

My Place: East Kent

It may have been a premonition as strange thoughts occur while trying to blank the mind for endurance of an unpleasant experience. The hovercraft journey back from Calais to Dover was not a swift forty minutes but an hour and a half of rolling and bucking with the engine-whine rising as it crashed into the next wave. People were carried off in wheelchairs; some were reluctant to move independently. My mind replays the passage of pebble beach and the White Cliffs, not once but at least twice passed Kingsdown and St Margaret's Bay seeking shelter before dashing into the harbour.

The geography of this horrendous journey only became clear a year later when, quite unexpectedly, I moved from Lancashire to work in the unfamiliar county of Kent. But I need to emphasise *east* Kent. Should I have known that England went so far east? Deal is a two hour train journey to London and we were reminded of that for ten years. This small coastal town remains a rural ride from Dover. Taking traffic high above the Eastern Docks, Jubilee Way had opened in 1977 with a concrete stanchion surrounded by harbour waves. With the reclamation for hard-standing it is now 400 metres from the nearest water. It is the A2 to London via Canterbury where a by-pass was yet to be completed. It still isn't motorway standard.

There was just a single Dartford Tunnel, with the traffic going in both directions, and no M25. Our journey back to parents in Cheshire was a nine hour drive. Now it takes five hours with the very best traffic conditions. With this perception of remoteness, our new life in east Kent was never around the corner from anywhere else.

Despite this feeling, the assets of a delightful town on the east coast are evident. The rainfall is considerably lower than western counties. Deal has a pebble beach, a historic seafront, castles and a modern pier. To the north it has sand-dunes and to the south chalk downland. It has fishing boats which ply the waters sheltered by Goodwin Sands. Many of the people we knew who had moved said they liked it too much to move on. Most locals were even more parochial and inward-looking.

It is typical that children do not know what they don't know and I found that they didn't recognise that being on the coast was the most distinctive feature of their lives. They were bemused that I had never been beach-fishing so I let them tell me about it as a way of showing we always have something to learn. Having been up all night fishing also explained the occasional listlessness in the classroom.

It also appeared a southern oddity, but one they took for granted, that their parents worked in the east Kent coalmines and for many it was their destiny, too. It was often repeated that these mines which opened in the 1920s and 1930s employed the tough-minded people thrown out, or opted-out, of Scotland's and northern England's pits. The pit-heads and waste-tips were far enough from the town to avoid visual impact but the social and economic influence was everywhere. No-one could have foreseen the speed in which that working community was torn apart by industrial dispute and eventual pit-closure.

Deal and Walmer had part of the royal marines also now gone from the town forever. This was another itinerant community with its own opportunities and challenges. The school of music made a distinctive cultural contribution. It was bizarre to see a gang of young men being made to run down

the shingle beach and into the sea wearing full kit as punishment for some mis-demeanour. For they, like the young miners, worked shifts, were relatively well paid and frequented the towns numerous pubs. And, then, there was a third-group with this 24-hour social dynamic: ferry crews.

Cross-channel ferries and the ports still employed large numbers of people in the area. Although roll on- roll off operation was well-established they were fully crewed. The train service still ran to the station at Western Docks before coaches were used for transit from Dover Priory station. The HM Customs and Excise facilities were extensive before the single market was put into place. The nationally-owned ferry operations were crewed separately by either the British, the French or by Belgians. It always seemed symbolic that the vehicle ramp was slowly lowered onto the foreign soil while glum port workers stood and watched. I remember one occasion, after the two hour crossing to Boulogne, where we had to wait for a further half-an-hour for disembarkation while the tide rose for the ramp to be at the same height as the dock. It seemed symptomatic that a simple, repeating act of nature was deemed an insoluble obstacle.

And then there was the great British invention, the hovercraft, which promised a forty minute journey before being killed off by the escalating cost of kerosene, the aviation fuel. Before that happened, the hovercraft had been 'stretched' or, more accurately, cut in half and a middle section inserted. In addition to increasing capacity they did give a smoother ride than the one described earlier. Of the times, the French had to have their own type of hovercraft which had rear mounted engines. It had a deep resonance sounding louder as it carried over water. It always seemed noisier as we could hear it from Deal seafront.

