

2nd Talk

TSS Dover

A talk by Richard Moffatt *reported by Terry Sutton*

Our second speaker at our public meeting in January was Richard Moffatt of the Dover Steamship Company who, in an amusing delivery, told of efforts to restore the former Dover ferry TSS Dover that sailed between Dover and Calais 1965-1980.



TSS Dover

© Don Smith

To me it seemed more a triumph of hope over experience, as Samuel Johnson once said about an unhappy marriage. But there was no doubt about our speaker's enthusiasm for the project.

Richard, a former railwayman, related the sorry 47 year history of the former Sealink ferry Dover, now comfortably nestling in the shallows at her berth at Central Quay, Middlehaven, near the famous Middlesbrough Transporter Bridge.

He told us how the 3,602-ton ship, built by Swan, Hunter & Wigham Richardson at Wallsend in 1965 (I attended the launching ceremony), came into service at Dover that year. The TSS Dover (with the yard number of 2013) a stern loading, twin screw, turbine steamer had the distinction of being the last steam vessel ordered by British Rail. She then could carry 1,000 passengers and 205 cars.

When Dover entered service in June 1965 she was the first vessel to appear in the new B.R. livery of a 'monastral' blue hull,

white waterline/chocolate brown boot topping: white superstructure, pearl grey masts, ventilators and davits. The funnel was painted red with the new logo that consisted of two railway lines with crossings between them and a pale blue house flag was adopted with this logo.

On the 13th June her first voyage was a press junket to Boulogne to open the newly constructed car terminal.

In 1967, Dover was used at for a short period at Folkestone and later that year on the Newhaven to Dieppe route. From 1969 she transferred to Holyhead - Dun Laoghaire, with brief spells between Preston - Boulogne and Heysham-Dun Laoghaire. On the 8th November, 1970 she returned to Dover to resume her cross channel duties. In June 1972, Dover was transferred to the Folkestone - Boulogne route for a passenger's only service.

In 1973 further changes to the vessels paint work were made with the legend Sealink painted on the hull.

From June 1974 to the end of 1975 Dover operated as extra cover on the Holyhead - Dun Laoghaire route.

In 1976, Dover was back on the Dover - Calais route, however on the 14th June Dover collided with the Breakwater on entering Dover East whilst berthing, sustaining heavy damage. On October 17th, Dover returned to Holyhead for to provide cover for the damaged Avalon.

The ferry was then converted in 1977 to take drive-through vehicles and renamed the Earl Siward. In 1979 she resumed operations from Holyhead. When withdrawn on the 2nd November 1980 she was the last railway-owned, steam turbine vessel to operate on the Irish Sea routes. At the end of the year she returned to service from Dover and on the 14th April 1981 made her final run on the Dover - Calais route.

On the 25th November 1981, she was sold to Sol Ferries Ltd, Cyprus who renamed the ship again as the Sol Express. As such the ferry took part in the evacuation of Americans from Beirut. But the Cypriot owners found there was a shortage of parts for repairs for the ship and they sold the vessel in 1986 to a Newcastle nightclub owner who in, 2008, gave the ferry the "tacky" name Tuxedo Royale for use on the Tyne and then the Tees.

After several years at Newcastle the ship was laid-up at Hartlepool and taken to various northern ports where it partially sank. "Since then no one has claimed ownership of the vessel" he said.

The original aim, explained Richard, was to restore the ferry and tow it back to Dover where it could become a tourist attraction and a work centre for young maritime apprentices.

"But that idea got a cold shoulder from Uncle Bob," said Richard referring to a decision by Dover Harbour Board and its chief executive Dr Bob Goldfield.

The more immediate need, explained the speaker, was to repair the ship sufficiently so it could be taken to a dry dock on Teesside where the gates needed repairing. The cost of doing this was estimated at £250,000 and so, he said, a professional fund-raiser had been appointed in Folkestone.

Richard commented that with no one claiming ownership of the "rust bucket" vessel it was possible to acquire it for nothing.

But, he said, the estimated overall cost of restoring the ship to make it seaworthy was in the region of £14-£15 million.

If you are interested in joining please contact:

Membership Secretary - Sarah-Jayne Hart
On line: membership@tssdover.co.uk



TSS Dover at Middlesbrough

© John Coates