

# The battle for Goodwin Sands

**Ed Cumming** discovers how a historic Kent sandbar found itself at the centre of an epic struggle

On an April morning, with an onshore breeze tickling the grasses that poke up through the shingle, the coast at Deal in Kent does not feel like a battleground. But six miles offshore, beyond the horizon, lies one of its most famous landmarks: Goodwin Sands. A sandbar that is partially exposed at low tide, it's at risk from developers in Dover – nine miles down the Channel coast – whom locals are determined to repel.

The dispute began in 2016, when the Port of Dover applied to dredge the sands for building materials. Since then, the Goodwins, as it is known locally, has become the focal point in an epic struggle between city authorities, the Crown Estate, the Government, environmental agencies, NGOs, academics and, crucially, a small community group, the Goodwin Sands SOS, determined to protect this unseen sliver of maritime heritage.

Having experienced a reprieve during the pandemic, the campaigners are now back at work. Despite plans for Dover's redevelopment restarting, they are determined that the Goodwin Sands will be protected. Joanna Thomson is the co-ordinator of Goodwin Sands SOS. "My family gets annoyed, saying 'you're not on the bloody Goodwins again,'" she says. "But you've got to have something to get up for in the morning."

Trouble had been brewing since 2008, when the port authority at Dover was looking for sources of sand and gravel to fill in the Dover East Harbour to turn it back into land that could be used to expand its cargo facilities. In the Goodwin Sands, it had a near-limitless source of the stuff on their doorstep.

Feasibility surveys were duly commissioned. The sands had been dredged before, for various projects including the Channel Tunnel, so what would be the problem this time?

By 2016, the plans were advanced. Which is when campaigners and

conservationists began to take notice. Various groups objected, including Kent Wildlife Trust, British Divers Marine Life Rescue, and the Marine Conservation Society.

Before long, Thomson, 63, along with Fiona Punter, 66, had taken over the SOS group. With help from academics, heritage and wildlife authorities, and a bit of stardust courtesy of actors Miriam Margoyles and Kent-born Mark Rylance, they fought the plan every step of the way.

The Goodwin Sands, they argued, provide a haven for wildlife, including seals and birds, as well as a resting place for shipwrecks and downed Second World War aircraft – a treasure trove, a mass grave, and a nature reserve rolled into one. Moreover, why dredge it when sand was available elsewhere?

"There probably isn't a better place for underwater archaeology than the Goodwin Sands," says Dr Daniel Pascoe, a maritime archaeologist, who has been diving the Goodwins since 2005. "The sands are constantly shifting, and they have this amazing ability to preserve shipwrecks for hundreds of years. There are old wrecks, new wrecks, wooden wrecks, metal wrecks. Aeroplanes, submarines, you name it."

Among other sightings, he has seen a Junkers Ju-88, with its bomb bay doors open, and a Dutch East Indiaman, where he found "boxes of sabres and swords, muskets". Nearby is another wreck, the HMS Northumberland, which went down on the Goodwins in 1703, with all 252 hands.

"It's inevitable that multiple wrecks will be uncovered when you dredge, and the trouble with a big dredger is it tends to destroy what it uncovers," says Pascoe. "You don't know you've hit something until it ends up in the hold."

Specific wrecks have exclusion zones around them, but given the Goodwins' history, many still lie undiscovered. The dredging plan promised to stick to a limited area, with an archaeologist checking to see nothing important was being disturbed. But for the Goodwins' defenders, this was not enough – and then things got heated. At one point, Thomson and Punter say that posters of the pair were put up in Dover accusing "the people of Deal of ruining the future of the people of Dover."

CHRISTOPHER PLEDGER; ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; MIRRORPIX



Despite the efforts of the SOS group, the Marine Management Organisation granted Dover a licence to dredge until December 31 2022. In 2019, Thomson and Punter tried and lost a judicial review. Then Covid hit, throwing

Dover's plans into disarray. This summer, the plans for redevelopment will restart. However, later this year Dover may need to reapply for its dredging licence and this gives Thomson and Punter hope. "I think the s--- is going to hit the fan in September," says Punter. "We're not going to let it drop," adds Thomson.

Surprisingly, the main target of their ire is not the Port of Dover. Instead, they focus on the Marine Management Organisation, and the quangos and modellers, including Natural England, Historic England and the Environment Agency, who support the MMO's decision-making. "The Marine Management Organisation are not fit for purpose," says Thomson. "I'm sure

a lot of it is under-resourcing. But they are not asking the right questions."

"Initially, we thought it was us versus Dover Harbour Board," notes Punter. "But the reality slowly dawned that it was us against Dover Harbour Board, the licensing authority and the statutory bodies. We've both become very disillusioned with the quangos."

For Mike Williams, a visiting professor at Plymouth University who specialises in nautical law, the specific row over the Goodwins highlights more generic problems with safeguarding systems. "There have been concerns about the marine licensing process for some years now. In a sense, the Goodwin Sands group coming along was just another example.



Clockwise from left: campaigners Fiona Punter and Joanna Thomson; the Goodwin Sands; the South Goodwin Lightship in 1954, which was pushed onto the sandbank during a storm

"There is a feeling that [the quangos] are under-resourced, and that the Government has a 'blue economy' agenda, and these agencies don't want to be seen to be getting in the way." He adds that the exclusion zones around the identified wrecks are not big enough. "[The licence for the Goodwins] shouldn't have gone ahead. There are alternative sites. They might cost the developer more, but that's the price of environmental protection."

In an email, an MMO spokesperson said: "In reaching the decision to licence this activity, MMO took into account the evidence provided, the comprehensive public consultations, and the clear conclusions of the environmental impact assessment consent decision. This decision was upheld by the High Court following a judicial review."

"I completely understand Goodwin Sands SOS and what they are trying to do," says Doug Bannister, who took over as chief executive of the Port of Dover in January 2019. He makes a calm case for his plans, which he says are vital for the future of the port and will bring jobs to the area. For him, filling in the harbour is a key part of the £250 million investment being made to modernise Dover.

"It's significantly cheaper to source [sand] from [the Goodwins]," explains Bannister. "At the end of the day, we need over a million cubic metres of infill and the nearer you can source it, the more efficient and effective it's going to be. We have a business case and a licence to source material in the most upright, best manner that we can."

Thomson and Punter, meanwhile, are not giving up. "The gatekeepers are not guarding our environment and our heritage, and that's what makes me mad," says Thomson. "Because if we don't do it now, it's going to happen again." Punter agrees. "The Goodwin Sands are part of our cultural environment, as important as the White Cliffs of Dover. While there's life in us we'll keep fighting."