



Hidden Gems of Coastal Kent

Awaken your sense of discovery

Whispers, hidden alleyways, lights at sea... Echoes of smuggling tease your imagination all along the Kent coast. Come and follow a treasure trail to uncover the secrets of village and town. Then go 'behind the scenes' of your favourite books and writers – you might be surprised just where they drew their inspiration. And do look beyond cathedral, castle and cliffs! There's far more to coastal Kent than its most famous attractions. Wander off the beaten track and be fascinated.

Smugglers, shipwrecks, spies

Half close your eyes and you can picture darting figures, bringing ashore their booty: Brandy for the Parson, 'Baccy for the Clerk; Laces for a lady, letters for a spy... Enjoy the thrill of the chase and get hot on their heels!

Kent's coast, so near to the Continent, was prime territory for 'free trading', no place more so than remote **Romney Marsh**. To this day you feel far away from the bustle of ordinary life here, the squat Romney Marsh sheep still grazing as they have for centuries. When massive taxes on exports of wool were imposed in the 13th century, locals made fat profits from smuggling fleeces to weavers on the Continent.



Explore their haunts, including the medieval marsh churches: look in **Snargate church** for the wall painting of a ship dating from 1500 – smugglers' code for a safe place to hide illicit goods. And soak up the atmosphere of the old **Woolpack** inn near **Brookland**, once a smugglers' base. The contrabandists were nicknamed 'owlers' because they communicated by hooting at dead of night and they came from all sections of society. Flick through Russell Thorndyke's *Dr Syn* novel (1915) and you'll find even the vicar of **Dymchurch** led a double life as a smuggler.

Then blow away the cobwebs scrunching across the wild, shingle beach of **Dungeness**. In one week in 1813 free traders landed 12,000 gallons of brandy here, out of sight of prying eyes. After filling your lungs with fresh air, skirt up the coast to **Folkestone**, passing the territory of the notorious 19th-century Aldington Gang. Smugglers in Folkestone often brought ashore goods in **East Wear Bay**. Preventive forces knew most people were in cahoots with the trade and expected no help in catching them.

However, there are great 'finds' to be admired at **Dover Museum**. The Bronze Age Boat, built from oak and yew some 3,550 years ago, is the world's oldest known seagoing vessel and gives a fascinating insight into early cross-Channel trade. Artefacts and models reveal life at the time and you can even practise your Bronze Age boat-building skills by completing a 'yew' stitch. Also find out about Britain's earliest known shipwreck, which occurred in **Langdon Bay** around 1100 BC, littering the seabed with over 350 bronze tools, weapons and scrap metal.

We continue our tour north to Victorian **South Foreland Lighthouse** on the White Cliffs of Dover, built to help shipping navigate the treacherous **Goodwin Sands**. Climb the tower for superb views. The 'Shippe Swallow' (Goodwin Sands), around six miles off shore and extending for ten miles, has proved the graveyard for hundreds of boats and men over the centuries. Yet between the Sands and the shore, the stretch of water known as **the Downs** provided sheltered anchorage – and a place for enemies to skirmish.



So, on now to **Deal** whose picturesque narrow streets and alleys are the very image of an old smuggling town. Visit **Deal Maritime and Local History Museum** to uncover some salty tales. Local boatmen regarded smuggling as their 'second fiddle' and Deal boat-builders were renowned for making boats with false keels and hollow masts to stash contraband goods. Even Lord Nelson used some Deal boatmen as pilots, though he disapproved of free trade activities.

Wander along to the **Timeball Tower Museum** on Deal's historic seafront and consider smuggling from the point of view of those who tried to stop it. Deal was the HQ for the 19th-century Coastal Blockade led by Captain William McCulloch, known locally as 'Flogging Joey'. A special semaphore system was established to send secret messages about suspicious movements. How successful was their spying? Come and find out!

Coast further to **Ramsgate**, where **Ramsgate Maritime Museum** highlights tragedies and heroism at Goodwin Sands. See the poignant relics recovered from vessels lost in 1703 during one of the worst storms in recorded history. And follow the daring exploits of the Ramsgate lifeboats, including the famous rescue of men from the ship *Indian Chief* in 1881.



Time to relax? Kick off your shoes and walk the sandy beaches of Thanet. **Joss Bay** recalls Joss Snelling, head of the Callis Court Gang. Bracing sea air and his sense of adventure kept Snelling going into a ripe old age – he was fined £100 for smuggling when he was 89! In his dotage he was even presented to a young Queen Victoria as 'the famous Broadstairs smuggler'.

Another popular sandy playground, **Botany Bay**, was so named because smugglers who were caught were deported to Botany Bay in Australia. In the 18th century the Battle of Botany Bay (Kent) between smugglers and revenue saw a number of fatalities, including members of Joss's gang. If you hear shouts today, it'll just be happy children with their buckets and spades.

Along the North Shore **Reculver** and **Herne Bay** were favourite landing-places of The North Kent Gang. Pause for a seafood lunch fresh from the bustling harbour in **Whitstable** before delving into the quirky town's maritime past at **Whitstable Museum and Gallery**. During the Napoleonic Wars local folk took a break from the usual free trade in brandy, tobacco, lace and gin to spirit away French POWs. A trail booklet from the museum shows you homes throughout the town connected with divers, salvage operators and smugglers.



We head towards the end of our adventure at neighbouring **Seasalter**, catching the breeze on the shingle. The so-called Seasalter Company flourished smuggling goods for over a century from 1740 – they used a signaling system involving brooms poking from the top of chimneys to show the coast was clear. Then it was off with their goods through **Blean Woods**, which is a lovely place to picnic and reflect after our tour.

For more information see www.visitkent.co.uk

