**HISTORY of ST. MARYS BAY**

*The Parish Council gives its grateful thanks to local Author & Artist Victor Haisell who gave permission for extracts of his books to be use on this web-site.*

**St. Marys Bay**

The origins of the village we now know as St. Mary’s Bay date from the early days of the nineteenth century. Prior to that time there was very little evidence of human habitation along the stretch of coast where the village now stands. A few distant farmsteads might have been visible from the road from Dymchurch to New Romney together with sheepfolds and looker’s huts – the shelters used by shepherds during lambing time.

In 1804 the threat of invasion by the forces of Napoleon, prompted a line of defence in the shape of the Royal Military Canal and a chain of Martello Towers running from Aldenburgh in Suffolk to Seaford Sussex. Two of these towers numbered 26 and 27 were the first brick-built structures to appear on the St. Mary’s Bay shoreline. Tower 26 was built on the eastern side of the Gobsden Gut (now Cobsden Sewer) an outfall which ran into the sea near the present Dunstall Lane. Tower No. 27 was built approximately a quarter of a mile to the west. Neither tower stands today. Damaged by sea erosion. No. 27 was demolished in 1841 and the other tower lasted until 1871. The site of Tower 26 was on what is now the sea wall next to the car park opposite Dunstall Lane, roughly in front of where the toilet block now stands.

**The Coast Blockade**

Smuggling was rampant all around the coast, particularly in this area and in the early 1800s, a force, known as the Coast Blockade was formed in an attempt to combat the problem.

The force was made up of naval personnel. Sailors who were used to spending their working lives at sea now found themselves based ashore. Many were drawn from the lowest ranks, who carried out the most menial task below decks. In their new working environment the men were knocked into shape by the strictest discipline, a well known dispenser of which was Captain William McCullock RN, an officer widely known as ‘Flogging Joey’.

In the 1820s a Blockade Station, known as the St. Mary’s Coastguard station was built. Located near the high tide line, its site was on the sea side of the present Rugby Club chalets. There were nine single story cottages facing the sea, in the centre one of which lived the Chief Boatman.

The nearby parade ground, a large green with flagstaff was where the men would assemble before marching to their headquarters at Tower 27.

**The Lifeboat**

Based at Tower 27, the first lifeboat was built by William Plenty and owned by the RNLI. The station was known as Dymchurch No.27 Tower and the crew were all members of the Coast Blockade. It was several years before Dungeness, Littlestone and Hythe received their first lifeboats.

On 27th August 1832, the lifeboat was launched in a full gale to aid the vessel *Osiris*

Floundering between Littlestone and Tower 27. The lifeboat crew managed to rescue all the men aboard the ship. For this remarkable feat the coxswain F.S. Henshaw received the RNLI Silver Medal.

On 1st October 1835 the brig *Industry* washed down the bay completely out of control dragging her anchor in gale force conditions. All the crew were saved by the gallant men from the Dymchurch Station. The Chief Boatman, Lt. John Summerville RN, received the Gold Medal for his courage and leadership.

The lifeboat was again in service on 13th October 1835 when it was badly damaged attempting to assist a pilot cutter caught in a full gale with heavy rain and sleet. A replacement vessel, designated and built by Paxton came into service on 3rd December 1836. Within a fortnight, on 16th December she was called into service in very bad weather to assist a collier aground on the Newcome Bar. Eleven men were saved before the vessel began to break up.

A few weeks later another small ship drifted onto the same sand bar. After standing by for four hours in very heavy swell, the lifeboat was able to come alongside. Despite being seriously damaged in a collision with the stricken ship the lifeboat managed to rescue the crew and return to the station.

After being sent away for repair she never returned. Instead she was sold to the other side of the world to serve as a coastal lifeboat in Australia. This signaled the end of the Dymchurch lifeboat station.

The Coastguards continued at Tower 27 for another three years. In 1840 the sea, which had long been threatening began to take control. The decision was made to demolish the tower and in the following year it was pulled down.

With the tower gone the Coastguard continued to work from home at the St. Mary’s Station. One duty was to help man the Littlestone lifeboat when they were short of crew. One occasion when this happened was on 6th March 1891 when two coastguards and a Chief Boatman were summoned to make up the crew of the *Sandal Magna.* Two schooners, *The Echo* and the *High Barley* of Fleetwood were caught in an easterly gale with heavy snow showers. It was some of the worst weather ever recorded along the coast and the ships were in serious danger.

After three failed attempts to get the lifeboat afloat the crew finally managed to get her away. The vessel immediately overturned throwing a man into the boiling seas. No sooner had the lifeboat been righted and the crewman hauled aboard when she capsized again. Coastguard William Ryan was swept out of sight and lost.

