Channel Tunnel: Plans & fears

Channel Tunnel: centuries of planning
[Source: The National Archive – Treasures from The National Archives
[http://apps.nationalarchives.gov.uk/museum/item.asp?item_id=40&sequence=1]

These plans are for a channel tunnel railway link between Calais and Dover. They were created more than 100 years before the channel tunnel was actually built. The idea for a tunnel linking Britain to France has a long history. The first scheme was considered by Napoleon as early as 1802. The first serious plans came from British and French companies during the 1860s. Business people were keen. Politicians worried about the cost and about how to defend the tunnel during a war. In the 1870s, the French and British governments agreed to work together on building a channel tunnel. The next few years were spent checking out the geology of the seabed to see if it was possible. Test shafts were sunk at Sangatte, near Calais, and in an area between Dover and Folkestone. These tests were successful and in 1881-2 tunnelling started on both sides of the Channel. It was expected that the tunnel would be finished in 5 years. However, in 1882 a rise in tensions in Europe revived fears that a tunnel could be used to invade Britain. The government ordered work to stop. So strong was the idea of Britain as an island fortress that the War Office opposed the building of a tunnel until well into the 20th century. By then, advances in air warfare had made this fear of tunnel invasion meaningless. The main issue became money. How would a tunnel be paid for and how would it make a profit? In 1972, the British and French governments, tunnel companies and national railways all signed an agreement to build the channel tunnel. It was built by a private company, cost £9 billion, and was formally opened in 1994.

Abstract: This article will discuss the defence arguments that were used to oppose the channel tunnel, the relationship between these arguments and Britain’s island status, the perceptions of British insularity, together with how and possibly why these changed in the period 1882-1975. The opposition to the Channel Tunnel project, especially in the period 1880 to 1945, can provide historians with a valuable insight into the British relationship with the sea. In particular, the opposition to a channel tunnel provides a way of analysing concepts of island status within Britain and what being an island meant to the British sense of self and identity, as they were expressed in the media as well as in official papers. At the same time, the changing attitudes to a channel tunnel, notably in the inter-war period and the post-1945 era, also show how the British understanding
of what being an island state gave them in terms of security and identity changed. Such a change was as a result of new or improving technologies, particularly the aircraft, and the resulting impact it had on conceptions of security that being an island provided.


The long-expected report of the military department on the Channel Tunnel has just been issued in the form of a Blue Book of 368 pages, containing not less than 282 official documents, the contents dating as far back as 1867. The opinions of the Duke of Cambridge are expressed in the strongest possible terms against the scheme. His Royal Highness says: ‘For me, at all events, there is one plain duty; and that is, on military grounds, to protest most emphatically against the construction of this tunnel between England and France.’ Not less explicit, in the same sense, is the opinion of Sir Garnet Wolseley. The experience recently obtained at Tel-el-Kebir would appear to give additional weight to the objection which Sir Garnet urges against the tunnel on the ground of possible ‘military surprises.’ The following contains the more important passages in the observations of THE DUKE OF CAMBRIDGE ON THE TUNNEL.

His Royal Highness refers to the lengthened statements by Sir Garnet Wolseley, which, he says, have his entire approval. Quoting the report of the Scientific Committee, ‘it is imperative that the tunnel should emerge in the immediate vicinity of a first-class fortress, in the modern acceptation of the term, a fortress that could only be reduced after a protracted siege by land and sea,’ the Duke says:-

‘A first-class fortress, in the modern acceptation of the term, is a very precise expression, which can have only one possible meaning. It is necessary to consider what this involves in point of expenditure. Antwerp has cost over three million pounds sterling. Since 1870 the German Government has expended on mere alterations and improvement of Strasburg and Metz four millions sterling. Each of the great fortresses which France has been building on her eastern frontier since 1870 has entailed an expenditure not easily ascertainable in exact figures, but which has certainly exceeded three millions sterling per fortress. Assuredly the great fortress, on which, according to the report of the committee, if this tunnel is made, the security of England is to depend, cannot be estimated at a lower figure than one of the many fortresses which France has been lately constructing. But this is not all. A great fortress implies an equivalent garrison. The scheme we are contemplating would place us under Continental conditions, and in fixing the strength of the garrison of the fortress, so all-important as this would be, it is necessary to employ a garrison at least equal to the great garrisons of the Continent.

