



FOLKESTONE & DISTRICT LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER No. 12 – Autumn 2002

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT by Alan F. Taylor

The Society has come to the end of another year and I am sure you will all agree it has been a very successful one. The membership was down by just one from last year, the total of paid-up members being 118. A well-balanced programme was presented with an average attendance at the meetings of 60. I am confident the programme for the coming year will be equally as good thanks to the hard work of our Secretary Peter Bamford and his wife Anne.

This year's Annual Outing consisted of a two-hour trip on Kennet Canal onboard the horse-drawn barge *Kennett Valley* on which a licensed bar and buffet lunch were provided. After disembarking from the *Kennett Valley* we made our way to 'The Living Rainforest' at Hampstead Norreys, Berkshire, following which we made our way home. I think those who went will agree it was a splendid day out and a great experience. I would like to sincerely thank Tom Leftley for arranging such a interesting outing.

Our Annual Open Day was held at the Methodist Church Hall in Sandgate Road, on Saturday 20th October 2001, and featured an excellent photographic display of Sandgate Road. Equally successful was the large screen video projector showing films of old Folkestone. Additionally there were albums of postcards for visitors to browse through, the bookstall, plus the library stand displaying archive material. All in all it was a very successful day.

Over the past year the Society has presented photographic displays in the Saga Pavilion, Holy Trinity Church, St. Peters Church and the Leas Cliff Hall; quite an achievement and thanks to all who gave their assistance.

Shirley our Treasurer ensured we had another good year financially. However sadly she is standing down this year due to other commitments. On behalf of all members I would sincerely like to thank her for all her hard work.

Your Committee for the past year has ensured the Society has functioned productively and I wish to thank them all for their hard work. Peter and Shirley have already been mentioned, while our Vice Chairman Chris Phillips made the announcements at meetings and compiled the reports for the local newspapers. Trevor Page is standing down after his three years serving on the committee and I would like to thank him and his wife Margaret for successfully running the raffle. David Fundrey is also standing down from the committee as is Caroline Groombridge, having completed their three years; I would like to thank them both for their part by providing constructive ideas throughout the year. I would like to thank David and his wife Joyce for successfully running the bookstall, Martin Easdown and Linda Sage for compiling the newsletters with dedication. Linda for additionally representing us at the Kent History Federation Meeting. Eileen Frankland for writing our minutes and her husband Eric for kindly providing their home for committee meetings and Don Gregory for his constructive ideas throughout the year. Last, but not least, I would like to thank Mary Hunt and members who assisted her in ably providing the refreshments.

That concludes my fourth report for the year 2001/02.

THE FOLKESTONE LIFEBOAT STATION

By Alan F. Taylor

After a tragedy off Dungeness in January 1873, the demand for a steam life-ship to supplement the Rye and Dungeness sailing and pulling lifeboats intensified.

The Hobart-bound sailing ship *Northfleet* was at anchor two miles off Dungeness in Hythe Bay on the night of 22nd January 1873 when she was run down by the Spanish steamer *Murillo* which was showing no lights, and made off down channel after the ramming. Besides a cargo of railway iron the *Northfleet* was carrying more than 400 emigrants, some of them women and children, of which some 350 were drowned.

Sir Edward Watkin, Chairman of the South Eastern Railway Company, wrote to *The Times* appealing for the government to establish a life-ship for cruising off Dungeness, but nothing came of the idea. Just five years later, in May 1878 a further tragedy occurred near the same place when two German warships, *Grosser Kurfurst* and *König Wilhelm* were in collision. The *Grosser Kurfurst* sank with the loss of 300 lives, but still nothing was done.

In the year 1887, the Golden Jubilee of the reigning Queen, Sir Edward Watkin decided to mark the occasion by having a steam life-ship provided by the South Eastern Railway. Samuda Bros. of Poplar built this unusual craft, which arrived at Folkestone Harbour on Wednesday 6th July 1887. Her official name was *Jubilee Life Saving Ship No.1*; she was 123.5 feet long 20 feet wide and had a tonnage of 141 tons gross. She was fitted with twin compound engines of 70 horsepower, made by T. A. Young and son, of Blackwall, the two engines drove a single screw, giving her a speed of 12 knots. Her life-saving equipment included lifelines and life buoys around her rails and a *resuscitation cabin* containing a large bath with hot water laid on. The Director's Report of the Railway Company said she was to be station at Folkestone and, although specially designed for saving life at sea, would be available for the transport of merchandise, and for towing.

