



# THE 'NIGHT FERRY'

## THE END OF BRITAIN'S FIRST INTERNATIONAL PASSENGER TRAIN

**ALLAN TROTTER** sets down some personal observations of the final years of this once illustrious train service.

The 'Night Ferry' was Britain's first international passenger train. Uniquely the 'Night Ferry' offered direct through sleeping cars from London Victoria to Paris Gare du Nord via the train ferry between Dover Marine (later renamed Dover Western Docks) and Dunkerque. The service was instigated and operated by the British Southern Railway and the French Nord Railway.

First, though, a brief background to the 'Night Ferry' service. Twelve specially built Type F sleeping cars were constructed for the start of service. These cars were based on the then standard Wagon Lits Type Y sleeping cars but because of the more restrictive British loading gauge, the Type F cars were built to 63ft in length. Instead of eleven cabins as in the Type Y, there were nine in the Type F. Each cabin contained two berths and could be configured for either day or night use although after 1956 only passengers travelling first class and thus occupying a single berth were carried. There were connecting doors between pairs of cabins to create a suite but cabin 9 had no connecting door. Cabin and connecting doors were of the conventional hinged type – Wagon Lits did not use sliding doors. Passenger access doors to the cars was at one end only, the other vestibule contained the conductor's pantry and the car steam heating boiler. However, emergency exit doors

were located in these vestibules. Like other Wagon Lits cars, heating could be provided by the on-board boiler but provision was also made to obtain steam heat from the locomotive in the regular manner. Vehicles were equipped for both vacuum and air braking. After the elimination of steam traction, electric train heating of both the British and European standards was used and vacuum brake equipment was removed.

The sleeping cars remained much as they were built throughout their in-service lives. The main visible change that came about was at the end of steam haulage around 1960 when the glass louvres for ventilation above the cabin windows on the cabin side only were removed. Some cars later managed to lose their CIWL embossed crests too. Three cars were repainted in a light blue colour with a white line below the windows and carried the markings of SNCF. One Type F car was restored by Wagon Lits and may now be currently inspected at the National Railway Museum at Shildon. Sufficient glass louvres could not be located for this restoration and so only some cabin windows have these, a situation that did not exist whilst the car was in service.

The service commenced on the evening of 14th October 1936 and offered a through overnight sleeping car service between London

**A Class 09 shunter takes the 'Night Ferry' train from Dover Marine for embarkation on the ship.** (Allan Trotter)

and Paris and eventually from 1956 to Brussels. The service was, of course, suspended during the period of hostilities when all the cars were returned to France. Just at this time, because of the success of the 'Night Ferry', a further six more Type F cars had been delivered. To make it a bit more difficult for some of these newly built cars to be sequestered by the occupying forces, the bogies were not attached and were located elsewhere. During hostilities some of the twelve original cars ended up in other places with some being converted to dining cars whilst others just simply disappeared.

Normal service resumed in December 1947 and in 1956 second class ceased to be offered. Catering services between London and Dover also declined and were finally eliminated in 1977. The Class 71 electric locomotives which were the mainstay of the service in post-steam days were also retired at this time, leaving the service to be operated by the less powerful Class 33 diesel-electrics and the Class 73 electro-diesels. The 'Night Ferry' was finally killed off on 31st October 1980 when Class 33 No.33 043, fitted with a commemorative headboard, led the final passenger-carrying formation to Dover Western Docks. The following evening the previous night's incoming train was returned to France, devoid of any revenue-generating passengers.

So how did this fascination with the 'Night Ferry' first come about? Interest came about purely by chance. Being in Glasgow Central station to make a booking on the Glasgow to Bristol overnight sleeper train, a schematic map was noted depicting all sleeping car services in Great Britain. One service noted was from London to Dover but as the distance is only around 70 seven miles, why was a sleeper service required? On asking

the ticket agent about this service he stated he did not even know of its existence.

Curiosity was now aroused and this mysterious service required further investigation. Back in the 1970s there was no such thing as the internet so this resulted in any research having to be done by use of books and any published advertising material. Once information was collated, an overnight sleeper trip to London was arranged with specific plans made to visit Victoria station late at night to attempt to see the elusive 'Night Ferry' train.

