

History Through Fiction

Some thoughts on re-reading 'Dover Harbour' by Thomas Armstrong

By Merrill Lilley

I have a feeling that my view of many of the most important events in history is coloured by my reading of historical fiction. Certainly I remember more historical facts from reading novels than from reading history books.

To give one example. I must have read several novels which included detailed accounts of the Battle of Waterloo (1815) obviously told from the point of view of characters in the novel. Therefore my impressions of the battle come from the pens of Georgette Heyer, Cynthia Harrod-Eagles or Bernard Cornwall. Here are the dashing young officers who attended the ball on the eve of the battle then, following the Duke of Wellington, left early to prepare for the battlefield, many of them to die there. Here are the society ladies who followed the army to Brussels, attended the balls and later nursed the wounded. Here, too, are the battle plans, the strategies, the mistakes and the triumphs. The Duke of Wellington inevitably appears somewhere in the narrative.

It is a joy to explore the Elizabethan court with Philippa Gregory, the Peninsular War with Bernard Cornwall or the Anglo-Saxon world of Boudica with Manda Scott to name but a few notable series. However, one of my favourite books is 'Dover Harbour' by

Thomas Armstrong. The story opens in 1789 and ends in 1809. In this period the reader learns a great deal about the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars from the viewpoint of the characters in the novel. At the same time one absorbs a lot of information about the town of Dover; the Harbour Commissioners; the problems of the silting up of the harbour and the plans to remedy this; the constant efforts of the smugglers to evade the customs officers; but overall a picture of what the town was like in those times and the lives of people who lived there.

The main characters are the members of two families, the Faggs, who live in Townwall street and the Rocheforts who live in Snargate Street. John Fagg is a ship owner and merchant, who has a profitable sideline in smuggling. Henry Rochefort is a banker with interests abroad. It is through them that the reader learns about the town. They attend the church of Saint Mary the Virgin for services of weddings, funerals or memorials. The bells of St. Mary's sound high above Peter Monin's clock. The church is also used for the Jurats of Dover to elect their Mayor and for the poll of parliamentary candidates. The novel starts, appropriately, with a memorial service at St. Mary's for five

young men, two sons of the Rochefort family and three from the Fagg family, who perished when a ship, caught in a sudden squall, was cast on the rocks below Archcliffe Point.

Most of the important townspeople attend the service, among them the Mayor, a crowd of Jurats, the Clerk to the Paving Commissioners, the Collector of Customs, the Agent Victualler, representatives of the Town Guilds, Loadmanage men, Captains of Mail Packets, the Town Clerk; in fact, all those with connections to the town and harbour.

Thomas Armstrong soon has his readers absorbed in the story and, with his skill and experience as a novelist, gradually expands our knowledge of historical fact with details of the town and the people. The garden of the Fagg house slopes down to the ropewalk and the children play there, digging channels in the shingle. John Fagg, setting out for the South Pier, passes the ruins of the ancient St. Martin-le-Grand, the old Guildhall, the gloomy jail, the Almshouse Hospital, and takes the narrow Last Lane into Snargate Street, which has a plaque indicating that the Snar gate once stood there. Beyond is the Pent and ahead Custom House Quay, the wharf which fringed the Basin. Towards the end of the South Pier stands the Pilot's Look-out from which can be seen ships proceeding towards Dungeness, the shipbuilding yards below Archcliffe Point and the earthworks of Townshend's battery. At low water the Tidal Harbour is dried out and he can see a twelve-foot-high



Old map of Dover

accumulation of shingle between the pier heads. This problem of the shingle is a concern throughout the novel. Mr Fagg then proceeds via Crane Street and Strond Street to Elizabeth Street, where his warehouse is located. His morning's walk has provided the reader with a mental map of the dock area of Dover. In his storehouse are tubs of tobacco from Bristol, boxes of bellows from Kings Lynn, cases of clay pipes from Poole, bales of woollens from Yorkshire, glassware from Newcastle and violin bellies from London.

In the same way the writer reveals, little by little, knowledge of the furniture and the dress of the period and the way of life of the townspeople. When Susan Fagg wishes to walk into town to go to the Albion library, Townwall Street is thick with mud and she sits on a gilt chair to put on clumsy iron pattens to protect her shoes from the mud. When Mrs Polly Fagg takes tea with her friend, Mrs Elizabeth Rochefort in the drawing room of her Snargate Street house the servant girl announces that Teakettle Tom is at the door and her mistress takes from her reticule a

penny to buy enough water for their afternoon brew from the Ladywell, set in the wall of the Maison Dieu. A pedlar calls frequently at their houses and sells broadsheets, pamphlets, ghost stories, ballads, love songs and fairy tales for the children.

When Susan walks into town she wears a cambric bonnet and a glossy, wadded silk mode coat with a pretty muff to match. John Fagg on one occasion is clad in a long green coat which comes down to his worsted stockings and 'he wore his hair plain, not so much for better cleanliness but because he felt that some gesture was needed against Mr. Pitt's tax on hair powder'.

Social events and assemblies were held in the Royal Oak Rooms. Guests arriving by carriages or on horseback could find space in the cobbled yard of the inn or through the market place in the nearby Antwerp Stables. The assembly rooms included a ballroom and card rooms, where the gentlemen played loo, quinze, vingt-et-un or whist.. Supper would usually be served about midnight. In the winter children had dancing lessons there.

Dover had a market weekly on Wednesday and Saturday. Stalls were put up under pillars of the old Guildhall and overflowed into the Market Place, selling fish, vegetables, game,

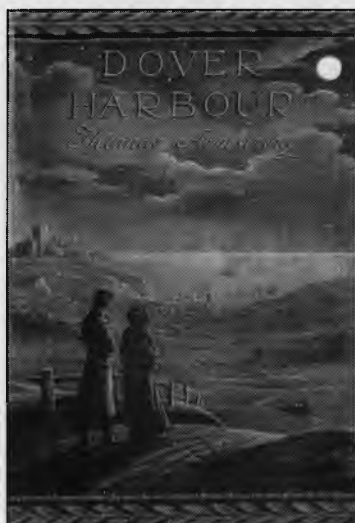
fruit and poultry. French traders mixed with the Kentish dealers and a strange mixture of French and Kentish dialects could be heard.

The story has everything, deaths and marriages, smugglers and customs men, fishermen and bankers, treachery and loyalty, everyday folk and historical figures. William Pitt and the Duke of Wellington play their parts. The Napoleonic War rages and its battles claim their victims. The parents age and the children grow up.

The main road out of Dover to London passed Buckland Bridge, which, on the boundary of the town was the place where the townspeople gathered to welcome distinguished visitors. Towards the end of the novel Charles Fagg elopes with Caroline Rochefort and when they return to Dover a married couple the whole town turns out to greet them at Buckland Bridge and escort them into the town. It is 1809 and Charles Fagg has to return to his

regiment in the Peninsula. The reader is left with the family in Dover, wondering what their future will be.

Thomas Armstrong, writing in 1943, researched the period with his usual acute perception and attention to historical accuracy and gave his readers a glimpse of the Dover of the early nineteenth century. We are left wishing he had written a sequel.



Cover of book of *Dover Harbour*