

DOVER MARINE STATION

A Talk by Terry Sutton

When a Tenterden-based holiday company, Travelux, wanted someone to talk about the history of Dover Marine Station (now the port's cruise terminal one) they sought the help of The Dover Society. Our former chairman Terry Sutton was 'volunteered' for the task and this is part of what he said:

This magnificent building, Cruise Terminal One, has played a major role in Great Britain's modern history. Once, this building was Dover's Marine Station and through these portals have passed kings and queens, visiting heads of state, diplomats and millionaires.... and quite a few international crooks.

More than 150 years ago, around 1850, the Admiralty built a huge pier, Admiralty Pier, to shelter ships of the Royal Navy.

In 1909 this pier was widened, using chalk infill cut from the famous white cliffs of Dover and in 1913 work started on the construction of this Marine Station on the widened pier.

Then came World War One and construction work was speeded up so that the station could be used by ambulance trains carrying the wounded from the Western Front in France to hospitals in the UK.

Between 1915 and the end of the war in 1918 more than 1.2 million wounded men were landed here, with up to 20 ambulance trains departing every day.

The station was eventually opened for civilian use in January 1919 and between the wars the station was used by the famous Golden Arrow service between London and Paris. Many a time the station's platforms and quays were the scene of state welcomes to visiting monarchs from

around the world.

With the outbreak of World War Two the station was again pressed into military use and during the Dunkirk Evacuation in 1940 it was here where nearly 200,000 British and Allied troops were landed from destroyers and scores of other craft.

The exhausted troops brought home with them scores of dogs and other pets, regimental mascots, which all had to be put down by the RSPCA to prevent disease spreading. The authorities had enough on their hands at this dangerous time.

During the 1939-45 war Dover was bombarded by bombs and shells - the shells being fired from gun emplacements on the French coast 21 miles across the English Channel. One never knew when one was coming to crash down on the town or the harbour installations. 2,226 shells fell on Dover, more in the harbour waters plus around 400 bombs - not a pleasant experience for anyone in the area. No wonder it became known worldwide as Hellfire Corner.

During the bombardment this station was badly damaged and one bomb penetrated the roof and made a large crater out there in the car parking area.

After the war the rich and famous continued to pass through the station. I remember interviewing and photographing stars here including Humphrey Bogart,

Dover Harbour from the Western Heights

Lauren Bacall, Bob Hope, Bridget Bardot and Rex Harrison. Here I witnessed the state welcome to the French president soon after World War Two.

I believe, but I am not too sure, but I think the Olympic torch was landed here in 1948 when Britain last hosted the games. It was brought across the Channel on a British destroyer, H.M.S. Bicester, landed at these docks, and then carried through the streets of Dover by a Dover runner Sid Doble on its way to London.

I was at this station to witness the arrival of the first refugees from the Hungarian uprising against the Russian invasion of their country in October 1956. It was quite a theatrical occasion with an attractive Hungarian girl in riding breeches, sporting a bloodstained bullet head wound, carrying the Hungarian flag at the head of a weary collection of freedom fighters.

However, gradually air travel took over and, with the opening of the Channel Tunnel in 1994, the railway company handed the station over to Dover Harbour Board.

The port authority, diversifying, decided to attract cruise liners to Dover and spent around £10 million restoring this property, a Grade 2 listed building. Because it is listed the railway track is still retained beneath the existing internal car parking area. For the same reason the war memorial to railwaymen killed in WW1 remains in situ.

As you can see great care was taken to recapture the features of this former Cathedral-style station, the platforms of which once bustled with international travellers.

At the main entrance hall to the cruise terminal, on a wall, you will find a plaque that commemorated the landing here of the body of the Unknown Warrior of World War One. His remains - who he was no one knows - were collected from a battlefield, along with others, and his were then selected to represent all those other unknown British soldiers who died on the Western Front. His body was rested in a castle at Boulogne and then brought across the Dover Strait with an escort of British and French warships to be landed here, just

outside these windows, before being taken by train to Westminster Abbey where it remains. The Dover Society, which I represent today, played the major role in placing the plaque on this building.

When you arrived at this terminal you might have seen a large building on your right. This was the former Lord Warden Hotel, now offices owned by Dover Harbour Board. Over the years the hotel welcomed many distinguished guests including Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray and others waiting for calmer weather to cross the Channel. It was at the Lord Warden Hotel that Napoleon III was re-united with his wife, the Empress Eugenie and their son the Prince Imperial. This was after his defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71. He was made a prisoner of war and only released on condition he abdicated and went into exile. He chose England and went to live at

Chislehurst in Kent. After his death Eugenie had a fine old time, according to the gossip of yesteryear.

Because of the popularity of Dover as a cruise liner port (it is the second busiest in the UK after Southampton), a second purpose-built terminal (Cruise Terminal 2) has been constructed seawards of this property.

Dover remains the busiest ferry port in Europe and the third busiest port in the UK for the import of fruit, mostly bananas (20 billion this year) and pineapples.

Dover Harbour Board is now planning to spend an estimated £300 million on the provision of a second ferry terminal, with four berths, just over there at the Western Docks. And there are proposals to extend the berthing facilities at the two cruise liner berths to meet the requirements of the bigger cruise liners that are now coming into use.



Admiralty Pier, 1910