In time of peace Metz has a garrison of 10,793, Strasburg 8,945; Mayence, Konigsberg, Dantsic, Posen, Cologne have all garrisons of over 7,000 men. It must be remembered that this garrison could not be reduced for a sudden emergency. It would be a force which, for the security of the country, it would be absolutely necessary to abstract from the numbers to be held available for foreign service, in cases of emergency, and for all the ordinary military duties in peace and in war at home.

The pay and maintenance of this garrison would be an absolute addition to the cost entailed upon the country.

Next, as to the various proposals of the committee for rendering the supposed tunnel impassable. It is to be observed that these are not alternative suggestions out of which the committee think that some may be selected and others omitted, but that, except in one or two instances in which the committee select alternatives, the essence of the proposal lies in the multiplication of methods for destroying the supposed tunnel, and that they consider it imperative to have all these various devices available to avoid the imminent risks of some of them at the critical moment.

What the cost of all these arrangements taken together would be is, of course, impossible to estimate without a much fuller report than it was within the scope of the committee to furnish. But, whatever it may be, if the principle laid down in your minute is to be adhered to, and the country is not to be put to expense in the event of the channel tunnel being allowed, I would most urgently impress upon her Majesty’s Government that an exact estimate for the cost of all these works and contrivances should be furnished, that there shall be no stint in calculating for their provision (as an example of the care with which this detail should be carried out, I may mention the necessity for providing that all the telegraph wires to be carried to a distance from the mines of the tunnel both to the interior of the fortress and to distant points – e.g. to London and to Chatham – should be underground, not overhead wires), and that the whole of the money required for the construction of
the necessary fortifications and other works should be paid over to the Treasury before permission was given to begin the tunnel at all.

**The Channel Tunnel (1888) by William Gladstone: speech given when Leader of the Liberal Party, on a proposal for the construction of Channel Tunnel and its history.**


The appeal which has been made to me by the right hon. gentleman the President of the Local Government Board is a very fair appeal. He has a right to know, and I will endeavour to explain to him why, having been at the head of the Government in 1884, and having voted against proceeding with the Channel Tunnel Bill, I do not take the same course on the present occasion. The right hon. gentleman has spoken for the Government to which he belongs; and, so far, he is in the same position as was my right hon. friend the Member for West Birmingham when, in 1885, he asked the House to put a negative upon the Bill. But the right hon. gentleman will at once perceive the broad and vital difference between the speech which he has now made in stating the grounds for his proceeding and the speech which was then made by my right hon. friend. The right hon. gentleman has opposed the Channel Tunnel Bill, I am sorry to say, upon its merits — upon grounds which will be as good in any future year as they are at the present moment. My right hon. friend the Member for West Birmingham is not in the House, but I have had within the last week or ten days an opportunity, through his kindness, of going over the whole ground and testing our several recollections, and I believe I am correct in saying that in the speech of my right hon. friend there was not one word condemnatory of the Channel Tunnel upon its merits, and that his opposition was an opposition of time, and of time only.

