

# Crossing the Channel

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The following short article is not a history of crossing the Channel but a brief resumé of the experiences of some British travellers whose travel diaries the present writer has edited, and whose manuscripts fortunately still exist in the collections of the British Library, the National Archives at Kew, and elsewhere.

Our first traveller is Anne Flaxman, wife of the sculptor John Flaxman (1755-1826), who set out from London with her husband for the Continent on the 17th September, 1787. Their eventual destination was Rome, where Mr. Flaxman hoped to hone his skills as an artist by the study of ancient sculpture. By this time John Flaxman was not in the first flush of youth, but the couple had by then saved sufficient funds for the trip and also had a commission from the potter Josiah Wedgwood to make designs for the latter's wares. Their destination in France was not Calais, as Mr. Flaxman intended to visit a patron in northern France before arriving in Paris and thus, perhaps somewhat unusually to the mind of the modern traveller, they made their crossing from Brighton to Dieppe. Mrs. Flaxman waxes lyrical in her diary of her first sight of the "great kennel" as she called it, but is less enthusiastic as she is tossed about on the packet boat. Readers will also, of course, be aware that Brighton had at that time no harbour, nor was the first pier yet built. The couple had to take a rowing boat out to the waiting packet which they did twice, firstly to inspect the cabin and then, later that same day, to set sail. According to Mrs. Flaxman's account, the sea was rough, and their cabin was full of moaning and groaning and Flaxman snoring! Oddly, though Dieppe had at that time a harbour, the packet was met the next morning by a pilot boat filled with figures in red caps who conveyed the passengers to the beach. Mrs.

Flaxman relates "that here I gloried in being born an Englishwoman - Orpheus (of Orpheus and Euridice fame) sure was never heard of here the Women Labor the men smoke!" The Flaxmans did not return home until 1794, John Flaxman having attracted the attention of several patrons in Rome, especially that of the notorious Frederick Hervey, Earl of Bristol and Bishop of Derry who commissioned the very large Fury of Athamus still displayed at the family home, Ickworth House in Suffolk.

Our next voyager is Sarah Bentham (1733-1809) (step-mother to the philosopher Jeremy Bentham) who went to Italy with her son by her first marriage, John Farr Abbot, in the summer of 1793. The reason for the trip again was not specifically for the purposes of tourism but because her daughter-in-law suffered from tuberculosis and subsequently died in Naples during their trip. It should be noted, of course, that Britain was then at war with France and thus the party again set out, unusually, in a packet from Harwich bound for Hellevoetsluis close to Rotterdam in Holland. Again, Mrs. Bentham had a very bad night, but the most interesting circumstance of her journey, as we are told, is that, because of the then war-footing, the following morning they were pursued by a French privateer which was gradually gaining on them. Due to the calm sea, the French vessel set men in a rowing boat to pull it, and the English captain did the same, though they eventually escaped due to a breeze springing up. However, we learn that Mr. Abbot had his own carriage aboard because at one point the captain threatened to throw it overboard so that it should not be in the way of the guns!

Members will probably be greatly relieved to learn that with our next traveller we finally arrive at Dover. This was Charles Abbot

(1757-1829), another son of the aforementioned Sarah Bentham by her first marriage. Abbot had been an MP and Speaker of the Commons. On retirement he set off on this trip to Italy with his wife, rejoicing in the newly acquired title of Baron Colchester, chosen no doubt because his father had been once vicar of the said town. They set out from London on the 7th July, 1819 but, before arriving at Dover, readers will probably be interested to know that his lordship mentions the "lowerings" then being undertaken at Boughton Hill by the Chatham & Canterbury Turnpike Company, the hill apparently being the steepest between London and Dover. The present writer assumes that the new road was later substituted by that presently bypassing the village which is indeed still quite a climb. On arriving at Dover, Lord Colchester, being someone of importance, was shown around the works on the Western Heights, including the Grand Shaft, by Colonel East, the commanding officer of the fortifications. The travellers crossed the Channel to Calais on the post-office packet, but Lord Colchester makes no reference to any "event" on the sailing.

Our final travellers are Anne & Matilda Lucas, two spinster sisters from a notable Quaker family in Hitchin in Hertfordshire, with interests in banking and brewing in the town! When their artistic father died in 1870, the two young women had an income sufficient to spend the winter in Rome and this they did for the following thirty years, becoming something of an institution in Roman ex-patriot society. On their first visit they were accompanied by their mother, but thereafter they travelled alone, but frequently meeting "Roman" acquaintances on their outward journeys.

The first mention of Dover in their letters home is from the autumn of 1875, when they left Charing Cross Station at 7.47am and were looked after on the crossing to Calais by a

kind French sailor. The following year they travelled via Newhaven to Dieppe, and in 1880 from Folkestone to Calais. The old Royal Pavilion Hotel gets a mention. In November 1880, the sisters travelled via Dover again and Miss Lucas records that the boat remained in the harbour for some time before setting out, as the sea was rough. This occasioned their being late on arrival in Paris where they also met a helpless English woman with a baby. She apparently spoke no French but was travelling to Marseilles to meet her sailor husband. They all had to spend the night in a hotel before setting off the following morning from the Lyons Station for the south.

For their autumn of 1882 crossing, Miss Lucas mentions sailing in the Calais-Douvres which had been built in Newcastle for the London, Chatham & Dover Railway in 1877. Her design was supposed to minimize seasickness which Miss Lucas confirms, though the vessel only survived for 10 years.

As we learn, the advent of the railways changed the times of journeys forever, just as the aircraft has in the 20th century, but continental rail travel is today making inroads into the dominance of the latter. As Dovorians know well enough however, crossing the Channel remains an important factor in the lives of local people.



*The Calais-Douvres Ferry at Admiralty Pier Dover*