

**FOLKESTONE & DISTRICT
LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY**

www.folkestonehistory.org

NEWSLETTER No. 54 – Spring 2013

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT by Alan F Taylor

At the December meeting we welcomed Jim Davis and Garry Cox who gave us their illustrated talk on 'The History of the Kent Coal Fields'. Jim started by say he was a miner at Betteshanger Colliery for 33 years. He said there were no miners in Kent when the Coalfields were started and the miners came from Ireland, Scotland the North East, Yorkshire and Cornwall. These miners lived in shanty settlements of makeshift huts near the mines until villages were built at Elvington, Aylesham, Hersden and Mill Hill, Deal and as the collieries grew so did the communities associated with each of the pits.

In 1826 coal was discovered in France and Belgium; 1846 first suggestions of a possible Kent Coalfield; 1886 Boreholes were sunk at Shakespeare Cliffs proving coal measures. In 1896 sinking a shaft for Shakespeare Colliery started.

Tilmanstone Colliery (1906-1986) first mined coal in March 1913 but it was only of industrial grade and for many years the mine made a loss until modernisation in the 1930s and 1940s.

Snowdown Colliery (1907-1986) was begun by Arthur Burr's Foncage Syndicate in 1907, and the first sod was cut by Mrs Weston Plumtree. During the sinking of the shaft a water pocket was hit at 260ft (79m) and two men were drowned. However, few other problems were encountered and the first coal in Kent was brought to the surface from Snowdown from a depth of 1,490ft (454m) on 19th November 1912. In January 1913 the Beresford seam was reached and, at 4ft (1.2m) thick, it enabled 800 tons per week to be mined. By 1916 Snowdown Colliery had a trading profit.

Snowdown was the deepest colliery in Kent, reaching well over 3,000ft (915m). It was also the hottest and most humid pit in Kent and was given the name 'Dante's Inferno' by the miners. Regarded by many as the worst pit to work in Britain, most of the miners worked naked since clothes became too uncomfortable. They could consume around 24 pints of water in an 8-hour shift and there were frequent cases of heat stroke. The colliery was served by the Faversham to Dover railway and there were halts at Snowdown and Nonington. Two locomotives that worked at Snowdown are now to be seen at the Dover Transport Museum and at the East Kent Railway at Shepherdswell.

Chislet Colliery (1914-1989) reached the coal seams in 1918 but output fell through the 1920s, rising again the following decade. Chislet was one of the first collieries to train the 'Bevin Boys' for the industry.

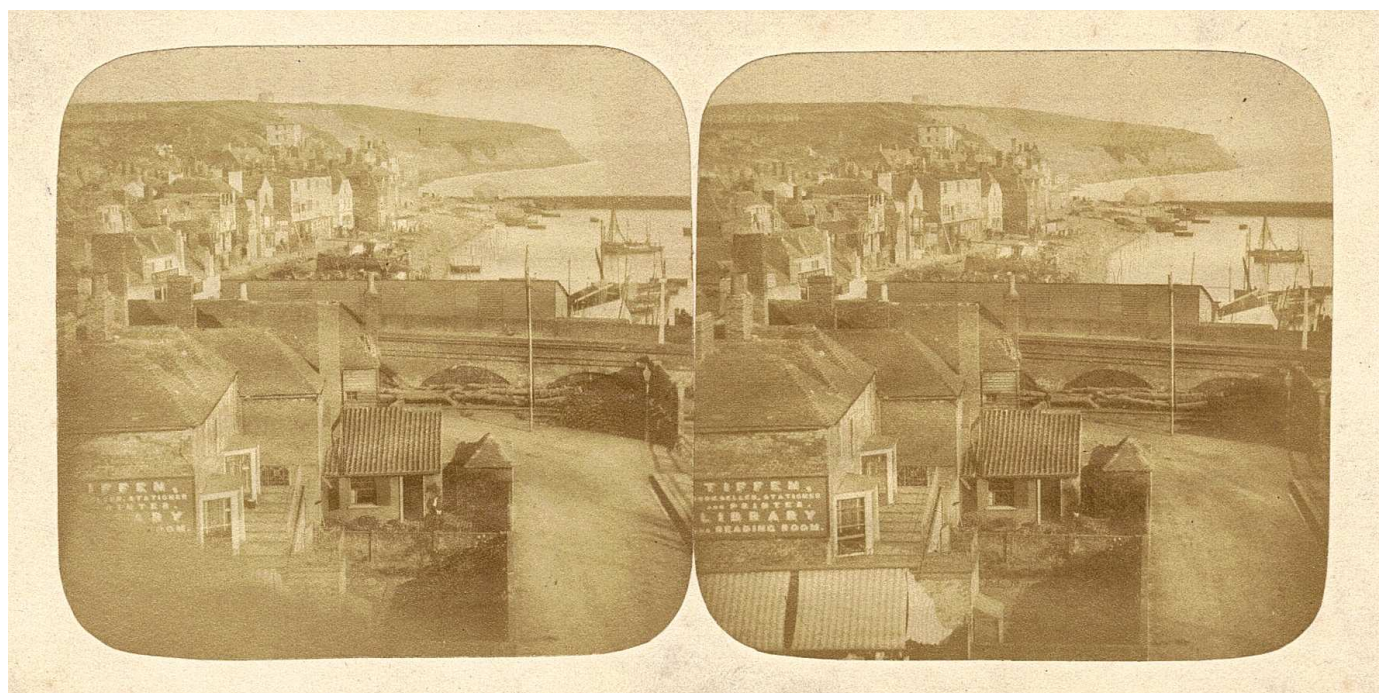
Betteshanger Colliery (1921-1989) was begun in 1924 although coal had been found nearby in 1912. When Betteshanger closed in August 1989 it was one of the most modern pits in the country and production records were still being broken. The talk ended with Garry giving us an overview of the Heritage trust and their activities.

