

THE THANET SEAPORTS, 1650-1750

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NEITHER Margate, Broadstairs nor Ramsgate was recognized as a fully-fledged port by the Customs Commissioners during the period covered by this article. Waiters and Searchers of the Customs Service were stationed at all three ports to supervise the loading and discharging of goods; but there were no legal quays for the transaction of foreign trade, and no cargo could be handled in Thanet without documents obtained from the Customs Collector at Sandwich.¹ In 1731 the inhabitants of Margate complained of the inconveniences arising from this position, but without success.² Certainly their complaint had some foundation, for Margate had a thriving trade, and in the past several smaller Kentish ports, such as Hythe and Folkestone, had enjoyed greater privileges. For the historian the most serious consequence of this dependent status is the almost complete absence of commercial statistics for the Thanet ports. Their trade and shipping were recorded with those of the port of Sandwich, and it is a difficult and often an impossible task to distinguish between the different ports. Thus T. S. Willan, in his *English Coasting Trade, 1600-1750*, treats the Sandwich Port Books as if they related only to the port of Sandwich, and makes no mention of Thanet, although he discusses quite insignificant ports like Folkestone, Hythe and Romney.

THE HARBOURS AND SHIPS OF THANET

The harbours of Margate, Broadstairs and Ramsgate were all of the same type: a single curved pier excluding winds and waves from the most dangerous direction, the north-east.

The wooden pier at Margate, as shown on a crude plan of 1646,³ resembled the present structure in shape and position, following a semi-circular course from south-east to north-west. A breakwater called the New Work ran northwards from the pier head. The space within the harbour was dry at low water, and at all times it had to be entered with care, for a long ledge of rock ran out from the West Cliff across the harbour mouth. The history of Margate harbour was more eventful than that of the other Thanet ports. Situated on a

¹ The stations of Customs Officers from 1675 onwards are to be found in P.R.O. Customs Registers, Series I, and the legal quays and port limits of Kent in P.R.O. Exchequer Special Commissions 6266. The latter document places Margate in the port of Faversham, but all the other evidence is against this.

² P.R.O. Treasury Board Papers 278/4.

³ British Museum Harleian MS. 7598.

coast particularly exposed to erosion, its chief problem was the danger of destruction by storm waves. The pier, the road connecting it to the town, the sea-wall and the houses it was intended to protect all suffered in this way in the period 1650-90, and the estimated cost of repair had reached £2,500 by 1690.¹ Like many other harbours protected by piers, Margate lacked sufficient financial resources of its own to maintain its harbour facilities in good repair. In 1662 not even the normal harbour dues were forthcoming, for masters were refusing to pay them, and pier-wardens were not being appointed to collect them.² This abuse seems to have been remedied, and pier-wardens were regularly appointed after 1679,³ but in 1690 they were £200 in debt, and a new schedule of harbour dues was requested. This request seems to have been refused, for a list of dues chargeable in 1694 states that these had been the rates for "time out of mind."⁴ Finally the harbour was repaired, perhaps only partially, with money granted by the Exchequer. No further complaint was made until 1723, when Lewis wrote: "By the sea's falling so heavy on the northern part of the island the harbour of Margate has gone very much to decay, and the masters of ships which used to live there are almost all removed to London."⁵ By this time the payment of harbour dues was again in dispute, but in the following year the whole matter was regularized by Act of Parliament (11 Geo. I c3), and no further complaints were made; by the end of the period the harbour was regularly used by vessels of a hundred tons burden.

At Ramsgate a curved pier projecting from under the East Cliff to the south and west had existed at least since the sixteenth century. In 1715 the pier was lengthened, and most surviving descriptions seem to refer to its subsequent condition. Unlike Dover, Ramsgate Harbour seems to have suffered little from the reduction of its depth by drifting sand and shingle. Between 1715 and 1750 a bar was cast up, but it was nowhere more than 2½ ft. thick. The chief difficulty was the maintenance of the pier itself and its protection from erosion, a difficult matter in a port with very little trade and therefore very little revenue. It was on this account that Ramsgate masters were exempted from the Dover Harbour dues, but no other financial aid was granted, although

¹ The history of this period may be extracted from Calendars of State Papers, Domestic, 1650, p. 173; 1682, p. 127; 1690-1, p. 434; and P.R.O. Privy Council Registers 2/73, p. 417.

² E. Hasted, *The History and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent*, 1779, Vol. 10, p. 317.

³ Margate Public Library, MS. List of Pier Wardens.

⁴ *Orders, Decrees and Rates Time out of Mind Used by the Inhabitants of Margate and St. Johns . . . For and Towards the Perpetual Maintenance of the Pier and Harbour of Margate*, 1694.

⁵ J. Lewis, *The History and Antiquities of the Isle of Thanet*, 1723, p. 22. See also House of Commons Journals, Vol. 20, pp. 352, 361.

