bought a boat. Charlie Gatehouse kept a boat on the beach. He taught me so much about tides, winds, knots, how to make lobster pots, longlining and how to care for the boat. All this provided us with fish, a bounty from the sea. I palled up with Don Gatehouse (or Don McClellan as he was known). He took me out 'splashing' with a seine net trapping fish in large rock pools. On one occasion it was bitterly cold and I was not keen, but we had three goes with the net and caught so many fish we could have sunk the boat. We had a string of crab and lobster pots, but Don was not interested in the crabs so I cooked them, put them in a big box and carried it on my head through the tunnel and sold them to my workmates for 6d each; we were soon able to buy a gas



Russell Children

stove. I built myself a boathouse with timber from the old colliery building, the joy of my life, installing bunk beds and a kitchen range. Sometimes I slept there with the sound of the surf on the shingle a wonderful opiate. I bought a trammel net and the first time I used it there were 72 Huss and goodness knows what else in it. We had no fridge or freezer so selling was the only option. The going price was 10 shillings (50 pence) a score.

The sea was not always friendly. The night of the great storm and floods of 1953 was horrendous and frightening when we lost the sea wall with huge plumes of white water soaring into the air. The spray was

hitting our roof and the wind took one of our windows off its hinges. We took the mattress off the bed, dragged it downstairs and slept in the kitchen. We were glad to see the back of that night.

The nearest residence to the railway cottages was the bungalow where the Gatehouse family lived. One night we were woken by Charlie saying his pregnant wife was not well. Hazel saw that the baby was coming and help was needed. I went up to the signal box and asked for a doctor to come. Dr. Tolland arrived by special engine. She insisted that I stay with her to help deliver the baby - not my scene at all! After three hours a boy was born and I could go home. 'No, you can't' said the doctor, 'there's more to come!' Twenty minutes later a baby girl arrived. Being premature the babies had to go to hospital, so I arranged for a train to stop and an ambulance to meet it at Dover.

Would anybody consider living somewhere similar? I hated the thought at first, but when it was time to leave, because it was lonely for our children, it was with a heavy heart. It taught us that life could be good, ignoring the 'must have' and 'throw away' society. We had no possessions to go wrong. There was a wireless, but it ran on batteries. Every Thursday I picked up my wages with nothing to knock a big hole in them.

New "Crypt" Group an Update

Cllr. Graham Wanstall - Chairman "The Crypt" Group

Many people were concerned that the tragic 1977 fire at the "Crypt" has never been permanently commemorated!

A group has been established with a dedicated committee to install and maintain a commemorative plaque and also to be interested and associated with the neglected site's future.

As the groups' chairman I thank Derek Leach, Terry Sutton, Cllr. Ann Burke, Charlie Elphicke M.P. and the many now retired firemen who fought the fire in 1977 for their help and assistance. We will remember the fireman, the three children and three adults who lost their lives in the fire and the four fireman awarded the Queen's Gallantry Medal.