



Hoverbow 50 - Opening Speech

HOVERSHOW 50

Opening Speech by Frances Cockerell

25TH July 2009

*THE HOVERCRAFT MUSEUM - HMS DAEDALUS
LEE-ON-THE-SOLENT*

Cover graphic shows SR-N1 making the first Hovercraft crossing of the English Channel from Calais to Dover

Madam Mayor, My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen

I want to say at once – how *very honoured and delighted* I was to be asked by Warwick Jacobs to open this historic and exciting Hovershow 2009 on the exact 50th Anniversary today of the first Channel Crossing by Hovercraft.

Warwick was a founder in 1988, and is a long standing Trustee of the Hovercraft Museum – a Trustee extraordinaire I think, and an indefatigable year after year Hovercraft Show creator. He is also a considerable artist, who painted my father's portrait, and ably circumvented the sometimes startling questions shot at him by my father during a painting session! Warwick's long fascination with hovercraft is well known, and his many friends and contacts will testify that he can talk hovercraft non stop!

I feel sure that it is not generally realised that the Hovercraft Museum receives no funding other than that raised by very welcome Membership Fees, and from selling hovercraft books and memorabilia, and also that raised by enthusiastic volunteers putting on Shows like this every year. The huge annual rent and the upkeep costs they have to find, always make me truly amazed at how they can accomplish this each year.

My father and mother became the first Patrons of the Hovercraft Museum in 1994. My father only agreed to this provided my mother could become a joint Patron with him, and I am now proud to follow them as a Patron myself.

I would now like to attempt to set the record straight from the Cockerell viewpoint, on one or two aspects of hovercraft history – I feel I owe it to my father to do so. I owe it to my father to *wake up the ghosts of Saunders Roe* and call them to account!

Last month as you know, on 11th June we had another very historic 50th Anniversary – the Anniversary of the first flight in 1959 of the Saunders Roe SR-N1 – the *first ever man carrying hovercraft*. Astonishingly – having invited the world's Press to East Cowes to witness the launching of their new craft – Saunders Roe *did not invite the inventor!*

As I said publicly in June, the only reason for my father's presence on that momentous occasion, was because he somehow got to know about it in advance, and so drove with my mother to the gates of Saunders Roe, and appealed to the gatekeeper who allowed them in. My parents were living just a few hundred yards away in East Cowes, and I can think of *no polite words* to describe this discreditable behaviour of the Directors of Saunders Roe towards my father.

In anyone's judgement – *my father had a moral right to be there*. Full use was being made of what is now termed his '*intellectual property*', benefiting from the huge amount of work and endeavour, in terms of time, as well as financial cost that he gave over many years.

An interesting but still not widely known fact, is that in 1957 – two years before the 1959 SR-N1 – my father had produced a '*Report On Flexible Extensions*' i.e. skirts, which was later published in '*Flight*' magazine.

I am looking across at the SR-N4 the Princess Anne while talking to you, but let me tell you that at the launch of the first SR-N4 in February 1968 – *my father was again not invited* to the occasion by Saunders Roe (in effect), who by then had become the British Hovercraft Corporation. He went with my husband by ferry from Southampton, and they walked as near as they could to the slipway, but they had to peer in through a fence to see the launch of the craft.

Without any doubt, the Directors of Saunders Roe were out of their depth in terms of appropriate conduct towards my father, and saw him as an outsider. They were unwilling to acknowledge his brainchild, disregarding the extraordinary achievement by a solitary fellow working far away in Suffolk, all of which culminated in his major patent dated 12 December 1955, the first of his fifty nine hovercraft patents.

However, I am glad to report, that on that strange and notable June day – all was not lost. My parents had their own private celebration when my father gave to his beloved wife, my mother, the gold watch I am now proud to wear; given to her to mark their years of hard work and achievement together – which culminated on that day in seeing my father's remarkable invention which they had together named a '*hovercraft*' – *take its place on the world stage, as a new form of transport!*

Now, to get back to the Channel Crossing on 25th July 1959, by three men in a rather small hovercraft! The fourth man, co-pilot Bob Strath, who with other pilots is with us today, was devastated to be left behind somewhere in Calais when pilot, Cdr. Peter Lamb, with a very keen eye on the weather conditions took the decision to set off immediately at 4.55 am.

In her diary, my mother says that on the previous day, the 24th, she and Mrs Lamb spent the day together, listening to radio and television, waiting and waiting for news that they were safely across, but much later they were told that the Crossing would be early the following day.

Although my father had not known if he would be authorized to be on board for the Crossing until the day before, his allotted task on board had been to act as human ballast at the prow – *but he had not been given proper wet weather gear, and even worse, no harness* to anchor him to the craft, with the result that he had a very narrow escape when he was nearly washed overboard. He soon became very frozen, and the extreme noise from the engine affected his hearing for ever.

Later on, having arrived in Dover – my father announced that the crossing had been "*a piece of cake*" and then went on to wonder where he could get some breakfast! Of course what he said was utterly right to gain good publicity for their historic venture, although we now know that the crossing was not without danger to everyone, with various incidents.