For our first year we lived in a seafront flat which was glorious in the warmer months but very cold with a north-east wind penetrating the Georgian sash-windows. One night the fishing boats were moved across the road in front of our flat by a JCB to avoid a high tide. The salt-water air didn't do much for the car's bodywork either. With binoculars we could see shipwrecks at low tide. At night we could see the Goodwin Lightships flashing on the horizon and, of course, the lights of ships sheltering in The Sound. As a fund-raising scheme the local youth service set up The Goodwin Sands Mountaineering and Pot-holing Club. One annual activity we enjoyed was a hovercraft landing on the sands for a game of cricket. Another time we went by fishing boat. Once on the sands, which are nine miles long, it is not possible to see land. It's a quick visit as, with the tide-turn, the sands start to shift very rapidly and the story of the stranded ice-cream van is likely to be true. We also set off from Deal Pier around the Goodwin Sands on the paddle-steamer Waverley.

One Friday night, playing badminton in the school hall, we heard the news that the Herald of Free Enterprise had turned-over in Zeebrugge harbour. It was dismissed as a silly notion as a ship like that couldn't possibly capsize. But it had. The tragedy and loss of life affected most local families directly and indirectly. The recriminations and enquiries lasted for years. It was a difficult time for the ferry companies as they faced the future competition from the Channel tunnel.

We didn't know the phrase at the time but even this small town was a 'community of communities'. In many ways it was parochial and remote, comfortable and safe. A veneer of well-being covered over deep structural inequalities. In other ways, it was a microcosm of the past being buffeted by the future in the global sense.

For us, this period presented its own changes. One work relocation to Maidstone and another to Folkestone meant Deal was less viable as a home-base. Ashford seemed like the obvious central place.

It is almost inconceivable now, but the M20 between Ashford and Maidstone not completed at this time. The section down to Folkestone was not connected to the nationwide network. This sea-side town was detached in many other ways, too. Depressed, run down and uncertain about the development looming over the rural fringe. As I drove from Ashford to Folkestone in the morning it was routine for one car to overtake and, perhaps, I would overtake one other. Now the motorway heaves with traffic in both directions twenty four hours a day. The bumper-to-bumper fuel-loaded forty-four tonne trucks try to overtake each other and, as one achieves one mile an hour more speed, they form a two-lane mobile road block. In the rain their vehicle-spray is blinding but, as with fog, their drivers are higher power on over their speed limit. The countryside of Kent is hell on wheels.

And then it gets worse. Every so often there is disruption in the cross-Channel services and the heavy-goods vehicles are directed into 'operation stack' which turns cars off the motorway for it to be turned into a linear car park. Swiftly, blue portable cabins appear and what seems like every police car in the county. A mobile concrete wall has been installed to allow the implementation of a contraflow system at short-notice. It has never been used and recently it was reported to cost £600,000 a year to sit idle. The county council wants to build a lorry park on some farmland near junction 11. This is what it means to live in Kent as the frontier county. The A20 takes the burden of local and through traffic at a very slow pace.

This former A20 main road is much more instructive on the nature of Kent. While motorways slice through the landscape in cuttings and steer great arcs around inconvenient obstacles, like villages, the old roads take the contours and actually link neighbouring places. This creates a paradox of experiencing the countryside on roads shaped by the hay-cart and, yet, seeing lines of housing and un-pretty services. The non-nucleated settlements of through-route Kent are responsible for the impression that the south-east is being concreted over. The urban mind-set denies the vast expanses of rural space.

Ashford's connectivity is most effectively demonstrated by the four railway routes from the nineteenth century - supplemented by another in the twentieth. Kent's railway network is a picture of unbridled Victorian competition. In part it reflects the chase for the lucrative routes to the ferry-ports of Dover and Folkestone one north and one south of the Chalk downlands. As a side-show there were connections to the towns and villages *en route* and not to mention the many Beeching-closed branch lines. Ashford workers served these railway industries in many ways and still do to a very much reduced strength. The latter part of the twentieth century saw government policy resulting in a legacy of the wrong means of power supply, ill-maintained track-work and neglected rolling stock. The railways were in a sad state of affairs.