For my part, I could not have taken then any other position, and I will presently state why it was that I was a party to opposition on that ground. It is a matter of justice to the hon. Member for Hythe[3] and to the promoters of the Channel Tunnel, after what happened in 1884 and 1885 — I believe these were the years, though I am not certain that I am absolutely correct — that I should explain the view which I took of their case, and the reasons which induced me at that period, without any doubt or hesitation, to join in the opposition to the progress of the Bill. I am very glad to think, after the debate of last night, that we are now engaged in a discussion of a very different kind. I do not think that any person who agrees with me will be induced to vote against the Government from any desire to displace it, or that any gentleman who will vote with the Government will do so upon the ground that this is one of the sacrifices required from them to protect the country against the danger of a Liberal invasion of the Benches opposite. On the other hand, I am afraid that our arguments in this matter are looked upon as singularly unsatisfactory by our opponents. On political questions we often feel that, at any rate, there is something in what the other man says; but on this occasion we seem to get at the ultimate principles and modes of thinking which are fixed on one side and fixed on the other, and which would lead us, to describe the opposite arguments in very disrespectful terms. The right hon. gentleman has stated his case with force, clearness and ability; and yet I frankly own — and frankness is, after all, a great virtue — the whole of the considerations he has advanced, and his arguments against this Tunnel are neither better nor worse than mere and sheer bugbears. Having gone thus far in the exercise of frankness, I will for the rest of my speech endeavour to fall back on the virtue of courtesy; and I will not recur to the use of any language of that character, by which I only meant to illustrate the position in which we stand to one another, and which we unhappily aggrivated in 1884.

Now, sir, this subject was first introduced to me by a Tory Chancellor of the Exchequer. It was first introduced to me in the year 1865 by a gentleman whose name will always be mentioned with respect in this House — I mean Mr Ward Hunt. He was not Chancellor of the Exchequer at that exact time, for I was. He came to me as the leader of a deputation, and endeavoured to induce — or perhaps I should say to seduce — me, the Chancellor of the Exchequer to Lord Palmerston, into giving my support to the promotion of this dangerous project. Mr Ward Hunt was totally insensible of the dreadful nature of the petition he was making — notwithstanding his position in the Conservative Party, he was totally unaware of all the dangers that have been pointed out by the right hon. gentleman opposite.

