

Ron Chatburn - A Man of Our Times

—Peter Sherred—

I have had the privilege of knowing Ron Chatburn for over 50 years and am aware he has led an extremely full and interesting life. I have spoken with him recently to gather the information which, together with material he has supplied, has resulted in the following tribute. Ron is one of Dover's most distinguished activists and talking with him is always stimulating but can be challenging. This is therefore his story, in his own words, as given to me. Clarke was the maiden name of his mother, and all her married sisters gave this name to one of their sons.

Ron has lived in Dover for 54 years and is now 92. He is a founder member of the Dover Society. He was born of Yorkshire parents on 29 July 1932 in the village of Wellington, a few miles north of the delightful cathedral city of Hereford and 16 miles to the east of the border with Wales, hence his accent. Shortly afterwards, the family, including his elder sister and brother, moved into Hereford. He was educated at All Saints, St. Owen's and the Grammar School. Ron says that he spent the best years of his life in the arms of another man's wife – his mother! Regrettably, his parents died within eight months of each other when he was eighteen or nineteen. He thinks of them every day. He vividly remembers the Second World War.



St Owen's School

Ron was an altar boy, choir boy and deputy organist at a local church. He did a lot of walking and dancing, activities which he pursued for many years. He was always interested in steam-operated railways and, at the age of sixteen, he worked a 28-lever signal box – but don't tell anyone!

In 1948, at the age of sixteen years and one month, he became an articled pupil for four years to the City Surveyor of Hereford. He then became a permanent member of the staff. Ron studied each evening after a hard day's work and at weekends for seven years. This period of appointment was extended while he carried out two years of National Service, which young men normally commenced at the age of eighteen. He enjoyed applying his love of all aspects of mathematics in surveying, designing and constructing roads, sewerage systems, water supplies and street lighting, especially in connection with the provision of housing estates when houses were much needed after the end of the war.

During his youth, he played most sports and was the secretary of the Hereford Caving Club, where members enjoyed crawling through the limestone caves of south Wales. There were no Health & Safety regulations in those days! At the age of twelve, after taking piano lessons, he was in a concert party which entertained convalescing troops in hospitals. He played for singing, dancing and had a spot of his own. He also remembers entertaining African-American soldiers just a few days before D-day (6 June 1944). He was given lots of chewing gum!

Eventually, at the age of almost twenty-two, Ron commenced his National Service in the Royal Engineers. After basic training in England, he was selected to be a Clerk of

Works. On 6 January 1955, he sailed to Singapore through the Suez Canal, the voyage taking forty-two days instead of the normal twenty-eight days, as the ship crossed the equator to call at the island of Mauritius. This journey impressed him, as at that time, there was no TV, jumbo jets or package holidays, which now make people aware of the world. He worked with Chinese contractors constructing new buildings and maintaining and renovating existing buildings. He took some lessons and could speak quite good Malay. He always said that his experiences during his National Service were at least equivalent to going to university.

After finishing his two years in the army, he returned to the Hereford City office for one year, then worked in the County Highways office carrying out major improvements to increasingly busy roads and designing a motorway; but he had itchy feet, and, in 1958, he went to western Canada to work with a firm of consulting engineers in Edmonton, the capital city of the province of Alberta, designing and constructing first-time sewerage systems, water supplies, roads and sidewalks (footways). He also worked in their offices in Calgary, Vancouver and Saskatoon. The provinces of Alberta and British Columbia were becoming populated quickly, so Ron was very busy. He felt like a true pioneer!

In May 1960, he married Eve who had emigrated from London before Ron. She was a radiographer in a hospital. They spent their honeymoon travelling through the Rocky Mountains and western America. For various reasons, they returned to England in 1962.

Ron worked as a Senior Engineer for the Sittingbourne Council, carrying out major drainage systems and road widening projects. During this time, Ron and Eve had three bonny sons, Byron (1963), Dean (1965) and Fraser (1968). Sadly, in 2003, he and Eve

divorced. He said that she was an excellent wife and an outstanding mother.

In September 1970, Ron came to Dover Borough Council as Chief Engineer and later became the Deputy Borough Surveyor. He very quickly realised much was needed to improve the infrastructure of the town and drew up programmes of work over future years. He also worked hard to increase the enthusiasm of his staff. On 1 April 1974, local authorities were reorganised under the Local Government Act of 1972, Dover Borough, Deal Borough and Sandwich Borough Councils together with Dover Rural Council and Eastry Rural Council were combined to form Dover District Council (DDC). Ron was appointed Chief Engineer in this new authority.

