

# **Folkestone & Hythe District Heritage Strategy**

## **Appendix 1: Theme 3b Seaside Leisure & Tourism – Dymchurch, St Mary's Bay and Romney Sands**

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## **(3b) Dymchurch, St Mary's Bay and Romney Sands**

### **1. Summary**

Dymchurch, St Mary's Bay and Romney Sands are popular destinations along the district's coastline for holidaymakers and day-trippers. Their attractive beaches, holiday parks and various other attractions have drawn in visitors and holidaymakers for a number of years and continue to do so today. The history of these areas is largely linked to the complex natural history of the Romney Marsh and the reclamation of land from the sea that has occurred over a number of centuries. The Romney Marsh today is now rich in heritage and natural biodiversity that constitutes a distinctive local landscape. The growth in seaside tourism and leisure time during the nineteenth century resulted in a rise in coastal resort towns along the coastline and by the twentieth century Dymchurch, St Mary's Bay and Romney Sands all had popular holiday camps that were easily accessible by the Romney, Hythe and Dymchurch Railway that was opened in 1927. All of these areas continue today as popular seaside destinations and boast attractive beaches as well as a number of valuable heritage assets that relate to its history of smuggling, farming and defence of the coast.

### **2. Introduction**

Dymchurch, St Mary's Bay and Romney Sands are all located along the coastline of the Romney Marsh. This area is the largest coastal wetland on the south coast of England and is a significantly distinctive part of the District's natural landscape. Its long and complex natural history is largely a story of land reclamation from the sea and the ongoing battle to drain and maintain that reclaimed land. This has resulted in variable geological deposits across its area that rely on the constant upkeep of effective land drainage systems, earthen defences and natural shingle barriers to continue protecting the land from the sea and natural erosion.

Around 4000 BC the Romney Marsh was a sandy bay that was completely covered by the sea. Shingle barriers between today's Dungeness and Dymchurch began to build-up as a result of longshore drift and these in turn created lagoons and mudflats where swamps and vegetation began to thrive. Archaeological finds date human occupation on the Marsh to as far back as 2000 BC, but sea levels were rising faster than the Marsh was building up and so occupation continued to be limited. Evidence of salt production at Dymchurch, Lydd and St Mary's Bay by the Romans has been found, and the Roman fort at Portus Lemanis (known as Stutfall Castle) further provides evidence for human occupation and activity in parts of the Romney Marsh early on in its history.

The Marsh gradually built up over centuries and structures were built in order to protect the reclaimed land such as the Rhee Wall and the Dymchurch Wall that were both formally constructed during the thirteenth century. By the latter half of the thirteenth century the land mass of the Romney Marsh had grown considerably and many more people began moving into the area to live permanently. For many centuries, life on the Marsh revolved around sheep farming, smuggling and the defence of the coast from invasion which has resulted in a number of valuable heritage assets relating to these activities that still survive today. The history of Dymchurch, St Mary's Bay and Romney Sands have their beginnings in this story of

land reclamation on the Romney Marsh and have developed as popular coastal destinations over time. A number of holiday parks and visitor attractions now serve these areas and they are also the locations of several valuable heritage assets that together mean that they all continue to be popular with holiday makers and day-trippers.

The table below summarises the key heritage assets that contribute to the leisure and tourism offering in Dymchurch, St Mary's Bay and Romney Sands.

### **Key Components**

<b>Asset</b>	<b>Form</b>	<b>Designation &amp; Protection</b>	<b>Accessibility</b>
<b>Dymchurch</b>			
Dymchurch Wall	Structure	None	Public access
Dymchurch Redoubt	Building Archaeology	Scheduled Monument	No
Martello Tower No. 23	Building	Grade II Listed Building	No (Private Residence)
Martello Tower No. 24	Building	Grade II Listed Building, Scheduled Monument	Public access
Martello Tower No. 25	Building	Grade II Listed Building	No
New Hall	Building	Grade II* Listed Building	Public access
St Peter and St Paul Church	Building Archaeology	Grade II* Listed Building	Public access
The Romney, Hythe and Dymchurch Railway	Transport Building	None	Public access
Dymchurch Amusement Park	Building Leisure Park	None	Public access
The Ship Inn	Building	Grade II Listed Building	Currently closed
City of London (Public House)	Building	None	Public access
Ocean Inn	Building	None	Public access
Dr Syn's Restaurant	Building	Grade II Listed Building	Public access
Dunkirk End, 26 Mill Road (alleged smugglers lookout)	Building	Grade II Listed Building	No
Wraights Cottages, Mill Road (previous residence of smuggler William Wincles)	Building	None	No

Marine Terrace, 50-60 Sea Wall (previous residence of Russell Thorndike)	Building	None	No
Clissold Cottage, 6 Sea Wall (previous residence of smuggler William Tolhurst)	Building	Grade II Listed Building	No
New Beach Holiday Park	Holiday Park	None	Public access
Sandy Bay Caravan Park	Holiday Park	None	Public access
Dymchurch Caravan Park	Holiday Park	None	Public access
<b>St Mary's Bay</b>			
Bailiffs Sergeant (Public House)	Building	None	Public access
Romney, Hythe & Dymchurch Railway	Transport Building	None	Public access
Romney Warren Country Park and Visitor Centre	Park Building	None	Public access
Jesson Court Holiday Park	Holiday Park	None	Public access
Marlie Holiday Park	Holiday Park	None	Public access
<b>Romney Sands</b>			
Sound Mirrors, Greatstone	Structures	Scheduled Monument	Public access
Dungeness No. 2 Battery (also known as Lade Fort)	Building (part of) Archaeology	Scheduled Monument	Public access
Romney, Hythe & Dymchurch Railway	Transport Building	None	Public access
Greatstone Sand Dunes	Natural feature Ecosystem	Site of Specific Scientific Interest	Public access
Greatstone Lakes (part of Dungeness National Nature Reserve)	Manmade/natural feature Ecosystem	National Nature Reserve (NNR), Special Protection Area (SPA), Special Area of Conservation (SAC)	Public access
Romney Sands Holiday Park	Holiday Park	None	Public access

## Dymchurch

Dymchurch has a rich history and is the site of a number of valuable heritage assets as well as popular tourist attractions that have made it a prominent seaside leisure and tourism destination. Together these have acted to attract holiday makers and day-trippers to the area and continue to contribute towards a distinctive local character and cultural offering. As has already been mentioned briefly above, the story of Dymchurch begins with the gradual build-up of the Romney Marsh a few thousand years ago when banks of shingle began forming and acting as a sea defence where the Dymchurch Wall is now located. Marshy areas were created behind these shingle banks by our predecessors who began to reclaim the land for occupation and cultivation.

