

Were they really the good old days?

Four decades have passed since John King left school for a 'glamorous' career in the world of shipping and forwarding

Leaving school at the age of 17 with only three O-Levels did not provide much of an opportunity in a town like Dover in 1971, so there was every chance you either worked on the ferries, in the docks, or ventured into the more glamorous world of shipping and forwarding. I opted for the latter.

After two unsuccessful interviews with established forwarders I managed to secure a job with a London-based company that had only just set up in Dover, as a messenger boy for the paltry sum of £9 a week.

The shortsea ferry route (roll-on roll-off as it was known) was still a relatively new concept operated by Townsend Thoresen in/out of the Eastern Docks. Meanwhile conventional cargo-carrying ships had been berthing and discharging a wide variety of bulk cargo at the Inner Harbour (Granville & Wellington Docks) for many years.

Whichever mode of transport goods arrived at the port by, the procedure for clearing goods through Customs was the same – completion of an import document coupled with a Purchase Tax document, bashed out on an archaic manual typewriter, interwoven with carbon paper to produce a sufficient number of copies.

Documents in hand, I would go on foot or by bus (the luxury of a company moped was to come a few months later) to the Customs House Long Room, located at the Western Docks, where all Import Customs Entries were processed manually.

If you were unlucky and your entries were not processed within opening hours, you simply had to wait (as did your cargo on trailer or quayside) until the next day.



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At the point the entry had been accepted, all taxes and duties had to be paid by cheque to the cashier at that time.

An awful lot depended on developing a good relationship between you and Customs staff and I quickly learned that being an arrogant "think he knows it all" 17-year-old was not going to get me far in this business.

Approved entries now had to be taken and given to the Landing Officer at either the Inner Harbour or Eastern Dock, depending on where your cargo had arrived.

Final clearance by the Landing Officer could take anything from a few hours to 2-3 days depending on the quantity of bulk cargo consignments in the shed.

Because ro-ro ships were less frequent than in modern times, the only way to find out if your trailer (s) were on a particular ferry was to check with the ferry operator's manifest. This often meant staying awake during the night, because you could only present the approved entry to the Landing Officer when the trailer actually arrived. I recall numerous occasions when it was easier to slip back to the office and have a doze in the chair while waiting to find out if the lorry had been cleared.

God forbid it was called for examination, because if so you had to do it yourself! I vividly remember having to turn out over 1,000 boxes of Kodak cameras after a full tally was requested by the officer, and then re-loading the lot afterwards.

One often hears people refer to "the good old days", but I cannot help feeling that there was a sense of adventure in everything.

John King is MD of PSL Group, founded 1984