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the town submitted a petition to the Commons in 1736, asking for a Bill to finance the construction of a second pier and the preservation of the first, which had become beyond their means.¹

Historians tend to belittle the old harbour of Ramsgate in comparing it with the modern structure begun in 1749.² It was dry at low water, and too small to be a valuable refuge when a serious storm swept the Downs, but it could accommodate forty vessels of between 20 and 300 tons, and a ship of 700 tons had once repaired there.³

Little is known of Broadstairs Harbour. Its appearance on contemporary small-scale maps suggests that the shape and position of the pier were as at present.

The most remarkable feature of the Thanet ports during this period was not the trade passing through them, but the number of ships belonging to them. As Willan has shown (op. cit., Appendix 6), a ship "belonged" to the place of residence of its owners. The following table is from a list which seems to have been previously unknown.⁴

SHIPS BELONGING TO THE PORTS OF KENT, 1701

	<i>Ships</i>	<i>Tonnage</i>	<i>Men</i>		<i>Ships</i>	<i>Tonnage</i>	<i>Men</i>
Ramsgate	45	4,100	388	Milton ..	34	807	53
Margate ..	37	2,909	138	Broadstairs	17	731	90
Sandwich	21	1,146	104	Whitstable	33	701	46
Rochester	22	1,054	70	Dover ..	7	415	44
Faversham	32	888	47	Deal ..	1	50	5

In this list, Ramsgate ranks fifteenth among all the ports of England. Thanet ships played an especially prominent part in the coal trade and in the trade in timber and naval stores. J. Brand's *History of Newcastle* (1789, Vol. II, p. 677) has a table showing vessels employed in the Newcastle coal trade in 1702-4. The figures for Kent are as follows :

	<i>Ships</i>	<i>Chaldrons of Coal</i>
Ramsgate ..	42	2,147
Margate ..	24	1,001
Rochester ..	21	808
Sandwich ..	17	554
Broadstairs ..	12	241
Dover ..	8	232
Faversham ..	2	59

¹ House of Commons Journals, Vol. 22, p. 591.

² Lewis, op. cit., 1736 edition, has a plan of Ramsgate. The old and new harbours are shown on one plan in *Gentleman's Magazine*, 1752, p. 18.

³ For the history of Ramsgate Harbour, see Lewis, op. cit., J. Smeaton, *An Historical Report on Ramsgate Harbour*, 1791, and *A Brief History of Dover and Ramsgate Harbours, by a Naval Officer*, 1837.

⁴ P.R.O. Admiralty, Correspondence from Customs Commissioners, 29th January, 1702.

The tables of ships passing through the Sound to and from the Baltic are another neglected source of information. Between 1680 and 1730 an annual average of more than twenty Ramsgate ships made this voyage. In the last decade of the seventeenth century the average was nearly 50, and in 1700 Ramsgate sent more ships through the Sound than any English port except London. The average for Margate was more than ten between 1671 and 1710. None of the other Kent ports achieved an average of more than three ships per year. After 1730 this traffic greatly diminished.¹ These ships are scarcely ever mentioned in the Sandwich Port Books. Presumably they left Thanet in ballast and returned laden with hemp and timber to the Dockyards of Chatham, Woolwich and Deptford. From the early 1680's the Rochester Port Books list many Ramsgate ships, from the Baltic, Norway and New England.

The importance of the Thanet ports as shipping centres is probably to be explained by their position at the lower end of the Thames Estuary, the most convenient place for ships to gather while awaiting dispatch on what were mainly seasonal trades. Ramsgate derived most benefit from this position because of the relatively superior quality of its harbour facilities.

THE MARITIME TRADE OF THANET

The character and volume of the maritime trade of English seaports in the period 1650-1750 is best studied in the Exchequer (K.R.) Port Books. There are a few other statistical sources, but none of these gives separate totals for the smaller ports. The trade of Thanet was recorded in the books of the Port of Sandwich,² usually without being distinguished from that of Sandwich. Only in the case of the inward coastwise trade, and then only in eight years between 1676 and 1686, do the books specify the port concerned. The outward coastwise trade of the various ports can also be distinguished, if it is assumed that Margate ships traded from Margate, Sandwich ships from Sandwich, and so on. In most cases such an assumption would be quite false, but in Kent there are certain special reasons for accepting it. In March, 1702, it was ordered that all Kent ports west of the North Foreland should henceforth be permitted to send agricultural produce coastwise to London without using the cocquet, the normal means of authorizing

¹ N. E. Bang, *Tabeller over Skibsfart og Varetransport gennem Oresund, 1497-1660*, 3 vols., 1906-33; N. E. Bang and K. Korst, *Tabeller over Skibsfart og Varetransport gennem Oresund, 1661-1783*, 1930.