Approximately half of the present Romney Marsh coastline is defended by sea walls, the oldest of these being the Dymchurch Wall. These are essential in the maintenance and protection of the land as the majority of the Marsh is below the mean high tide level and so without this protection would be under water for much of the time. Up until the thirteenth century the shingle barriers at Dymchurch acted as a coastal defence, however major storms during that century diminished large parts of this natural defensive wall. Construction of the new Dymchurch Wall began sometime after the great storm of 1287 and was initially built using local clay and other organic materials such as wood piles and faggots. By 1803 the condition of the wall, which was 4 miles long and 20 feet high, had deteriorated and so alterations were made that included the inclusion of Kentish Ragstone to protect the front face. Together with the Rhee Wall that stretched between New Romney and Appledore, the Dymchurch Wall ensured that the rich alluvial land deposited by the river Rother was maintained and slowly became rich and fertile land for farming on the Marsh.

In 1799 Hasted in his *The History and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent: Volume 8* when referencing Dymchurch described the wall as being “*three miles in length, extending from Brockman’s Barn, eastward of this place, as far westward as Wallend*” and being made of “*a continued raddle-work of overlaths and faggots, fastened to rows of piles in ranges of three feet width, parallel with the wall, one above the other*”.

By the first half of the nineteenth century stone was being used on the seaward slope and the wall was steadily extended with widespread improvements undertaken in 1894. On the 20<sup>th</sup> July 2011 a new sea wall was built at a cost of £60 million and has been implemented as part of a wider scheme of coastal defence strategy for Folkestone to Cliff End. The new wall provides a more effective defence against flood risk and has also had some groynes reinstated that had fallen into disrepair. It is accessible to the public and allows for pedestrians to walk along its entire length, and at Dymchurch this goes from the Hythe Military Rifle Ranges to the east of the St Mary’s Bay boundary. To mark the completion of the new Dymchurch Wall a time capsule was placed inside one of the wall’s pillars by the Dymchurch & District Heritage Group and Dymchurch Parish Council with various items and memorabilia being donated by local people. Poems by the Greatstone poet Anthony Webb that describes the Dymchurch Wall and historic smuggling on the marsh were also placed inside the capsule. It will remain untouched for 100 years and when opened will illustrate the rich history of the area as valued by its residents and visitors.

The Dymchurch Wall is a distinctive feature in the landscape of Dymchurch and has continued to play an important role in its protection and maintenance. As the village grew in size and prominence during the medieval period, Dymchurch became the headquarters for law and order on the Romney Marsh and was home to the governors of the Marsh, also known as The Lords of the Level. The name Dymchurch derives from *Deme* which is medieval English meaning judge or arbiter. Justice was historically administered from the town to maintain the wellbeing of the Marsh and its people. The governors met in a court room called the New Hall which was originally a wooden structure with a thatched roof but was rebuilt in 1575 following storm damage to the original building. It was again altered in the nineteenth century and held its last court in 1951.

The building survives today and is located in New Hall Close opposite the parish church of St Peter and St Paul. It is designated as a Grade II\* Listed Building and is accessible to the public by prior appointment. The eighteenth century court room is now used as a museum which exhibits artefacts relating to the history of the New Hall and the old gaol that is also located adjacent to main building. The gaol, which was built in 1797 is next to the Court House and consists of two rooms that were used as a gaol until 1866 when the New Romney Constables were superseded by the County Police. The Corporation of Romney Marsh manages the New Hall which continues to be a valuable heritage asset that attests to the judicial history of Dymchurch and is also an important part of the cultural offering here for tourism and leisure.

### ***Local Smuggling and Doctor Syn***

Dymchurch is arguably best known for its historical association with smuggling. There are several heritage assets across Dymchurch town that can be linked to the historic and infamous smuggling activity that was particularly rife across the Romney Marsh during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These include buildings that acted as smugglers lookouts, previous residences of known smugglers, locations used in the Dr Syn novels, public houses that were havens for smugglers as well as the New Hall which fulfilled the judicial role in prosecuting and imprisoning convicted smugglers. Each of these properties is highlighted as a place of interest along the Dymchurch Heritage Trail which clearly demonstrates the important contribution that historic smuggling makes to the local character and tourism offering at Dymchurch. There is also Dr Syn's Restaurant and Guesthouse that was previously a residential building and is now designated as a Grade II Listed Building. This is another example of the significant role that the history of smuggling plays in the local character and tourism offering.

The Romney Marsh is believed to have been the birthplace of smuggling along the southern coast of England due to its remoteness and the high volume of grazing sheep whose wool was heavily taxed when exported. In 1275 the government introduced a tax on the export of wool which quickly rose and had doubled by 1298. It was also made illegal to export wool from an undesignated port and laws relating to export taxes continued to fluctuate and remain expensive. Smuggling began to expand in response to these laws and incentives to smuggle wool illegally continued to increase. By the seventeenth century the problem of smuggling had reached epidemic levels and the Romney Marsh was largely considered to be at the centre of this activity.

During the 1660s the death penalty had been introduced for the smuggling of wool. This was meant as a deterrent but in fact caused smugglers to become more aggressive towards their pursuers and captors, known then as “Revenue Men”. Smuggling on the Romney Marsh continued at its height between 1700 and 1840 where wool continued to be the primary material smuggled out of the country along with tin and graphite. Early smugglers were known as “owlers” as they only operated at night and used the hoot of an owl as a signal to fellow smugglers. A number of the men involved in smuggling on the Marsh were fishermen by trade and so could navigate the English Channel well and capitalise on this advantage over the Revenue Men. A number of the medieval churches on the Marsh were involved in smuggling and were used as hiding places for smugglers and their contraband. The churches at Ivychurch, Snargate, Brookland and Fairfield are all believed to have been involved, and there are tombstones in the cemetery of the parish church at Dymchurch belonging to Revenue Men that would have acted in the prevention of smuggling.