I was a solicitor in the legal department of Dover District Council (DDC) and for a short period, I had the privilege of working with Ron, including appearances in the Magistrates' Court. He was responsible for new roads and the maintenance of existing roads, the sewerage systems including pumping stations, street lighting, traffic signals, car parks, waiting restrictions, pedestrian areas, concrete structures and sea defences. Perhaps his legacy to Dover could be summed up in the phrase *si monumentum requiris, circumspice* [if you seek (his) monument, look around] which was originally the epitaph for Sir Christopher Wren in St Paul's Cathedral.

Ron was a committee member of the southern branch of the Institution of Civil Engineers, the Institution of Municipal Engineers, the Institution of Highways and Transportation, and was Chairman of the Association of Kent Surveyors. He was secretary of the Dover History Society, organising speakers, outings and the annual convention and was a member of the Chamber of Commerce so that he could discuss their needs more readily.

In his personal life, Ron did much DIY work. He was on the parents' committee for St. Martin's school and the Boys' Grammar school. He became chairman of the 3rd Dover Scout group. He was a member of the Goodwin Sands Potholing Group and reckons that he is the only person to have performed magic on the Sands. He played the four-manual concert organ in the Maison Dieu for community singing at the monthly charity dances held by the town Mayoress. He has recently lent recordings of playing the organ so that copies may be made in connection with the re-opening of the Maison Dieu in May, after a long and expensive renovation. He was a member of two walking clubs and often planned and led walks.

Ron took the opportunity of early retirement to leave DDC in 1987. After a short time catching up on the maintenance of his house and garden, he went to Lesotho, Southern Africa for two years as a technical advisor to the Government. The country is one of only three countries in the world which are completely surrounded by just one other country. Lesotho is surrounded by the Republic of South Africa, which causes many problems. In Maseru, the capital of Lesotho, he had the experience of constructing a road for Pope John Paul II to travel on in his popemobile. He played the organ in a church. He often went walking in the Maluti Mountains and also did much pony trekking.



Maluti Mountains Lesotho

He was active in the local Save The Children organisation. He often talked with the President, who was Queen Mamohato and also with her eldest son, who later became King Moshoeshoe. He was a member of the Rotary Club of Maseru and travelled widely in South Africa and Swaziland.

He then worked in Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, as a technical advisor. The expected lifespan for a man there was 36 and falling! He played the organ in a church there and when the priest, in the local language, told the congregation that the organist was from England, they gave him a standing ovation. Ron later sent recordings of the organ in the Maison Dieu to accompany the choir when there was no electricity because they could not pay for it.

Ron then worked for a Danish firm of consulting engineers all over Tanzania. During his time there, he visited the island of Zanzibar. Having an addiction to playing The White Cliffs of Dover on a piano in unusual places, he was reluctant to play one in a church because the ivory notes were so yellow. It was pointed out to him that the colour of the notes was no indication of its playing capability – it just so happened that the elephant had smoked too much! He also played an organ in a church there, including variations on The White Cliffs of Dover.

He then worked in Cambodia with a French firm. Cambodia used to be part of the French empire, and many professional people still speak French. Ron's French was considered good enough to work with them. Later he worked as a volunteer with a charity trust helping the Zulus in Natal, South Africa. Before going, he read books about the history of the Zulus. He impressed them with his knowledge of their history and culture. Being aware of their part in the Anglo-Zulu war of 1897, they were proud when he told them that they had killed many British soldiers.

With a bell and dressed as Father Christmas, he did a little magic for the children before giving them presents.

On returning to Dover, he drove in a large convoy of over ninety vehicles to Romania, taking all sorts of aid to help the poor, abandoned children in orphanages. The buildings and the care of the children was terrible. There, he dressed as Father Christmas, and handed out presents to 110 children, who had their photographs taken on his knee. He also drove to what was then Yugoslavia during their civil war, taking aid for the many displaced people.

In 2000, at the age of sixty-eight, Ron trekked to the base camp of Mount Everest in Nepal.

He prepared classical music programmes for Dover Hospital Radio and held classical music evenings for over thirty years. As a member of the Elgar Society, he gave talks about the composer locally to raise money towards the £60,000 for a statue near Hereford Cathedral. He attended the unveiling ceremony and enjoyed talking to Dame Janet Baker, the president of the Elgar Society.

