



Sheerness Present and Past

THE TOWN OF SHEERNESS TODAY

The Railway Station at Sheerness marks the end of the line called Swale Rail. Passengers emerge from the station facing a War Memorial to the local WW1 dead, a park and ultimately the sea wall. The High Street bears off to the left. There are numerous small shops and eating establishments and the town boasts a market twice a week. Close to the market area is a terrace of cottages, one containing a museum. It is called Rose Cottage and used to house Dockyard Workers and their families. Like many high streets, the area is struggling to survive and there are plans to upgrade it in order to attract more foot-fall.

The town its self owes its existence to the Naval Dockyard, the historical presence of the military in the area and tourism brought about by the coming of the railway.

In the centre of the High Street is a Victorian clock tower. The High Street forms the demarcation line between two communities. Marine Town is the part nearest the port and dockyard area. Mile Town is on the opposite side and gets its name from the fact that it lies approximately a mile away from the Dockyard. Neither of these communities are particularly old, much of Mile Town comprising of rows of tightly packed Victorian terraced properties. Never-the-less, the streets and alleys leading towards the now closed Dockyard, and the narrow passage ways, have their own charm, if one can look past the obvious deprivation of the area.

Turning left from the railway station and left again, lying hard up against the Dockyard wall, is the very much older Blue Town. Constructed originally chiefly of wood, obtained from dockyard scraps, much of the town was demolished as being unfit for habitation. There are however, charming examples of buildings and street furniture, enough to give one a sense of the community which once called this their home. With the Navy based on the doorstep, public houses abounded. Still standing is the small theatre, now a Heritage Centre and on the corner is the fine old Court House, aimed at keeping public order in an area not known for quiet behaviour. A very run-down hotel, now houses local people and is in need of much repair. Yet it still speaks of grand passengers, alighting from the train and taking the steam boat; Ladies in long dresses with parasols, and whiskered gentlemen, with pocket watches and top hats, who perhaps frequented the area.

WHAT TO DO IN SHEERNESS

THE BEACH AND PROMENADE.

An obvious attraction to visitors to the island is the coastal promenade and beach area. The beach is a safe bathing beach due to its excellent water quality and Life Guards are on duty during the summer months.

BEACHFIELDS PARK AND AMUSEMENTS

There is a family friendly park with attractions for the children and places to picnic. There is an Amusement Park with an indoor bowling alley. Around the park are several murals painted by local artists. Of particular interest is the one about Beowulf relating to the story, which Wilkinson, in his book, suggests that the saga may have been written down originally on the Isle of Sheppey. His argument being that some of the features mentioned in the text relate very closely to the land features that would have been visible at the time of writing.

The second mural of the mermaid refers to the SS Montgomery and the danger she may pose to the community.

THEATRES AND HERITAGE CENTRES

There are two small theatres in the area. The Sheppey Little Theatre in Mile Town and the Criterion Theatre which is part of the Blue Town Heritage Centre. The second heritage centre is in Rose Street Sheerness and is called Rose Cottage.

SPORTS CENTRE AND SWIMMING POOL

Backing on to the sea wall is the Sports Centre and Swimming Pool. One of the two local radio stations is also located here, within the small parkland area.

THE SHEERNESS CYCLE WAY AND BARTONS POINT COUNTRY PARK (see visit Kent web site for details of the route)

There is a family friendly cycle route and footpath around the town of Sheerness. This chiefly uses the Promenade and the Queenborough Lines which run along the canal side.

There is a boating lake at Barton's Point. During weekends and holidays, miniature trains run around the park. There is also a pond for safely sailing small boats and an imaginative play area for the children. A flying ground for radio-controlled planes exists as well as an underused golfing area. The park is great for exercising dogs as well as people, after which, there is a cafe to rest and take refreshments by the lake.

