

Memories of Dover

A Nostalgic Personal Perambulation.

Part Four - Transport

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In the previous trips down memory lane (Newsletters 101, 102 and 103) I looked at shops and buildings along the principal town route from Bridge Street as far as the seafront. In so doing I found myself reflecting on forms of transport. In the 1950s my general impression of travelling in the town and its surrounds was either by bus or by bike or simply by using one's 'plates of meat' (Shanks's Pony). Unlike today, the motor car was not dominant or a preferred choice of transport, probably because so few people could afford the luxury of a car. This made a considerable impact on the town scene as a picture of Biggin Street highlights – it shows people on bicycles, people walking and buses in line coming up the main street. Interestingly a second picture shows Biggin Street after the properties on the LHS (going seawards) had been demolished, removing, at a stroke, small business outlets, homes, and a discreet court or two.

One feature that remains in my mind is the bus service number 86. East Kent Road Car Company (EKRRCC) was the provider of the bus services at this time and the vehicles had a very distinctive livery of burgundy and



Biggin Street After Widening

cream. In my mind's eye I recall a double decker bus whose sole route, it seemed to me, was that of Tower Hamlets to East Cliff. The bus in question was possibly the oldest in the local fleet and may have been a Leyland Titan – someone better placed than I may be able to clarify that specific point. In any event this breed of bus, I believe, was something of a workhorse from the 1940s until possibly the 1970s or beyond. This particular bus would travel down from Tower Hamlets turn right into the High Street and make its way down the town ending up at the Eastern Docks (which in those days had a brick wall and gates for entry). At that point, roughly where the roundabout is found today, the bus would



Biggin Street Before Widening



Tower Hamlets East Cliff bus 1950s

reverse into Athol Terrace and pause before it retraced its route. Of course, in those days there were bus conductors on board, in addition to a driver, and this must have been of great help to the latter when undertaking such a reversing manoeuvre. The picture shows the bus at the Eastern Docks terminus point.

I see it indicates Tower Hamlets and Chamberlain Road. I always felt, for some reason, that the bus having travelled up Tower Street turned right into South Road then reversed into Curzon Road as its terminus stop in the Hamlets rather than travelling much further towards Chamberlain Road. Whatever, all I recall is that this bus was a permanent feature of life in the main street of Dover for quite some time. As an aside, I recall the Maxton service bus used to reverse into Approach Road from Folkestone Road when it reached Maxton. Conveniently the EKRCC used to publish a little manual of its bus fleet with the registration numbers of the buses and this proved useful for youngsters like me who enjoyed bus spotting! - Registration numbers from memory were letters e.g. JG, FN, GFN and then numbers.

There were two routes to Folkestone - one via Capel, usually a double decker, and a service through the Alkham Valley usually by a single decker, a Dennis Lancet Park Royal I believe, the lower half of its body being burgundy in colour while the upper half was cream. The driver sat in a cab that extended forward from the main seating area of the coach, which cab occupied the offside half of the bonnet area, while above the nearside bonnet area was open (possibly services 90 via Capel, and 91 or 90A via Alkham, respectively).

Other main routes were to Canterbury, Ramsgate (number 87) as well as town services. There was even a bus service to West Langdon served by an elderly single decker, but where it turned round when it reached its rural destination I do not know.



Man of Kent Steam Engine

The main bus station and garage was based in Russell Street. It had been badly bombed in the war and required rebuilding. The main terminus for routes in Dover was in Pencester Road where most bus journeys began

and ended, including services to and from London Victoria coach station. The bus company offices in Dover were in a semi-detached property that used to stand where the Pencester Surgery is now located. The Russell Street bus station/garage was subsequently demolished, and its site is now part of the St James's development car park.

So much for buses: what about trains? Well, this was the era of British Railways, the era of the steam train and of passenger carriages in a green livery with slam doors. When in the 1950s I went off to boarding school each term, I would take a midmorning train from Dover Priory - London bound. More often than not this midmorning train was rather special - pulled by the *Man of Kent* engine and complete with buffet car (remember those?). This train was not too dissimilar to the *Golden Arrow* train which brought passengers from London Victoria to Dover Marine, invariably linking up with the *Invicta* passenger ferry.



Golden Arrow Train

This, in turn, would take passengers to Calais where they would be met by the *Fleche d'Or* train (Locomotive a vapeur!) for the onward service. The British trains may have been part of the Merchant Navy class of engines. Which reminds me, when they arrived at a London terminus how did the engines turn round for the return journey? I guess there must have been a turntable somewhere.

The *Invicta* was one of several ferries that were requisitioned during the war and it served as a troop ship, *HMS Invicta*, until she was returned to the Southern Railways fleet, where she served on the Dover Calais run for something like 25/26 years.

