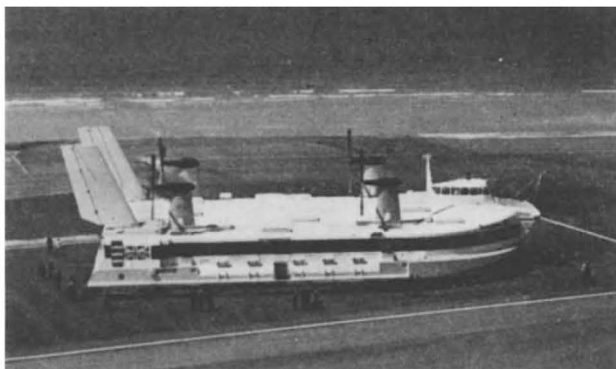


Hover Over from Dover

THE publicity for the opening of the first hovercraft service across the Channel on Thursday, August 1, was rather less than overwhelming. On July 31 HRH Princess Margaret inaugurated the service by SRN-4 (Mountbatten), which is to cross six times a day between Dover and Boulogne. The preceding day British Rail, whose subsidiary Seaspeed/BR Hovercraft Ltd operates the service, took over a large group of journalists. Before proving its claim—that the hovercraft clips an hour off the conventional Dover-Boulogne ferry time—British Rail had wasted more than an hour on embarkation formalities at Dover for a known number of luggageless passengers. On this basis, BR's claim that London to Paris by hovercraft and train takes only five hours against eight by the Golden Arrow needs some justifying. So does its other claim, that British travellers can get to Boulogne for breakfast by hovercraft and so snatch 10 hours in a day on French soil. So they can, but only by spending the previous night in Dover. There is no connexion from London early enough to catch the departure of the first Seaspeed "flight" at 8.20 a.m.

The crossing by hovercraft was a very small proportion of the day's total travel, but it was what mattered. First impressions seemed to depend on what correspondents had been led to expect—very few had travelled by hovercraft before. Some had been expecting



a very high noise level—like that in the SRN-6—a view almost completely obstructed by spray, and little motion. They were wrong on all counts.

The noise was quite tolerable for a 35 minutes exposure—it was possible to hear and to be heard. For less talkative passengers, the noise had a soporific effect, especially in the late afternoon. Its intensity falls between a noisy train and a noisy aircraft—it should not be compared with a jet aircraft in clear air, as its designer pointed out dryly. But the specially designed propellers had achieved a decrease of 15 decibels against the SRN-4, thanks to the lower tip speed. In any case, Princess Margaret was expected to suffer fewer decibels than the press, because various soundproofing measures were not then complete.

Conditions on July 30 were described as average for the Channel. There was a wind speed of 15 knots, a 4-5 foot sea and a slight swell abeam. In these conditions the craft kept up a steady 50 knots, picking up speed as soon as it cleared Dover harbour. The land/sea transition was entirely imperceptible at both terminals. The passenger deck of the SRN-4 is some 10 feet from the ground with the craft at rest, and when the 8-foot skirt inflates before take-off the seated

occupants are gently lifted another few feet. At this stage the skirt sometimes picks up a resonant frequency typical of a certain engine speed. A nasty throb develops and the craft jolts up and down like a horse at the trot. The sensation is quite disagreeable, but can be readily got over by use of the throttle. Out in the open sea the craft adopts a sort of irregular swivelling motion as the skirt moulds to the swell, but there is remarkably little spray. At intervals there is a cheek and shudder familiar to sailors as the craft's nose "ploughs in" to an oncoming sea. A deeper skirt will iron out all these bumps, and the builders, British Hovercraft Corporation, look forward to 16-foot skirts for Channel operations, although it is not yet clear when these will be practicable. Meanwhile the present 8-foot skirt will enable the SRN-4 to operate in all but 1 per cent of Channel conditions, according to the chairman of British Rail Hovercraft Ltd, Dr Sydney Jones. British Rail is also considering other hoverferry routes, and Dr Jones suggested the Irish Sea. He said that the SRN-4 was an equally suitable craft for this crossing, and he doubted that Irish Sea conditions were systematically worse than the Channel, at least on the shorter routes. At the British Hovercraft Corporation consideration is being given to the building of 400-ton and 1,000-ton hovercraft.

British Rail's SRN-4 across the Channel needs to be half full throughout the year to obtain a reasonable return on the investment. Much, of course, hangs on the craft's reliability. If it spends much time out of service for maintenance—and the first breakdown happened this week—a higher load factor will be necessary. At present the service relies on a single hovercraft, which must return to Dover for major repairs and inspections, because jacks have been installed only at the Dover end. A second craft would be ordered if the service warrants it, a decision typical of British Rail's attitude. The present SRN-4's internal configuration allows for 30 cars and 254 passengers. The number of car passengers (typically 3 per car) is expected to fill only a third of the seats, but rail connexions for the hovercraft service are to be provided only if there is a demand. It is hard to believe there is not. Compared with the squalor of the Channel boat service, the relative luxury of a booked seat by hovercraft even if it costs £1 more seems well worthwhile, without taking the potential time-saving into account.

Graduates Who Never Were

TECHNOLOGISTS are apparently more likely to abandon their degree courses before graduating than are students of pure science, the arts or social sciences. This disturbing trend is revealed in a report just published by the University Grants Committee (*Enquiry into Student Progress 1968*, HMSO, 37s. 6d.). The report, compiled from university records, analyses the success of all British students who would normally have been expected to graduate with first degrees in the summer of 1966.

There were 35,386 students in Great Britain who could have graduated in 1966, and of these 27,496 (77.7 per cent) obtained first degrees at the normal time; 2,770 (7.8 per cent) obtained first degrees after a further year; 432 (1.2 per cent) were re-admitted in October 1967, and 4,688 (13.3 per cent) left university