Dymchurch is particularly well known for being the home of one of the most notorious smuggling gangs called the Aldington Gang or the Blues who rose to notoriety during the nineteenth century. Local smugglers had grown in confidence by justifying their actions as being helpful to the local community and eventually seeing themselves as justly challenging the law. The Blues worked along the coastline from Deal to Camber in neighbouring East Sussex and were extremely successful until a run-in with the law in 1821 saw the leader and other members of the gang arrested and some hanged. The group disbanded but smuggling would continue at its height until around 1840 on the Marsh.

As well as a number of buildings that relate to the history of smuggling that are highlighted along the Dymchurch Heritage Trail, Dymchurch is also closely associated with Russell Thorndike and the Dr Syn novels. Every two years Dymchurch holds a “Day of Syn” in celebration of this association. The first was held in 1964 in order to raise funds for repairs to the St Peter & St Paul Parish Church roof, and has continued to grow into a bi-annual event. The event now takes place across a weekend and attracts thousands of visitors to the area. It again illustrates the significant part that historic smuggling and the Dr Syn novels play in the overall identity and local character of Dymchurch. This heritage and its associated assets contribute to a rich cultural offering for the area that has continued to attract visitors for many years and continues to do so today. A number of these sites are accessible or at least viewable by visitors and so play an important part in the leisure and tourism offering at Dymchurch.

### ***Historic Public Houses***

There are three historic public houses in Dymchurch that not only contribute to the local character, but also play a valuable role in the leisure and tourism offering of the area. The first of these is The Ship Inn which is believed to be the oldest of the three and is the only one that is designated (Grade II Listed Building). It first enters the historic record of Dymchurch in 1530 and has a longstanding connection with the local fishermen and smugglers of the area which is believed to be the reason for its name. It is located across the road from the church of St Peter and St Paul and has



continued to display a number of items and memorabilia relating to historic smuggling on the Romney Marsh which highlights this historic connection.

The inn is famously the headquarters of Russell Thorndike's fictional character Dr Syn and is also believed to have had many associations with real-life notorious smugglers and the Lords of the Level at the time when the Romney Marsh was self-governed. The proximity of the inn to the New Hall and adjoining gaol makes it highly likely that this would have been the case on a number of occasions. It is reputed that in 1781 a gang of smugglers were apprehended exporting live sheep to France and were subsequently tried and imprisoned at New Hall. They were later able to escape with the aid of friends who mounted their efforts from The Ship Inn. The building itself is also believed to have a number of hidden passageways and voids that may have been used in smuggling activity and some have been found during more recent restoration work.

The other two public houses at Dymchurch also feature in the Dr Syn novels and so can be linked to the heritage of smuggling on the Romney Marsh. The City of London is believed to date to the sixteenth century when it was initially built as a coaching inn. It is mentioned in the Dr Syn novels as the Seawall Tavern which is supposed to have been the original name for the inn. It is alleged that the current name was coined during the eighteenth century when a ship called the City of London was shipwrecked over the Dymchurch Wall during a great storm and had crashed into the inn causing significant damage as well as loss of life. The inn was subsequently restored using timbers from the ship and in commemoration of those that had lost their lives the inn was renamed after the ship. The figurehead of the ship stood for some time in Wraights Builders Yard and is now displayed at the New Hall.

The final public house is the Ocean Inn which dates back to 1783. It is also mentioned in the Dr Syn novels and inside the inn a local artist has produced murals depicting smuggling activity to highlight this connection to the historic smuggling on the Romney Marsh. At one time in its history it was known as the Victoria but is now the Ocean Inn. It acts as one of the most popular inns in Dymchurch due to its closeness to the beach and so plays an important role in the local leisure facilities.

This strong association to smuggling that can be seen in each of the above gives these inns a distinctive local character as well as a unique tourism appeal. They should be seen as parts of an important collection of heritage assets at Dymchurch that relate to the local history of smuggling that gives this area such a distinct identity. In addition to this, they also provide amenities for numbers of local people and visitors that come to visit the area for its many attractions that include the beaches and unique landscapes as well as the many heritage assets.

### ***The Dymchurch Heritage Trail***

The Dymchurch & District Heritage Group have produced a heritage trail around Dymchurch that highlights a number of the historic buildings and people who have once lived or been associated with the village. There are a total of 35 sites along the trail and they range from the New Hall and smugglers houses to Martello Tower 24 and the local amusement park. This trail gives local people and visitors the opportunity to engage with the rich heritage of Dymchurch and to reconnect with the

histories that are told through these buildings and sites. This should be considered as an important part of the local tourism and leisure offering for Dymchurch, particularly as people can adapt the trail to their own interests and it highlights sights that continue to attract visitors to the area.

### ***Dymchurch Defence Heritage***

In and around Dymchurch there are a number of heritage assets relating to the defence of the coast against foreign invasion, namely the Martello Towers and Dymchurch Redoubt. These assets will be covered in more detail in a later theme paper within this strategy and so will not be repeated here; however it is important to note in relation to this theme that these assets make an important contribution to the local character as well as to the cultural and tourism offering of Dymchurch. There are three Martello Towers at Dymchurch, Martello Tower 23, 24 and 25 and the Dymchurch Redoubt on the south side of the A259 main road which is approximately halfway between Dymchurch and Hythe.

### ***Famous People around Dymchurch***

A number of notable people have lived in or visited Dymchurch over the years which now contributes to a varied tourism and cultural offering. The residences or associated buildings of these individuals are highlighted along the Dymchurch Heritage Trail. Examples include the residences of Paul Nash (1889-1946) who was a British surrealist painter, war artist, writer and designer of applied art who lived for a time in Dymchurch (1920-1925). The famous children's author Edith Nesbit (1858-1924) also lived for a while in Dymchurch before moving to St Mary's Bay in 1917. Noel Coward (1899-1973), the British playwright, composer, director, actor and singer is also known to have visited Dymchurch and is said to have become good friends with Edith Nesbit. However, perhaps most well-known are the buildings that are associated with Russell Thorndike (1885-1972) and his Dr Syn novels. Russell Thorndike had lived in Dymchurch and also wrote many of his Dr Syn novels in The Ship Inn. A number of the buildings throughout Dymchurch are related to these novels and the rich heritage of smuggling which provides a unique tourism and cultural offering.