In the official Saunders Roe film of the epic Channel crossing, of which I have a copy, it is conspicuous that my father has been carefully edited out of it, and I doubt if the true

Rather wonderfully, a telegram from his father addressed to

“COCKERELL HOVERCRAFT DOVER”

with just a pencilled note on it, reading

“ON BEACH BY PRINCE OF WALES PIER”,

found its way to him! It reads

“BRAVO BRAVISSIMO – FATHER”.

unedited version still exists. Saunders Roe, had apparently been afraid that my father would *steal the limelight from them* and although it was his naturally, *the limelight really did not interest him at all!*

My goodness! All their efforts to blank out my father’s presence are now turning round to cast a ghostly and detrimental reflection. But what those directors of Saunders Roe did not foresee, was that some fifty years later, a daughter’s admiration and devotion would generate a firm resolve to set things straight and reveal the truth!

Even in this year of celebration of the successes and achievements by hovercraft worldwide in the last fifty years, it has seemed to me that the view of some of the Press in this country appears to have become somehow rather stuck in a negative attitude, which I think is due to the cessation of the Channel crossing SR-N4s. This has resulted in a fashionable view that hovercraft have faded away.

But of course they have not! There has been a reluctance to look around at the world, in which hovercraft are to be found operating in seventy countries plus. Hovercraft are living and breathing here and worldwide: in those seventy countries such as America, Russia, Canada, Greece, Italy, North Korea, India, Saudi Arabia, China and Japan to give just a very few examples. They are being used for very many fascinating applications and tasks, too many for me to list here, but this sort of information is not usually forthcoming. In television programmes and news during this celebratory year, the viewer needs to be given the historical context and data and the current international perspective.

However, I think perhaps in the last few days I can just about detect in this 50th Anniversary Year, that a fairer, more factual and considered evaluation of today’s hovercraft is at last being given...

What was Christopher Cockerell, the man, like? Above all else, his mind was not trapped by established thinking, and this enabled him to approach everything in a more fundamental way. Like his father, he was an inspiration, a leader of men, and those around him soon recognised his qualities and became his enthusiasts. He was a fair and kind man, very generous to many, and he would go out of his way to help people with their problems.

He could sometimes be forthright, and so single minded that now and then he forgot to consider the niceties of life. For example, one evening at Hythe where he lived, having called a neighbour Dennis, earlier on to ask him if he could bring something he wanted, my father settled down to work on something. Later, it suddenly occurred to him that Dennis was nowhere to be seen. My father rang him...“Dennis where are you???” Pause “...but, Sir Christopher – I’m in bed... it’s two o’clock in the morning!!”

Not for nothing did his wartime Marconi team claim that his initials ‘CSC’ – stood for ‘CHOP, SCRAP and CHANGE!’ He would set them up to do something – then come in next morning and say “Stop – I’ve had a better idea, work on it this way...”.

He had arrived in Cowes in February 1959 ready for hard work, with an exceptional innovative technological talent, already well proven by his thirty six electronic patents gained while working at Marconi before and during the war, when he led his team producing a new radio communications system in just a matter of weeks so urgently needed by our RAF bomber crews.

He was a true patriot and would do anything for his country, even against his own interest. Offers came in from abroad, but nothing would tempt him. When he was offered an honorary degree in Science from Cambridge University, ever conscious of the need to promote the status of engineers in this country, he asked if he could have it in engineering, and when they declined, he declined the honour of the degree.

My father had very wide interests indeed, including the arts, and I could claim him to be ‘Universal Man’. As a friend of his, Juanita Kalerghi, founder and editor of the publication *‘Hovering Craft and Hydrofoil’* said to me just a few days ago, “He was unique – you could talk to him about anything, on any subject.”

I am not quite sure that even now in 2009 – the significance of one man actually having invented a new form of transport with no parallel in nature – has yet been fully grasped by all. Can you think of another example? But I think the lucky man just rescued at Weston-super-Mare – who had sunk in the mud up to his chin, *has fully grasped* the unique amphibious nature of hovercraft!

I am always thrilled to recall, and I think it is not much known, that my father had a singular honour accorded him in 1987 when a piece of Antarctica was named after him as *‘The Cockerell Peninsular’*.

Next year, the 4th June 2010 will be the centenary of my father’s birth, and the Hovercraft Celebratory Column will be unveiled at Somerleyton in Suffolk, where he had invented hovercraft in 1955. The Celebratory Column has been funded by very many donations, and all those kind benefactors will be invited to the unveiling. We have been promised a Fly Past by the RAF Memorial Flight in honour of my father’s work for Bomber Command during the war.

May I finish by very warmly welcoming everyone here on this historic and memorable day. With so many of the hovercraft elite gathered here, it is a wonderful day for remi-

niscences and anecdotes! And for all those hovercraft “...*band of brothers*;” who are missing, they will surely feel “...*accursed they were not here*...”!

But I must come down to earth, and thinking of the future, one thing is very certain, hovercraft will continue mushrooming across the globe in their various sizes and guises – for all the years to come!

So let me say: *Christopher Cockerell – you are still with us – and we salute you!*

I now have the greatest pleasure in opening this HOVERSHOW 50 ~

© *Frances Cockerell 25 July 2009*

Bibliography: This speech is based on personal knowledge, and with reference to the archive papers of Sir Christopher Cockerell CBE FRS, which includes the following papers:

1. '*A Note On The Early History of Hovercraft by Sir Christopher Cockerell September 1974*'
2. *Letter* to his father, Sir Sydney Cockerell dated *August 15th 1959* with Christopher Cockerell's (*first*) description of the Channel crossing. This letter was later presented to the Science Museum.
3. '*The Channel Crossing Of The Hovercraft SR-N1 Oct 12th 1959*' Christopher Cockerell