Prior to this development, and running in parallel, Ashford was a market town and still carries many of the associated functions. In some people's minds that is how they still want to see it. They still miss the livestock market being in the centre of the town. People who live in fenced and gated modernised farmhouses overlook that farm-labouring numbers have been decimated. Villagers are not employed by rural activities any more. Towns, like Ashford, have become more suburban in

purpose. When we moved to Singleton, our part of Ashford, in 1987 the feeder road was a dead-end. Local people we met didn't know where it was: 'I've never been there.'

Ashford, I thought, had a sense of potential. It was about to happen.

A significant change was about to impact on East Kent: the Channel tunnel. While many people imagined that a tunnel would never happen, a major report looked at the potential for economic development especially through tourism. The mind-set in Britain seemed to be why would I want to go there – and why do I need to get there quicker? Our parochial concerns ignored the Europe-wide significance of the city-to-city fast rail route. International goods and freight transport was expanding without our recognition.

The tangible impact of landscaping, concrete and steel belied the concept of a changing relationship with the rest of Europe. It re-located East Kent from the periphery of southern England to the locus of the cross-Channel region of Kent and Nord-Pas de Calais. While Folkestone was still resisting a change it didn't like, Ashford Borough seized on the by-line 'the light at the end of the tunnel'. At different levels it was a re-shaping of geography.

I assumed a role in supporting schools and colleges consider these impacts and opportunities. It was contentious for education to be so closely involved but it was deemed important for local young people to engage with what was happening to their countryside and how it might affect their employment potential. Working closely with the Channel tunnel construction gave essential access to information as it happened and the trade-off was helping meet the widespread schools' interest in the project. For a number of years, as the enormous Folkestone terminal took shape, the Eurotunnel Exhibition Centre received school visits and contributed to the tourism offer within the Shepway District.

In due course the drama of tunnel breakthroughs, track-laying and rolling stock trials became more prosaic as a functioning transport system. Before we had access to the staff train to Calais, prior to the service opening, we had reason to experience the different means of crossing the Channel. In addition to the ferries mentioned earlier I had the chance to make a flat-calm crossing of the Channel in the driver's cabin on a hovercraft. From this tiny black-curtained cabin I was shocked by the oil and timber floating on the water's surface. The hovercraft invades a concrete apron at speed and then settles, rather than ferries' slow approach to dock. The bi-national tunnel construction penetrated the two coastlines at 40 metres below sea-level making a really permanent connection.

Meanwhile Ashford made its own adjustments. The cinema was demolished to improve the roundabout and railway bridge by the station re-designed to take the long Eurostar trains. It took ten years for a cinema complex to replace the loss of this facility. The Kent Impact Study had identified the need in East Kent for a four-star hotel with conference facilities. When it was first built it was partly mothballed and local members of the gym and pool club walked through a ghostly edifice before the residents numbers increased.

Another study suggestion resulted in a tourist attraction for Dover called The White Cliffs Experience. It was an odd mix of mainly low-brow 'edutainment' which achieved neither a local nor a tourist-visitor respect. It became one of the many lottery-funded schemes that never reached the revenue targets for continued viability. Ironically, during a road scheme construction, a Bronze-Age

boat was recovered from the former coast-line and, with genuine international significance, remains on show in an interpretation centre. Dover also has the castle and war-time tunnels for visitors but on the most part remains a town to pass through.

The coast of Kent is varied and attractive - easy to conceive as a playground for urbanites with cliffs, dunes and beaches. The chalk-spoil from the Channel tunnel was used to create a unique site called Samphire Hoe. Surrounded by a concrete apron, and with vehicular access through an old cliff tunnel, it has gradually re-vegetated with salt-tolerant grassland species. It is an extraordinary place next to the railway tunnels of the Folkestone to Dover line. The original platform was used to explore for coal in the nineteenth century and was then used in the cancelled 1970s tunnel project. In the 1980s it was used to unload pre-formed sections of tunnel-lining for transport down to the boring-machines below.