THE FOUNDING OF THE DOCKYARD AND FORTRESS

In the scheme of things, Sheerness is a new-town. When Charles the second returned to the throne of England, he did so to find that one of the castles, built to defend the Medway and Thames, had been dismantled and the materials sold off. At a time when England and Holland were at war with one another, the defences of London and of Chatham Dockyard were very much on his mind.

With Queenborough no longer being best placed to fulfil this task, the decision was made to build a new castle/fort on the reclaimed land at what was then called West Minster (now called Sheerness). "*The King accompanied by Sir Bernard de Gomme, his chief engineer, Sir William Brockman, and the garrulous Samuel Pepys, the secretary of the Board of the Admiralty, visited the site.*" (18th August 1665) According to Samuel Pepys, the group walked the area and laid out the ground, initially for both the dockyard and the fort. Further visits were made by the King and the Duke of York, to the construction site. However, their efforts were too slow in coming to fruition, because in June 1667, the worst happened. The Dutch invaded and took the fort at Sheerness and the now unprotected town of Queenborough. Neither the fort at Sheerness, nor the Fort at Upnor, were in a position to defend the area, and much devastation was wrought, valuable materials taken, and ships wrecked. The acute embarrassment of the nation at the time was to be remembered by future governments, when forced to defend the Thames and Medway area. Subsequent improvements to the defences of the island and the expansion of the dockyard were overseen by King Charles.

NB; - Both the fortifications and the dockyard are now gone or not available for public viewing. The port has been taken over by the Peel Port Authority. There is some talk about opening up the remains of the old dockyard to visitors in the future. The Dockyard Church is being refurbished and the remaining Admiralty Terrace still stands as a proud reminder of the area's historic past. The original model for the dockyard exists and it is hoped to bring it back to Sheerness in the future.

THE FOUNDING OF BLUE TOWN

The Dockyard needed workers and at first these were housed in Hulks (abandoned boats) which were moored along-side the dockyard. The town of Blue Town grew up mainly during the Napoleonic Wars and gained its distinctive name from the practice of the earliest inhabitants to preserve their wooden houses using blue paint “liberated” from their employers in the dock yard. It began as a small self-contained community built on a very damp and wet place reclaimed out of the marshes. It was a very confined area, a dense triangle of houses and alleyways, compressed between the dockyard wall and Well Marsh. It was prone to both flood and fire. At one point separated from Sheerness fort by a moat and drawbridge, the area was enclosed by an earthwork bastioned trace at the end of the 18th century amid growing fears of a French invasion. This compact Blue Town contained shops, public houses, a church, a school, hotels, a variety theatre, a Police Station and a Court House.

FEAR OVER ANOTHER ATTACK BY A FOREIGN GOVERNMENT

This time it was fear over invasion by Emperor Napoleon that sparked a frenzied effort to protect the island and its’ Dockyard. This was part of a much bigger line of defences that stretched around great swathes of the English coast line.

To ensure that Sheerness was not invaded from the rear, a canal, circulating the town and the dockyard was built. The canal is known as The Queenborough Lines.

WHAT THE VISITING PUBLIC CAN SEE TODAY

THE QUEENBOROUGH LINES.

The Queenborough Lines were constructed in the 1860s as a defensive feature, built as fears of invasion from Europe intensified. It consists of a 3km-long linear earth rampart and water-filled ditches, and two brick-built magazines for storing gunpowder. The site is considered to be nationally important for its archaeology and history and also regionally important for wildlife. At the same time, the garrison was re-enforced to protect the dockyard and town from the seaward side. Round towers called Martello Towers formed part of the defence system which was spread around the Kent coast to deter invaders.

WW1 and WW2 DEFENCES

Nick named ***Barbed Wire Island*** during WW1 and WW2; reports of recent research projects have discovered the following:

Miles of forgotten First World War trenches and defences snaking across Sheppey and Kent have been uncovered by an army of volunteers. It’s part of a Defence of Swale project being carried out by Kent County Council’s archaeological team to mark the centenary of the conflict. The findings confirm the Island was one of the most fortified areas of the country as the government prepared for a German invasion which never came. One of the most exciting discoveries is a set of gun emplacements with weapons which were designed to swing round from the coastline and fire inland over Sittingbourne and Faversham.