Fifty people attended the meeting two of whom were visitors.

The January meeting was an open evening when members bring along items of local interest. Members were able to view a variety of ephemera including postcards, photographs, prints, stereo cards and newspaper cuttings.

There was a lot of interest shown in stereo cards which was partly due to the fact that the society has purchased six modern flat-pack stereo viewers from the London Stereoscopic Company, which makes viewing the images much easier. Some of Folkestone's earliest photographic images are on stereo cards dating back to the 1850's.

Twenty-seven people attended the meeting one of whom was a visitor



An early example of a stereo card (1850's) showing the inner and outer harbours at Folkestone

At the February meeting we welcomed guest speaker Derek Leach who gave us his illustrated talk on Dover's Caves & Tunnels. Derek said he had published some books on Dover since retiring about twelve years ago, but was stuck for another title when a friend gave him some material on the tunnels and caves in Dover. He then acquired some plans which were compiled by two Dover firemen, John Walton and Allen Cook who decided to survey and record all the known underground sites for the use of the Fire Brigade after a serious underground fire in October 1969. They eventually handed over drawings for 24 sites to Kent Fire Brigade. They also contacted Shorncliffe army base where they were given Second World War drawings which were about to be rubbished. Something similar happened when they visited Archcliffe, which was still an army depot at the time. There were drawings, but unfortunately, some of them were marked 'Secret', but the guy said not to worry and tore off the Secret stamp and gave the drawings to John and Sam!

Derek went on to say Dover was riddled with caves and tunnels constructed over many centuries, often for military purposes but also for civilian use as: storage, dwellings, shelters and industry such as a foundry and mushroom growing. Dover's caves and tunnels, both old and new, played an important part in both world wars. Most of them were used to protect civilians or the military.

We were then taken on a whistle stop tour round the caves and tunnels for Military Purposes starting with Dover Castle followed by Capel then working east to St Margaret's Bay. Some of the caves and tunnels Derek mentioned were; Capel Battery, Lydden Spout, Drop Redoubt, Grand Shaft, Archcliffe, Fort Burgoyne, Langdon Lights, Fan Bay, Wanstone Farm, South Forland, St. Margaret's Bay, Esplanade Tunnel, Bluebird Tea Rooms, and Leathercote Point.