The Eurostar trains were a big leap forward in the railway experience. But, when the service started, they had to use the Victorian-standard railway track from the Folkestone terminal to London Waterloo via Tonbridge. It was pitiful to contrast the 300 km per hour (185mph) section in France with the slow haul through Kent. By this time I was a daily rail commuter to London. You can stand on the domestic platforms as the heavy Eurostar trains squeal to a halt and squeal as they pull out again. It didn't help knowing that it was quicker to get to Lille from Ashford than it was to arrive at Cannon Street station in London. On the way home, and after stopping at each darkened village station across Kent, the domestic train often used to halt outside Ashford station as a Eurostar train was given priority to go ahead. As it passed there was an audible groan from the passengers.

The Channel Tunnel Rail Link was a major project which eventually provided the high-speed link into St Pancras International. It meant further disruption for Ashford town centre as it was deemed necessary to have a by-pass link, by tunnel and flyover, as well as the complicated junctions at both ends of the international station. It remains irksome to this day that Ashford receives an incomplete international service having put up with all the disruption. The concession is to have, at last, a decent domestic rail service into St Pancras, even if the fare differential is too high.

The new construction also meant relocating some retail units and the livestock market to the edge of the town. Besides two new road configurations, much misunderstood, and an expanded shopping facility, Ashford's centre has been a catalogue of proposals that never happened. Putting the FE College next to the railway station was a great idea thwarted by a change in national-funding structures. The empty sites close to the station and town centre must present the biggest single development potential in any town or city in the south of England.

After being a fully-fledged rail commuter for some years, two hours door-to-door, my work was relocated to Croydon which had about the same journey time. The first part was by busy motorway followed by a slow crawl for the last twelve miles which took fifty minutes. Both journeys were made possible by what we said about Ashford being 'a good place to get out of'. It is also evidence that London casts a long shadow over Kent providing both opportunities but it's also a restriction causing it to be less self-contained. The promise of a corporate or government office being established in the town has not materialised. An unpopular, largely empty office block ruins the low-rise urban aspect.

Although now home-based, I still have to make journeys to London but the balance makes it interesting rather than a chore. When the high-speed domestic service started trials I was looking

out of the window as the train pulled up hill from the Medway River crossing and spotted the three-lanes of stationary traffic on the M2/A2. The passenger opposite saw the same scene and we exchanged a satisfied smile of recognition of what we were avoiding. Now the high-speed service is heavily used from the 6am departure and standing-room only has been reported.

One aspect where Ashford remains weak is the cultural landscape. Until the recent re-development of St Mary's Church for dual-use, there has not been a performance venue. Canterbury has the rebuilt Marlowe Theatre and The Gulbenkian Theatre at the University. The coastal towns have a variety of tired and inflexible halls. Wye College, formerly part of the University of London, and closed down in acrimony by Imperial College used to provide a professional interest in the wider community. Our experience of concerts in Ashford is one of disappointingly low attendance.

Our main pleasure in live music has been staying in Thanet for Broadstairs Folk Week for each of the last ten years. It's just a one hour drive but a world away. The town pubs, main venues and open spaces are taken over by music and dance. It is a self-contained setting right alongside the usual functions and glorious weather of a seaside town in August.

I have mentioned the proximity of the coast but a real asset of Ashford is the expanse of surrounding countryside. From the woodlands and farmland of the North Downs, through the gap of the River Stour and the rolling hills of The Weald, there is much to explore and enjoy by road or on foot. Village pubs have suffered badly in recent years but many, like our own Hoodeners Horse at Great Chart are worth seeking out. The character of villages has changed and the distinctive Kent features of hops and orchards have almost vanished. The main new land-use seems to be grazing horses. Kent has a fine range of coastal and inland golf courses and I play at Chart Hills which has massive oak trees, off-site Oast Houses and a distant view of The Downs.

East Kent illustrates the significant geographical changes taking place across the world. It shows that personal and institutional decisions of mobility are taking preference over settlement.

Web source: www.pannage.com/my-place-east-kent