² A document attached to a Sandwich book for 1730 (P.R.O. Exchequer K.R. Port Books 706/6) explicitly orders that the books shall contain "a true entry of all . . . goods . . . as well coming into the Port of Sandwich and all creeks and places thereunto belonging as going out of the same."

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coastwise trade. At exactly the same time, all records of such traffic cease in the Port Books of Rochester, Milton and Faversham. Up to this time Margate ships are frequently mentioned in the Sandwich books. In 1702 these mentions abruptly cease. Unless we postulate some catastrophic change in the disposition of trade or shipping, it must be assumed that Margate ships had been trading from within the North Foreland. This matter has been explained at some length because it affects the interpretation of the Port Books of all North Kent and much of Essex. Willan (op. cit., pp. 139-40) infers that the trade of this region had declined in the eighteenth century, whereas it had merely ceased to be recorded.

There are thus records of the inward coasting trade of Thanet from 1676 to 1686, and of the outward coasting trade from 1650 to 1701. The rest of the trade, including all foreign trade, is either not recorded at all or indistinguishable from the trade of Sandwich.

The distribution of the coastwise trade is shown in the following table.

NUMBER OF COASTWISE CARGOES PER YEAR, 1676-86

	<i>Outwards</i>	<i>Inwards</i>	<i>Total</i>
Margate	93	21	114
Broadstairs ..	2	6	8
Ramsgate	2	11	13
Sandwich	108	81	189

The outward coastwise trade of Thanet consisted almost entirely of corn, almost all of which was exported from Margate. Corn was shipped in small cargoes of two or three hundred quarters each. Such cargoes could be handled by Margate Harbour as easily as by Ramsgate, and Margate had the advantage of closer proximity to London, the market for almost all the corn shipped from the island. Most travellers and topographers, from Camden to Defoe, were impressed by the fertility and productivity of the Isle of Thanet, and the Port Books prove that this impression was correct. In the period for which records are available Thanet exported 7,000 quarters of malt, 3,500 quarters of wheat and 500 quarters of barley per year to other English ports. Among the ports of Kent, it ranked second in exports of malt and barley, and third in exports of wheat. Other coastwise exports were of very small importance. Shipments of wool, herrings, and kelp were frequently recorded, but only in very small quantities. There are no detailed records of the coastwise trade in the first half of the eighteenth century, but the available evidence suggests that its volume was maintained, despite Lewis's implication to the contrary. In 1719

Harris stated that 20,000 quarters of barley were shipped every year to London,¹ and many writers mention a weekly hoy service from Margate to London.² In 1724 the Margate harbour dues were reported to yield from £140 to £150 annually, a sum which compared favourably with those collected at Dover and Sandwich.³ There is also a complete record of the coastwise trade of Thanet and Sandwich in the last nine months of 1741 : during this period 109 Margate ships, one Ramsgate ship and one Broadstairs ship left the coast within the limits of the Port of Sandwich.

During the period for which records are available, Newcastle coal was the cargo of seven out of every eight ships entering the ports of Thanet. The average annual imports in 1676-86 were : Sandwich, 1,710 chaldrons ; Margate, 579 chaldrons ; Ramsgate, 427 chaldrons ; Broadstairs, 190 chaldrons. These amounts seem small, but by contemporary standards they were not inconsiderable for ports of this size. No port in Sussex imported as much coal as Margate during this period. Certainly Thanet was more than usually dependent on imported coal, owing to the timber shortage in the island. In 1672, when enemy privateers confined the Thanet ships to harbour, the inhabitants protested : " If speedy care not be taken our people will starve for want of fuel in the winter."⁴ Such reports suggest the relative costs of land and sea transport ; plentiful supplies of wood were available a few miles to the west of Thanet.

There is no means of distinguishing the foreign trade of Thanet from that of Sandwich. The Sandwich Port Books of this period record a foreign export trade in corn and herrings, and an import trade in wine, Norwegian timber, and general cargoes from Rotterdam and Ostend. According to the law, only the corn, fish and timber trades could be carried on at ports without legal quays, but at least before 1732 some wine, linen and fruit were allowed to be directly imported to Margate, where the yearly Customs receipts amounted to £2,000.⁵ But the chief foreign trade of the Thanet ports was almost certainly the export of fish. Throughout the period 1650-1750 there are many references to the Thanet fishing fleets, but no records of fishing boats belonging to Sandwich. There is only one statistical record distinguishing the fishing vessels of the different ports : the lists of Cinque Port vessels visiting the Yarmouth Free Fair.⁶ Between 1648 and 1660 the usual

¹ J. Harris, *The History of Kent*, 1719, p. 314.

² Lewis, *op. cit.*, 1736, p. 134 ; *A Brief Director for All Those that Would Send Their Letters to any Parts of England, Scotland or Ireland*, 1710.