When the boat overturned for a third time all hands were thrown into the sea. All but two managed to wash ashore, some within three-quarters of a mile of the lifeboat house, others as far along the coast as Romney Hoy, quite close to where the greens and beach huts are to be found at Littlestone.

Chief Boatman Thomas Sullivan and his colleague Samuel Hart were buried with full ceremonial honours in New Romney churchyard. This was also the last resting place of four victims from the schooners. The body of William Ryan was never recovered.

On a lighter note, it appears the coastguard station was provided with a donkey for carrying supplies and water. Apparently they were standard issue for remote stations. One animal was so bad tempered they wanted to get rid of him and in 1839 the following order was issued:-

‘The board having ordered the disposal of the donkey at No. 27 Tower, I have to direct, in the first place, that the one now at the station be exchanged for one at Lydd Station, as complaints of the latter have been made to me of his being of vicious habits. As soon as this takes place, the commanding Boatman of 27 Tower will sell the donkey of Dymchurch by Public Auction.’

In 1887 the first groynes or breakwaters were constructed to counteract erosion by the sea.

The precaution was to no avail as the sea first claimed the green, complete with flagstaff and then the cottages. This left only a few outbuildings and one cottage which had no connection with the coastguard station. These buildings were on the land that was later to be purchased and built on by Rugby School. The cottage which stood near the sea wall was demolished in the late 1940s.

**The Hamlet of Jesson**:

Apart from the coast road, the main thoroughfare through St. Mary’s Bay is Jefferstone Lane from which Jesson, the name of the original hamlet derives.

Jesson Farm, which was built around 1820 consisted of two houses, which are still standing and a number of outbuildings. They were close to the Light Railway and were eventually demolished to make way for housing development.

The development of Jesson did not begin in earnest until the 1914-1918 War when the War Department built a camp. This was to house the Royal Flying Corps No.1 (Auxiliary) School of Gunnery amalgamated with No.1 (Observers) School of Aerial Gunnery.

The camp was intended to accommodate 1000 men, 300 NCOs, 400 officers and 400 women. It was estimated that from each intake 400 trained pilots would receive their wings.

Initially they used the landing strip on Romney Warren and part of the Littlestone Golf Course but soon moved to a proper aerodrome in Jesson Lane. This occupied 75 acres of land bounded by Jesson Lane and the Jefferstone and Cobsden Sewers.

**Wartime**:

Jesson Aerodrome, was erected as transport garages to house lories during the 1st World War. The main building ran parallel with the A259 road at the top of Jesson Lane (now known as Jefferstone Lane). A local builder acquired the buildings after 1st World War and converted both ends into living accommodation.

The old Jesson Aerodrome, situated near the edge of the flying field used to operate pleasure flights between the 1st and 2nd World Wars.

Fields at the end of Dunstall Lane, and by the former Golden Sands Holiday Camp (more recently known as the Reunion Leisure Club) were worked by the land army and local ladies during 2nd World War. One of the popular crops to be cultivated was the turnip.

Long poles were erected infields across the Marsh to cause damage to any German gliders attempting to land.

On 3 September, 1939 at 11am, 2nd World War was declared. Almost 1000 children were at St. Mary’s Bay Holiday Camp at the time.

St. Mary’s Bay Holiday Camp was originally used in the 1st World War by the Royal Flying Core.

Movement outside St. Mays Bay was controlled by issue of personal identity cards which were inspected at road blocks patrolled by the army.

Bungalow known as Blue Sky’s, Seaway Gardens was commandeered by the army, the Somerset Light Infantry who turned it into a pillbox.

The army dug out tank traps in fields at the back of Seaway Gardens. These were designed to stop the movement of enemy armoured and logistic vehicles. The army was detailed to build a small bridge across the tank trap. It was manufactured from twenty foot steel scaffold poles with bracing struts. A walkway of about eighteen inches was fixed to the bridge. This provided a short cut by way of a small road that routed past the Levin Club, which was used as the NAFFI during wartime.

Defences along the sea wall were reinforced as iron scaffolding was erected and mines fixed to it. On the land side, fences were constructed with barbed wire coils fixed to the top. Only army and maintenance engineers were allowed over the sea wall.

2 large naval guns were located in front of the Sands Motel, pointed out to sea. They were disguised to appear like two adjoining houses having false roofs and wooden chimney pots.