Mention of the *SS Invicta* turns my attention to the port and ferries. Many people who say they have been to Dover mean they have driven to the port for embarkation on a ferry, en route to France for pleasure or business. In the early 1950s the ferry services were very much limited in operation, unlike today. Passenger ferries were the norm, it is fair to say, in the immediate post war years. Although Townsend Brothers did carry cars pre-war, these were craned onto their vessels. The transforming event in the 1950s was the introduction of the car ramps onto ferries, enabling cars or other vehicles to be driven onto the ferries by their owners. By 1953, something like an average 100,000 vehicles per-year rolled on and rolled off the newly installed ramps onto the ferries.

By today's standards that would seem small beer, but it was the start of something that has grown phenomenally. In the 1950s the tourist trade and ferry operation was very much a seasonally influenced business. The summer season would see the greatest activity, but come the autumn and winter it was not unusual to see two or three ferries berthed in the Wellington Dock adjoining Snargate Street and Cundall's Wood Yard.



Halladale

From the Eastern Docks three ferries operating in the early days come to mind – the *TS Halladale* operated by Townsend Brothers, the *SS Lord Warden* run by British Rail and the *Prinses Josephine Charlotte* of Belgian Marine all carried vehicles with drive on facilities. The Ro-Ro service began!

The *Halladale* was an interesting ferry when it first arrived in Dover for it was a converted Royal Naval frigate! The Royal Navy had commissioned it pre-war and after the war it was sold to Townsends and converted. I remember Muriel Chambers was the first female purser (possibly in the Merchant Navy) on the *TS Halladale* and then later *Free Enterprise I*. Her daughter, Elizabeth, used to attend the Royal Merchant Navy School with myself and I seem to recall Elizabeth's in the Market Square was named after her. There were only the two vehicle berths at the time with their distinctive white structures on the ramp shore side, complete with Dover Harbour Board crest.

The *Lord Warden* was a tremendous workhorse over the years. I well remember her in service in the late 1960s when I was serving as an Assistant Steward on the *Maid of Kent*. *Prinses Josephine-Charlotte* seemed to continue in service for years and years and had the longest of the routes to serve - to Ostend. As ferries gradually increased in size, 'PJC' as she was called began to look

miniaturist! Fog in the Channel was a natural hazard and often led to one or more of the ferries trying to demolish Calais pier!

On the western side of the port, train ferries operated to Dunkirk and there were three twin funnel ferries very much alike that I recall, in fact sister ships, operating this service – *Hampton Ferry*, *Shepperton Ferry*, *Twickenham Ferry*. Very iconic vessels, almost flat bottomed I believe and all three had been requisitioned in the war and converted to mine layers. They were all therefore ‘HMS’ before their names in the war.

My father and my godfather served on *HMS Hampton* during the war. Although all three ships were British built, the *Twickenham Ferry* was owned and run by a French company. All three ships had a lengthy service record before being broken up. The train ferry dock I remember had a dock gate that would sink horizontally in the water to rest on the dock bed to permit ferries to enter and leave the dock. The berth came to the end of its life in the late 1980s.

The Admiralty pier was primarily for passenger ferries – along with the *Invicta* and *Canterbury* usually one or two Belgian Marine ferries would be moored there such as *Koning Albert*.

I remember travelling on these to Ostend, feeling they were overcrowded on occasions and I wondered if they carried passengers over their limit. Luggage was stowed on the aft end deck and I recall a particularly rough journey back from Ostend when the ferry did a quite spectacular roll near Calais, resulting in significant items of baggage just going overboard! On this occasion I remember leaving Ostend and, because of the state of the sea, the ferry hugged the Belgian and French coast until about Calais when it swung through ninety degrees to head straight across the Channel to Dover. In that manoeuvre the

ship heaved and rolled, in a drunken motion, having dramatic effects on some of the passengers as well as the lost luggage! Dover Marine was the destination for these passenger ferries which were also mail ships. The Marine Station had four lines into platforms, all of which are now history.

Because the ferry operations were fairly seasonal it meant that in the high season there were insufficient Dover staff, in terms of Customs and Immigration Officers, to cope with the additional volume of passenger and vehicular traffic and so additional officers from all over the country would be seconded to Dover on what was called Detached Duty (DD). Waterguard or Customs Officers wore uniforms rather like Merchant Navy uniforms with peaked caps and, in the summer, these would have a detachable white top added. They were either Assistant Preventive Officers - APO's (one gold ring on the sleeves of the jackets), Preventive Officers - PO's (two gold rings) and Chief Preventive Officers - CPO's (maybe some ‘scrambled egg’ on the cap peak). Immigration officers would often travel on board ferries in those days and on the Belgian passenger ferries in particular. This was very useful as it meant one could have one's passport checked and all appropriate documentation sorted during the three and a half hour trip, rather than being delayed going out or on the return journey.

The ferry industry has been transformed over the years by a number of factors including hovercraft, jetfoils (I liked these), the Channel Tunnel, the motorway link completed between Calais and Ostend and, of course, larger ferries, but there was something very special about activities on the cross Channel route in the 1950s leading to the 1960s. Interestingly many ferries when they stood down in Dover ended up in the Mediterranean Sea operating from countries such as Greece!