### ***Seaside Amusements and Dymchurch Beach***

Dymchurch is well-known for its attractive sandy beach that stretches for over three miles along the Hythe Bay from north to south. At low tide wide sand flats are exposed which are frequently 'washed' by the English Channel and provide a popular leisure destination for thousands of visitors every year. The sea at Dymchurch beach is safe for sea bathing and a number of water sports such as fishing and jet-skiing are also permitted. Dymchurch beach is considered to be one of the best beaches from which to launch along the southern coast and is also an ideal location for sea fishing. The Dymchurch & District Sea Angling Club has its premises on the Dymchurch Wall.

Dymchurch beach is also served by a number of amenity facilities which include cafes, restaurants, public houses and amusements. Some of these such as the public houses and Dr Syn's Restaurant are also considered as important heritage assets relating to the historic character of Dymchurch and further add to the tourism and leisure offering here. The beach is also easily accessible via the Romney, Hythe & Dymchurch Railway and is overlooked by Martello Tower 24 as well as the

Dymchurch Amusement Park that are again valuable heritage assets that contribute to the local character as well as tourism and leisure offering.

The Dymchurch Amusement Park was originally a small fairground with a putting green during the 1930s and is now a popular family attraction. It is located at the south end of Dymchurch High Street next to the beach and offers a range of rides and amusements. Together with the Dymchurch beach, local heritage attractions, the Romney, Hythe & Dymchurch Railway and local amenity facilities, the Dymchurch Amusement Park is part of a popular tourist and leisure offering that draws thousands of visitors to Dymchurch each year.

### ***Holiday Parks***

There are three main holiday parks in and around Dymchurch that provide leisure and tourism facilities; New Beach Holiday Park, Sandy Bay Caravan Park and Dymchurch Caravan Park. Large numbers of visitors are attracted to Dymchurch every year by the assets that have been explored above, and these holiday parks are able to cater for holiday-makers that wish to stay longer.

### ***St Mary's Bay***

St Mary's Bay is located along the coast from Dymchurch towards Dungeness in the parish of St Mary in the Marsh. It is a vibrant community and like Dymchurch boasts a unique natural setting and has various assets that contribute to its leisure and tourism offering. Heritage assets in and around St Mary's Bay again reflect the local history which is largely characterised by smuggling, sheep farming and coastal defence. The sandy beach that stretches from Dymchurch to Littlestone-on-Sea is also a primary draw for large numbers of visitors throughout the year.

The origins of St Mary's Bay Village date back to the early nineteenth century. Prior to this time there was very little evidence of human habitation along this stretch of the Romney Marsh coastline. A few farmsteads, looker's huts and sheepfolds would have been visible from the main coastal road that runs between Dymchurch and New Romney, but the initial phases of the village were not established until the early years of the nineteenth century. The nearby ruins of the Hope All Saints Church were famously a favourite meeting place for smugglers during the nineteenth century, but there is very little other evidence for human activity in this area prior to the early 1800s.

Smuggling was rife on the Romney Marsh throughout much of its history, particularly between 1700 and 1840. During the early 1800s, a force known as the Coast Blockade had been formed in an attempt to combat this illicit activity. The Blockade was made up of naval personnel and in the 1820s a Blockade Station known as the St Mary's Coastguard Station was built at St Mary's Bay. It was made up of nine single story cottages that faced the sea and the nearby Martello Tower 27 was also used as a base. The site of these cottages became part of the camp ground for the Rugby Portobello Trust and is now due for redevelopment under new ownership.

The village was previously known as Jesson until 1935 when the name was officially changed to St Mary's Bay. It is believed that the original name was taken from Jesson Farm that had been built around 1820 on what is now Jefferstone Lane. Apart from the coastal road, Jefferstone Lane is the only other main thoroughfare

through the village. In 1804 the threat of a French invasion had become a reality with the start of the Napoleonic War the year before. In response to this threat, various lines of defence were erected along the Southern coast which in the district included the Royal Military Canal and a number of Batteries, Redoubts and Martello Towers. Two Martello Towers were built in St Mary's Bay, numbered 26 and 27, and were the first brick structures to appear at this location. Tower number 26 was built on the eastern side of the now Cobsden Sewer and number 27 was approximately a quarter of a mile to the west of this. Unfortunately neither Martello Tower survives today; number 27 was demolished in 1841 and number 26 was later lost to the sea in 1871.

### ***St Mary's Bay during the First World War***

The development of St Mary's Bay did not begin to accelerate until the First World War when the War Department built a camp along Jefferstone Lane (then known as Jesson Lane). The camp was intended to house the Royal Flying Corps No. 1 (Auxiliary) School of Gunnery amalgamated with No.1 (Observers) School of Aerial Gunnery and could accommodate 1000 men, 300 NCOs, 400 Officers and 400 women. Initially a landing strip at Romney Warren and Littlestone was used but it was soon moved to a proper aerodrome at St Mary's Bay (then still Jesson).

Jesson Airfield operated throughout the First World War and continued in the years between 1918 through to the start of the Second World War in 1939. A number of the buildings from the airfield were later reused as shops or private residences and others have since been lost. Four long brick sheds were located near the flying field where the Romney, Hythe & Dymchurch line now runs. Two were later used as photographic laboratories and the author Edith Nesbit owned two which were converted into bungalows where she lived for 2 years. They were named *Longboat* and *Jollyboat* and still survive today at the bottom of Nesbit Road. Others were reused as shops and for local businesses such as a bakery.

After the armistice the School for Aerial Gunnery was moved to Manston and the flying field was kept open for private emergency landing facilities. The airfield was known as the Littlestone Emergency Landing Ground and continued to operate in the intervening years between the two World Wars. During the 1920s and 1930s the airfield was the venue of public air displays and on some weekends it was possible for the public to take pleasure flights. It also became the site of various holiday camps that established St Mary's Bay as a leisure and tourism destination.

### ***History of Camps at St Mary's Bay***

During the twentieth century, there were a number of camps at St Mary's Bay that form the start of the village's history as a leisure and tourism destination. A few years prior to the First World War, the London Boy's Brigade had held summer camps on land behind Consden just off Dunstall Lane. Then in 1920 when the Flying Corps' Gunnery School put the land up for sale, the Boy's Brigade purchased all of the accommodation on the New Romney side of then Jesson Lane excluding a couple of houses. However they found the camp difficult to maintain and so sold it a couple of years later to Joseph Allnatt, an entrepreneur who converted the old air force buildings into a residential centre for schools.

