

THE TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF THE CHANNEL TUNNEL



The Channel Tunnel has become such well-known and well-used transport system in Europe that it is hard to believe it is only twenty years old. May 6th 2014 marked the twentieth anniversary of the opening of this 31.4 mile long tunnel, although work began back in 1988; a tunnel that actually comprises of three separate lines, hundred of trains and countless passengers and become both one of the American Society of Civil Engineers' Seven Wonders of the Modern World and a vital resource for European tourism.

Is this a celebration of a British wonder of engineering, a French visionary or a marvellous joint effort between the two nations?

Whether the Channel Tunnel's 20th birthday is best celebrated as a British or French achievement ultimately depends on the side of the tunnel upon which you reside but it very much a joint effort: the first proposal was put forward by a Frenchman named Albert Mathieu, who envisioned an island in the middle for changing horses; the Brits can claim to have dug out more of the tunnel than the French; both nationalities were represented and the ceremonial break through on December 1st 1990; and both the Queen and President Mitterrand officially opened it on May 6th 1994 - although the French were the first to finish the journey, travelling from Paris at 186mph while the Queen went from Waterloo to Calais at just 80mph. Either way, the excavation had a significant impact on travel between the two countries and the English coastline, with a large portion of the chalk marl removed being deposited at what is now Samphire Hoe Country Park in Kent.

Twenty years on, the Channel tunnel remains an important part of tourism in Europe and has been a big success, despite a few problems along the way.

The history of the Channel Tunnel has not been entirely positive, with an initial setback, a few fires and serious train failure creating questions and disrupting travel along the way. One of the boring machines that created the tunnel is still buried beneath it somewhere; on November 18th 1996, 500 metres of tunnel were damaged in a blaze that led to the installation of an automatic fire dousing system; and, on December 18th 2009, five trains failed, trapping 2000 passengers underground for 16 hours.

These issues aside, the Channel Tunnel has to be seen as a massive success because of the few problems that have been encountered in this impressive transportation system, the way it has brought the UK and mainland continent together and the continual high passenger numbers. 400 trains can pass from English coast to French coast every day, with not just an average of 50,000 human passengers onboard but also their cats and dogs - thanks to the introduction of the pet travel scheme in 2000 - and their vehicles, with 6000 cars and 180 coaches being ferried below the sea on any given day.

Over twenty years, the tunnel has developed from an ambitious project to such an everyday part of travel in Europe that sometimes its scale and importance is overlooked: this twentieth anniversary is the best time to re-evaluate this impact on the landscape and on tourism.

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