The Civilian Caves and Tunnels starting with the Channel Tunnel were; Warren Halt well shaft, Limekiln Street Bonded Store/Champagne Caves, Oil Mill/Hammonds Caves, Scott's Caves, Snargate Tunnels West, Winchelsea Caves, Tower Hamlets Tunnel, Noak's Ark Tunnel, Waterworks Reservoir, Travanion Caves, Athol Terrace Caves, Arial Ropeway Tunnel and Canterbury Cave which is thought to be a natural cave, part of a fossil cave system eroded by marine action and is situated to the west of St. Margaret's Bay beyond Ness Point and above high tide level.

Fifty-five people attended the meeting three of whom were visitors

The Samuel Plimsoll Memorial Service on Saturday 9th February 2013

St. Martin's Church Cheriton this year hosted what will hopefully become the first of many future years of memorials to one of Folkestone's unsung heroes. A church full of about 130 people sung the same hymns that were sung at the great man's funeral, were taught a music hall song about the man that was sung during his lifetime and listened to various addresses and readings delivered by Folkestone's Mayor, to the author of the recent biography on Plimsoll, Nicolette Jones. A collection was taken for the RNLI and Kent Merchant Navy Association and this was followed by a wreath laying ceremony at Plimsoll's grave. A display of old photographs and illustrations was on display in St. Martin's Church and a further celebratory Music Hall Evening was put on in the evening by the United Reformed Church near Radnor Park.

In fact, Plimsoll Day is actually on the 10th February in line with the anniversary of his birth (10th February 1824). And whilst memorials have taken place at St. Martin's Church before from a small graveside wreath laying a few years ago and across the years with the local school and Sunday school children paying their tributes, it is this years' service that hopefully has gained enough momentum to see a more regular and larger commemoration take place annually.

There is not enough space here to warrant a full biography; and those who would like to find out more should read Nicolette Jones' acclaimed book 'The Plimsoll Sensation.' But briefly, Samuel Plimsoll, was born in Bristol, and whilst Liberal M.P. for Derby devoted a great deal of his time and efforts on improving the conditions of the poor, most notably the seamen who sailed on overloaded and heavily insured ships, known as 'coffin-ships' as they were risking their lives for the often unscrupulous ship owners who would profit from their ships' demise at sea without too much consideration for the loss of life. The Load Line, or Plimsoll Line, which was introduced to prevent this behaviour, is what Samuel Plimsoll will be best remembered for; but also the common plimsoll shoe is named after him (having its own rubber 'Load Line' above which the wearer would get wet!) and later in life he visited America and did a lot to remove the anti-British bias from American schoolbooks which still existed, with the 1812-14 war between America and the British Empire in which British troops burnt down the White House and government buildings in Washington, still fresh in the memory of many Americans.

Samuel Plimsoll's connection with Folkestone only occurred towards the end of his life, when being diagnosed as diabetic in 1892 he nominally retired from public life and moved first to 31 Clifton Gardens and then to 35 Augusta Gardens in 1895 to his death on 3rd June 1898 after falling into a diabetic coma.

Whilst in Folkestone, Plimsoll attended first the Tontine Street Congregational Church and when the congregation outgrew the church warranting the building of a second Congregational Church

in the town near Radnor Park (now renamed the United Reformed Church), Samuel Plimsoll was to have laid one of the foundation stones in July 1897. Sadly his ill health meant his wife fulfilled his duty that day, but he was a worshipper in the Radnor Park Congregational Church during the last year of his life.

It has been suggested that the reason Plimsoll lies in St. Martin's churchyard is that it was the only local churchyard with a view of the sea, and shortly after his death, all the ships in Folkestone's harbour are reported to have flown their flags at half-mast. Then on the day of the funeral, sailors from local vessels arrived at Plimsoll's home in Augusta Gardens, removed the horses from the hearse, and drew the coffin themselves to the graveside.

There is talk that with the creation of new streets and space with the proposed harbour development that Folkestone may also pay tribute to Samuel Plimsoll in the naming of another street after him (as we already have Plimsoll Avenue near Creteway Down), or a plaque on the Leas bandstand, or even some permanent artwork or sculpture. Either way let us hope that this year's Samuel Plimsoll memorial service is the catalyst and that Plimsoll Day continues to be commemorated in Folkestone, and that future generations do not forget 'The Sailor's Friend.'

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We would like to welcome new member: Alec Perry

On a rather sad note I would like to announce the death of Pat Perry who died on 29th November 2012 aged 83 years.

Registered Charity No. 295994