The new camp was large and could accommodate for over a thousand children per week who would attend the camp to engage in programmes of outdoor activities and

visits to the surrounding countryside. Famously, in 1927 the Duke of York (later King George VI) visited the camp which then became known as the Duke of York's Camp for Boys. The camp continued to flourish during the 1920s and 1930s and now comprised three dining halls and kitchens as well as a number of dormitories. When Jesson then became known as St Mary's Bay in 1935 the name of the camp was changed to the St Mary's Bay Holiday Camp. At this time the camp was the largest employer in the village and contributed significantly to the local economy.

During the Second World War St Mary's Bay suffered damage to buildings from bombing including parts of the St Mary's Bay Holiday Camp. However, in the post-war years of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s the camp again thrived with large numbers of children and teachers coming to stay. The children's side of the holiday camp was eventually scaled down and the name changed to St Mary's Bay School Journey Centre in around 1964/5. Most of the buildings down from the Romney, Hythe & Dymchurch Railway were taken over by the Romney Marsh Poultry company. By the 1970s the demolition of the camp had begun and by 1975 bungalows had been built along what is now Laurel Avenue as the start of the Tree Estate as it is known today.

There had also been a holiday camp located down Dunstall Lane called the Golden Sands Holiday Camp and Sands Holiday Motel. The camp was originally built by Robert Briggs and was then sold to Maddiesons in the late 1950s when it became known as Maddiesons Golden Sands. The camp had been so popular that it was given its own halt along the Romney, Hythe & Dymchurch Railway line at the point where the line crossed Dunstall Lane. The station was called *Golden Sands Halt* and then briefly *Reunion Halt* during the 1990s.

The camp prospered during the 1960s and early 1970s and saw thousands of holiday-makers coming through its doors. Its facilities included chalets, a ballroom, swimming pool, bar and dining room. However, the camp began to decline once charter holidays abroad were introduced which led to its eventual closure in the mid-1970s. In the early 1980s it was again opened but this time as a Hosesasons Holiday Camp which then became a caravan site. In 1994 the camp finally closed for good though the main buildings were not demolished until 2006.

The Sands Hotel was located on the seafront roughly opposite the turning to Jefferstone Lane on the A259. It had been built on land previously occupied by the Jesson Club and prior to that Jesson Farm. During the Second World War it had sustained substantial bomb damage and was repaired in the years following the war where it again became a popular holiday destination. It was later demolished in 1970 when The Sands Holiday Motel was then built on the same site. The hotel and bar continued as a popular holiday destination but were later demolished due to being badly damaged during the Great Storm of 1987. The site of the hotel is due to be developed and little remains of The Sands Holiday Motel.

The Rugby Clubs, now The Rugby Portobello Trust, had also owned 4.6 hectares of land near the seafront at St Mary's Bay since 1902. In 1899 two old Rugbeians had bought land in St Mary's Bay as well as outbuildings that had previously been part of the old Coastguard Station. They erected buildings for a permanent camp for boys and later girls from Notting Gate and Notting Hill (London) to holiday by the sea. It could house up to 100 people at a time and still survives though in poor condition. In

1922 the caretaker's house was erected in memory of 117 members of the Notting Hill Rugby Clubs that were killed during the First World War. In 2012 planning permission was granted for the refurbishment of the camp and its buildings as many had deteriorated to a point where they were not usable. However, this work was never realised and a new planning application has been submitted to "change the use of the land to a holiday park for general holiday use together with the partial demolition of existing holiday accommodation and erection of new holiday accommodation buildings and replacement swimming pool, formation of camping area, together with associated access and infrastructure". In February 2016 the land was sold to Clerkenwell House.

Evidently, during the 1950s and 1960s in particular St Mary's Bay was a popular holiday destination and had a number of holiday camps to accommodate for holiday-makers. Today the area has two main holiday parks that provide leisure and tourism facilities; Jesson Court Holiday Park and Marlie Holiday Park. St Mary's Bay has remained a popular holiday destination because of its beaches, natural landscape, cultural offering and proximity to other tourist attractions within the Romney Marsh and wider district.

### ***Romney Warren Country Park***

Marlie Holiday Park just outside of St Mary's Bay along the main coastal road (A259) lies next to the Romney Warren Country Park. The park is within walking distance of St Mary's Bay but can also be reached via the Romney, Hythe & Dymchurch Railway as there is a halt station at Romney Warren where the train stops on specified occasions. The park is managed by the Romney Marsh Countryside Partnership and is a valuable site which protects, conserves and illustrates the natural history and heritage assets of the Romney Marsh.

The Romney Warren Country Park and visitor centre make an important contribution to the tourism offering of St Mary's Bay and the surrounding area. Visitors are able to learn about and engage with the historical and natural history of the Romney Marsh as well as attend a number of events and activities that are held throughout the year. The Warren is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) as designated by Natural England because of the important flora and fauna that the park supports. This includes ancient sand dunes that are able to convey information about ancient sea levels which is important to the future understanding of climate change. Various walking routes around the park show the varied wildlife and plant life that lives on the Marsh such as the Romney Marsh sheep that have historically been the predominant livestock farmed across the Marsh. Resources at the park and visitor centre also demonstrate the historical formation of the Romney Marsh and the important heritage that now survives here.

### ***Seaside Leisure and St Mary's Bay Beach***

St Mary's Bay beach attracts thousands of visitors every year and is an important part of the leisure and tourism offering here. It is a long sandy beach that stretches from Dymchurch south to Littlestone-on Sea and provides safe sea bathing. During the summer months a kiosk is open along the beach promenade that sells food and drink but there is also the Bailiff Sergeant public house within the village which is the only public house at St Mary's Bay. The village is served by the popular Romney, Hythe & Dymchurch Railway with a station on Jefferstone Lane, making it easily

accessible to visitors and holiday-makers. Overall the unique natural setting, sandy beach and proximity to various heritage assets relating to the local histories primarily associated with smuggling, sheep farming and military defence make St Mary's Bay a popular leisure and tourist destination for both day trippers and holiday-makers.

