

Over 150 Years of Cross-Channel Connections

The development of the East Coastway line owes much to the interest of the nineteenth century railway companies in providing cross-Channel links. Travel to the continent by steam ship was gaining in popularity at the time and rail brought continental tourism within reach of the middle classes. When the railway arrived in Brighton in 1840-41, there was already a steam packet crossing to Dieppe on the Normandy coast from the Chain Pier, constructed in 1823. Brighton to Dieppe had in fact become one of the busiest Channel crossings and there were close ties between the two towns: the *Brighton Herald* of the day even had a Dieppe correspondent! There was real excitement on both sides of the Channel at the prospect of the railway speeding passengers on to Paris and London respectively.



Brighton's Chain Pier, c. 1895 (mike.perris.com)

But the Chain Pier was a poor substitute for a proper harbour and the unpredictable Channel weather often caused delays and cancellations (a situation which repeated itself when a jetfoil link with Dieppe was attempted from Brighton Marina between 1979-80). The Chain Pier was frequently battered by storms and indeed, it was finally destroyed by severe weather at the end of 1896.

Both Shoreham and Newhaven, near Brighton, had good natural harbours. Shoreham was the obvious candidate for the cross-Channel route; by 1841, there was already a railway line from Shoreham to Brighton and on towards London (see our poster 'London Road Station and its Connections'). The railway company had set up a subsidiary company to operate ships out of Shoreham but in the process, had come into conflict with the Shoreham Harbour authorities. This contributed to the decision to build the line to Lewes and out to Newhaven.



(Derek Longly collection, <http://ournewhaven.org.uk>)

Once the line had been opened to Newhaven at the end of 1847, the London, Brighton and South Coast Railway (LBSCR) and its French partner, the Chemins de Fer de l'Ouest, were eager to commercialise 'the shortest and cheapest route' (*la plus courte et la plus économique*) from London to Paris. This would compete with the existing South Eastern Railway cross-Channel routes from Dover to Calais and Folkestone to Boulogne.

The connecting service was introduced in 1863 and proved very popular. Between 1888 and 1903, passenger numbers tripled; in 1900 270,000 passengers used the Newhaven to Dieppe route. It was, of course, based on a direct rail route from Lewes on to London (opened in 1847), but Brighton was still a fashionable resort and French visitors came to stay in large numbers. The East Coastway line thus retained its 'cross-Channel' importance.

The new century proved to be a very good time for Franco-British relations. The Entente Cordiale was signed in April 1904, and in the years that followed, the Councils and various associations in Brighton and Dieppe exchanged visits. The *Brighton Herald* was particularly effusive about a visit to Brighton by the Comité Républicain du Commerce on May 11th, 1907, with a grand reception in the Pavilion. "Brighton is quite a French town", the Mayor had declared in his welcoming speech – given in French. As *The Herald* commented: "It has come to be recognised, half seriously, half humourously, that a qualification for the Mayoralty of Brighton is the capacity to speak French fluently!"



From 'Brighton: the Century in Photographs', C. Horlock

Up until 1914, the Newhaven-Dieppe route continued to thrive, with passenger numbers well above 200,000 per year. The railway company, with its trains and ferries, was Newhaven's major employer. During the 1914-18 War, the port was taken over by military authorities, but after the war, the Newhaven-Dieppe crossing again became popular, with a record 376,000 passengers crossing in 1926. However, the economic crisis of the 1930s led to passenger numbers falling dramatically and during the Second World War, Newhaven again took on military significance as one of the important embarkation ports for allied Normandy landings.



The famous London & Paris hotel at Newhaven Harbour, c. 1920 (ournewhaven.org.uk)

The post-war period saw the rise of air and car travel. This badly affected the Newhaven to Dieppe sea route, which was longer than those from Dover. Furthermore, up until 1964, any cars had to be winched aboard cargo ships bound for Dieppe while their drivers followed on the passenger ferry. Journeys by rail were also becoming less popular, and 'boat train' passenger numbers from London and from Brighton were in decline. Between 1960-70, the percentage of foot passengers fell from 77.6% to 25%. Yet, during this same decade, the total number of passengers rose by over 60%.

The reason was the introduction in 1964 of car ferries, or rather the conversion of the existing fleet to 'drive-on drive-off' boats. The 1960s and the 1970s saw the popularisation of the continental motoring holiday: fashionable couples drove sports cars down tree-lined roads to the Cote d'Azur, while families headed for the French coast camp sites. The ferries out of Newhaven were still operated by the railway company, by then the nationalised British Rail, branded as 'Sealink'. Though passenger numbers increased through the 1960s, it was not until 1973 that Sealink brought into service a brand new drive-on drive-off ferry.



This was the locally much-loved *Senlac*, which operated on the route until 1986-7.

These were still good times for foot passengers. It was easy to travel from Brighton to Dieppe and on to Paris. The East Coastway train pulled up by the ferry terminal in Newhaven, and the train for Paris was waiting on the quayside in Dieppe. Day trips to Dieppe were popular during this time and were marketed as reasonably priced excursions by British Rail: groups of students from Sussex University, for example, could afford the crossing at around £6, with rail fares thrown in. Trains left Brighton at 6am to connect with the 7am boat out of Newhaven. The four-hour crossing could be spent catching up on sleep!

Dieppe's ferry harbour at this time was still in the centre of the town. The boat would draw in at midday alongside picturesque cafes and restaurants, with just enough time to catch the market stalls around the Cathédrale St. Jacques for garlic, herbes de provence, saucisson and cheese. Then a long three-course lunch in one of Dieppe's little restaurants, followed by a saunter along the Grande Rue to buy mustard, olive oil and wine. The afternoon would end with a leisurely coffee in a harbour-side café before taking the boat back to Newhaven at 5pm. Four hours later, foot passengers would disembark, cross the footbridge to the station and pick up the train for the short journey back to Brighton.

There was a romanticism about the Newhaven-Dieppe crossing that was lacking in the shorter, but more efficient, crossings from Dover. The rail and road routes snake through the South Downs down the Ouse valley to Newhaven while Dieppe retains its small-town charm: as a *Daily Telegraph* writer put it recently, "Arriving in Dieppe, anglers look up from their lines as you chug past the jetty into the calm, dark waters of the port ... Even on dull days, the light is mesmerising. Turner, Delacroix, Vernet, Monet and Gauguin all painted here, attracted by the luminosity of the alabaster shore."

However, by the 1980s, the route was proving unprofitable despite a steadily increasing number of passengers, at least until 1993. The last thirty years have seen the Newhaven-Dieppe ferry route plagued by strikes, and subject to mergers and take-overs. British Rail was privatised in 1995 and the railway company has long ceased to operate the ferries. Foot passengers to Dieppe no longer pass through Newhaven Harbour station: the advice is to disembark at Newhaven Town and walk or take the connecting bus to the port. The end of an era? Who knows ...

Since 1994, we can cross the Channel by rail. A number of trains along the East Coastway line now go on to Ashford International to link up with the Eurostar. They don't stop at London Road Station, but we recognise the sound of their diesel engines trundling down the line.