



A tranquil scene from the rustic past

CHAPTER 1

A Remarkable Journey Through Time

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Smallhythe is a small village or hamlet, hidden away on a small peninsular of firm land, three miles south of the town of Tenterden in Kent. The peninsular links the northwest fringe of the marshy area known generally as Romney Marsh with the uplands of the Weald of Kent.

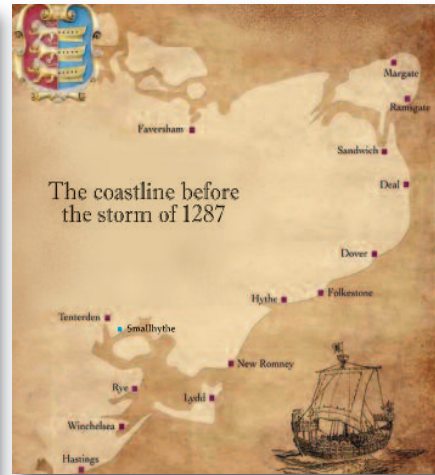
The surprises start with its age. Smallhythe is known to have been in existence by the mid-13th century. It was an important ferry crossing point to the Isle of Oxney to the south, and an equally important port for goods and materials being transported to and from Tenterden and the Weald.

For much of the second half of the Middle Ages, Smallhythe benefitted from being on the north bank of a broad and deep river, the River Rother. The natural course of the Rother was to the south of the Isle of Oxney but between 1332, when the Knelle Dam was built across the river, and 1635, when the dam was deliberately breached, the river flowed to the north of Oxney, sweeping past Smallhythe, Reading Street, Ebony, Stone and Appledore on its way to the sea near Rye. It was during this 300-year period that Smallhythe harboured another surprise - it was a busy local port and a builder of ships, including warships for some of the Plantagenet and Tudor monarchs, two surprising historical roles which are now almost forgotten outside the local area.

Today the river valley at Smallhythe is occupied by sheep, rather than ships, grazing on reclaimed land that is drained by the Reading Sewer (sewer is the local word for a drainage canal) and its tributaries. The slopes to the north, resting on underlying Wadhurst Clay, are used for a mixture of pasture, woodland, arable farming and vineyards producing some of the finest English wine. It is hard to imagine that where there are now fields of sheep there was once a wide tidal channel with ships coming and going. Occasionally, however, flooding of the flat fields between Smallhythe and the Isle of Oxney gives the present day observer an inkling of the watery scene that would have greeted a visitor 500 years ago.



Smallhythe floods in 1925



The coastline of south-east England today contrasted with the heavily indented coast of the 13th century

The Marshes

Over the last 2,000 years, there have been many changes in the marshlands between Hythe in Kent and Rye in East Sussex, some occurring naturally and others as the result of human intervention.

In the mid-13th century a number of storms caused the sea to break through the coastal shingle banks, flooding significant areas of land and turning it into marsh. The Great Storm of 1287 left New Romney flooded and the harbour was filled with silt, sand, mud and debris. Old Winchelsea was also flooded and the course of the River Rother changed to enter the sea near Rye instead of at New Romney. However, despite their destructive power, the storms also helped to build up protective shingle banks along the coastline that was then developing.

By the 14th century, several of the marshes had been reclaimed by “innings”, a process of building embankments around a marsh and draining the land by a system of dykes and one-way sluices or drains in the sea wall. This process continued over the following centuries as did the deposition of shingle along the coastline and today the marshland, generally known as the Romney Marsh but actually comprising several marshes, is protected from sea incursions and flooding by sea walls and a network of rivers and drainage channels and ditches.



The course of the River Rother through the marshes

Shipbuilding

Hugh Roberts, in his publication *Tenterden – The First Thousand Years* notes that maritime activity existed at Smallhythe from 1326. The safe harbour, nearby oak forests and the sloping shore needed for slipways provided all that was necessary for shipbuilding. The first mention of vessels built at Smallhythe was in 1342, shortly after the building of the Knelle Dam. The earliest record of a named ship being



The Knelle Dam and courses of the River Rother

built at Smallhythe is in the New Romney town accounts which record expenditure on a barge, the *Eneswythe* built at Smallhythe in 1400. There are no known records of the depth of the river but at Smallhythe it is likely to have been about 6.5 metres at high water and 2 metres at low water, sufficient for the largest ships of Medieval England to be built or repaired at Smallhythe.

The nearest town to Smallhythe was, and still is, Tenterden, a town made rich by its role in the wool trade. In May 1337 King Edward III issued an edict to encourage Flemish cloth workers to come to England and Kent was selected as the centre for broadcloth manufacture. The Weald of Kent acquired the reputation for making strong, durable, broadcloth of good mixture and colours. The export of wool from Tenterden was channelled through the port at Smallhythe, as were exports of timber and charcoal. By the middle of the 14th century, Smallhythe's role as Tenterden's port was of considerable importance and by 1381, the year of the Peasants' Revolt, Smallhythe was perceived as a municipal centre in its own right. The port

was handling considerable shipborne commerce and foreign immigrants, particularly from the Low Countries, took up residence there in order to do business.

Tenterden and the Peasants' Revolt of 1381

The revolt, which spread across much of the country, had various causes, including the socio-economic and political tensions generated by the Black Death in the 1340s, the high taxes resulting from the conflict with France during the Hundred Years War, and instability within the leadership of London. Locally, much of Tenterden's wool-trade wealth was enjoyed by a privileged few. The ordinary townsfolk's resentment of their position led to some of them joining the 1381 Peasants' Revolt, in which Wat Tyler marched a group of protesters on Canterbury and then London to oppose the institution of a poll tax.