### **Romney Sands at Greatstone**

Romney Sands Beach and Holiday Park are located in the seaside village of Greatstone, one mile east of New Romney. Like St Mary's Bay, the village of Greatstone does not have a long history but has become a popular tourist and holiday destination over more recent years. It has a rich leisure and tourism offering which is particularly unique due to the natural setting of Greatstone within the Dungeness National Nature Reserve and parts of the village and surrounding area also being designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). The military heritage is also prominent in the area and the attractive sandy beach is further popular with visitors and holiday-makers.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century Greatstone was no more than a shingle headland that marked the southern entrance to the bay which at that time extended as far west as New Romney. The sea had been retreating from New Romney since the thirteenth century and the town soon ceased to be a harbour and port. Around 1800 shingle began to move south from Dymchurch and started to form a barrier which was known as Little Stone but is today the village of Littlestone. Silt built up behind this barrier and then in 1839 a wall was erected to protect the reclaimed land just to the north of the present Littlestone which accelerated the silting process. Around 1900 another sea wall was built that closed the gap between Greatstone and Littlestone.

Some properties began to develop at Greatstone in the early years of the twentieth century though it remained largely empty of human habitation. The few properties that did exist were mainly holiday homes and the original Jolly Fisherman public house that is believed to have been built in 1908. The Greatstone Golf Club took up a large area and was a popular destination until its decline in 1931. However the Greatstone sand dunes, sandy beach at Romney Sands and safe sea bathing were already contributing to Greatstone as a popular holiday destination.

In 1931 a local Littlestone builder and councillor Mr C. E. Andrews instructed architects to produce plans for over 1370 residential properties in Greatstone due to its potential for tourism and a growing residential population. Greatstone was seen as an attractive prospect due to its sandy beach, excellent air and water quality and secluded location. The proposed development was known as the "Greatstone Dunes Extension" and the properties were to be located between Dunes Road and Hull Road with the Jolly Fisherman public house in the south east corner. In total there would be 1379 properties for sale covering an area of approximately 250 acres. The site was bounded by the Romney, Hythe & Dymchurch Railway to the east and the Dungeness National Nature Reserve to the west.

These plans were never realised and only a hotel, the new Jolly Fisherman public house and some public facilities for holiday-makers and visitors were built in 1935. Shops were added at the east end of Dune Road during the early 1960s as part of a limited development of Greatstone which continued into the 1970s. Today

Greatstone remains a popular destination for visitors and holiday-makers but has never reached the residential scale that was originally envisaged. It does however have a rich collection of natural and heritage assets that contribute to a distinctive leisure and tourism offering.

### **Greatstone Sound Mirrors**

There are a number of military heritage assets throughout the district that attest to the Districts important role during wartime in the defence of the southern coast against foreign invasion. As mentioned already, these assets will be explored in more detail during a later theme paper and so the below is a brief outline. The Greatstone Sound Mirrors, also known as *Acoustic Mirrors* or *Listening Ears*, are a valuable collection of defence heritage assets and also make an important contribution to the heritage and tourism offering at Greatstone. Other assets that are associated with this theme that are located nearby also include the PLUTO bungalows and Dungeness No. 2 Battery, also known as Lade Fort.

Sound Mirrors are large concrete structures that were designed as an early warning system to detect enemy aircraft and enabled the British forces to respond to this threat quickly. They worked by focusing the sound from enemy aircraft engines so that they could be heard by personnel stationed at the Sound Mirrors before the aircraft were visible. Their curved designs focused the sound waves into a central point which could then be picked up by a sound collector and later by microphone. Specialised training was given to those that were stationed at the Sound Mirrors as distinguishing the sound of enemy aircraft from other background noises was particularly difficult.

Experiments on sound detectors had begun at the start of World War I in 1914 and started life as horizontal *Listening Wells*. These were primitive and by 1922 research into standing concrete sound mirrors were replacing this design, with their total abandonment in 1932. An experimental 20 feet (diameter) sound mirror was built at Hythe in 1922, and then in 1928 the first of the three sound mirrors at Greatstone was built.

The Greatstone Sound Mirrors are a significant collection of this type of structure as they exhibit all three designs; 20 feet, 30 feet and 200 feet sound mirrors. They were built between 1928 and 1930 as part of Britain's national defence strategy. The 30 feet mirror followed the 20 feet mirror and was set at a different angle so as to detect aircraft that were higher in the sky as well as providing greater accuracy. The final mirror, which is 200 feet long and 26 feet high, was also built in 1930 and on a clear day was able to detect enemy aircraft up to 24 miles away. The sound mirrors did work however they quickly became obsolete due to the invention of radar in 1935 and were eventually abandoned in 1939. The Greatstone Sound Mirrors are now designated as a Scheduled Monument and are situated on an island within the Greatstone Lakes in the Dungeness National Nature Reserve. They are managed by the RSPB and access is provided via a swing bridge which is opened on specified occasions and open days throughout the year. They are an important part of the local character and also make a valuable contribution to the local tourism offering.



### ***Greatstone Lakes***

The Romney Marsh constitutes some of the most distinctive natural landscapes in Kent which not only gives it a unique local character but also attracts large numbers of visitors each year. At Greatstone, there are a number of distinctive natural landscapes that give the area a unique tourism and leisure offering. The Greatstone Lakes are located within the Dungeness National Nature Reserve to the west of the village and are easily accessible by the Romney Sands Holiday Park and other visitors. They are a haven for several wildlife species, particularly birds, as well as flora and varied natural habitats. The Greatstone Sound Mirrors are also located within the Lakes on an island between the south and north lakes.

These lakes are man-made as they were originally gravel pits that were worked during the 1970s. This gravel industry was important to the local area and provided the materials for sea defences and road building amongst other things. Gravel extraction continued for four years at this site and once this had ceased, the pits were then returned to nature and over time became water based habitats covering an area of about 25 acres. They now support diverse wildlife, plant life and natural habitats and so attract thousands of wildlife enthusiasts and visitors each year. The Greatstone Lakes are easily accessible from the village and are a valuable part of the local character as well as unique tourism offering.

### ***Greatstone Dunes***

The Greatstone Dunes are located between Greatstone Beach and the coastal road and run almost the entire length of Greatstone. These coastal dunes have developed by onshore winds blowing sand into the intertidal zone (area between the high and low tide marks) which is then trapped by specialised dune-building grasses that grow through successive layers of the deposited sand. Sand dunes can support important ecosystems such as rare plant and animal life and are often designated as a result. The Greatstone Dunes have been designated as a Site of Specific Scientific Interest (SSSI) due to the many rare species that grow and live here, in particular the Brown Tail Moth Caterpillar.