And here, sir, I am obliged to correct a statement of my hon. friend the Member for Hythe, who, on the authority of someone or other, alleged that I alone among the Ministers of that day was disposed to give a guarantee in some shape or other to the promoters of the project. I was never disposed to give a guarantee to the extent of one single farthing to the promoters of this scheme, or any other scheme of a similar kind. I find it necessary, for my own credit, perhaps, at any rate for the truth of history, to disclaim it. Sir, I was instructed on behalf of the Government, and with my own full concurrence, to refuse a guarantee; but we did so without giving the slightest opposition.
Well, Sir, these powers among them created at that period such panic that even those circles of London are backed by the threefold forces of the military and literary authorities and the social moment, but who are a greater power and become an overwhelming power when they and clubs, who are at all times formidable, and a great power for the purposes of the opinion of the day – that is to say public opinion manufactured in London by great editors, not accessible to the mind of the nation. They are accessible to what is called the public society. The subject of this panic never touched the mind of the nation. These things are of minds, I am bound to say, are very largely to be found among the educated portion of have an attraction for certain classes of minds that is indescribable; and these classes the least degree likely to happen. These speculative panics – these panics in the air – that panic is based on a latent conviction that the thing which it contemplates is not in the luxury of a good panic. There is nothing more enjoyable than a good panic, when the opinion of what is called “Society,” and society is always ready for the enjoyment of sickness. Then, Sir, the army – the military host and the literary host – were backed by hon. gentleman has described in his speech as suffering occasionally the pains of sea-sickness. Well, Sir, at the time I am speaking of, the opinion of the military authorities was in favour of the Tunnel. The two Governments did not act in respect of the Tunnel without consulting the military authorities, and those military authorities whom the Government had to consult were distinctly favourable to the Tunnel. But I think I may go a little further than that, and may venture to read, at least for the purpose of challenging contradiction if it can be challenged, a short extract from a very well-informed memorandum with which I have been supplied on the part of the promoters – and which is one which can easily be brought to issue. The extract to which I refer says – “It was not until the autumn of 1881 that any military opinion adverse to the Tunnel was expressed.” Now, Sir, that is a remarkable fact. The Tunnel was then a scheme twenty years old. It had been discussed in every possible form. It had been the subject of much official correspondence, and it had received the assent of a number of Governments. Those Governments would not have assented, and did not assent, without the authority of the Military Department and the advice of their military advisers; and until the year 1881 these portentous discoveries which have taken possession of the mind and imagination of the right hon. gentleman, and, I suppose, of those who sit near him, were never heard of. Surely that is rather a staggering circumstance. And now I will relate the facts upon which the Government of 1881 and the following years had to base itself in dealing with this subject. At that time we find that the military authorities had commenced their opposition, and a great ferment began to prevail. A combination of powers was brought to issue. The extract to which I refer says – “It was not until the autumn of 1881 that any military opinion adverse to the Tunnel was expressed.” Now, Sir, that is a remarkable fact. The Tunnel was then a scheme twenty years old. It had been discussed in every possible form. It had been the subject of much official correspondence, and it had received the assent of a number of Governments. Those Governments would not have assented, and did not assent, without the authority of the Military Department and the advice of their military advisers; and until the year 1881 these portentous discoveries which have taken possession of the mind and imagination of the right hon. gentleman, and, I suppose, of those who sit near him, were never heard of. Surely that is rather a staggering circumstance. And now I will relate the facts upon which the Government of 1881 and the following years had to base itself in dealing with this subject. At that time we find that the military authorities had commenced their opposition, and a great ferment began to prevail. A combination of powers was brought into operation. The literary authorities were brought to back up the military authorities. Great poets invoked the Muses, and strove, not as great poets in other times used to do, to embolden their countrymen by conjuring up phantoms of danger that were not fit to be presented to anybody except to that valuable class of the community that the right hon. gentleman has described in his speech as suffering occasionally the pains of sea-sickness. Then, Sir, the army – the military host and the literary host – were backed by the opinion of what is called “Society,” and society is always ready for the enjoyment of the luxury of a good panic. There is nothing more enjoyable than a good panic, when that panic is based on a latent conviction that the thing which it contemplates is not in the least degree likely to happen. These speculative panics – these panics in the air – have an attraction for certain classes of minds that is indescribable; and these classes of minds, I am bound to say, are very largely to be found among the educated portion of society. The subject of this panic never touched the mind of the nation. These things are not accessible to the mind of the nation. They are accessible to what is called the public opinion of the day - that is, to say public opinion manufactured in London by great editors, and clubs, who are at all times formidable, and a great power for the purposes of the moment, but who are a greater power and become an overwhelming power when they are backed by the threefold forces of the military and literary authorities and the social circles of London. Well, Sir, these powers among them created at that period such panic that even those
who were most favourable to the Tunnel, of whom I was one, thought it quite vain to offer a direct opposition. We, therefore, proposed the appointment of a Joint-Committee; and the issue of that Joint-Committee has been very fairly stated by the right hon. gentleman. I am bound to make a fair admission – and I do it in the presence of my noble friend the Member for the Rossendale Division of Lancashire,[4] whose opinion at the time I do not now remember – that, although in the government of 1868, to which he and I belonged, there never was a question as to the propriety of the Tunnel, and Lord Granville wrote in that sense, and even instituted communications with France; yet when we come to the Government of 1880, and the circumstances of 1881, 1882 and 1883, a change of opinion did find its way even into the Cabinet. Some of us were what I should call not quite sound and others of us were, and we all agreed that the best thing we could do was to refer the matter to this impartial tribunal. And when that tribunal reported, there was no improvement in the circumstances. If I am asked why, under these circumstances, I took part in throwing out the Channel Tunnel Bill, my answer is that we, the Government, were engaged in arduous affairs. Powers were put very freely into action against us at that time which are now happily in abeyance. We deemed that it was our duty to have some regard to the time of Parliament. We knew it was impossible to pass the Bill. It was a time of tempest; and as sensible men in time of tempest are not satisfied with the shelter of an umbrella, and seek shelter under the roof of some substantial building, so we acted. Whether or not we ought to have shown more heroism I do not know. But we thought it idle to persevere in a hopeless struggle. We did not in the least condemn the Tunnel on its merits. We did not think there was the slightest chance of proceeding with the Bill to the end, and we therefore invited Parliament not to bestow its time on a discussion which we believed to be perfectly useless. That was the principle on which we proceeded at the time. I will say a little upon the arguments of the right hon. gentleman; but I am not going to attempt to follow those arguments, as if we were engaged in a debate like that of last night. I do not think it would be expedient or convenient to make this a debate between both sides of the House. There are some on this side of the House who are probably unsound beside those who are usually so; and I hope there are some on that side who are sound; and, therefore, the House is totally without prejudice. But there is one thing which fell from the right hon. gentleman which I regret, and that was his comparison between the internal condition of France at the present time and the internal condition of France some six or seven years ago. I own I think it was an error to enter upon the chapter of the subject, even if the right hon. gentleman entertains the opinion which he apparently does entertain. But as he has said that he thinks there is not the same prospect of stability in France now as then, I must give myself the satisfaction so far of expressing quite a different opinion. And I may remind the Government and the House of this – that the French Republic never, since 1870, has been called upon to pass through so severe a crisis as the crisis, not yet, I think, twelve months old, with respect to the appointment of a President. That was the most trying experience which it has had to go through, and it has made many of its friends and well-wishers tremble as to the issue. It made every sound and right-minded man in France apprehensive of what was to happen; and I rejoice to say that France and the institutions of France came through the struggle with as much calm temper and solidity as any country in the world could have done. That is one thing I feel it right to say in consequence of what fell from the right hon. gentleman. Following the right hon. gentleman opposite, I do not touch on the engineering question. Neither will I touch upon the commercial question, except to say frankly that I differ from the right hon. gentleman, and I believe the commercial advantages of this Tunnel would be enormous. I have nothing whatever to do with engineering or commercial questions. I am here simply as a Member of Parliament to see whether there is any reason why I should withhold my assent to the plan. Now, Sir, I have used the familiar illustration of the umbrella as shelter in a storm. After hearing the speech of the right hon. gentleman I am not quite sure whether the storm is still going on; but I was under the impression that the panic had passed away. My impression has been, and in the main my impression is that the literary alarm and the social alarm, which backed up the military alarm, are very greatly allayed, and that we have now, what we had not five or six years ago, a chance of a fair, temperate and candid discussion. The right hon. gentleman refers to a land frontier as if it were an unmixed evil. No doubt it is less secure, upon the whole, than a sea frontier; but he must not forget that a land frontier has enormous advantages with respect to intercourse between man and man, which are of great consequence in the view of those who believe that peace, and not war, is the natural condition in which we live with foreign countries. But on the question of procuring a land frontier, if it is a land frontier, which I do not think it is, the habitual and standing advantages of a land frontier are enormous compared with its occasional disadvantages and dangers.

