

A new ferry route for Folkestone and Boulogne-sur-Mer

Background

Many people in Folkestone and Boulogne have fond memories of the ferry route that united their two towns and brought in much needed trade and work. Sadly it ceased operating some years ago due to market forces at the time. In early 2009 Roger De Haan, as Folkestone Harbour's owner and Frédéric Cuvillier, Mayor of Boulogne, agreed to explore together the potential to re-open the ferry link between their two towns. Given the lack of infrastructure, it was quickly recognised that it would not be feasible to operate a cross channel service for vehicles. They therefore initiated investigations into a summer service for foot passengers, with the aim of attracting people to stay in their towns, rather than using them as a point of departure as they do at present.

Research

The French and British partners commissioned two research studies into the possibility of re-opening the ferry link. They focussed on technical and commercial viability. There were several visits to Folkestone by technicians from Boulogne and by a consultant commissioned to carry out the commercial survey.

Technical survey findings:

- Folkestone Harbour is dilapidated in parts and would need massive investment to bring it to minimum standards to receive passengers.
- There is no infrastructure in place – parking, reception buildings, customs and border agency accommodation as well as boarding apparatus would all need to be provided
- Prevailing strong winds and tides would make the operation liable to possible cancellation due to weather even in the summer months. This was the case even in the days of the larger ferries which carried vehicles as well as people
- Dredging of the harbour would be needed before vessels could use it.
- Various types of ferry were considered. It emerged that for a foot-passenger only service, a 250 seat ferry normally used for short crossings, was the only viable option. However it had many unsatisfactory features.
 - It would take approx 2 ½ hours to make the crossing plus a half hour to embark and disembark passengers (faster boats would be too expensive to operate for foot-passengers only)
 - Half the seats would be on an upper external deck.
 - Passengers would have no amenities and would need to be seated throughout the journey.
 - Such a vessel is not equipped to operate in rough seas

Commercial survey findings:

- Capital: Capital costs of providing infrastructure and dredging as detailed above would be very high – several million pounds.
- Income: Realistically, given the length of the journey, only one trip each way per day is likely. The income from one return boatload per day is minimal, even if the vessel were full each time.
- Expenditure: At the same time, costs of hiring the vessel, recruiting, training, and paying crew, port fees, insurance, marketing the enterprise and taxes greatly outstrip the likely income. Charges would have to be low to be competitive.
- Capacity: Given the poor climate in the channel and probability of cancellations, 100% capacity over the season is very unlikely.
- Market: the study looked at the potential market for foot-passengers and at what would attract them to the area
 - The market would be restricted to people living in the immediate area; although St Pancras - Folkestone now takes only an hour by rail, home to harbour would still take a couple of hours each end of the journey for London residents and this would put off many travellers.
 - The potential for day-trips outside Folkestone, eg to Port Lympne zoo, is limited; realistically passengers on a day-trip would have neither the time nor the means of transport to get far from Folkestone.
 - Given the length of the journey, would people be tempted to stay overnight? The market for weekend visits to Folkestone is small at present. The ferry would need to rely largely on foot passengers who expected to stay for the day in Folkestone or Boulogne and this is felt to be a limited market.
 - The length of the journey and restrictive accommodation on the boat may put off many potential passengers.
- Competition: LD lines runs a regular Dover-Boulogne ferry service for cars and may extend this service to foot passengers. Journey time is 1 ¾ hours. This would reduce the market for a service from Folkestone

Conclusion

There was a genuine Entente Cordiale on both sides and a wish for a renewed Boulogne –Folkestone ferry service. Research into feasibility was very thorough and took over a year. It was with the greatest regret that both partners came to the conclusion that for both technical and commercial reasons, it would not be feasible to re-open a ferry service between Folkestone and Boulogne

Gabrielle Wilson

19 March 2010

S T R A N D

125 Sandgate High St, Folkestone, Kent CT20 3BZ. Tel: 01303 212040 Fax: 01303 247613

2 November 2011

I Sisley & C Crawford
C/O CHS Project Managers
127 Sandgate Road
Folkestone
Kent CT20 2BH

Dear Ian and Colin

The time has now come to draw our discussions on a Folkestone-Boulogne ferry to a conclusion. We have maintained dialogue with you on the subject since April 2010 and, I think you will agree, given you every opportunity to work on a viable plan and introduce an appropriate investor.

