

The Zeebrugge Ferry Disaster 1987

A talk given to The Eltham Society
Thursday 2nd October 2008

It was a welcome return for our guest speakers at the October and November lecture meetings. Colin Breed, a retired senior police officer of the Kent Constabulary, provided a moving account of the Zeebrugge Ferry Disaster and the Kent police operation after what was described as the worst shipping disaster since the Titanic. A total of 193 British subjects lost their lives on the roll-on roll-off type vessel *The Herald of Free Enterprise*, which in just 90 seconds capsized when sea water entered the car deck outside the mouth of the harbour. Miraculously the ship, as it turned 180 degrees, landed onto a sand bank at only 30 feet deep. Had the ship been further out to sea the loss of life could have been immeasurable.

There were many accounts of heroism and Colin and the team from Kent Constabulary worked with the Belgium authorities in returning survivors to the UK, but also the very sad and distressing duties of body identification and assisting the coroner. It would be a month later after the disaster that all bodies had been removed from the ship and the vessel brought upright. The subsequent inquiries would castigate the ship's owners and describe a 'disease of sloppiness' against the crew. Whilst further ferry disasters would follow, particularly the *Estonia* in 1997, improvements were made in these types of vessels, which still today provide a convenient way in which to cross the channel not just for business and freight but for thousands of day trippers and holiday makers.

Colin's talk highlighted the diverse range of our lectures and to again, as we did for his talk on Royal visits to Kent, commend Colin and the staff of the Kent Constabulary for the exemplary and vital work they do.

David Sleep