With regard to the political and military objections, I must say I feel pained, as an
Englishman, in considering the extensive revolution of opinion that has taken place. For twenty years this project lived and flourished, difficult in an engineering sense, very difficult in a technical sense, and as a financial question. I do not presume to enter upon those questions, and I leave them to those who better understand them – but with no doubt cast on it from the point of view of the security of this country. Now, Sir, a transition from darkness to light has taken place – and it ought to be hailed, notwithstanding all the inconveniences which accompany such transactions – and it is rather a serious question for us to consider whether the English nation and Government from 1860 to 1880, or whether the influences which acted during the years 1883-4 and 1885, and which are to some extent acting now, lead us in the right or wrong direction. Speaking of the dangers of a land frontier the right hon. gentleman, in a lugubrious manner, said that this end of the tunnel must always be the subject of great anxiety. Well if this end of the tunnel is to be the subject of great anxiety, what will the other end be? But, strange to say, I find that the other end of the tunnel is the subject of no anxiety at all. Many of us are in the habit of considering the French nation as light-minded, with great resources and great ingenuity, talents and ingenuity, but still light-minded, unlike ourselves, solid and stable, perhaps rather heavy, but at any rate a very steady-going people, who make up our minds slowly and resolutely, and do not change them. [Laughter] Oh, I am not speaking for myself – I am only speaking on behalf of my country; but I would ask hon. gentlemen to apply this test to the case of the French people. I must say that they have treated this matter with the most dignified self-restraint and consistency throughout. I am bound to give my opinion, and I think the French, had they any other than the most friendly disposition with regard to ourselves, might have made serious complaints of the manner of their treatment in having been invited to embark on this enterprise to an extent only short of the signature of the Treaty when we receded from the ground, and left the light-minded people standing in exactly their original attitude, while we – not the nation, but the Government and the circles of opinion known in London – have very considerably altered. Well, but you will say, the question of our invading France is not a matter to be considered at all. Therefore, the other end of the tunnel does not seriously enter into the question. The real question that we have before us is the likelihood of the coming of that unhappy day – I agree it is a perfectly possible thing, I think and hope it is nothing more than a possible event, still it must be taken into consideration – when England will be invaded by France. I am very much behind the age in a great many respects, and I am sorry to say very much behind the representatives of the age who sit on the opposite side of the House; for I have the habit of being guided to a certain extent in anticipations of the future by considerations of the past. I know that it is a mode of looking at a subject entirely dismissed from consideration at present. For about 800 years, beginning from the Conquest, I want to know which country has oftenest invaded the other, and I will stake this proposition – that the invasions of France by England have been tenfold more than the invasions of the British Islands by France. Do you believe in a total revolution in the means of action between the two countries? I do not believe it. There has, indeed, been a great change in one matter – that of population. Now, Sir, during the Revolutionary wars what happened? The great Napoleon – the most wonderful general and strategist of modern times, the man of whom Dr Döllinger says that he raised war as to the mode of its planning and execution, not as to its morality, almost to the dignity and attitude of a fine art – addressed the whole of his resources and thoughts to the invasion of England. Ireland was tried three times by the Directory, and three times there were miserable failures. Two other fleets had set out, one from Holland and one from Spain, and they had been destroyed by the power of British arms at sea. But Napoleon made a study nightly and daily to devise and arrange the means of invading England, and he was obliged to recede from it as an impossible task. Not that it is an impossible task. Do not suppose that I am going to say anything so extravagant. I am going to say this. It is worthwhile for those who have those portentous ideas of the power of France, and so small an idea of our means of defence, to consider the relative population of the two countries. At the time when Napoleon prosecuted his schemes the population of Great Britain was 10,000,000; the population of France 22,000,000. I will not count the population of Ireland, for at that period, unfortunately, as at others, it added nothing to the military resources of this country for repelling invasion. Well, 10,000,000 Englishmen constituted the sum of those whom Napoleon had to invade, and he could not manage it. At the present moment this island contains far more than 30,000,000 men, not less strong, not less determined, not less energetic than the 10,000,000 in Napoleon’s time at the beginning of the century, and they are close in mere numbers upon the population of France.