St. Mary’s Bay was a victim of bombing raids. The Sands Motel sustained a direct hit, killing the boilerman. There was bomb damage to Children’s Holiday Camp and the house near the bridge owned by Capt. Allnat was demolished. Crater damage was evident along Jesson Lane and an unexploded bomb landed at the intersection of Jesson Lane and the A259. The army tried to excavate the bomb, but had to chutter the hole with scaffold boards when they reached running sand. It has never been retrieved to this day.

German bombers over the marsh was a common sight. The German aircraft would travel across the English Channel, just skimming the tops of the waves and at the last possible moment they would pull-up to clear the sea wall, and therefore be undetected by our radar system.

There was a Land Army Hostel near Brodnex Corner.

Travelling towards St. Mary in the Marsh was where the aerodrome runway terminated. It extended from the road in the direction of Hope-All-Saints and continued past the rear of the Romney Marsh Potato Company. If the Typhoons returned from a successful combat mission, the pilots would fly low over the field and perform a victory roll. However, on one occasion when this manoeuvre was being practiced, two Typhoons collided and both pilots were killed.

1944 saw the arrival of the United States Army who took up residence in bungalows previously occupied by the British Army near the Golden Sands Holiday Camp.

A bungalow called ‘Moonfleet’ in Seaway Road was occupied by the US Army and locals would get their hair cut by the Army barber free of charge.

The Sands Hotel was repaired and again it became a popular holiday venue for many years after the War.

All the buildings on the left hand side of Jesson Lane were part of the aerodrome accommodation and later became St. Mary’s Bay Holiday Camp.

On the seawall, just in front of the Sands Hotel, is a slab of concrete which was the site of one of the big naval guns and other guns were placed along the seawall.

The American Army sited a number of olive green mobile port-a-cabins by the Cobsden Café (now the Chippey) which were fully enclosed with the exception of a door at one end, and a revolving radar scanner fitter to the roof. This helped to improve the gunners shooting.

The 150 Wing Station at Newchurch were credited with the most kills shot down. More flying bombs than any other Unit in the Royal Airforce. The commanding officer was Wing Commander Roly Beamount.

The Tempest and the Typhoon flew from our local airfield in Jesson Lane, to attack enemy trains, tanks, blow-up bridges and generally help the Army to make headway across Europe.

At the time of the D Day Landings B17 Flying Fortress and B24 Liberators of the American 8th Airforce came in support. On flying home, from Europe several crashed in this area. A Liberator came down on the beach at Dungeness, another landed in the sea at Littlestone. It was very near the low tide mark and for many years after, you could see the remains sticking out of the sand. A Flying Fortress also crashed in Lydhurst Road Dymchurch.

An incident at the Rugby Club involved an officer who was instructing a group of soldiers in the use of hand grenades. Unfortunately, he accidentally set one off which in turn caused others in the box to explode killing several soldiers and injuring others. This accident was the worst incident to occur in St. Mary’s Bay causing more casualties than any other local event in the war.

May 1945 saw the end of nearly five years of food rationing, barricaded beaches, blackouts, bombs, roadblocks and no bananas. A Victory Party was arranged for the local children at the old Jesson Club.

Administration and living quarters were located on the western side of Jesson Lane close to where it meets the main coast road. The field on the Dymchurch side was used to build sheds for transport and engineering. The main transport garages were close to the main road and were used for servicing large lorries and planes. In later years the end of the building facing into Jesson Lane was converted to a shop and became Jesson Post Office.

Further down the lane on the eastern side was the carpenters’ shop. With most of the aircraft being build with wooden frames and carpenters’ skills were much in demand. Tears and holes in the aircrafts’ linen-covered fuselages and wings were repaired in the adjacent sailmakers’ shop. In the adjoining dope shop shellac was applied to stiffen up and waterproof the linen, giving it great strength. The planes were then ready to return to service.

One of the airfield workshops later became Marshland Bakery. In its heyday during the three decades after the Second World War the bakery was an important local employer. There were shops in Dymchurch, New Romney and Greatstone as well as in St. Mary’s Bay itself. As many as seven vans delivered door to door all over the Marsh and two bakers worked all night to meet the demand. Special large loaves were baked for the children’s holiday camp.

While the Flying Corps were at here Jesson Farm was used as offices and the large barn as a cinema and theatre complete with stage. The highlight of passing out was a party and concert held in the barn.

Near the flying field and where the Light Railway line now runs stand four long brick-built sheds. Two of them were used for photographic laboratories and dark rooms. All the film taken by the air crews of the mock dog fights, aerial gunnery and target practice were processed there. Edith Nesbit, the author owned two sheds that were later turned into bungalows. In fact she lived there for some two years and most of the time was in ill health. Her husband Captain Tucker named the bungalows Longboat and Jollyboat. Both still stand today and can be seen at the bottom of Nesbit Road.

