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THE BOATMEN OF DOVER AND DEAL:  
THE REPORT OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS  
SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE  
CINQUE-PORT PILOTS, 1833

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In the years following the Napoleonic Wars, 1793–1815, as the great fleets of merchantmen that had assembled for convoy in the Downs were broken up and the naval forces stationed there disbanded, the boatmen of Dover and Deal suffered a sharp decline in the demand for their services, a decline exacerbated by improvements in the construction and management of ships, in particular the substitution of chain cable for hemp, the introduction of steam vessels on the passenger service in Dover, and the introduction of two pilot cutters, designed to ship pilots on board homeward-bound vessels. So great, indeed, was the decline in the demand for their services, and the widespread poverty and distress to which it gave rise, that in March 1833, they petitioned the House of Commons for relief, requesting, in particular, that they should be granted the privilege of putting pilots on board homeward-bound vessels, that they should receive payment for conducting ships through the Downs, and not be put off without compensation when a pilot came on board, as frequently happened, and that they should be granted the exclusive privilege of landing pilots from outward-bound vessels, at a rate to be fixed by law of 20s. each. As a result, in June 1833, a Select Committee was appointed by the House to enquire into the question. The report it produced, and the papers attached thereto, provide a rare and fascinating insight into the lives of the boatmen and the conditions prevailing in their industry in that period.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Parliamentary Papers*, Vol. VII, Report of a Select Committee on the Cinque-Port Pilots, 1833. See Appendixes Nos. 1 and 2 for the petitions of the Dover and Deal boatmen.

In a memorial presented to the Elder Brethren of Trinity House, later presented by the President of the Board of Trade to the committee, the Deal boatmen described their way of life.<sup>2</sup> For as long as anyone could remember, they recalled, their forefathers had made a living cruising to westwards, by day and by night, at all seasons of the year, in readiness to assist homeward-bound vessels by procuring pilots for them, putting pilots ashore from outward-bound vessels, conducting ships in the absence of pilots and providing an easy communication with the shore for the conveyance of letters, despatches, the landing of passengers and the supply of fresh provisions. Crews were not generally attached to particular boats. When a boat was required, those on the look out, or resident nearby, would go, as the Elder Brethren put it, 'promiscuously in any boat which may be on the beach.' Whatever was earned by a boat was divided into as many shares as there were men employed to it, with two shares added for the owner of a first-class boat and one for a second.<sup>3</sup> In 1832, in Deal some 440 boatmen were thus employed, in Dover somewhat less than half that number.

Figures presented by Edward Darby, managing clerk to the house of Messrs. Iggulden, shipping agent to the East India Company, illustrate the extent of the decline that had occurred in Deal in recent years. In 1809, his firm had paid boatmen £11,000 for services rendered, in 1819 £2000, in 1829 £3000 and in 1832 £680. Where 30 or 40 first-class boats, capable of staying afloat in the worst of weathers, had once plied to westwards, now only 20 remained, many in a state of disrepair.<sup>4</sup> Similarly in Dover according to Henshaw Latham, Lloyd's agent, many boats were laid up or falling into decay. Nor could they be replaced, as 'tradesmen see the folly of the investment and decline to lay out their money'.<sup>5</sup>

The evidence presented to the committee regarding the distress experienced by the Deal and Dover boatmen in recent years was overwhelming. According to Lieutenant Kelly Nazer, R.N., collector of light and harbour dues in Deal, the greater part of the Deal boatmen had not, on coming ashore, soaked to the skin, another suit of clothes to put on. Nor had they meat to eat sometimes for a fortnight together, with the result that they were becoming more and more debilitated, unfit to face the hardships of life at sea. As for the