The **Maunsell Forts** are armed towers built in the Thames estuaries during the Second World War to help defend the United Kingdom. They were operated as army and navy forts, and named after their designer, Guy Maunsell. The forts were decommissioned in the late 1950s and later used for other activities including pirate radio broadcasting.

THE WW2 BOOM ACROSS THE ESTUARY



A 3" gun on a ship guarding one of the gates in the anti-submarine net

Courtesy of Wikipedia

The boom was erected in 1939, at the start of WW2. The primary intention was to prevent any incursion of enemy submarines up the estuary where they might be able to attack merchant shipping. Secondary benefits included protection against floating mines, enemy surface vessels and as an anti-invasion measure.

The boom ran from **the East Beach at Shoeburyness, Essex to Royal Oak Point in Sheerness**, Kent a distance of some 5.6 miles (9.0 km). In the shallow water at either end, closest to the land, the boom was formed of wooden piles driven into the sandy seabed and reinforced with concrete – on the Essex side of the boom these extended over 1 mile (1.6 km) into the estuary.

Where the boom met the deep water channel it transitioned into an anti-submarine net. At intervals along the net 200-ton lighters were stationed armed with anti-aircraft guns and searchlights. Two gates were included within the net to allow for access by shipping, one towards the north for access to the Thames and one towards the south for the River Medway ports. These were opened by a Royal Navy boom defence vessel and closed overnight

The boom was backed up by the nearby Maunsell Sea Forts and by a coastal battery at Shoeburyness. The latter housed two 6" naval guns and search-light emplacements protected by landward defences. The remains of the coastal artillery emplacement at Shoeburyness, together with its magazines and search-light emplacements are also visible but lie within the grounds of MoD Shoeburyness with no public access. There are no visible remains of the boom at the Shoebury end but a line of piles and wrecked boats is visible on the Kent side at East End, close to Minster Beach.

The SS MONTGOMERY

SS Richard Montgomery was an American Liberty ship built during World War II. She was named after Richard Montgomery, an Irish soldier and officer. Montgomery originally served in the British Army and fought in North America during the French and Indian War.

The ship was wrecked off the Nore sandbank in the Thames Estuary, near Sheerness, in August 1944, whilst carrying a cargo of munitions. Around 1,400 tonnes of explosives remain on board, which continue to be a significant hazard.

The masts of the SS Montgomery are clearly visible from the promenade at Sheerness during low water. Also, on the steps leading to the beach from the promenade, are words of dire warning to the citizens of the area, about the dangers that the ship may pose.

THE MODERN ARAY OF WIND TURBINES

The Kentish Flats Offshore Wind Farm is a wind farm located off the coast of Kent, on a large, flat and shallow plateau just outside the main Thames shipping lanes. The wind farm is operated by Vattenfall. The distance from the nearest wind turbine to Whitstable is 6.2 miles (10.0 km). The nearest turbine is 5.5 miles (8.9 km) away from Herne Bay.

Turbines at Kentish Flats, Kent, England, with the WWII gun platforms visible towards the right.



Satellite image of the Thames Estuary with Kentish Flats.

Courtesy of Wikipedia

Construction was completed in August 2005, with commissioning and testing of all turbines completed by September 2005. The wind farm consists of 30 Vestas V90-3MW wind turbines with a total nameplate capacity of 90 MW. Turbines were installed by the Danish offshore wind farms services provider A2SEA. Between 2007 and 2010, the capacity factor was around 30%. In February 2013 Vattenfall was granted consent to extend the existing Kentish Flats Offshore Wind Farm. 15 turbines each with a capacity of 3.3 MW were installed adding an extra 49.5 MW to the wind farm. Offshore construction began in October 2014 and was operational by December 2015.

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