The *Jubilee* however was never called upon to fulfill her primary purpose. There were occasions when she might have done so, had she been afloat or at hand and not in Boulogne loading perishable goods. Twelve years later, soon after the formation of the South Eastern and Chatham Railway Company on the 1st January 1899 the *Jubilee* was sold.

The next disaster, which caused much public concern about the lifesaving facilities on this part of the coast, was the loss of the sailing ship *Benvenue*.

The 2,033-ton sailing ship *Benvenue*, of Glasgow, was bound from London to Sydney with a general cargo, proceeding down the channel under tow of a tug on 11th November 1891. The wind had increased to hurricane force when they were off-Folkestone. At 5 a.m. the tow-rope parted and the stricken vessel was swept towards the shore. The captain dropped his anchors just off Brewers Hill, Sandgate. This halted the drift, but the seas cascaded over the vessel and she began to sink so the crew took to the rigging. The rocket apparatus was at once brought into use by the coast guards, but their efforts failed.

In the meantime the Seabrook lifeboat *Meyer de Rothschild* had been taken up wind to Hythe and was launched about 9.30 a.m., but she only got a short distance before she turned completely over losing a crew member by the name of Fagg. Attempts with the rocket apparatus to reach the vessel carried on all day until the supply of rockets ran out.

By 8 p.m. the wind had abated and a volunteer lifeboat crew from Folkestone finally reached the *Benvenue*, 27 survivors were snatched to safety and taken to Folkestone Harbour, where large crowds cheered their arrival. The captain of the *Benvenue* and an apprentice were both drowned.

There was much concern about the lifeboat facilities at Seabrook after the loss of the *Benvenue*, many people thinking they were inadequate. The Rev. Foster Jeffrey appealed to the Mayor of Folkestone, Councillor Stephen Penfold, to call a public meeting and just eight days after the disaster a public meeting was held at Folkestone Town Hall. A lifeboat committee was formed in accordance with the wishes of the local residents; the Chairman elected being Stephen Penfold, and in early 1892 the Royal National Lifeboat Institution decided to form a lifeboat station at Folkestone and move the Seabrook station to Hythe.

The Folkestone Lifeboat House was built opposite the Bathing Establishment just east of the Victoria Pier. Tenders were received in July 1892 from eight local builders, the tender from Hayward and Paramor was accepted for £659.

The lifeboat provided was 38 feet long 8 feet wide and to row 12 oars double banked. It was fitted with three water-ballast tanks, provided with plugs and pumps by means of which water could be readily admitted or pumped out, it also possessed the latest improvements in way of self-righting, self-ejecting water. Like all modern self-righting lifeboats the boat would promptly self-right if capsized with all the crew and gear in, with masts up and sails set. It was furnished with a transporting and loading carriage. The cost of the boat, carriage and equipment was £900 and was defrayed by Miss Curling of Denmark Hill, London. The boat was built by William T. Ellis of Lowestoft, her official number was 343, and as desired by Miss Curling was named the *J. McConnel Hussey*.

By April 1893 the boathouse was approaching completion but there was no mention of the boat. It finally arrived early in December 1893 and was tested on 16th December at 2.30 p.m. She was taken to the South Eastern Railway Company's pier where self-righting properties were tested under the supervision of Captain Holmes R.N. chief inspector of the R.N.L.I. The crew were made up of volunteers from the Folkestone fishermen with R.J. May (coxswain), S. Cook (2nd Coxswain), G. Philpott (bowman), with crew members; E. Major, S. Penny, J. Wilson, W. Hall, R. Carter, J. Alton, W. May G. Spearpoint, G. Featherbee, W. H. May, F. Featherbee and G. Down.

On 31st January 1894 the lifeboat was launched again in the presence of Captain Cunningham Graham, Deputy Chief Inspector, it was to ascertain what was necessary in the shape of a slipway. On leaving the boathouse the carriage ran a few feet and then stuck fast in the beach. The boat was removed from the carriage and run down the beach on greased sleepers without much difficulty, so it was decided that the formal launching would not take place until a slipway was constructed.

