

Hovellers by David Chamberlain

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries Deal's main workforce comprised of boatmen and beach hands. There would be many hundreds working the luggers and boats that operated from the beach at north Deal, Central Parade, Walmer and Kingsdown. As the boatmen's age reached maturity, or they no longer wished to go to sea, they would become beach hands. Although this job did not pay as much as could be earned at sea, their experience and input was essential for the boats to get afloat and back to shore.

Many of the Deal boatmen were called Hovellers and when afloat they were hovelling. Over the years there have been many thoughts as to what this name and profession meant. However, it may be due to their tactics of hovering around the Downs waiting to be used for ship attendance work or in bad weather piloting and salvage work. They also were not above waiting for a vessel to provide contraband on a predestined day or night. This fact was known to the Revenue and was tried to be prevented by the Hovering Act.

This act was introduced in the 1700s to prevent vessels 'loitering' within 6 miles of the British coast and to prevent smuggling. Smuggling at that time was costing the Government a large income from imported goods. The act furthermore enabled customs officers to search any boat they felt was contravening the law or even having untaxed goods aboard. With the Deal boats continuously hovering or loitering in the Downs they became the target of the local Revenue men. Perhaps, because of this they were known as 'Hoverers' or as a Deal accent might be interpreted as 'Hoveller'.

Smuggling went on throughout the early 19th century, which was always a burden on the treasury as the war with France and other British ventures abroad were draining the financial resources. As much as the Coastguards and Revenue men tried to stop it, smuggling was still a large part of the economic pay for the hundreds of Deal 'Hovellers' wages. There were many who were caught at their illicit trade and paid the price with jail sentences and confiscation of their boats. Nevertheless, it was still worth the risk when times were hard for the boatmen and their families. Obviously, when these men were caught it produced malcontent with the other boatmen against the authorities. Having death threats made against them, the officers made sure some were armed when on duty.

By the mid 1800s with the arrival of steam ships, the Downs was not as crowded and work started to lessen with the boats and boatmen diminish from the beach. Those that were left had to acclimatise to the situation and find other means to make a living. In the 20th century their boats became mechanized with inboard engines - and sail was almost discarded. They found tourism with boat trips lucrative and sea angling a godsend all year round as an income.

Although smuggling might have been phased out by then – there was an incident in the 1960s when a local boat was seized by the customs and impounded. The wayward boatman went alongside a German ship anchored in the Downs and purchased a bottle of brandy. After consuming some of the bottle's contents he decided to purchase more. He incorporated his next trip out to the ship with a group of fare paying scouts for a boat ride. When the boat came ashore the scouts were enthusiastically telling everyone that they had been out with a smuggler – needless to say the customs were informed and the boat impounded. It was up to the owner of the boat to sort out the situation as he was not aware of the boatman's foolish act!