³ House of Commons Journals, Vol. 20, p. 361.

⁴ Calendar of State Papers, Domestic, 1672, p. 387.

⁵ P.R.O. Treasury Board Papers 278/4.

⁶ Town Hall, New Romney, Cinque Port Records, 8.

numbers were nine from St. Peters, one from St. Johns, and none from Sandwich. It seems safe to assume that all the exports of fish recorded in the Port Books of Sandwich came from the Thanet ports. Foreign exports of herrings appear only in 1695, and reached a maximum in the period 1712-33, when the average annual export was nearly 1,500 barrels. After this the trade rapidly declined, but exports of Icelandic codfish begin to appear in the 1740's. Over the whole period, Thanet exported more fish than any other port in Kent or Sussex except Dover. About half the exports went to the Mediterranean.

In the early eighteenth century the Port of Sandwich exported about 4,000 quarters of corn per year to foreign ports; some of this doubtless came from Thanet, but it is impossible to say how much. The same is true of the large import of Norwegian deals and fir timber, and the cargoes of linen, pantiles, bricks, earthenware and bullrushes imported from Rotterdam.

There is some evidence of the use of the Thanet ports by travellers to the continent. In 1678 troops and horses were carried from Margate to Ostend and Antwerp,¹ and in 1691 two vessels were appointed to ply between Margate and Ostend carrying intelligence.² Among the celebrities who travelled through Margate were William III, George I, George II, Queen Caroline, and the Duke of Marlborough.³ A regular passenger service would have been a natural development, for Margate lay closer to Ostend than did Dover, but in fact there was no regular peace-time traffic. Although passengers were not listed in the Port Books, it would be possible to trace passenger traffic, if it existed, from references to passengers' belongings, especially their horses.

THE HARBOUR OF REFUGE AT RAMSGATE

The period discussed in this article was brought to an end by the construction of Ramsgate New Harbour. The history of this structure has often been told, but a few new facts are included in the following brief account.

Ramsgate, rather than Margate, was chosen as the site of the new harbour because of its proximity to the Downs, an important but not altogether safe anchorage. The earliest suggestion for a harbour to relieve ships caught in the Downs by a storm seems to have come from the Corporation of Sandwich, three years after the great storm of 1703. A detailed scheme for a harbour at Sandwich appeared in 1736, and in the following year the Corporation spent more than £345 "on endeavouring to get a new haven." Unfortunately this money was wasted,

¹ Calendar of State Papers, Domestic, 1678, pp. 261, 375.

² *Ibid.*, 1690-1, p. 313.

³ *A Description of the Isle of Thanet*, 1763, p. 10.

for although the plan was approved by a Commons committee in 1745, the ultimate decision in 1749 was in favour of Ramsgate.¹

In an undated petition, the City of London, the East India Company and nearly 800 merchants of ports ranging from Scarborough to Falmouth recommended Ramsgate as the more suitable site.² Ramsgate had several advantages over Sandwich. It lay on a cleaner shore, for beach material did not normally drift north of the Stour; the chalk rock of Thanet provided a firm foundation for the piers, and an easily available building material, both of which were lacking at Sandwich; ships could leave Ramsgate Harbour in an east wind, which was not possible at the rival site; the tidal currents ran directly into the harbour mouth, instead of across it, thereby cleansing the harbour of silt and facilitating the entry and departure of ships; there would be no expense of digging, and experiments had proved that the chalk would not damage a round-bottomed ship settling upon it.³ These were the circumstances which determined that of all the places within the old limits of the port of Sandwich, only Ramsgate should still deserve the name of port.

MAPS OF THE THANET PORTS

The oldest harbour plan of Thanet appears to be a very crude sketch of Margate made in 1646 as part of a scheme for building a sea-wall (British Museum: Harleian MS. 7598). The 1736 edition of J. Lewis's *History and Antiquities of the Isle of Thanet* contains a view of Margate Harbour and a detailed plan of the town of Ramsgate, showing the pier and harbour. The projected harbour at Sandwich is shown on Labelye's map of the Downs, printed in the 1738 edition of Grenville Collins' *Great Britain's Coasting Pilot*. The position of the old harbour of Ramsgate in relation to the modern works is well shown on a small plan published in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol. 22 (1752), p. 18.

¹ Smeaton, op. cit., p. 1; Sandwich Guildhall, Water Treasurers' Accounts, 1706, 1736.

² House of Commons Journals, Vol. 24, pp. 772, 861; Vol. 25, pp. 721, 745. The petition is in British Museum, Additional MS. 33061, ff. 157-180.

³ The arguments in the controversy between Ramsgate and Sandwich are given in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 1745, p. 95; 1749, p. 103; *The London Magazine*, 1749, p. 68; D. Defoe, *A Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, 1748, Vol. 1, pp. 174-184.