

# THE DEAL BOATMEN

## Origins of Deal

The coastal settlement known as Lower Deal (now Deal) grew up from the mid-17th century on the shingle ridge which is now Beach Street, Middle Street and the High Street. The houses were built of brick, which reflected the wealth of the inhabitants.

There was a need to service the growing number of sailing ships at anchor in The Downs, and tenements were built along the whole stretch from South Street to North Street on both sides of the road. The rest of the town provided essential maritime services such as boat building, rope making, sail making and collecting mail from the ships to take by road to London.

When the ships were moored, people came ashore needing feeding and refreshment, entertainment and lodgings. Almost every building was a pub, lodging house or brothel, with the occasional barber-surgeon and dentist. A flour mill and a brewery were nearby, supplying ships



Credit: Colin Vorrall

*Improvements to Beach Street. The old street was only 2.36 metres (7 feet and 9 inches) wide.*

waiting in The Downs. Most of the pubs have now closed but many old inns still survive as private houses, some keeping their original pub names such as the Deal Cutter. The Pelican is also a former pub, and you can still see a pelican on one of the two seaward-facing plaques.

The area close to the junction of Oak Street and Beach Street was the centre of this once busy area. It was here that the fishermen's catch was landed and where the local boats went about

their ceaseless ferrying to the many sailing ships that were anchored in The Downs. There were many houses and inns on the beach side, and two stretches of capstans, but these have now all disappeared.

In the 1830s, tourism became increasingly important to the town. New boarding houses were built on Beach Street and some properties were demolished. The Royal Hotel is the only remaining building on the seaward side of Beach Street. Deal's first pier, a wooden landing stage built in 1838, stood opposite the former Star and Garter Hotel (now a private house).

## Other buildings

A little to the north is Adelaide House. This was named after Princess Adelaide, who landed at Deal in 1818 on her way from Germany to marry the Duke of Clarence (later crowned William IV). She always remembered her welcome in Deal and gave generous financial support to the people as well as contributing to the Royal Adelaide Baths when they were built on the beach opposite this house. Unfortunately, the baths were not a great success and they were demolished sometime after 1882, enabling extension of the North Parade.



Credit: Colin Vorrall

*Seagirt House, Beach Street. This was one of, if not the, last house to remain on the seaward side of Beach Street before 'improvement works' which led to the demolishing of houses on the east side of Beach Street to build the South Parade and North Parade.*

Further along, at the corner with Exchange Street, is a building called the Boatmen's Rooms. This was built in the 1860s for the Mission to Seamen, to serve the local Deal boatmen who were internationally renowned for their skilled seamanship and bravery, particularly when on rescue or recovery missions in The Downs. Next door is the Mary Hougham Almshouses built to look after the retired boatmen.



*Beach Street, just north of the Royal Hotel, around 1900.*

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## Operation Dynamo

A memorial on the almshouses wall honours the Deal men and boats that were part of Operation Dynamo - the evacuation of 338,000 British and allied troops from the port and beaches of Dunkirk during May and June 1940.

A naval officer and policeman were sent to Deal to ask for boatmen to take part in the operation. They entered the Boatmen's Rooms, where the wedding reception of one of the Deal boatmen, Fred Hook, was taking place. He delayed his honeymoon to join Harry Brown and Alfie Betts on the *Gipsy King*, one of the 850 vessels that became known as the Dunkirk Little Ships.

This was one of eight boats from Deal that heeded the call to help. James O'Neill went in *Golden Spray II* and Nathan Cohen went in one of two lifeboats on Deal beach that had come from the wrecked ship the *Dunbar Castle*. The motorboats *Britannic*, *Rose Marie* and *Moss Rose* were crewed by navy personnel. All three were lost at Dunkirk. The *Lady Haig* was also crewed by navy personnel and is the only surviving Deal motorboat that went to Dunkirk.

On returning from Dunkirk, Nathan Cohen joined the Royal Air Force as a flight navigator, but he was tragically killed during a bombing raid. He was buried in a Commonwealth War Graves Commission grave in Eindhoven in the

Netherlands. After the war, Harry Brown became a volunteer on the Walmer lifeboat and was Coxswain at the station from 1966 to 1973.



Credit: Colin Vorrall

*Deal boatman, Harry Brown. At Dunkirk he saw several soldiers drifting out to sea and tied a rope around his waist, then swam to save them.*

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Credit: Colin Vorrall

*A youth standing next to one of the capstans on Deal beach, 1863. The photograph was taken by WH Franklin.*



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