

The Day the Balloon went up in Dover

Terry Sutton

The English Channel was swum more than one hundred times in 2013, more than in the first eighty years of the sport that followed Matthew Webb's pioneer crossing. As a result, with so many successes, no longer are there headlines in newspapers when another crossing from Dover is notched up.

How different it was in the heydays of Channel swimming when the Daily Mail and then Billy Butlin organised international races from France to the Kent coast. Today the French maritime authorities will not allow Channel swims to start from the French side. On those far off days Dover and the cliffs were crowded with spectators waiting to welcome the race winners ashore.

But they were not the only days when



Jean-Pierre Blanchard

thousands of spectators poured into Dover to watch an attempt to cross the Strait.

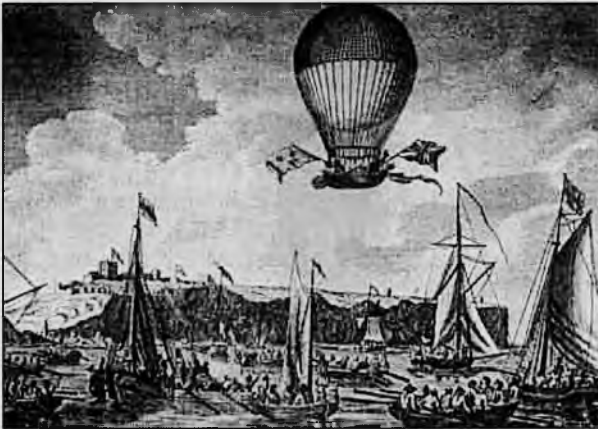
One time was in January 1785 when a brave Frenchman was preparing, with a colleague, to fly from Dover to France in a gas-filled balloon.

M. Jean-Pierre Blanchard was a great believer in hydrogen gas balloons and, reluctantly, he agreed to be

accompanied on his pioneer flight by the American Dr John Jeffries.

Arrangements were made for the couple to set off from Dover Castle and the event was so important that on the morning of their departure the military authorities fired three guns from the castle ramparts. A flag was hoisted at the castle when M. Blanchard began filling his balloon and a fourth gun was fired when the filling operation was completed.

Those in the castle grounds were astounded to see the shape of the passenger basket (in those days described as the car) attached to the balloon. It was in the shape of a boat with oars. Blanchard believed he would be able to use the oars to navigate the direction of the balloon once airborne. The basket was loaded with ballast, a sack of letters, a compass,



Blanchard - Cross Channel Flight

barometer, thermometer, two life jackets and, most necessary, a bottle of brandy.

The place of take-off was near the site where once stood the Queen Elizabeth Pocket Pistol (not far from the present NAAFI building) and soon after one o'clock the balloon began to rise. When clear of the castle M. Blanchard stood in the basket and bowed to the crowd of spectators.

Soon things began to go wrong and those watching from the cliffs saw the balloon dipping towards the sea. To prevent an unwanted swim the duo in the basket began hurling out the ballast and the balloon rose again. But, mid-Channel, the balloon dipped towards the sea once more and other items had to be ditched to lighten the load. An anchor went - and even Blanchard's trousers!

Just in time there was a change in air pressure. The balloon went up and was able to drift comfortably over the French cliffs.

The balloon landed in a forest near Calais soon after three o'clock-the crossing taking about two hours.

The French were waiting for them and they carried the intrepid flyers in triumph to Calais where Blanchard was awarded the Freedom of the Town. There was a scheme to erect a statue in honour of Blanchard in Calais but it is doubtful if this was ever done.

**Some 24 years later M. Blanchard was up in a balloon again at The Hague when he suffered a heart attack, resulting in him falling to the ground. The fall caused serious injuries from which he died a year later.*

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