



Folkestone & District Local History Society

www.folkestonehistory.org

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CHAIRMAN'S REPORT by Alan F Taylor

At the March meeting I gave my illustrated talk entitled; 'A Potted History of Folkestone Harbour' which covered two-hundred and fifty years. I started with an engraving of the Town and Port of Folkestone from the south east, which comes from the History of Kent written by Edward Hasted, first published in 1790. I went on to talk about the Stade, the timber jetties and groins, which were often damaged by storms. To help pay for the repairs coal dues were introduced at 10 pence a ton. I followed on talking about building the stone harbour (1809 and 1820), the fishing fleet; the collier brigs; the harbour silting up, which caused the harbour company to go bankrupt; the South Eastern Railway Company purchasing the harbour for £18,000; the introduction of the packet boats from Folkestone to Boulogne; the branch line to the harbour; the new custom house and harbour station; building a low water landing; the introduction of larger paddle steamers; extending the harbour station on to the low water landing; building the pier extension (1897-1905) to as we see it today; the South Eastern Railway Company merging with the London Chatham and Dover Railway Company in 1899, becoming the South Eastern & Chatham Railway Company; the introduction of turbine steamers in 1904; the railways being divided into regions in 1923 when we became the South Eastern Railway; the privatisation of Sealink in 1984 and its sale to James Sherwood, Chairman of Sea Containers. Sea Containers sold the shipping company to Stena Line in 1990 which itself closed the Folkestone route on 31st December 1991, after which various ships and Seacats tried to run a service to Boulogne, but failed. Sea Containers sold the harbour to Roger de Haan for £11 million.

Sixty people attended the meeting twenty-two of whom were visitors.

At the April meeting we welcomed guest speaker Doug Lindsay who presented his illustrated talk on 'The Kent & East Sussex Railway'. Doug said in the 1800's before railways, goods were transported by horse and cart and heavy goods on canals. In those days working class people couldn't afford to travel and they stayed in the towns and villages where they were born and brought up. In the 1900's, with the coming of the railways, things changed - goods were carried by freight trains, people could afford to travel, and seaside towns started to flourish with the arrival of holiday makers.

The Tenterden Railway was proposed to run from Maidstone to Hastings via Headcorn, Tenterden, and Appledore. The section from Headcorn to Appledore was authorised in 1892, and agreement was reached in 1896 with the South Eastern Railway over the operation of the line. In 1898, the proposal was abandoned in favour of extending the Cranbrook and Paddock Wood railway to Tenterden and Appledore. In 1896 the government passed a Light Railways Act allowing cheaper construction methods, but with a speed restriction of 15 miles an hour. This was abandoned in 1899 as it was too expensive to construct and the South Eastern Railway again backed the Tenterden Railway; but no work was done and powers to construct the line lapsed in 1901. The South Eastern & Chatham Railway, seeking to relieve themselves from building the Tenterden Railway, entered into an agreement with the Rother Valley Railway for the latter to build and operate the line from

Tenterden to Headcorn. In 1904 the Rother Valley changed its name to Kent & East Sussex Light Railway.

Holman F Stephens, who took an apprenticeship in the Metropolitan Railways, was appointed engineer in 1922. Doug went on to tell us the other stations built on the line, which were Robertsbridge, Bodiam, Northiam, Wittersham Road, Rolvenden (which was the original Tenterden station), Headcorn, High Halden Road, Biddenden, Frittenden Road and High Halden Road.

Upon nationalisation, one of the surviving two locomotives and all but the newest rolling stock were scrapped and birdcage carriages were put into service. Mixed trains continued to run, but were now provided with a brake van. Two freight trains a day were run, with hop-pickers' specials running until 1958. There was occasional passenger traffic in the form of railtours, between Bodiam and Northiam. The final passenger train over the line before closure was a Locomotive Club of Great Britain railtour on 11th June 1961. The line closed the following day apart from a short stretch with Robertsbridge serving Hodson's Flour Mill, which became a private siding. This final section of the line closed on 1 January 1970.

Doug said a group of railway enthusiasts acquired some of the line and preservation activities began immediately. But due to difficulties in obtaining the necessary Light Railway (Transfer) Order, it was 1974 before the line partially reopened as a heritage steam railway between Tenterden and Rolvenden. Extensions followed, notably to Wittersham Road in 1977 and Northiam in 1990; then to Bodiam in 2000, and an extra mile extension to the site of Junction Road Halt in 2011.

Fifty-two people attended the meeting eight of whom were visitors.

At the May meeting we welcomed guest speaker Deborah Colam who gave us her talk on 'The work of a paper Conservator'. She said Castle Fine Arts Studio was established in 1986 to incorporate a workshop specialising in the conservation of paper, with a high quality picture framing service and gallery displaying contemporary artwork. Deborah studied Paper Conservation at Camberwell School of Arts and Craft in London, from 1978 to 1981.

