

## FORMER PRESIDENT ALAN DOMVILLE CONTINUES HIS REMINISCENCES AS A MOTORING WRITER & LIFELONG GROUP FRIEND.....

The recent backing of a scheme to build a bridge linking Scotland and Northern Ireland by former Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson and Arlene Foster of the DUP reminded me of the great project that revolutionised motorists' means of travelling to the continental mainland...the Channel Tunnel.

Opened by our Queen and President Francois Mitterand on the day after my birthday in 1994, you will have guessed I was privileged to be one of the first journalists to make the crossing both by car and the Eurostar. I also bought shares in the outfit (thinking that like those a great aunt bought in an obscure railway company in Canada in the 19th century which became part of the Canadian Pacific and made her a millionairess several times over) that the investment would do the same for me. Dividends in the tunnel have been dire - but my great grandchildren may still thank me for investing.

All of this takes me back to pre-tunnel days when ships provided the only means we could drive our way across to the rest of Europe. One of those trips was especially poignant - a week before the Herald of Free Enterprise sank off Zeebrugge in 1987 my wife and I were invited by its owners, Townsend Thoreson, to make the trip aboard that very ferry. I knew the press office staff very well; each of their lives were totally changed for the worse by the impact on them by the sinking in which almost 200 people were drowned.

The Townsend ferry was originally the only opposition to the railway-owned boats that enabled one to cross the Channel. The Dover to Dunkirk night train ferry service left Dover just after midnight and one was awakened at 3.30am to be ready for breakfast half an hour later. Disembarkation was at 4.15 - if the lock gates had been opened.

An early start for the delights of Brittany or beyond? Not so...the customs officers didn't arrive for work until after 6am.

Ellerman Wilson line's ferries took 16 hours to cross from Hull to Rotterdam; nowadays the magnificent North Sea Ferries ships have to slow down overnight so that customers can enjoy a good night's sleep - as long as the sea is in a friendly mood.

Not much fun was a return trip from the Loire Valley to La Havre to Portsmouth; a miscalculation meant that my wife and I and our four children arrived at the ferry port too late to book a hotel and so we had to sleep in the car in the terminal car park ahead of the morning crossing.

That event even had a precedent: we once arrived in the middle of the night at a Haven camp site in northern France, saw the main gate was closed, and bedded down in the car. We awoke next morning to see a sign at the gate - Welcome to the Domville family. Use the side gate; wine is in the fridge...

Naturally, I believe that being able to use a car increases the enjoyment of one's holiday in Europe - if you plan it right!