



FOLKESTONE & DISTRICT LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

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CHAIRMAN'S REPORT by Alan F. Taylor

On 8 November 2005 fifteen members and friends went to the Theatre Royal at Margate. We had an interesting guided tour of the theatre followed by afternoon tea, then watched the musical *Calamity Jane* put on by the Theatre Royal Operatic and Dramatic Society.

The Theatre Royal at Margate is the second oldest theatre in the country (the oldest being The Old Vic at Bristol). Part of the theatre was built in 1786 with the first show *She Stoops to Conquer* being performed in 1787. The theatre was granted a royal patent by King George III, making it one of about twelve in the country with a royal patron. In 1875 Sarah Thorne became manager and it was her idea to enlarge the theatre to how we see it today. The architect was Jethro Robinson.

However, in the twentieth century the Theatre Royal suffered a setback. It closed, becoming a furniture warehouse for a time before reopening to an indifferent public then closed again for the duration of WW2. In 1946 it was opened once again by a supporters' club, the theatre attempting to regain its former glory with mixed results. Bingo eventually took over, keeping the fabric warm. A new company then tried its hand and although it failed, this led indirectly to the formation of a new trust. Painstakingly and through several changes of leadership, the Theatre Royal eventually regained full licence. Under the present management and board, the Theatre Royal is finally returning to its former greatness.

From the feedback I received, everybody really enjoyed the visit. **Another visit is planned to see *My Fair Lady* on Wednesday 11 October 2006.**

At the December meeting Dr F W G Andrews talked about the effects of railways on East Kent. He said that the first trains to Dover from London carried 105 passengers and that there were seven trains a day. Investors in shares in the London to Chatham Railway stock received no return.

For first class passengers the earliest trains resembled stagecoaches, but for the working class they were like cattle trucks with holes drilled in the floor allowing water to drain during wet weather. Until 1800 every railway town went by sun time. This meant that the time at each town varied so that the trains could never run exactly on time. In the 1800s the government passed an Act, requiring all towns to use Greenwich Mean Time. This helped the trains run punctually.

Dr Andrews described the arrival in the 1800s of large stores such as Mence Smith. The railway enabled milk to be shifted around the country, and in 1879 refrigerated vans were introduced for transporting meat and fish. Passengers wanted to read newspapers while waiting for their trains so bookstalls began to appear at stations - in 1882 W H Smith opened a bookstall at Margate station. Building materials could be transported by train: Welsh slate was one example; also fletton bricks from the north. Thus builders could use a variety of materials instead of only having access to local sources. It was also interesting to note that the advent of

the railway did not dispense with the horse and carriage. It did the opposite with more horse-drawn carriages being used to transport passengers from home to railway stations and vice versa.

This was a fascinating talk, giving insight into all the effects of railways on East Kent. It attracted an audience of seventy people, ten of whom were visitors.

The December meeting also saw the launch of our new DVD/video "*Memories of Folkestone II, 1914-1939*". I am sorry it was not announced at the November meeting but, because of several delays in the process of making it, no copies were received until 5 December.

On 4 January 2006 twenty-seven members met at the Grand for a coffee morning. We thought this would be a good way for members to mix and have a chat, and comments have been very favourable. For those who didn't hear about this and would have liked to come, please accept my apologies. It was a last minute addition to the programme and was only announced at the December meeting. My thanks go to Richard Monk for negotiating with the Grand to get us a good price (£1 per person for a generous serving of tea or coffee and a mince pie).

Another coffee morning is being arranged for Friday morning 15 June at 11am venue to be announced.

On a sad note I have to announce the death of Eric Drury who died on 25 November aged 84. Eric had access to the archives of St Mary's Hospital at Etchinghill before its demolition and compiled an illustrated talk on its history, which he presented at our September 1998 meeting.

A.F.T.

PADDLING ACROSS THE BAY

Abbreviations: S.E.R: South Eastern Railway. L.C.D.R: London Chatham & Dover Railway. S.E.C.R: South Eastern & Chatham Railway. P.S: Paddle steamship.

