

for 50 years

To start a career in 1914 as a probationary railway clerk at the age of 13 and to end as stationmaster at Waterloo controlling a staff of 750 is a journey most men would be proud of.

But Mr Ernest Down, of 59 Bridge Down, Bridge, has just reached another high spot in his life. On Saturday, he and his wife, Constance, celebrated their golden wedding.

This week, Ern and Connie, as the couple are known in the village, looked back over a life that brought them to Bridge after Mr Down retired in 1966.

Both Kentish-born, they were married at St Mary's Church, Selling, on August 28, 1926, after a childhood romance which started in 1912.

As stationmaster at Waterloo, Mr Down was the last official to wear the traditional top hat and frock coat, complete with a red carnation buttonhole, when he greeted Royalty, Government Ministers or other celebrities. He has met the Queen six times.

At the start of his career, after promotion to railway relief clerk, he worked throughout East Kent. From 1940 to 1945 he was in charge of a railway control office at Chatham, dealing with war-time traffic.

In 1947, he was appointed relief stationmaster for the whole of Kent and in 1952 became yardmaster at Battersea Yard, where he lived next to the sounds of shunting trains and clanging waggons.

It was a great moment in 1953, when he became stationmaster at Brighton and moved to brighter surroundings.

There, he met Royalty for the first time, but three years later the peak of his career came with his promotion to stationmaster at Waterloo.

"I was delighted to be appointed stationmaster at the largest railway station in the British Isles," he said.

Did he ever have any anxious moments when meeting Royalty or VIPs?

"On one occasion, the pigeons in the station roof were even more of a nuisance than usual. If they flew in the wrong direction it could have caused a lot of embarrassment, but the engineers set up an artificial wind to keep them away from the red carpet."

Among his many top level duties, he was responsible for the arrangements for taking the coffin of Sir Winston Churchill from Waterloo to Bladen.

Mr Down, who was awarded the MBE in the 1963 New Year Honours List, has vivid memories of Canterbury in the early days, when all transport was horse-drawn and Kent's famous hops and fruit, as well as leather, timber, flour and beer, kept the goods yards at the East and West stations stretched to capacity.

He remembers the ambulance trains from Dover bringing wounded soldiers to the city

during World War I and troops from the barracks marching behind bands to Canterbury East en route to the battlefields of France.

"In those days, Canterbury was a very dim and dismal city. There was hardly any street lighting and the scarcity of food was a real problem," he recalled.

When they came to Bridge, retirement was not just a matter of tending the garden or staring at television. Before long, Mr Down was a parish councillor. In 1971, he took over as parish clerk, a post he still holds.

Meanwhile, his wife joined Bridge and Patricbourne Women's Institute, served as treasurer for three years and is still an active member.

Mrs Down, a teacher for 25 years, began her career after qualifying at Goldsmith's College. She has taught in Swanley, Tunbridge Wells and at Milton Regis, where she took a scholarship class.

"It was hard work and there was no class with less than 50 children. Boys were more difficult to teach than girls," she remembered.

Both keen photographers, as well as seasoned travellers, they have a collection of 4,000 slides taken on holidays all over Europe, for which Mrs Down has taped her own commentaries.

They gave a celebration party at the village hall on Saturday, for 60 guests.

A recorded account of some of the outstanding events of the past 50 years was given by Mrs Down and a nephew, Mr Horace Dyer, organist at Abbotsbury Church, Newton Abbot, entertained.

Orchestra, also at 7.50.

