

MIDDLE STREET

The centre of smuggling

Middle Street has a character all of its own, with its narrow cross-lanes and variety of houses, mostly from the 17th and 18th centuries. Some are tiny and simple, others more substantial and elaborate.

Deal was a notorious smuggling town, with its rabbit-warren streets close to the large open beach, and Middle Street was the centre of that illicit activity. Smuggling is the illegal trade in goods to avoid paying customs duties and taxes.



The grocers at 98 Middle Street, at the junction with Coppin Street, around 1919. The store was later a gun and tackle shop and is now a private home. The overhanging bay window above the shop entrance is reputed to have been used as a lookout by smugglers.



Sketch of smugglers during a struggle, published in the Illustrated London News.

Taxes were put on goods to protect the home markets; first on wool, then spirits, and other products followed. Once items were taxed, they began to be smuggled.

The Deal boatmen were heavily involved in smuggling and they built special boats with amazing hiding places, such as false keels and hollow masts. Houses in the town were also built with barrel-vaulted cellars for storage. Roof access was interlinked between houses so that goods could be moved around discreetly. Discoveries of smuggled goods have included packets of tobacco gone to dust, 24 pairs of French gloves wrapped in oilskin, and packets of tea.

Smuggling began in earnest in the 17th century; it was first mentioned in East Kent in records dated to 1617. It is reputed that a large part of the population in Deal was involved, from building the smugglers' fast galleys to helping unload, hide and sell goods. During its peak between 1730 and

1780, more than half the male population of Deal may have gained their livelihood from smuggling, and many had no idea it was illegal. Tobacco, tea and spirits were the main items smuggled but silk, lace and other fancy goods were also major cargoes.

Smuggling was supported by the wealthy aristocracy, who travelled many miles to buy Deal's goods, and with hundreds of hiding places, the authorities found it difficult to have any effect in stopping the activity.

Smuggling was also useful to the government during the Napoleonic wars. The establishment used Deal smugglers to transport gold coins to Paris, where the exchange rate was better. They also brought spies to and from France. At the same time, Napoleon gave the English smugglers their own French ports as they also sold information on England to the French, and would take escaped French prisoners of war back home for a price.

Crackdowns

At its height in the 18th century, the authorities tried to crack down on rampant smuggling activity in coastal towns. By 1781, Deal was so notorious that the authorities felt obliged to act against the smugglers. Troops were sent to the town, but an informer had already warned those involved and smuggled goods were transported elsewhere for the duration of the raid.

Three years later, William Pitt, the Prime Minister, ordered the troops in again and despite resistance from locals, the troops destroyed and burned every boat in Deal. However, the town's boatmen immediately built new boats; smuggling soon started again and was supported by many in the town.

In 1801, smugglers had no trouble in getting Deal residents to help when the revenue men forced one of their luggers onto the town beach. The mob attacked the Preventative Officers, and brought ashore the cargo of tobacco, playing cards and bolts of fine cloth. Sixteen years later, blockade-men who were trying to arrest some smugglers were set upon by a mob of local people and had to shelter in a shop. To add insult to (near) injury, the mayor of Deal ordered their arrest, accusing them of assaulting the free traders!

In 1816, the government ordered all Deal galleys, 'so neatly and lightly constructed that



The Preventative Service, by William Heath, 1822.



Smugglers attacked, A gang of smugglers being attacked by Preventative men, the force that policed the coastline of Kent for the search for smugglers.

nothing could catch them' to be seized. Captain William McCulloch, or 'Flogging Joey', of the Royal Navy Coastal Blockade led the blockade of Kent and Sussex smugglers in his frigate *Ganymede*. He vowed "to make grass grow in the streets of Deal". Preventative measures existed in other parts of the country, but arguably were the strongest in Kent.

When peace came with the ending of the Napoleonic wars, there was less need for the services and trades that had supported the troops. Along with the clamp-down on smuggling, many people in the town were reduced to poverty.

Despite repeated attempts, smuggling continued in Deal in a small way into at least the 20th century, long after it had been effectively stamped out elsewhere.

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