In 1891 a pair of interesting paddle steamers were introduced in the Poplar Yard of the Samuda Bros. (Builders of nearly all the S.E.R. cross channel ships since 1861 for use on the Medway Ferry).

The two ships were neat little steel-hulled craft, each of about 200 tons, with two masts and a single tall funnel with bell mouthed topping in black. They had a speed of 7 knots and could carry about 150 people.

They were named 'Edward William' (after Sir Edward Watkin) and 'Myleta' (named after Sir Myles Fenton's adopted daughter Myleta).

Every summer in the 1890's one or the other was placed at Folkestone to run two hour coastal cruises. The 'Myleta' began cruising on August weekdays in 1892.

Sailings were at 11am to St. Margaret's Bay, then at 3pm to Dungeness. The reverse order applying on alternate days.

The 'Edward William' followed the 'Myleta' for seven consecutive seasons. For two years, sailing days were cut back to four, Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday.

In 1895 the sailing days were expanded to six, the service beginning on July 22. In 1896, the season was lengthened to eight weeks, from mid July to mid September.

'Myleta' appeared at Folkestone again for the 1900 season, but with alterations to the schedule, Sunday being a working day, with Friday reserved for maintenance.

In the prevailing holiday mood of the times, coastal trips were highly popular; indeed, the turn of the century was an unequalled period for pleasure vessels on the South Coast of Britain. The S.E.C.R. began to exploit the obvious popularity of the coastal trips established in the nineties, and their enterprise produced a splendid idea, into which the 'Edward William' and 'Myleta' fitted as though they had been specially built for the

purpose. A summer coastal service was established between Ramsgate and Folkestone with calls each way at Dover and Deal. It provided the option of going by train in the opposite direction at Folkestone, and the 'Myleta' at Ramsgate, each ship making a daily return voyage to the other resort. A return steamer ticket gave passengers the option of going by train in the opposite direction. At Dover the ships used the now defunct Promenade Pier inside the main harbour, while at Deal they berthed at the end of the pier.

It was interesting to see Ramsgate used as a base; apart from a period in the late 1840's the place had never been regarded as a railway steamer station. When the L.C.D.R. received steamship-owning powers by an Act of 1864 it had been given authority to develop quay-side services at Ramsgate, or routes from there, but this option had not been taken up before.

The new service was popular not only with holidaymakers but also with East Kent residents. For the first time, apart from isolated excursions, they could gain a fresh view of their historical coastline with the many landing places that have made their mark in the story of England.

Fares from Folkestone were a shilling (5p) single to Dover and one and sixpence (7½p) return; two shillings (10p) single to Deal and three shillings (15p) return; and half-a-crown (12½p) single to Ramsgate with four shillings (20p) for the Ramsgate round trip.

The winter quarters for the 'Edward William' and 'Myleta' were at Folkestone, where in the north-eastern corner of the outer harbour the S.E.R. had long ago established a small repair basin with a slipway, jetties and a forge.

These facilities were gradually abandoned after the formation of the S.E.C.R. as better amenities existed at Dover. The basin made an ideal mooring for the two paddle steamers. The winter of 1906-7 found both of them at Dover Harbour Packet Yard undergoing a thorough overhaul from which they emerged to take up service in the middle of June.

Working only in the summer months, they were not usually subject to vagaries in the weather. We find an exception in 1903. Early in the programme for that year, from July 6 to 9, normal running was suspended during the arrival off Dover of the combined British and French fleets, when President Loubet returned King Edward's historic visits to Paris, the first step towards the Entente. Trips round the fleets were run from the Promenade Pier by an armada of small craft including 'Edward William' and 'Myleta'.

Six weeks later, on the afternoon of Monday, August 18, a tremendous gale began to blow in the channel. The 'Myleta' managed to return from Folkestone to Ramsgate but the 'Edward William' was able to go no further in the reverse direction than Dover.