The Greatstone Dunes are owned and managed by the District Council. As the sand is constantly on the move, efforts have been made to maintain and preserve these sand dunes. Sea Buckthorn has previously been planted as it is an excellent sand stabiliser though it has spread to the extent where it is now threatening the rare native plant life. Since 2008 volunteers led by the Romney Marsh Countryside Partnership have been working to remove areas of the Buckthorn in order to maintain the native plant populations. Other strategies have been employed such as installing semi-permeable fencing along the maximum high tide line which will encourage the dunes to increase in size seaward rather than becoming taller and as a result more unstable.

There are various access points to the dunes where visitors are able to walk, including the England Coast Path which passes through part of the dunes. They are a significant natural asset and also play a key role in the local character, and are therefore also important to the local tourism offering in conjunction with other sites within the wider area. Greatstone in particular has a number of assets relating to its natural heritage that continue to attract thousands of visitors each year.

### ***Seaside Leisure and Greatstone (Romney Sands) Beach***

The beach at Greatstone is a popular destination for visitors and holiday-makers and continues to attract thousands of people each year. It plays an important role in the tourism and leisure offering at Greatstone as well as being a significant natural asset with its sand dunes that are a SSSI. The sandy beach stretches for over two miles and is frequently 'washed' by the tide of the English Channel. Historically, it has always attracted people to the area and offers safe sea bathing as well as many sporting opportunities.

The beach is flat and devoid of groynes and so is popular with a range of water and wind sports. These include kite surfing, kite boarding, kite buggy's and Greatstone beach is also considered to be one of the best sites in the country for land yachting. The beach is also popular with a number of water sports such as sailing and jet skiing. Around high tide Greatstone beach is also a very popular destination for sea fishing.

There is a Greatstone Shingle Trail that covers part of the beach and Dungeness National Nature Reserve. Along this trail there are information boards explaining about the important plant and animal life that can be seen along this route. It offers visitors a valuable opportunity to engage with the natural heritage of the area whilst also exploring Greatstone beach and the Dungeness National Nature Reserve.

### ***Holiday Parks***

Greatstone is the location for the popular Romney Sands Holiday Park that acts as an important part of the local tourism and leisure offering. It is in a prime location with easy access to the Greatstone beach as well as to other heritage and natural assets nearby such as the Dungeness National Nature Reserve and Greatstone Lakes. Like Dymchurch and St Mary's Bay, Greatstone is able to accommodate for large numbers of holiday-makers as well as day-trippers and local visitors.

## **3. Statement of Significance**

Dymchurch, St Mary's Bay and Romney Sands each boast valuable collections of heritage and natural assets that result in a diverse tourism and leisure offering. Their many attractions and historical assets have attracted thousands of visitors each year and continue to do so today. These assets primarily exhibit the Romney Marshes heritage of smuggling, sheep farming and coastal defence as well as its unique natural heritage and landscapes. Whilst not all of the local heritage assets are designated, they are however essential to the local character and tourism offering and so should still be considered as significant. Many that are designated are also important examples of their type and so the assets highlighted in this theme are of **moderate to considerable significance**.

### **Evidential Value**

The vast majority of the assets highlighted in this paper still survive in good condition today with many of them still in active use. As a result, the potential for these sites to reveal further evidence of past human activity is low and there is little opportunity for future archaeological work. Many of the sites such as the Martello Towers, the New Hall and Sound Mirrors are concrete or brick structures and so inevitably survive well. A number of these sites such as the historic public houses, historic residences and Romney, Hythe & Dymchurch Railway remain in active use and so are

maintained and preserved as a result. The histories of several of these sites are also already well understood and documented, particularly in the cases of the military heritage sites such as the Martello Towers and Sound Mirrors and so again are not likely to reveal further information in the future.

Some sites such as the holiday camps and Martello Towers at St Mary's Bay have been completely lost, but there is little opportunity for buried remains or further archaeological investigation to reveal further information at these sites. There may be opportunities to further investigate some of the medieval churches and public houses on the Marsh that were associated with smuggling around these areas as evidence for smuggling activities has been found for example at the Ship Inn in Dymchurch during more recent restoration works. However again this is already a well understood and documented history and there is probably little further evidence available for future discovery.

### **Historical Value**

The historical value of the majority of the assets at Dymchurch, St Mary's Bay and Romney Sands (Greatstone) is significant as they are able to create strong links with past events and people. An important part of the local tourism offering here is the association to a number of notable people, particularly at Dymchurch where several past residences of notable people are highlighted along the Dymchurch Heritage Trail. Various places at Dymchurch and St Mary's Bay also have strong links to the Dr Syn novels as they were either used as settings within the novels or were places where the author Russell Thorndike lived and wrote his works. Links to notorious smugglers can also be made to a number of the public houses and residences around these villages, and the New Hall at Dymchurch further illustrates this powerful link to historical smuggling that was so infamous across the Romney Marsh a few centuries ago.

The various defence heritage sites such as the Martello Towers and Sound Mirrors are further able to demonstrate significant historical value as they create strong connections to major historical events, in these cases to the Napoleonic and World Wars. They are iconic sites within the landscape and make important contributions to the local character as well as to the tourism offering. Whilst they are not all accessible or may only be accessible on specified occasions, they are still powerful reminders of the role that the district played in the defence of the southern coast during major wartime events.

### **Aesthetic Value**

Many of the assets from this theme have significant aesthetic value, particularly the natural assets which make the Romney Marsh and these areas such a distinctive collection of unique landscapes. The Dungeness National Nature Reserve is a distinctive and particularly valuable natural asset that has a unique aesthetic appeal. The Romney Warren Country Park is also a significant natural asset and one that illustrates the history of the Romney Marsh and its natural landscapes. The beaches along the Romney Marsh coastline at Dymchurch, St Mary's Bay and Romney Sands are popular tourist attractions for a number of reasons but also have great aesthetic value particularly as part of the local character as well as in attracting people to the area.

Some of the other assets such as the defence heritage sites are not particularly attractive but then they were not designed with this in mind. They are however imposing structures within the landscape and provide powerful connections to past historical events and so still have a significant aesthetic value in that they provide strong sensory experiences of the past.