The last building belonging to the Flying Corps’ camp was the power station on the right of Jesson Lane just past the Light Railway station. This brick building housed two large single cylinder paraffin engines with enormous flywheels. The engines were started by using blowlamps and would generate enough electricity to meet the demands of the camp as well as some of the properties nearby. After the 1st World War the engineer in charge was Mr. Charles Colmer who later started his own electrical business and used one room at the end of this bungalow as a shop. The shop today is Foord Electrical Centre.

The Guardroom was at the top of Jefferstone Lane in the corner on the left opposite the transport garages. All the camp accommodation was on this side of the road. The first building block was the officers’ mess and dining hall.

A third group of buildings were the airmen’s billets, cookhouse and a hospital. After the war Lt. Chapman was left in charge of the camp with a care and maintenance party. He lived in and later purchased the hospital. He built a plane out of parts that had been left by the Flying Corps and flew it regularly.

The last building near the railway line was the mortuary. With a lot of student pilots flying and practicing combat maneuvers and dog fights, casualties must have been quite high. When the Airforce left the aerodrome became a holiday camp and the mortuary was used as a meat store.

After the armistice in 1919, when the School for Aerial Gunnery was moved to Manston, the flying field was kept open to provide emergency landing facilities for the newly-established civil air services flying from Croydon to Paris and Brussels.

Although Lympne was the south coast customs airport it was particularly susceptible to fog. On occasions when fog enveloped Lympne planes were diverted to Littlestone (Jesson). The airfield was known as the Littlestone Emergency Landing Ground probably because the first airstrip was on part of the Littlestone golf links.

In the centre of the field was a large white circle made from blocks of whitewashed chalk. The name Littlestone was painted across the centre of the circle. Set at intervals around the circumference were tallish beacons, which at night constantly blinked and showed a red light. They were operated by gas and serviced by the round crews from Lympne. When planes landed taxis would arrive to collect the passengers and their luggage and take them on to their destinations or another airfield.

When in 1925 the Romney Hythe and Dymchurch railway was laid it cut across the top of the aerodrome leaving a rectangular flying field.

During the late twenties and the thirties the field was the venue of some spectacular air displays. One famous airman was Sir Alan Cobham with his flying circus. His team performed wing walking, parachuting and dare devil low flying. On some weekends in the summer it was possible for the public to take pleasure flights.

As air travel became more reliable with larger aircraft being used demand for the emergency landing facilities and Littlestone diminished. Just before the Second World War the landing lights were switched off for the last time and removed. The land reverted back to farmland and has remained so to this day.

**The Development of the Holiday Camp**.

A few years before the First World War the London Boys’ Brigade held summer camps under canvas on William Body’s land behind Cobsden, just off Dunstall Lane. When the Royal Flying Corps’ Gunnery School was up for sale in 1920 the Boy’s Brigade purchased all the accommodation on the New Romney side of Jesson Lane excluding the homes of Mr. Colmer and Lt. Chapman.

After a year or two, finding it difficult to maintain they sold it to Allnett’s, a northern building and development company. Captain Allnett started what became the Dymchurch Holiday Camp using most of the Airforce buildings.

At about this time the Duke of York, later King George VI, had accepted the presidency of the Industrial Welfare Society. He conceived the experiment, which became famous as the Duke of York’s Camp. This brought boys of different social status together annually to spend a holiday together by the sea. One hundred public schools and one hundred industrial concerns were each asked to send two boys to the camp, which was held at Jesson. Later the Duke of York’s Camp was held at Southwold in Suffolk.

The Camp flourished in the late twenties and thirties. During this period three dining halls and kitchens were in use, and all the dormitories would be fully occupied by the children and their accompanying teachers.

In the mid 30s plans were drawn up for the construction of All Saints Church. Thus the hamlet of Jesson became the Village of St. Mary’s Bay and in 1936 the name of the camp was changed.

In those days the camp was the biggest employer in the area during the summer and also kept a good gang of workmen to carry out maintenance during the closed season.

In World War Two, a number of the buildings were bombed, mainly those running alongside the A259. The Berkshire and Lancashire Kitchens never opened up after the war, all the catering being done in the Yorkshire Block in the centre of the camp.

The dining hall was known as York Hall and a large, adjoining kitchen was modernized to cope with all the cooking needs. Some of the Lancashire Block was never used again as accommodation although some new dormitories were built after the old one was demolished.

In the post-war years of the forties, fifties and early sixties the camp thrived with fleets of coaches packed with children and their teachers arriving on changeover day.

Part of the camp was taken over by Middlesex Schools who came every year bring children from all over the county. The north was also well represented with many boys and girls from Manchester and Liverpool.