The previous deadline for a plan to be submitted passed in October 2010 at which point detailed work was initiated on the harbour plans assuming no ferry. You then raised the issue again in January this year. Despite the considerable costs incurred on our planning work I agreed to allow you further time to develop your proposal and introduce Roger De Haan to an investor who had sufficient confidence to move the project forward. You wished to bring the plans to the World Travel Market show in London in November. We agreed this would need a deal between us in October and serious discussions and introductions by September as a prelude to that.

The final deadline has now passed and I request that you honour the pledge made in your email of 13 May 2009 to terminate your plans and make this position clear and unequivocal in the public domain. This will allow us to proceed with a planning application on the seafront site, without a ferry, which has been held back pending your deadline.

I appreciate how much work you have put into this project but, as previously stated, we too would have liked to see a reinstatement of the ferry but concluded it was not viable following our studies during 2009.

I am copying this letter to the Go Folkestone Chair, Ann Berry, and SERP Chairman, Philip Carter, as they participated in our discussions on the matter.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Trevor Minter', with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the left.

Trevor Minter OBE

CC: Ann Berry
Philip Carter

THE FOLKESTONE-BOULOGNE FERRY SERVICE

12, The Mariners, Marine Parade, Harwich, Essex CO12 3RL
Phone 01255 507332/503816 Mobile 07836 693977
e-mail: colin.crawford1@btconnect.com

2nd November 2011

Trevor Minter Esq OBE
Director
The Folkestone Harbour Company Ltd
Strand House
125 Sandgate Road
Folkestone
Kent CT20 2BH

Dear Trevor

Proposed Ferry Service Boulogne- Folkestone

As we said we would do about this time, we write to outline the latest position with this project.

We have made very good progress with the many detailed matters that had to be addressed and we still feel we have an extremely viable project, which we hope you will receive with the enthusiasm we believe it deserves.

We do not yet have a fully funded investment package, unfortunately. The financial climate, as you can witness for yourself, is not realistically conducive to this outcome at present. We had been in touch with one potential funder whom we had thought initially would confirm his unqualified interest, however he has now taken the line that he is not keen on start-ups and, consequently, he is not prepared to fund the whole project. He appreciated us approaching him and wants to be kept involved. We believe that he might show far greater enthusiasm and get involved if he was not the only funder.

We have been in touch with a major UK bank operating internationally in transport and logistics based projects and we are awaiting a date to meet them in London in order to get guidance from them on the criteria they would need to be satisfied to fund a major part of the investment (the charter party for example) and what proportion they would look to us to fund ourselves. In this respect, the sums involved are not vast and we are convinced therefore not insurmountable, even in the current economic climate.

We have thoroughly looked at the technical solutions on offer and our initial outgoing costs and we are considering, at least in the first instance, the use of the outer berth at Folkestone as that would avoid incurring initial dredging costs which is a substantial part of the initial start-up cost.

We have had a very useful meeting with Network Rail recently and talked our project through in detail with them.

We are making an Interreg application for funding for a consultancy study to verify our mid-term traffic forecasts and market place sensibility. This is in respect of the longer term, post-Olympic, market and will have no bearing on our start-up timing.

Our investigations confirm that there are several suitable fast ferries on the market and we are meeting one big Australian company, Austral, in the next few weeks, that have new and second hand vessels available.

We are very keen to work with the Folkestone Harbour Company as we are sure that our ferry project can complement your major Sea-front development project, and that we can both bring some much-needed vitality to a town that desperately needs such initiatives.

We would very much appreciate meeting yourself and Roger De Haan to discuss the project in more detail, particularly in respect of funding and the capital costs, as we know Roger is keen to understand these. Ian is away until 29 November but Colin can meet you earlier than that if you wish, together with Bob Parsons who is now working with us.

Yours sincerely

Colin

Colin Crawford
Shipping & Port Management
Harwich

Ian

Ian Sisley
CHS Project Managers Ltd
Folkestone