

SYNOPSIS of FOLKESTONE

Past & Present

Location location location!

Folkestone has been fashioned by its strategic location between England and the Continent, the development of communications and the foresight of its residents.

Roman cannon fodder

It first came to prominence in Roman times, 2000 years ago. Caesar, who invaded in 55BC, is said to have built a fortification on an escarpment to the north of the present town, on a round topped hill now known as Caesar's Camp. In 1924 an elaborate Roman villa was excavated on the East Cliff, complete with hypocausts and tessellated pavements; the area was then important for the production of millstones and later for cannon balls, as well as being a strategic location.

Christian Kingdom

Agriculture, fishing from the beach where the Foord Valley's Pent Stream enters the Channel and ragstone working supported the population of about 800. After the Romans left about 1600 years ago, Saxon Kent became its own Kingdom and the cradle of Christianity in England. The King of Kent established the first nunnery in England for his daughter, St Eanswythe, who together with St Mary are the patron saints of the parish church. A monk who was attached to it was responsible for establishing the Christian calendar which remains in world wide use today.

From Domesday – a piratical Cinque Port

After William the Conqueror took charge in 1066 he ordered the compilation of the Domesday Book – a record of all property and occupants – which showed that Folkestone had an area of over 6000 acres, about 600 residents and an annual value of £100. By the fourteenth century Folkestone had its own charter with several weekly market days, and became a limb of the Cinque Ports with an obligation to provide the king with ships (which in their spare time freelanced as privateers – in modern parlance pirates).

Medieval fortification

After Henry VIII split with the Church of Rome, he dissolved the nunneries and monasteries in 1535, and locally the buildings were dismantled and the stone used to build Sandgate Castle to guard against an expected invasion from Europe. This nearly came with the Spanish Armada in 1588, but was averted by Wm Drake dispersing the Spanish fleet with fire ships in the Channel within sight of the town.

Blood money

A famous son of Folkestone, Dr Wm Harvey, discovered that blood circulated around the body, and became physician to the King nearly 400 years ago; he left the founding bequest for the town's Harvey Grammar School.

Napoleonic fortification

The prospect of invasion loomed again 200 years ago when the French dictator Napoleon was eyeing up the Kent coast from across the Channel. Massive fortifications were constructed in the Folkestone area – primarily centred on Dover Castle, but with Martello Towers costing over £3000 each dotted along the Channel coastline and a fortified canal along the northern edge of Romney Marsh. The whole area became a vast military encampment, and extensive road building was undertaken to ensure good and speedy communication.

Grand residences

After hostilities ceased some of the senior military officers, having discovered the balmy south facing locations nestled in Sandgate's undercliff, built substantial residences for their retirement, and the notion of it being a salubrious watering hole was born. Mary Shelley, widow of Percy Bysshe Shelley, friend of Byron and creator of Frankenstein, took up residence in 1830.

Chalybeate springs eternal

Efforts to popularise the mineral rich water – at 350 parts per million some of the richest in the world – with an ornamental ruin were perhaps going too far, but the good health and longevity of the population bears witness to its beneficent effects, and the Folkestone Silver Spring Mineral Water Company continues to prosper today.

Smugglers galore

The high taxes extracted to pay for the Napoleonic wars made smuggling an attractive and profitable way of life – repeated again in recent years with white van man and duty frees.

A noble cliff fall

Lord Radnor's forebears had acquired the Folkestone Estate over 300 years ago; coastal erosion had been a continuing problem (all five pre Norman Conquest churches had fallen into the sea), but a massive cliff fall in 1784 had formed Folkestone's undercliff which together with harbour works protected the remaining cliff behind which supports what has become The Leas, and thereafter he set about developing his estate.

Communications = money!

Nathan Rothschild maintained a pigeon loft in Folkestone, and was famed for his advance intelligence. In 1815 while standing on the quay he was handed a Dutch newspaper reporting the result of the battle of Waterloo; he rushed to London, sold

government consols 'short', the price crashed because it was thought he knew we'd lost before anyone else, but his agents quietly bought up all they could and when our victory was promulgated the Rothschild banking fortune was secured. For many years one of the family lived in a fine mansion on The Leas.

A harbour with a railway – more money!

The initial attempts at improving the harbour facilities had been fraught with difficulties, but help was at hand with the arrival of the South Eastern Railway in 1843 spanning the Foord Valley with still the highest brick arched viaduct in the world. This was primarily constructed to give a good connection between London and Paris – initially via Dover – but Wm Cubitt the building contractor took over the bankrupt harbour for £10,000 and immediately sold it on to the railway company for £18,000, which commenced cross Channel services forthwith. Not only did this rejuvenate the harbour activities, but it also resulted in good fast services to London which enhanced the visitor and residential attraction of the area.

Steepest railway line in Britain

To get from the viaduct to the harbour, however, required a gradient of 1 in 25, and the many steam banking engines used provided a regular spectacle in addition to the myriad sailing ships.