During the season, the Boys’ Brigade would arrive from London at New Romney Railway Station and march to the Camp headed by their band.

When the children’s side of the holiday camp was scaled down, the name was changed again and it became known as the St. Mary’s Bay School Journey Centre. Most of the buildings down from the Light Railway were taken over by Romney Marsh Poultry who were still part of the same company that owned the Camp.

Turkey rearing became more intense and a hatchery was built in one of the former dormitories. After incubation and hatching, the chicks were put in pens and sheds near the railway line. When ready for the market the turkeys were killed and plucked and prepared for the table in one of the old dining halls. The period just before Christmas was always a busy time and many local people, especially women helped with the plucking.

In the 1970s the bulldozers moved in and demolition of the camp began. Starting near the Light Railway line the machines worked their way up to the main road. By the middle of the decade the first roads had been laid and William Bray started to build the bungalows along what is now Laurel Avenue. This was the start of the Tree Estate, as we know it today.

The Dymchurch Holiday Camp canteen was at the top of Jesson Lane and was built originally as the Guard Room for the Royal Flying Corps. It became the camp canteen where children could buy sweets and was later renamed the camp Tuck Shop.

St. Mary’s Bay also had plenty of family holidaymakers who rented bungalows or stayed at other places such as the Sands Hotel, Golden Sands Holiday Camp and Apps’ Caravan Site. Along the seawall there were several ice cream kiosks and you could hire deck chairs.

On the sands when the tide was out there were pony rides for children and every week a Punch and Judy show near the Sands Hotel. This was the golden era of the traditional British seaside holiday. With the advent of cheap air travel and guarantee of Spanish sunshine, demand for this type of holiday waned and the local traders had to rely on day-trippers when the weather was fine.

During Bank Holidays the Rugby Club would be down.

**The Rugby Club’s Camp**

In 1899 two old Rugbeians bought some land near the seashore with the outbuildings which had been part of the old Coastguard Station. The new buildings they erected became a permanent camp where boys, and later girls from Notting Gate and Notting Hill areas of London could come down for a holiday by the sea. In 1903 William Temple also an old Rugbeian and later Archbishop of Canterbury, stayed there. The caretaker’s house was built in 1922 in memory of the 117 gallant members of the Notting Hill Rugby Clubs who were killed in the 1914-18 war. The property belongs to Rugby School, founded in 1567 by Lawrence Sheriff and immortalized in *Tom Brown’s Schooldays.* Famous headmasters have included Matthew Arnold, and two who later became Archbishops of Canterbury, Drs. Tate and Temple. The school motto is ‘By praying and by working’.

Most boys who lived in Jesson would play football and cricket in school holidays. The pitch was any field that had not been ploughed up by the farmer. They moved from field to field and in the end stayed in one at the bottom of Jesson Lane, which was eventually taken over by the local council and turned into a sports ground. Jesson Cricket Club was formed, a square prepared for the wicket and a pavilion built. The club’s headquarters was at the Levin Club. A football club followed soon after.

In the mid 1930s Captain J.C. Allnett was able to persuade the War Office to allow him to start a territorial unit as St. Mary’s Bay holiday camp. In 1936 the Romney Marsh detachment of the Dover Cinque Ports Searchlight Company, Royal Engineers was born, and known as Allnett’s Terriers. To warrant a drill hall the unit needed to muster one hundred recruits, officers and NCOs being provided. The number was achieved in 1938 and a hall was duly provided. During the war dances were held there, especially during 1944 when the area was invaded by the Yanks. They livened up the place and the lorries ferried in girls from all over the Marsh.

**Lost Fishing Fleets of Dymchurch and Littlestone.**

In the 1800s each little village and hamlet around the coast had its own fishing fleet and the Dymchurch boats worked from the beach at the end o the sea wall near High Knock. In those days the sea wall was constructed with faggots of hawthorn and blackthorn, mixed with clay. Although this method of construction provided an effective defence against the sea and continued to be used well into the nineteenth century, modern methods were eventually adopted.

Around the turn of the century, with rumours of the proposed construction of a concrete wall, the fishermen moved their boats to the stretch of beach near the site of the old St. Mary’s Coastguard near the Rugby Camp.

After many years’ work the new wall, built under the auspices of the Romney Marsh Level was completed in 1927. The wall was later extended to Littlestone. Part of the labour force was drawn from the depressed South Wales mining areas. In just three years the sea wall was in ruins having been breached in several places. A replacement was built.

The Environment Agency has recently reconstructed and strengthened the seawall at Dymchurch and improved defences at St. Mary’s Bay, at a cost of over £25M.