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The decline of Smallhythe

Smallhythe gradually declined as a prosperous port and shipyard in the 16th century, when the River Rother began to silt up. In 1549, an enquiry was held to establish the need to retain the chapel at Smallhythe. One witness said:

“There is no haven there, saving only a creeke of salt water where no ship can come buy onely lyters and such kind of small vessels - and that only at full water.”

After 1549, records of marriages, baptisms and deaths diminished in number, suggesting a fall in population.

In 1636, a great storm destroyed a dam upstream on the River Rother, which resulted in the main flow of the river reverting to the course that it had taken up to 300 years previously, to the south of the Isle of Oxney. Initially, the old stretch of the river continued to be an important highway for cargo such as iron and wood, but it gradually silted up and larger ships could no longer reach Smallhythe. Consequently, the port and ship-building activities declined. By the end of the 18th century, only small boats and barges could navigate the river.

With the draining of the Romney Marsh to the southeast, it eventually became impossible for vessels to navigate between the sea and Smallhythe. The last record of a sailing vessel to reach Smallhythe was at the beginning of the 20th century.

The waterway just to the south of Smallhythe Place, called the Reading Sewer, follows the old course of the River Rother for some miles and forms part of the complex drainage system of the Wittersham Levels.

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Smallhythe – a deserted medieval shipyard



Smallhythe, on the broad River Rother, was an important shipyard from at least the 13th century. Indeed, it was one of the most significant ship-building centres of medieval England.

Unlike nearby Rye and Winchelsea, Smallhythe was not a place of docks, quaysides and merchant activity. Although there were some slipways cut into the river bank, most of the ship-building, ship-repairing and ship-breaking activity took place at the river's edge.

Much of the archaeological evidence at Smallhythe is subtle. Traces of slipways are just visible as slight depressions in the fields to the east and west of Smallhythe Place but the lightweight wooden landing stages have left no archaeological remains.

Channel 4's Time Team visited Smallhythe in 1998 and carried out a number of surveys, including a study of aerial photographs and the opening of several exploratory trenches. A broken frame from a clinker-built vessel was found as well as numerous iron fastenings and clenched nails. The findings from these surveys along with written historical evidence lead to a new class of field monument being declared: *Deserted Medieval Shipyard*.

Royal commissions – The great ships

In 1410, *The Marie*, a 100 ton vessel, was built at Smallhythe for Henry IV. Four years later (the year before Agincourt), Henry V came to the shipyard to see two vessels that he had commissioned being built - *The Jesus*, the first ship of 1,000 tons, and *The George*, a balinger of 120 tons. A balinger was a craft that could be rowed as well as sailed; in the 15th century they were used for scouting and raiding purposes.

Throughout the 15th century, Smallhythe continued as a successful shipyard but in the 16th century activity began to decline with the silting up of the river and the establishment of new shipyards elsewhere. Local craftsmen had to look further afield for work and in 1514 thirty-seven men from Smallhythe walked 44 miles to Woolwich to take part in the building of the *Henry Grace a Dieu*, at 1400 tons the largest warship in the world and capable of carrying up to 1000 men. The ship was commissioned by Henry VIII as a replacement for the 600 ton *Regent*, which had been built downstream from Smallhythe at Reading Street in 1486 and lost in battle in 1512.

In 1546 Henry VIII ordered *The Great Gallyon* to be built at Smallhythe. At 300 tons, she was the last of the Great Ships, the last Royal Commission for Smallhythe and the last large vessel to be built there.

The port and community of Smallhythe

At the height of its success, Smallhythe was a community of around 200 people, most of whom were involved in ship-building. The population would have been increased by transient workers when large vessels were being built and by sailors joining and leaving the ships.

The main settlement was centred on the road leading down to the riverbank and on Strand Syde, the road along the north bank of the river. Strand Syde was the area where most of the ship-building activity took place. From here a ferry crossing to the Isle of Oxney provided an important link between the Cinque Port towns of Tenterden to the north and Rye and Winchelsea to the south.

During the 15th century, local society was dominated by several wealthy families involved in ship-building. One of the most successful and significant residents at this time was Sir Robert Brigandyne. He was clerk of ships to Henry VIII and supervised the design and construction of *The Mary Rose*. He lived and worked in the house now known as Priest's House, next to Smallhythe Place.

Toward the end of the 16th century, the community supported several inns and shops. There was a mercer's shop which provided a variety of exotic goods including Holland cloth, saffron, prunes, sugar, aquavit (strong spirits), silk, white pepper, quicksilver and gunpowder. The shop was in a large timber-framed house and the proprietor, Henry Badcock, lived above the shop "in considerable comfort". He had another equally well-stocked shop down river at Appledore.