Here, then, are two countries, and the question is whether one will invade the other by means of the Channel Tunnel. This is a country that has incessantly invaded France, and I am not sorry to say that though we did it with marvellous success 500 years ago, we
have not always been equally successful in recent years, though there is the paramount case of 1815, with respect to which, if a parallel case could be quoted on the other side for the action of England and Wellington, I would admit that there would be something more in the argument of the right hon. gentleman than I can allow that it contained as matters stand. I shall be told that Napoleon had no steam. That appears to be a strong argument, but it is capable of being used both ways. I believe that the invention of steam, and the great revolution that we have seen in shipbuilding, have enormously increased our means of defence as compared with those of France. I believe that our defensive power in times of crisis would develop itself with a rapidity, to an extent, and with an efficiency that would surpass all previous examples, and would astonish the world. There is one question that I should like to ask—What is the ground taken up by those gentlemen who point to our security as the main matter which we have to consider? Do they mean, on that ground, to limit our communications with France? Do they mean, as in the time of Queen Anne, to "abate" our trade with France, as being a source of danger and insecurity? “No,” says the right hon. gentleman opposite; “anything but it; extend your communications to the uttermost; give every facility by which men and material—” for the word "goods" is synonymous with material—"can pass from one country to the other, but do not sanction the construction of this tunnel.” That is the plan of the right hon. gentleman. He proposes that the harbours of the country should be enlarged. He set no limit to the range of his philanthropy and enlightened views upon this matter. He has no apprehension upon this subject. Well, my apprehension of invasion is not great; but, if I am to conjure up any prospect of danger, I tell the right hon. gentleman deliberately that his plan of harbours and great ships, and of making the Channel a high road to be crossed with wonderful rapidity, presents ten times the danger that the danger that the prospects of the tunnel could possibly present to the most excitable mind.