Brilliant town planning

The Lord Radnor of the time commissioned a well known architect, Sidney Smirke, who had made his reputation designing the British Museum, to prepare a layout for the West Cliff estate with squares and gardens and establish a design specification for the buildings. This was such an astounding success that the population grew from about 4,000 at the time of the arrival of the railway to about 40,000 60 years later, when the town as we now know it had taken its shape.

High and mighty thinkers and performers

Many prominent people became residents; Charles Dickens extolled the virtues of the salubrious climate, the philanthropist and anti-slavery crusader Wm Wilberforce became a week-ender in Sandgate, Plimsoll the seamen's friend and scourge of shipowners moved in, J M W Turner painted Seascape Folkestone (sold by another resident, Alan Clark, over 20 years ago for a then world record £7.3m), H G Wells had a house designed by the fashionable architect Voysey and more were designed by Lutyens. Other literary figures associated with the town included Henry James, Joseph Conrad, Noel Coward, Evelyn Waugh and Agatha Christie, and performers such as Robert Morley, David

Tomlinson, Hattie Jacques, Michael Bentine, Michael Caine, Yehudi Menuhin, Arthur Brough, Peter Bowles, Paul Nicholas and Nigel Havers.

And their inventions

The world's first pillar box was installed in 1858 opposite the site for Trinity Church, and the first telephone kiosk on The Leas in 1903 opposite The Grand.

Concrete achievements

A local architect, Pope, had a brother with a cement works on the East Cliff, the result of which was the earliest concrete houses being built on Marine Crescent in 1872, and the first steel and reinforced concrete building, The Grand, being erected in 1899 through the initiative of Daniel Baker who became Mayor of Folkestone.

Beauty, for all to see

Nettie Bainbridge was crowned here as the world's first beauty queen in 1911, and John Logie Baird, who had a shop in Guildhall Street, made the first television transmissions to John Stainer's shop in Sandgate Road in the 20s – he another of the town's mayors.

Top level politicians to boot

The Parliamentary representatives for Folkestone & Hythe have included Sir Edward Watkin, Chairman of the South Eastern Railway and architect of not only major harbour developments but also the early Channel tunnel schemes and a fast rail service to London; Sir Philip Sassoon, ADC to Earl Haig of poppy fame, Minister for Air in the formative years of aviation with his own airfield; socialite and bon vivant Sir Harry Mackeson, rather partial to his own Hythe brewery product; Sir Albert Costain, another master of concrete, whose firm built the motorway into Folkestone; and now Michael Howard who has been instrumental in putting Folkestone back on the map particularly by soliciting the high speed rail link to London.

The war to end all wars

Proximity to the Continent, however, was again to take its toll. During the First World War, Folkestone became the main transit camp for troop movements to the front line in northern France, and it is said that seven million troops embarked here. However, the image of Fashionable Folkestone had taken a pasting, and after the cessation of hostilities with high taxation and the decline in spending power of the well to do the atmosphere became rather more cosmopolitan.

And the war to end it all

The Second World War had even more cataclysmic consequences. Front Line Folkestone took a front line

battering, and much of the population, by then 50,000, was evacuated, leaving a rump of about 10,000 for most of the six years of hostilities. Churchill and Montgomery (whose brother lived here) came, but Albert Sandler took his Palm Court Orchestra to Eastbourne, never to return.

Brain drain

But worse was to come – with the departure of the intelligentsia the town took a dive down market, and many of the fine old buildings were demolished, to be replaced by 'modern' constructions which in many cases are an assault on the sensibilities of the fashionable people who had formerly made the town their own. Lord Radnor's carriage drive – Cherry Garden Avenue, laid out as the main dual carriageway entrance to the town in 1900 – was mostly reduced to a single carriageway. Even major employers such as Pfizers were driven out – the town clerk of the time, Noel Scragg, maintained that this was the crowning achievement of his career – and Kent University was diverted to Canterbury, all in the name of keeping employment costs down for the benefit of the tourist industry but which thereby lost a sizeable chunk of its patronage.

Rolls out

Folkestone had had the highest density of Rolls-Royces in the world; it even had two of its own R-R coachbuilders, Maltby's and Martin Walter.

But – it's still an historic royal domain

King John made Folkestone his headquarters for his pre 1215 Magna Carta discussions with the Papal Legate, and over the ensuing centuries Henry VIII, Elizabeth I, Victoria, Edward VII, Edward VIII and latterly Princess Margaret all stayed here.

The future is arriving – here and now!

The town's strategic location and idyllic environment is again coming to the rescue aided by its adroit residents. To service the Channel Tunnel not only has the road network been massively improved but also the railway infrastructure is being substantially upgraded; 100 years ago the best trains made London in a little over the hour (50% faster than today), but now thanks to our resident MP we are told to expect trains to the capital in about an hour, and Paris in only about two.

Money again – with style!

Our home grown billionaire, the Saga sage Roger De Haan, is refurbishing many buildings in the Old Town and attracting occupants for his Creative Quarter. Demand for good houses has rocketed, and in its wake will come the patronage for stylish shops, restaurants and other amenities which one may confidently expect to restore Folkestone to its premier position as the jewel of the south coast.



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