On 25th July 1894 the formal inauguration of the lifeboat establishment took place in the presence of a large concourse of spectators. The Mayor and Corporation and the invited guests assembled at the Town Hall, and proceeded thence to the beach adjoining the lifeboat house. The Mayor wore his chain of office and the Town Sergeant his Louis 14th uniform and carried the mace. The Vicar of Folkestone, with his curates in their robes, the organist and choirmaster of the Parish Church and the choir were stationed at the bow of the boat and the Corporation and officials gathered around her. In the course of the opening remarks the Mayor referred in term of gratitude to the magnificent gift received from Miss Curling and regretted that the state of her health precluded her from being present on that auspicious occasion. In her name he handed over the boat to the District Inspector who then transferred the boat to the care of the local committee, on whose behalf Lieut. Colonel Stephen Penfold, J. P. undertook that it should be found efficient in the time of deed. Miss Vaughan, the daughter of the Mayor then performed the naming ceremony, after which the Rev. Canon Woodward conducted a religious service. The appropriate hymn, *Eternal Father Strong to Save* was sung with striking effect by the choir and the assembled spectators, and the Benediction concluded the service. At a given signal the rope which held the boat was loosened and she glided smoothly into the waves amidst ringing cheers, while several rockets were fired, and the band of the Scots Fusiliers played *Rule Britannia* and other appropriate airs. The pier and beach were gaily decorated with flags, and quite a fleet of boats was on the sea waiting for the lifeboat to join them.

In the evening the lifeboat crew were entertained at the Albany Restaurant. The Mayor invited the members of the Corporation and several of his friends to a private dinner at the Pavilion Hotel.

The *J. McConnel Hussey* was stationed at Folkestone from December 1893 to March 1903 during which time she made 5 launches and saved 10 lives. After leaving Folkestone she was fitted with an 11 B.H.P. two-stroke Fay and Bowden petrol engine which gave her a speed of 6 knots and was stationed at Newhaven from 1904 to 1905, where she had engine trials. Later she was at Tynemouth from 1905 to 1911, where she was on service 9 times saving 8 lives,

and Sunderland from 1911 to 1914 where she was on service 6 times saving 3 lives, after which she was dismantled and sold.

In 1897 due to ill health the Folkestone coxswain Richard May retired. He was replaced by Stephen Cook and Edmund Major became 2nd coxswain.

In March 1903 Folkestone received its second and last lifeboat the *Leslie*. She was built at Thames Iron Works (Blackwall) her official number was 508. The vessel cost £788, which was funded by a legacy from Miss K. S. Skynner of Brighton. She was another pulling and sailing boat 35 feet long and 8 feet 6 inches wide, she was fitted with a centre board and rowed 10 oars. From 1903 until the station closed in 1930 the *Leslie* was launched on service 21 times saving 16 lives.

On 5th October 1904 the Coxswain Stephen Cook saved the lives of three Folkestone fishermen from their fishing lugger, *Good Intent*, for which he was awarded the Silver Medal for Gallantry. Stephen Cook retired in 1919 and W.E. Hart was coxswain for one year before he was succeeded by William H. Baker, who held the post till the station closed in October 1930. Both Stephen Cook and William Baker received a pension and a certificate on vellum from the R.N.L.I. on retirement.

A new motor lifeboat, being provided and partly maintained by the City of Nottingham, was due to be stationed at Folkestone. However by the time the boat was ready the lifeboat institution had decided to station the new boat at Hythe and close the Folkestone station. This was due to a number of reasons.

(1) Dover had a new motor lifeboat in January 1930 and Dungeness also had a motor lifeboat, these two boats could cover greater area in less time than the old sailing and pulling boats, which meant two stations between Dover and Dungeness were not necessary.

(2) Folkestone lifeboat could not be launched from one hour before low water until one hour after low water due to the obstruction caused by the Church rocks.

The new motor lifeboat arrived at Hythe on 11th January 1930 and the Folkestone station closed on 16th October 1930.

On 7th March 1931 the Folkestone Committee of the R.N.L.I. hosted a supper at the Clarendon Hotel, Tontine Street, for the crew of the Folkestone lifeboat. The Chairman Mr. F. Scarborough said "he had always regarded Folkestone as possessing a first class lifeboat crew with a second class boat and he was sorry that 'powers that be' had decided to station the new motor lifeboat at Hythe." He realized what a blow it was to these men, but could assure them that if anything could be done to get a boat at Folkestone the local branch would do it. He then made a presentation of a vellum certificate of service (the highest award of the R.N.L.I.) to Mr. William H. Baker, retiring coxswain of the Folkestone lifeboat in recognition of his 11 years service as coxswain (Mr. Baker had actually been in the lifeboat crew since the station opened in 1893). The Chairman also presented to Mr. Richard Cornish, (second coxswain for 4 years) a certificate in recognition of his 32 years service during which time the crew had saved 26 lives from shipwreck.

The lifeboat *Leslie* was retained for exhibition purposes for some little time after the station closed in October 1930 after which she was launched and taken round to Folkestone Harbour ready to leave. There are no records of her after that. The lifeboat boathouse was surrendered to the landlord's agent on 7th May 1936 and was subsequently demolished.