Now, one word about the opinion of the military authorities. I am not going to speak of them with contempt; on the contrary, I must say that I have the deepest respect for the profession of the soldier, and especially for the function of the commander in the field, charged with the care of large bodies of men, with the duty of making the most of the resources of the country, and with the enormously difficult task of bringing all to bear on a particular point, under particular circumstances, and at a particular time, for the purpose of war. That I deem to be one of the highest and most extraordinary trials to which the human mind can be subjected, and I do not know any other position in which the demand for energy and the exercise of every great quality of human force is so tremendous and overwhelming. Therefore in the opinion of Lord Wolseley, whom I believe to be a man extremely valuable to his country in the great and possible contingency of military danger and military effort, I have the profoundest respect, as I have for the opinion of other military authorities. But that respect is mainly due in relation to the operations of war, or measures directly connected with the operations of war. On other matters not so connected their judgement carries weight, and always will carry weight; but in questions of this character the judgement of military authorities cannot be accepted as infallible, and we find that the prescriptions and recommendations of the military authorities of one day or one year are disavowed and reversed by the military authorities of another time. We were told in 1860 that Lord Palmerston’s fortifications would give us such a state of security that we need never be alarmed again; but have we not had within these latter years alarms more poignant, more startling, more costly than, perhaps, were ever reached before in times of peace, and these fortifications are regarded apparently by those who recommended them with the greatest indifference? If I am asked to rely on the opinion of military authorities as infallible, and required to surrender my own poor judgement and responsibility into their hands, I would quote the name of Alderney. If there is a single creation on earth that may be called the creation of military authority it is the work now represented by the remains, the ruins, the shreds and tatters of the fortifications at Alderney. Save that the funds we supplied from the Treasury, these works were a military creation. I know it is sometimes said that all faults and imperfections in such cases are due to the impertinent interferences of civilians; but what civilian had anything to do with the works at Alderney? I had to do with them in the sense of yielding to the imperative demands of the military authorities of that day, excellent, able, and highly distinguished men they were—Air John Burgoyne, Sir Henry Hardinge, and others who adorn our military annals. They told us that with an expenditure of £150,000 Cherbourg would be sealed up, and no hostile fleet would ever issue from it. I was the man who proposed this expenditure, and the House agreed to it thirty-five years ago. But I need not say that the matter did not stop there; the expenditure went up to £1,500,000—and I am not sure whether it stopped short of £2,000,000—and of that there now remain but the miserable fragments of that work, a monument of human folly, useless to us as regards any purpose for which we were urged by military authorities to adopt their plan, but...
perhaps not absolutely useless to a possible enemy, with whom we may at some period have to deal, and who may possibly be able to extract some profit in the way of shelter and accommodation from the ruins. Then take another and very different example from another branch of the subject. I wish to speak of nothing but of which I have some personal knowledge. Everybody knows that in the crisis of a great war the only and appalling difficulty, if not danger, of this country is the fewness of men, and not the sanctity of any other resources whatever. We were, until the forethought and sagacity of Lord Palmerston and Lord John Russell relieved us of the task, in military occupation of the Ionian Islands. Our garrison there used to consist in times of peace of 6000 or 7000 men, and I believe it was admitted that, considered in reference to times of war and in reference to Reserves, such soldiers as we would require to have there would stand to our debit in time of war at not less than 12,000 men. I am not speaking of political considerations; but I do not think any man in this House will say it is desirable to be charged with the responsibility of maintaining 12,000 men in a time of a great war for the purpose of maintaining a hold, even if it were otherwise possible upon Corfu, Cephalonia, Zante, and the other Ionian Isles. But at that time military authorities were unanimous in their belief, and strongly urged upon the Government that the maintenance of our military hold upon the Ionian Islands was a great, if not an essential, element in the maintenance of our power in the Mediterranean. Something, we must admit, is to be allowed for the professional zeal of men who know no bounds to the service they render and the sacrifices they are prepared to make when the country has occasion to call for their services; but much must also be allowed for the fallibility of human judgement when applied to an object they consider it necessary to secure, and these are considerations which in some degree equalise our position, though not absolutely, to the position of the military authorities. It seems ludicrous for a person like myself to give an opinion on the military danger of the Channel Tunnel in the face of the opinion of military authorities; but I cannot get rid of the feeling – and it is simply common sense – that when I endeavour to consider all the points, which I will not now enter upon in detail, I am bound to point out that it is not a safe thing for us to say, “We have military authorities who tell us this thing or that, and we ought to be satisfied,” when, of necessity, we have before our eyes many exemplary cases where the predictions and injunctions of military authorities have been totally falsified; and when we know that what is preached by the military authorities of to-day is the direct reversal of what was thought and taught by military authorities twenty or thirty years ago. Under the circumstances, I trust we have arrived at a time of comparative calm, when the matter can be considered without prejudice, which was not possible in 1883. If I may presume to refer to an old and homely proverb, “Philip was then drunk;” but Philip is now, I trust, sober, and it is in the sobriety of Philip that I place all my confidence. I hope, Sir, I am not going beyond Parliamentary etiquette, if I express my hearty congratulations that you, Sir, in the midst of the storm and excitement, were one of the men who affixed a signature to the Minority Report on the subject. I believe even now we have arrived at a happier time, when the gallant enterprise – for I must call it so, arduous and difficult as it is – of my hon. friend the Member for Hythe has some chance of fair judgement. The opinion of the nation was never against it. A fictitious opinion, which is sometimes assumed to be national opinion, was too strong against it at one period, and it was too strong for me, and it even now exists, but weakened and brought within moderate bounds, and there is now some chance for common sense and the exercise of that spirit of enterprise that has been at all times among the noblest characteristics of our country.