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Appendix No. 3, Memorial of Deal Boatmen to the Elder Brethren of the Trinity House.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Appendix No. 3, Report of a Committee of the Elder Brethren of the Trinity House.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, Minutes of Evidence, 12-3.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

condition of their houses, where everything had once been good and neat, now nothing but misery and wretchedness presented itself.<sup>6</sup> According to William Cavill, guardian of the poor in Deal, there was scarcely a boatman's family in the town that did not receive food daily from the parish, nor one that had not been relieved from the payment of the poor rate. Of the £5,265 which the last rate should have raised, £1,612 was still owing, the greater part by boatmen. Moreover, in recent years, because of the recession and the heavy burden of the poor rate, the price of property had fallen by more than a half.<sup>7</sup> The boatmen, themselves, preferring not to dwell on the details of their own miserable condition, merely pointed out that for some years their earnings had been insufficient to afford the subsistence and clothing necessary to fit them for the toils, bad weather and perils they were daily called upon to face, and to enable them to keep their boats in a proper state of repair: from the comfort, sufficiency and happiness they had all enjoyed some years ago, they were now reduced to 'penury and want the most pinching and distressing'.<sup>8</sup>

Conditions in Dover were equally depressing. According to Henshaw Latham, where once the boatmen had generally kept their houses well furnished and themselves well clothed, they now found themselves in such a state of poverty that they were unable to go to sea for want of a change of linen in wet weather.<sup>9</sup> According to Mr. T. Robinson, manager of the Dover Benevolent Society, which distributed £330-350 annually in Dover, the distress on the pier, where most of the boatmen lived, was so great that it could not be described. Their dwellings were, for the most part, of the most wretched description: 'furniture they have none, and their apparel by day serves to cover their innocent babes by night'. In the previous year the society had lent out blankets and distributed large quantities of coal and soup. Scarcely any of the boatmen paid poor rates or taxes. Those that did were behind hand with their payments. So great, indeed, was the non-payment of poor rate that in 1828 the parishioners had been obliged to adopt Mr. Bourne's Act, whereby landlords under a certain rental could be compelled to pay a poor rate.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, Appendix No. 3, Letter from Kelly Nazer, Esq., to the Committee of Elder Brethren.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, Appendix No. 3, Report of a Committee of the Elder Brethren of the Trinity House.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, Appendix No. 3, Memorial of Deal Boatmen to the Elder Brethren of the Trinity House.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, Minutes of Evidence, 35-6.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, Letter from Mr. T. Robinson to the Commission of Trinity Masters.

In their investigations the committee found expert opinion overwhelmingly sympathetic to the case presented by the boatmen. As the Committee of Elder Brethren of Trinity House pointed out, not only were the pilot cutters extremely expensive to operate, they did not effectually answer the intention of their establishment, in that in the winter season and in foul weather, when their services were most required, they were frequently obliged to remain at anchor under the Ness, and on venturing forth sometimes proved incapable of boarding. The Deal and Dover boatmen, on the other hand, never failed; and in times of bad weather, when the cutters were obliged to remain at anchor, they frequently came to the assistance of ships in distress, even in the direst circumstances. As Edward Darby put it:

'In gales of wind ships are unable to assist themselves in the Downs; they break adrift and then they want the assistance of the Deal men, who, the harder it blows, the more they are afloat; and but for their assistance would be lost by going on shore on the flats at Sandwich, or in attempting to go to the Ramsgate pier, and be lost at the back of the Heads; the Deal boatmen are enabled to prevent this by their knowledge and skill; they take charge of them in bad weather, and conduct them to places of safety. When ships are on the Goodwin Sands, they are equally zealous in hastening to assistance; frequently they do nothing but save the lives of the crew; for that they are entitled to no remuneration whatever.'<sup>11</sup>

Thomas Trott, boatman of Deal, told the committee of one such incident, when he endeavoured to come to the help of a ship stranded on the Goodwin Sands:

'In the case of Ogle Castle, I was lying-to under the South Foreland lights; it was blowing very hard in the winter season, and I had my storm-sail set with a reef. I said to a man who was close by me, that ship is going on the Goodwin Sands; for heaven's sake let us make all the sail we can: but before we got there she was on shore and her bottom in. I wore round and the man (Carr) said to me, where are you going? I said I was going inside of the sand: but as the weather got lighter I could see that the vessel was right on the body of the Goodwin Sands. I then wore round my boat, and I said, I mean to bring up; and as the water has got five hours to fall, we will be able, please God, to save these people. We could see the people not more than two cables' length from us, but we were not able to get near them. I said to my son, stand by and cut our cables; let us save these poor fellows; he said, father, we cannot get back again: and we saw every one of them washed away, and could not save a single soul. On coming on shore, on the beach we saw Lord Liverpool and Mr. Canning: they asked me what ship it was, and I said I thought it was an East Indiaman of a large class. His Lordship asked me if there were any female passengers on board, and I told him I could not tell. His Lordship said we had had a great deal of trouble; I said, yes, my Lord, but not the pleasure of saving the crew. I formerly have had: I never in my life saw a time when I could not have saved some persons off the Goodwin Sands, but on this unfortunate occasion I could not save a soul. There were eight boats out at the time; and if I was a coward, they were not all of them; if it had been possible, some of the number would have been saved.'<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, Minutes of Evidence, 11.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

It was no doubt instances such as these that persuaded numerous witnesses to testify to the excellent character of the boatmen. Henshaw Latham referred to them as a 'very invaluable race of men',<sup>13</sup> while the Elder Brethren of Trinity House declared that they were deserving of every encouragement, not only of the shipowners, but from the country in general: 'it having been confidently represented to your Committee that their first object in cases of wreck is to save the lives of individuals, for which they have no claim to pecuniary reward; and that there has scarcely been a case of plunder known for many years.'<sup>14</sup> Nor were they any less dependable on land. According to Lieutenant Nazer, they were not only honest but good family men as well:

'Putting out of question their dauntless bravery in rescuing their fellow-creatures from a watery grave, they are honest; a robbery by a Deal boatman being unknown; witness the property constantly in their boats on the beach, without being pilfered. That they are good fathers, the fact of their children never wishing to leave them, and its being almost impossible to get their sons away to sea, speaks for itself; and that they are good husbands, the simple fact of a false step or improper conduct on the part of their wives being altogether unknown, is a sufficient testimony on that head.'<sup>15</sup>

Only the pilots struck a sour note, drawing attention to the disputes which had from time to time arisen between the pilots and the boatmen and expressing concern regarding the exorbitant demands the boatmen occasionally made on ships in distress.<sup>16</sup> Yet, even they do not appear to have mounted any serious opposition to the boatmen's proposals, the pilots of Deal requesting merely that in any new arrangement they should not be put at a disadvantage as against the pilots of Dover, who being more to seaward generally had the advantage of securing an unfair proportion of the work available. Provided this inequality could be taken account of in any new system, they would have no other objection to the discontinuance of the cutters.<sup>17</sup>

In the light of such unwonted unanimity, one may suppose that the committee had little difficulty in reaching a conclusion. In their final report, they accepted the principal proposals of the Deal and Dover boatmen in full, recommending that, as the cutter system did not answer the purpose for which it had been constructed, competition

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, Appendix No. 3, Report of a Committee of the Elder Brethren of the Trinity House.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, Letter from Kelly Nazer, Esq., to the Committee of Elder Brethren.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, Minutes of Evidence, 36-42.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, Appendix No. 3, Report of a Committee of the Elder Brethren of the Trinity House.

should be allowed in the shipping of pilots, that licensed boatmen, within the limits of the Cinque Ports, should be paid for their services in piloting ships between Dungeness and the Downs in the absence of pilots, at the same rate as was now by law fixed for the pilots, but subject to such rules and regulations as would guard against breach of law, combination and other misconduct, and that they should henceforth enjoy the privilege of putting pilots ashore from outward-bound vessels, at a fixed scale of 20s. for vessels of 150 tons and upwards, irrespective of the state of the weather. Finally, they advised that it was 'imperiously necessary, for the benefit of Commerce and the Shipping Interests, that this intrepid race of Men should be kept up, and that they should meet with every reasonable encouragement from the Legislature.'<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, Report of a Select Committee on the Cinque Port Pilots, 1833.