Photography of the train was another hurdle to overcome. As can be deduced by the title of the train, operation took part during the night which is not conducive to photography. This was well before the era of digital cameras and we were using Kodachrome 64 ASA colour slide film. Time exposures and a tripod were essential. Also, as I resided in Glasgow at this time, regular visits to the area were restricted by employment commitments and financial considerations. Despite all this, a number of visits to London and Dover were made to capture the images. In the late 1970s there were neither restrictions nor discouragement from railway staff for setting up a tripod and camera for close-up photography of this international train at either London Victoria or Dover Marine. Try to imagine this scenario today concerning an international train and the present-day onerous regime; the force would immediately be upon you.

Operation of the train in the UK was quite convoluted. The following description is based on first-hand observation only. During the day the train was usually stabled in Road 1 in Victoria Grosvenor Road Carriage Shed. At the appropriate time it was brought into Platform 2 of London Victoria station by either a Class

**Platform 6 at Dover Western Docks (renamed from Dover Marine in 1979). A Class 73 electro-diesel is ready to take the 'Night Ferry' to London Victoria.**  
(Allan Trotter)

33 or 73 locomotive, then another would be attached at the other end ready for the journey to Dover. The first vehicle behind this locomotive was an adapted Mk1 brake corridor composite BCK, either S21270 or S21273. This vehicle was only for use by the train guard, no non-sleeping car passengers being carried. The next vehicles in the train were the CIWL Type F sleeping cars. The number of cars varied depending on demand but six sleeping cars seemed to be common. Bringing up the rear there were either one or usually two SNCF four-wheel fourgon vans.

The train was generally routed via Folkestone but deviations could happen. After exiting Shakespeare Cliff Tunnel the train took the right-hand line at Archcliffe Junction and proceeded into Platform 4 at Dover Marine station. There are four platforms here, Nos.3 to 6. Platforms 1 and 2 are not passenger platforms but are the two lines set into the quayside.

On arrival the locomotive was detached and a Class 09 diesel shunter attached to the rear of the train. This locomotive then hauled the vehicles towards Hawkesbury Street Junction and towards Dover Priory station. Once it had cleared the junction it was propelled towards the train ferry dock. The Mk1 BCK was detached and left in a siding adjacent to the link span whilst the sleeping cars and the vans were distributed in a balanced position on the train ferry where they were jacked up off their springs and then secured by chains to the deck, thus restricting movement due to inclement weather. This is the English Channel, remember! The Class 09 then withdrew.

The following morning the ferry returned with the other 'Night Ferry' set from Paris and Brussels. The fourgons and sleeping cars were removed from the ship by a Class 73 locomotive and a stop made to collect the BCK left on the previous evening. The train then proceeded towards Hawkesbury Street Junction and Dover Priory and once the junction was cleared it was propelled into

Platform 6 at Dover Marine. After some time the 'Night Ferry' then departed for London via Folkestone. I was unable to observe operations on the other side of the Channel despite having at one time purchased through tickets from London to Paris. The excursion was cancelled as the French *matelots* were having one of their many industrial disputes.

After 31st October 1980 it would be further fourteen years before it would be possible to travel by direct through passenger train from London to Brussels or Paris. However, this time only day seating accommodation was offered and no sleeping car service was provided. On the opening of the Channel Tunnel, this ideal opportunity to provide through day and sleeping car services between regional locations throughout Britain and the abundant city centres of mainland Europe was squandered despite the fact the some 'Night Star' sleeping cars and lounge cars had been constructed. These were eventually sold off to VIA Rail of Canada.

No doubt because of the petty politics of railway privatisation in the UK and elsewhere and the subsequent chaotic franchise company fragmentation, this will ensure that such an ideal scenario will never come about. Progress does not necessarily indicate an improvement in the quality of services available to customers. Even the passengers on the prestigious Venice Simplon Orient Express are compelled to disembark the British Pullman cars at Folkestone West and transfer to a bus to travel beneath the English Channel – yes, a bus, incarcerated on board a commercial freight vehicle shuttle train!

How much more convenient it would be if all Continental departures took place from London St. Pancras station. Once the Continental loading gauge line between London and Folkestone had been opened, there was no logical reason why this could not be the case. However, there is a surfeit of superfluous and trivial excuses from so-called industry experts for this not happening. What an opportunity lost!

