

MIDDLE STREET CAR PARK

Lower Deal

When Lower Deal began to develop in the 1600s this area was the first to grow, and it had some of the oldest buildings in the town. Where this car park now stands was once the heart of Lower Deal, a crowded maze of houses, inns, workshops and factories. From 1699, when Deal became independent of Sandwich, until 1815, England was almost constantly at war, and Deal became an important naval and military base. The town boomed and became very prosperous. Middle Street, with its pubs, boatyards, smithies, slaughterhouses and lodging houses was the home of the working classes, mariners and smugglers. It was where the soldiers and sailors went for beer, gambling and prostitutes. The street soon gained a terrible reputation.

This particular section of Middle Street was a hotch-potch of inns and coach-yards. Coach Yard itself was a branch of Middle Street. As well as its coach-and-horse proprietors and carriage hirers, it also had tinsmiths, blacksmiths and tallow makers. Custom House Lane ran from the High Street to the original Custom House on Beach Street which later moved to the High Street.

After the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 the military presence reduced and Deal's prosperity declined. Middle Street became neglected and decayed and in the early 1900s slum clearance schemes proposed to demolish most of it.



The Coach Yard, looking towards the seafront.

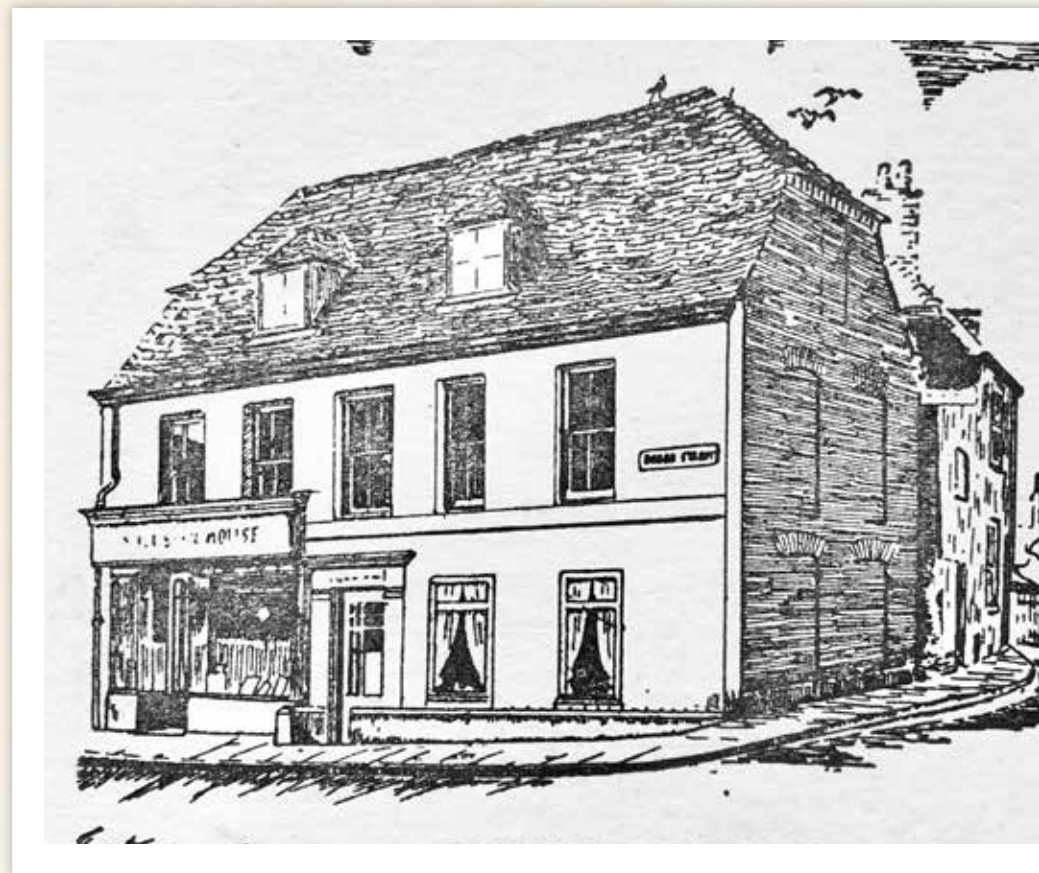
During the Second World War Deal was badly damaged by shells and bombs, including most of the area that is now the car park. 'Black Friday' on 4th October 1940 was a bombing raid which virtually destroyed Short Street and Coach Yard, killing eight and wounding five. The area was hit many more times during the war.



Middle Street, around 1942. This shows some of the bomb and shell damage to Middle Street in the Custom House Lane area. The photograph was taken from the King Street end looking towards what is now the library.

Redevelopment plans

When the war was over, plans were put forward to redevelop the old slum area and demolish most of Middle Street rather than repair it. The proposed area was between the sea, King Street to the north, South Street to the south and the High Street to the west. A badly-damaged section was levelled where today's car park is, although some buildings remained until the 1960s, including the Nelson restaurant. This was reputedly where Lord Nelson would meet his mistress Lady Hamilton. Deal Library is now on this site.



The Nelson House restaurant. This was located where Deal Library now is.

The rest of the development plans were widely opposed and a campaign group, the Deal Protection Society, was hastily formed by residents. In six days, more than 1770 signatures were collected against the demolition plans. At the same time, some residents wrote to the local newspaper to ask if those who opposed the scheme would want to live 'day after day, year after year, in a house without a bathroom, no hot water, no electricity and only one lavatory which is outside'.

A 3-day official enquiry was held in the town hall in July 1948. As a result, the Minister of Town and Country Planning did not approve the plans as a whole but did allow the council to buy some of the properties. The Beach Street Hotel and other properties along Beach Street were demolished.

On 1 June 1949, 44 buildings were given Grade II listing, which stopped the wholesale demolition of properties.



The Beach House Temperance Hotel, 1890s.

The Allen Plan

In 1964, Deal Council invited a leading town planner, Professor Allen, to prepare a new plan for Deal. His plans included an inner circular road to provide a continuous flow of traffic, civic buildings on Middle Street, a tall block of flats and an area for office development. The plans covered two acres to the west of West Street and south of Brewer Street.

The original Deal Protection Society (now The Deal Society) was reformed to fight the plans which opponents described as 'a monstrous, incongruous collection of public buildings in the modern mode...and the Borough Council's offices in a skyscraper, whose occupants will...thrive in one of the coldest and draughtiest corners of the winter scene'. With public opposition, the plans were thrown out. By 1966, home improvement

grants were available. In 1968, the Middle Street area of Deal was designated as a Conservation Area, the first in Kent.

Today

Today, the once unsavoury street is a much sought-after residential area with beautifully maintained 17th and 18th century houses. All that remains of Middle Street, Custom House Lane, Short Street, Coach Yard and Primrose Hill are the gaps between the buildings of the High Street and Beach Street which show where the old streets once ran. Alleys off the car park have kept their names such as Custom House Lane and Cockle Swamp Alley.



Middle Street before the car park.

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