THE LATEST CHANNEL TUNNEL SCHEME (1906) - Spectator 29 September 1906
[http://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/29th-september-1906/6/the-latest-channel-tunnel-scheme.html#how-much-is-reme]

It is that Great Britain is an island, and the whole of her foreign policy is ultimately based on her insular position. That is a shocking platitude, but if tunnel communication between England and the Continent is to rob her of the advantages of her position as an island, it is a platitude which may as well be repeated. The existence of a submarine tunnel could only weaken her insular position. If you are defending a fortress say, surrounded by a moat, you do not strengthen your defence by running a passage under the moat. To establish land communication between England and the Continent, then, is at once to complicate the problem of national defence. At present the country depends for the defence of her shores on her command of the sea. No amount of sea power could, however, help her to repel an attack made on her by land communications. To that it may be replied, no doubt, that we are on the best of terms with the country in whose territory one end of the tunnel would open, and that we need not be afraid of France entraining guns and men for Dover. That is so; but there are other possibilities to take into account. France might be at war with Germany, and Germany might seize the French end of the tunnel. She certainly would try to do so. And does any one
suggest that our defences would still remain as strong as they are at present if, Germany held one end of a railway communicating by land with England? It may be urged that it would be easy to flood the tunnel, and so render the railway useless,—to which the best answer is that in that case it clearly would be better for all concerned if the railway had never been built.

Support for the Channel Tunnel was expressed by Arthur Conan Doyle in *Britain and the Next War* (1913)