Conditions on the Tuesday were so bad that neither could put to sea.

Saturday, September 12 was the last day of running in that year, but another tremendous storm in the Channel stopped both ships from venturing out on the Thursday and Friday.

The summer of 1903 was notable in the Dover Straits not only for these two tremendous storms (there was another bad one on October 5), but also for the introduction of 'The Queen', the world's first turbine-driven cross-channel ship. Her success soon led to the disposal of paddle steamers, including the little coastal twins. Within four years the S.E.C.R. was running five turbine craft and was obviously committed to getting rid of all its paddle-driven vessels.

In the winter of 1908-9 the pair was at Folkestone as usual, when on February 13 it was suddenly announced that both had been sold. For the next few years they ran in the Eastern Mediterranean under the names of 'Adam' and 'Eve'. In 1911 on May 9 the 'Eve' (the old Myleta) was wrecked in the Dardanelles.

Residents of Folkestone, then at the height of its Edwardian popularity as a resort, disliked the prospect of losing their coastal service. It gave rise to more public fuss than

the withdrawal by British Railways of the Boulogne excursion steamer 'Isle of Thanet', without replacement, fifty-four years later. The borough council and the Chamber of Commerce took up the cudgels to find a possible substitute. For a time, optimists hoped that a discarded paddle steamer, perhaps one of the 1896 trio of 'Lord Warden', 'Calais' and 'Dover', might be seconded to the service. But the economies of the coastal traffic could not sustain a ship of nearly 1,000 tons in this employment. P & A Campbell, operating from Brighton at the time, regretted that they had no spare tonnage. In the end a compromises solution presented itself through a curious little vessel, the Tyne-built 'Conqueror' of 1897, owned by Dick & Page, the Elliot Tug Company. This craft of 224 gross tons measured only 131 ft. by 22ft. and was one of the shortest vessels on record to have two funnels in line ahead. Built primarily as a tug, she was converted each summer to serve as a pleasure steamer operating in the Margate area where she must have crossed the path of the 'Edward William' and 'Myleta' at different times.

The Dick & Page 'Conqueror' in her earliest years ran from Margate to Calais and Southend and round the corner to Dover.

On June 21, 1909, the 'Conqueror' opened a daily return service between Margate and Folkestone with calls at Ramsgate, Deal and Dover. Leaving Margate at 10 am, she reached Folkestone at 1.30 pm, returning from there at 3.00. Tickets were interchangeable by rail in either direction. It must have been great fun to make this coastal journey, which the outbreak of war in 1914 brought to a stop.

The little 'Conqueror' was able to make a dramatic rescue in the last week of July 1910. Returning to Margate in the Afternoon, Captain Wash saw distress signals flying from a coast-guard station on the cliffs. He closed in to the rocky shore and shopped a broken-down motorboat with two occupants; the boat was on a falling tide over rocks. With the Purser taking soundings he brought the 'Conqueror' in as close as possible and then launched a rowing boat. Taking charge himself, he towed the boat to the ship, later landing it and the occupants, at Margate, to the applause of his passengers. The 'Conqueror' became HMS 'Query' during the war, presumably serving as a tug, and was finally scrapped in 1925.

During her coastal days, despite her small size, she advertised a band on board. The so-called band turned out to be one violin accompanied by a harmonium; when this combination had run through a couple of numbers, half its personnel would immediately stump round with a collecting box.

On this musical note the story of the Kent coastal service must end, for regrettably it was not revived after the First World War and there must be many East Kent residents who have never seen their coastline from the sea lapping its shore. A few sporadic calls at Folkestone by Campbell steamers ended with short cruise towards Dover in September 1954 by the P.S. 'Glen Glower', happily well patronised for the occasion. Fortunately the P.S. 'Waverley' still visits once a year.

This article first appeared in Ships Monthly, June 1968 and was written by Eric Harrison.

Taken from Don Gregory's collection.