He is a Friend of Dover Museum and was vice chairman and membership secretary of the Friends of Dover Castle, and also Kent Archaeology. He is a patron of Dover Operatic and Dramatic Society, Dover Youth



RHDR Turntable

Theatre and of the Folkestone and Hythe Symphony Orchestra. With the White Cliffs organisation, he enjoyed clearing bushes and trees and constructing steps for the convenience of walkers. Ron is a Friend of the National Railway Museum in York. He worked on the preserved railway at Shepherdswell and belongs to the Remembrance Line Society, which is endeavouring to have a tram line leading to the harbour in Folkestone. Ron is a member of the Romney, Hythe and Dymchurch narrow gauge railway, and a photograph of Ron on the occasion of his ninetieth birthday shows him holding a special engine plaque commemorating the occasion. He is member of the British Music Hall society, and the International Brotherhood of Magicians – often inventing tricks which are published in magazines in the UK, America and New Zealand. He was a guide for the Western Heights and the Castle. He enjoys gardening; he says is no expert but undertakes the tasks just to keep fit. He often goes to the Marlowe Theatre in Canterbury. He visits elderly friends who are in care homes. He uses his free bus pass to advantage and has a senior rail card giving a one-third reduction of all fares.



Ron Chatburn

He spent much time in Calais and was a member of the Rotary Club of Calais Risban and the local magic club. Also being a member of a magic club in Ashford also, he reckoned that he was the only person who took part in the activities of two clubs in two different countries. Continuing his interest in Rotary, he joined the clubs of South Foreland and of Deal. He also attends the social events of the Rotary Club of Dover. He enjoys raising money, which is used for good purposes, planting bulbs on roundabouts and picking up litter. On his ninety-second birthday, he walked with Rotary friends along the cliffs from Dover to St. Margarets. He is also a member of Dover Probus - ex. PROfessional and BUSiness people. He was a member of the local Royal Engineers Association and paraded in Dover and Whitehall on Remembrance Sunday and is a member of the Royal British Legion. Together with Rotary, he sells poppies in November.

Ron has been to India ten times, each time for three months. He goes for magic conventions, where he is made most welcome and meets magicians from all over the country and Bangladesh. Many of them, from all walks of life, invite him to their part of India where everybody makes a big fuss of him and he is often taken to areas where people have never seen a white man before. He stays with an Indian family in Kolkata (Calcutta) and meets with their relatives, friends, work colleagues, and neighbours. In 2018, Ron played the organ in a Methodist church for the wedding of the daughter of the family. He played music by Wagner, Handel, Purcell, Bach, Schubert, Elgar, Tchaikovsky and Mendelssohn. The congregation had never heard this sort of music before, nor of their composers. While in India, Ron is not a tourist but one of the people. The trains are extremely cheap. The only non-Indian with 1,500 Indians, he has great fun travelling long distances in air-conditioned carriages with

sleeping berths. They share food, sing to each other, and he does a little magic. He visits some of the thirty-six Rotary clubs in Kolkata. At one club, he taught a choir to sing at an evening dinner celebrating the 100th anniversary of the founding of Rotary. He had the experience of pulling a rickshaw puller in his own rickshaw. A photograph of the event is displayed on the wall of his lounge. He pays for the education of poor children in Hyderabad.

He plays chess, duplicate bridge, whist and sudoku. He uses his computer to further educate himself, but becomes very angry when his computer fails to co-operate. He is an avid reader of books on all subjects. Ron has been a member of the local U3A (University of the Third Age) for many years, enjoying their monthly speakers and their winter courses including French, German, Psychology, Tai Chi and picture-frame making. He has taught chess.

Ron has obviously contributed much to the development of the Dover district and to its social and community life. He is most grateful to the many people of various nationalities and languages who have been so kind and helpful during his life. He has been to seventy-seven countries. He considers himself to be fortunate in being British and has had the opportunity to express himself and help others through his profession, even though working in all extremes of climates and subjected to noise, dust and fumes has worn him out. He says he was born at an early age into an old world and has continually exhausted himself trying to rejuvenate it. He is thankful that his mind and memory are still alert and fertile. He agrees with his father who said that you only get of life what you put into it. Ron believes in wearing away rather than rusting away, and that he who manages his time, masters his life. He retains an entertaining sense of humour.