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# Joe Harman

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## Freeman of Dover 1914-2007

A TRIBUTE BY DEREK LEACH

**JOE HARMAN** died on 28 January aged 92. His life was in some ways unique, always interesting, sometimes exciting, adventurous and always lived to the full, often for the benefit of others.

I think Joe's name was the most recent to be added to the Roll of Dover Freeman in July 1989, claiming his right by being married to the daughter of a Freeman.

He was born on 28 December 1914 and, his mother claimed, his birth was hastened by the fright from the first bomb to fall on Britain in Dover on Christmas Eve 1914. Joe lived in the same house in St. Radigund's Road all his life until forced by ill health into a care home two years ago. At the age of seven he developed diphtheria and spent 13 weeks in the isolation hospital without seeing his mum and dad. Apparently he picked up several swear words from the older boys, which were banned as soon as he got home! When his father, a sergeant in Dover's own police force, died at the age of 41, Joe had little choice but to leave Barton Road School to become the family breadwinner for his mother and two younger sisters.

He became a tram conductor in the days when you could go from the town centre to River for an old penny and quickly got to know all the girls on the route! When buses replaced the trams in 1937 Joe became a bus conductor, (he was on the last tram and the first bus) then a bus driver and, throughout the war, a bus mechanic as well. He spent the war dodging bombs and shells, narrowly

avoiding death more than once. Joe had to swap his shift in March 1942 because of a Home Guard exercise and so missed the bombs that destroyed the bus garage, killing 11 of his mates, including the one who had taken his place that evening.

In 1955 Joe became an ambulance driver and eventually retired as an ambulance service controller. As you can imagine he had many experiences – some sad and others amusing like the lady who cut her bottom, when the chamber pot she was sitting on cracked, and Joe had to stick a plaster on. He didn't go into the shop she worked in for weeks!

That was his working life, but he had many leisure interests.

Joe was a scout from the age of ten, even though you had to be 11. When asked how old he was, he did not lie, but whispered 'nearly' and shouted 11. He got in! Later he became a rover scout as well as a cub and scout master. Throughout the Second World War senior members of the scouts and girl guides met in safety at the Guide Cottage beyond Elms Vale recreation ground, which soldiers and sailors based in Dover with scout and guide connections also attended. They sent out news bulletins all over the world to Dover scouts and guides serving in the forces. It was always headed 'published monthly, shells and other circumstances permitting'. On one occasion the well had frozen. Not to be deprived of their hot cocoa, Joe shovelled snow into the dixie. With cocoa made, he was asked when the shovel had been used last, 'Moving

cowpats off the hockey pitch,' he replied. Despite the war, Joe said that those times spent at the Cottage were the happiest times of his life - not surprising when it was also when he met and courted his beloved Rosa, marrying as soon as the war ended.

Joe was a Christian throughout his life. He attended Buckland Church Sunday

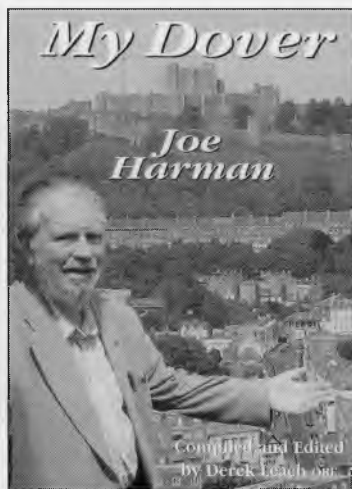
School and was later a server and candle boy at Charlton Church, but courting Rosa from St. Mary's he moved there and stayed for the rest of his life.

Joe and Rosa loved to travel - walking, cycling and later in their old van. This included walking completely round the coast of Kent - in easy stages. But they also managed to cover most of England and Europe long before the days of package holidays.

Throughout his life Joe always took a keen interest in both the history of the town and in what was going on during his lifetime. He was also a keen photographer right from his childhood and always carried his camera with him even when working on the trams and buses. His large collection of Dover photographs was donated recently to the Museum. He researched many aspects of Dover's history doggedly, accumulating a vast, detailed knowledge. I am sure Trish Godfrey thought he was part of the furniture of the reference library as he pored over old borough records or old newspapers. On one occasion when



Joe Harman, Freeman of Dover



Joe Harman's book cover - 'My Dover'

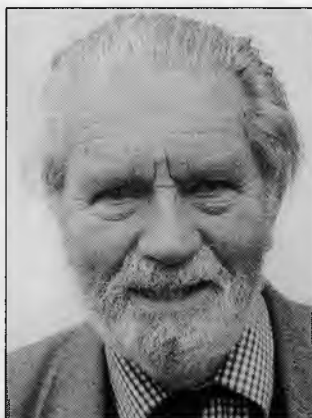
researching Dover's ironworks, he was looking for details of the Stiff family and told the Librarian he wanted to look for Stiffs in St. Mary's Cemetery records, which caused a laugh. It gave Joe enormous pleasure when we produced a book, *My Dover*, based upon his life story and some of his research. Much more remains to be published.

Joe represented Dover on the Kent Federation of History Societies and was one of the first members of the Dover History Society when it was founded in 1971, later becoming its chairman and was also a member of The Dover Society, Friends of the Museum and Dover Castle. But interests were not confined to a love of Dover's history. He belonged to the Kent Archaeological Society, the Police History Society, the Brewery History Society and had a great love of water and windmills. With grandparents living on Romney Marsh he knew and loved it well, becoming an active member of the Romney Marsh Research Trust.

Joe even found time for voluntary work, becoming a founder member of the

Hospital League of Friends in 1955 and remaining an active member for many years, including organising the Hospital Fete for five years. He was on the Road Safety Committee in the 1950s and on the Dover Trades Council. A life long first aider with the St. John Ambulance Brigade, he became a first aid instructor with the Red Cross in 1960 and was still training guides for their first aid badge at the age of 86.

With failing health, Joe moved to the Old Vicarage Home at Tilmanstone in August 2004. Despite not being able to stand, walk or see for the last year or so, he could still talk and remember well.



*Joe Harman at 86*

During my weekly visits we would chat about where I had been and what I had seen - he had always been there too - and of course we talked about old Dover. He always responded to my queries about Dover. Now when I get stuck in my research, and it's happened already, I won't be able to think, 'No problem, I'll ask Joe'.

What a man! What a life!

With the passing of Joe Harman, Dover has lost one of its best connections with its past, but has also lost a fine Christian gentleman who was always willing to help others. We shall miss you, Joe.

## SOCIETY MEETINGS

**November 2006**

### DOVER PRIDE

*A report by Jack Woolford on a talk by Paul Watkins, leader of D.D.C.*

Although visibly chuffed by recent victory over the threatened open prison (which reprieved Phase II of the White Cliffs Business Park), Paul Watkins, armed with the latest in desk-top projectors (but hampered by a small and wobbly screen) began with illustrations of Dover's drawbacks: its run-down areas, job shortages, health and educational shortcomings and crime. Consequently Dover Pride, set up in 2003 and with a programme manager in 2005, is a partnership of business, local and regional organizations, and the people of Dover to

improve environment, business, homes, jobs, town centre, schools, colleges and transport. Projects are to create a high quality environment, develop quality businesses and homes, regenerate the town centre, create new jobs and bring in first-class education. These already involve the Dover Town Investment Zone, Buckland Mill, Dover Priory, the Sea Sports Centre, expansion of the port, and the Channel Tunnel Rail Link. They would improve Dover's image, improve the way people feel about Dover and raise the town's profile as a visitor destination.