She then spoke about the care of works of art on paper, the do's and don'ts and the problems commonly treated including: delining, dry cleaning, aqueous treatment, chemical treatment, deacidification, desizing, repairs, and restorative work. She then spoke about archival material, which includes: letters, documents, books, maps, charts and photographs - then ephemera, which includes: advertising posters, theatre bills, postcards, greetings cards and stamps before finishing with mounting and framing, surveys and reports.

After our refreshment break, Deborah took questions, after which she put on a fine display of damaged items for us to look at.

Fifty people attended the meeting five of whom were visitors.

On a rather sad note I would like to announce the deaths of former member Dick Pace who died on 25th February 2016 aged 79 years and member Linda King who died on 28th April aged 66 years.

A Swimming Migrant in Folkestone

Mercedes Gleitze, a 21-year-old typist, first visited Folkestone in the summer of 1922. She had just taken part in the *Daily Sketch* prize competition to swim the English Channel (starting from Dover), but lack of training forced her to abandon the swim after 3½ hours when her shoulder muscles gave out.

Her ambition was to become a professional open water swimmer – a unique occupation for a woman in those days – and she planned to use the English Channel crossing as a platform to start her chosen career. Over the following five years she made Folkestone her training headquarters, and on 7 October 1927, on her eighth attempt, she became the first British woman (and third woman) to succeed – swimming from Cap Gris-Nez to St Margaret's Bay in 15 hours 15 minutes.

Mercedes lived and worked in London, and with very limited free time, she obtained permission from the Port of London Authority to train in the Thames (a tidal river) each Sunday. But during her summer holidays she travelled to Folkestone to acclimatise to sea conditions. By 1925 she had already made two test swims and three formal (unsuccessful) attempts to swim from England to France. Neither these failed attempts nor the passing of the years lessened her ambition to realise her dream, but to accomplish this she knew that she had to spend more meaningful time training in the sea, and so during 1926 and 1927 she gave up office work in London from July onwards and moved temporarily to Folkestone. With hindsight it is clear that these extended periods in Folkestone became the key to her eventual success.

This success was also due in no small part to the friendship and cooperation of two Folkestone men of the sea – Henry ‘Gare’ Sharp and his son, Henry (Harry) Sharp – both of whom over the years piloted her in their boats *Ocean King* and *F.E.11 Little Willie* respectively, and whose faith in her ability never faded. Harry’s brother Arthur, and Arthur’s wife, were also family members of the crew.

It was not a level playing field in the race to become the first woman to succeed. The American girls were all fully sponsored, but the British girls had to make their own way through. As well as keeping her London flat going, Mercedes used her savings to rent a room in a cottage on the Dover Road, and to cover the expenses incurred in training and in formal attempts.

She also had to face other obstacles. For example, a few days after her successful swim, two other Channel aspirants - Dr Dorothy Logan and Mr Horace Carey - hoaxed the nation into thinking that Dr Logan had also completed the crossing. Because their deception cast doubt on her own fog-bound swim, and that of others, Mercedes declared she would swim the Channel again to prove that she could do it. This ‘vindication swim’, piloted by Harry Sharp, took place just two weeks after her successful swim, and was widely covered by the world’s press. In the event, after over 10 hours in seas registering temperatures as low as 53°F, and after battling for 3 hours against being carried down the Channel by an ebb tide, her trainer (George Allan) and the medical advisors on board called for the swim to be abandoned. Mercedes protested and had to be chased. A twisted towel was thrown over her head and underneath her arms, and she was pulled aboard the accompanying rowing boat.

However, it was subsequently acknowledged by the newly formed *Channel Swimming Association* that Mercedes had exonerated herself, and her record as the first British woman to swim the English Channel stood.

Mercedes went on to conquer the Strait of Gibraltar, the Hellespont, the Sea of Marmara, the Wash, the Firth of Forth, Loch Ryan, Lough Neagh, Lough Foyle, Galway Bay, Wellington Harbour, Cape Town to Robben Island and back, and other swims of note. She also established the British Record for endurance swimming in corporation pools in the UK and abroad, raising the record to 47 hours before retiring into domesticity.

Her other legacy was to use her swimming earnings to institute the *Mercedes Gleitze Homes for Destitute Men and Women* in the city of Leicester during the economic depression of the 1930s. The Homes were demolished by enemy action in 1940, but her Trust Fund, although small, is still being used today to help people in poverty.

Doloranda Pember (Mercedes’s daughter)

21 January 2016



Harry Sharp pilot, and Mercedes resting before her swim; news photographer Stanley Devon (wearing trilby hat)



Mercedes in water drinking Ovaltine



Mercedes shaking hands with the Mayor of Calais (M. Leon Vincent); the man on the right is Ishak Helmy, an Egyptian channel swimmer



Mercedes in the black bathing hat



Mercedes with her sister, Doloranda.



Dr Dorothy Logan in the water helping Mercedes into the boat.