### **Communal Value**

These assets have a high communal value, particularly when considering their amenity value and the role that they play in the local tourism and leisure offering. A number of the assets offer a unique tourism experience such as those that are strongly associated with the smuggling heritage of the Romney Marsh or the natural landscapes and beaches located at each location. They also play an important amenity role such as the historic public houses, holiday parks and cottages and seaside amusements that can attract and accommodate for large numbers of visitors and holiday-makers.

A number of the sites in and around Dymchurch, St Mary's Bay and Romney Sands are also distinctive and so make important contributions to the local character and sense of place for the local communities. There are a number of local heritage groups that work to preserve and highlight these assets and in so doing illustrate the communal value that is placed on the local heritage here.

## **4. Vulnerabilities**

There are a number of vulnerabilities that can put the assets from this theme at risk. As has already been mentioned, not all of the assets that are considered as relevant to this theme are designated and so are not afforded levels of statutory protection. Whilst many of these assets play important roles in the local character and are valued by the local communities as well as by visitors, they are at greater risk of decline or complete loss because they are undesignated assets. Local Lists may help to identify the value placed on these undesignated assets and their ongoing preservation, but this has yet to be considered for this theme. The importance of undesignated assets that play important roles in the local character and in this case as part of the local tourism and leisure offering should also be recognised in order to avoid the loss of these sites.

The loss of assets through the closure of sites is a further vulnerability that has affected some from this theme. The Ship Inn at Dymchurch which is a valuable heritage as well as amenity asset has now been closed for some time and so is inaccessible. This public house has historical as well as communal value and has strong links to the local smuggling heritage. Whilst it remains closed, visitors and the local community are unable to engage with this heritage at the Ship Inn and are also unable to utilise this site as part of the leisure amenities in the area. The historic public houses play a valuable role in the local amenity facilities and contribute to the leisure attractions in the area. It is hoped that this public house will open again in the future, but it illustrates a vulnerability that faces some local amenity facilities if they are unable to stay open to the public.

A number of other assets are also vulnerable to degradation and natural erosion. The Sound Mirrors at Greatstone for example are iconic and valuable defence heritage assets that tell the story of the defence of Britain during the World Wars.

They are however vulnerable to degradation through the natural erosion of the concrete and reinforced metal by the marine environment in which they are located. Past restoration work has been done by Historic England, but there will be a need for more investment in the future if these structures are to be preserved. Access to the site is controlled by the RSPB and a swing bridge and so degradation through human activity such as vandalism is however managed.

The Greatstone Dunes are also at risk of natural erosion, particularly since Sea Buckthorn was planted to stabilise the dune and has now spread to the extent that it is threatening the native plant population. Work is being done by the Romney Marsh Countryside Partnership to remove sections of the Sea Buckthorn which will help to alleviate this problem, but the ongoing management of this site is needed in order to preserve the dunes and to protect against natural degradation.

A final vulnerability that will affect particularly the natural assets of this theme is being able to achieve the correct balance between conservation and the promotion of assets for tourism purposes. The natural landscapes and biodiversity that can be found on the Romney Marsh are a primary reason for many visitors coming to the area as it is so unique, yet large numbers of visitors may also cause damage to the sensitive environments that have attracted them in the first place. A delicate balance needs to be achieved which can preserve these special landscapes whilst also keeping them open to the public.

## **5. Opportunities**

The heritage assets from this theme create a number of valuable opportunities. The trails such as the Dymchurch Heritage Trail and Greatstone Shingle Trail offer important opportunities for visitors and the local communities to engage with the local heritage and connect to the important histories that various sites reflect. They are also important in promoting the heritage in these areas and providing learning opportunities in the way of interpretation boards and leaflets mapping the trails with information about the sites which are highlighted along the various routes. Visitors are able to follow the entire trail or adapt it to their particular interest which again is an important opportunity in attracting people into the area to experience the local heritage.

These heritage trails, whilst highlighting the local heritage, also present important opportunities in promoting outdoor activity and reconnecting with the natural environment. The health benefits of physical activity and being outdoors are proven and can have significant impacts on overall wellbeing. There may also be opportunities to create new trails that cover a wider area across the Romney Marsh and link more heritage assets to one another to tell a broader story. This will not only continue to raise awareness of the local heritage assets, but could also increase local tourism and benefit the local economies. Longer trails will again have significant health benefits whilst also encouraging powerful experiences of the local heritage.

A number of events and activities are held throughout the year at a number of the sites mentioned in this paper. These present important opportunities for community engagement with the local heritage as well as the engagement of visitors from further afield. These events will also encourage local pride of place and ownership of the local heritage assets as well as their promotion to wider audiences.

## 6. Current Activities

A number of events are held throughout the Romney Marsh each year that makes an important contribution to the tourism offering at Dymchurch, St Mary's Bay and Romney Sands. In Dymchurch, the *Day of Syn* is a bi-annual event that celebrates the local theme of smuggling and the association to the Dr Syn novels by Russel Thorndike. It started life as a day of celebration but is now held over the August bank holiday weekend and includes battle re-enactments between smugglers and Revenue Men, a court trial, historical demonstrations, Morris dancing and other musical entertainment. The event is organised by volunteers and is free to attend but helps to support local shops and charities. The last *Day of Syn* was held last year (2016) and the next will be in 2018.

The various holiday parks between Dymchurch and Greatstone offer events and activities for people holidaying in the area, and there is also a range of local amusements as explored in this paper that are open to the public. Other events that will add to the tourism offering at Dymchurch, St Mary's Bay and Romney Sands includes the New Romney Country Fayre which will be held at New Romney in July of this year (2017). It is an annual event that is free to attend and has attracted over 7000 visitors in previous years. It offers varied entertainment in two arenas and over 130 stalls. The event also works in partnership with the Romney, Hythe & Dymchurch Railway which runs special trains on the County Fayre Day. On the 15<sup>th</sup> July this year (2017) there will also be an open day for the Greatstone Sound Mirrors run by the RSPB. This will offer visitors the opportunity to see the mirrors up close and to learn about the history behind these structures.

As well as a range of local events, the Dymchurch & District Heritage Group is active in the promotion and preservation of the local heritage. The group meets bi-monthly and curates an archive of photographs, books and other media relating to the history of Dymchurch and the surrounding District. They have a room at the rear of the Methodist Church in the Dymchurch High Street which is open to the public between April and December at specified times, and also hold heritage events and open days.

## 7. Sources Used & Additional Information

<http://theromneymarsh.net/>

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