

# Mystery fittings on a train ferry

**John Wilson** (Cambridge) unravels an intriguing little WW1 mystery with a little help from 'Funnel'

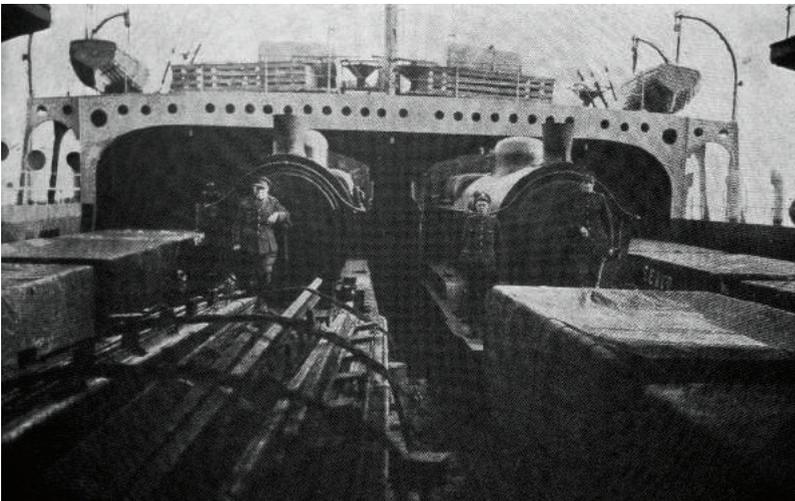
*Not many people know about Richborough, close to Sandwich, in Kent which may have been the primary landing place for the Romans in Britain. However, 100 years ago, it was the site of an extensive but strictly temporary 'secret' WW1 port facility built to supply Britain's Expeditionary Force with heavy equipment, trapped as they were, and almost stationary, on the Western Front. The facility was dismantled very quickly after the Great War, and little remains today to indicate the size of the operation, and the fact that from this port some of the earliest Ro-Ro ferries were operated to enable railway equipment to be transported efficiently and fast.*

A good friend with whom I sailed on the Harwich train Ferries in the 70s has, over the years, collected vast amounts of information and pictures of the first train ferries which ran from Richborough and Southampton to the continent during the First World War .

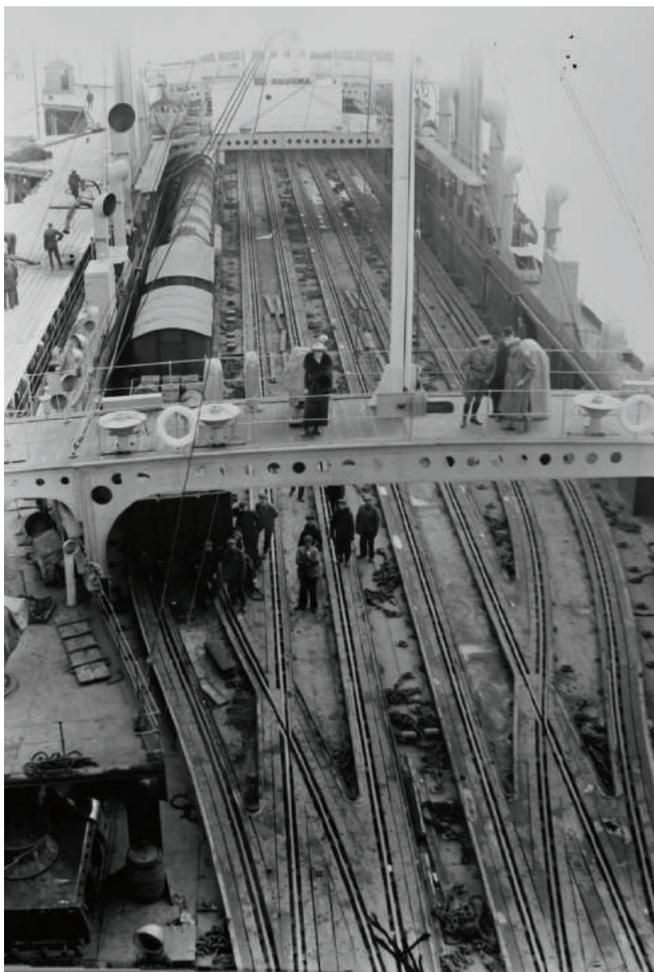
The ferries named Train Ferry 1, 2, 3 and 4, transported wagons of munitions and stores, along with locomotives, over to France directly from the factories, onto the continental railway system, and then to the front lines

Having looked at many of these photos, he was puzzled about one piece of equipment that was stored on the flying bridges of the ferries, looking like large ventilators or mushrooms. In some photos they were there, in others not, and sometimes they were in different positions, but after the war they disappeared completely.

Despite many lines of research they were still a puzzle.



*Loading locos and rolling stock for France at Richborough port. One of the mystery objects is above and just to the right of the left hand loco. {Ed. Do both engines have a whiff of Great Central about them?}*



Then I remembered an article I had read, I believe in 'Funnel', about someone towing a boat home after a rally only to find that the draught had raised a supposedly dead fire, and steam was produced in such profusion that his safety valve lifted.

On contacting my friend, we thought possibly this could happen on a crossing to France. Most engines were shunted on to the ferries dead but the last on was sometimes left in steam.

Could it be that they were worried that the wind on the crossing could fan the fire on the locomotive? If so, the last thing the crew would want is a trail of sparks marking the ship's progress across the channel to some passing U-boat.

So our thoughts went to spark arresters.

Sure enough a quick Google search produced spark arresters of every shape and size, one design matching those on the train ferry picture. These were the mystery objects, stowed on the flying bridge, and lowered down onto the locomotives as they passed beneath.

After the War ended the train ferries returned to civilian operation carrying wagons to and fro to the continent. Train ferry No2 was lost to the west of Dieppe during the Second World War, as was Train ferry no 3, lost off the Somme Estuary. Train Ferry no 4 only made about four trips before being decommissioned and was turned into a tanker at the end of WW1, while Train ferry No 1 became the Essex ferry. It was eventually replaced by a new Essex ferry and, along with the Suffolk, Norfolk and Cambridge Ferries, ran on the Harwich to Zeebrugge route, this being the generation of ferries I and my friend Tony knew when working for British Rail.

So whoever submitted the article about the embarrassing safety valve incident, thank you for solving a long standing conundrum!