

A Traditional Community in Decline; The Deal Boatmen in the Nineteenth Century

JACQUELINE BOWER

'Almost wherever one looks in Victorian England, one finds evidence of . . . traditional society, living in juxtaposition to the newer world of industry . . . not as a decaying relic . . . but simply as an older society with a different life-cycle alongside the new industrial world'.¹ Among these traditional communities were the Cornish tin miners and the coalminers of the Forest of Dean. Others existed around the coast – the beachmen of East Anglia, the Whitstable oyster fishermen, the fishermen of Hastings, and the Deal boatmen.² What distinguishes the men of these communities is their economic independence. Most were small scale capitalists who operated on a basis of cooperation and profit-sharing, rather than as master and servant, or employer and employee. These traditional societies or communities did not conform to the Victorian view of social structure, which was hierarchical and deferential. The Stones have written of 'an assumption of an attitude of self-conscious paternalism' by the gentry and nobility which 'governed their relations with their social inferiors. . . . Paternalism presupposes an inegalitarian, unchanging, hierarchical social order where everyone has his place and stays in it, under the protections and direction of his superiors'.³ Because members of the traditional communities were economically independent they saw no need to accept the 'protection and direction' of their supposed superiors, and so frequently exhibited a lack of deference which confused and annoyed other sections of society. Mainstream society responded either by ignoring the traditional communities and their concerns or by attempting to force them to occupy what was deemed to be their proper place. Even the Registrar General's classification of society has no place for men such as the Whitstable oystermen and the Deal boatmen. The nature of their work would place them in Class III, skilled labourers, but many were also owners or part owners of boats, and those who were not boat owners were not wage earners, but shared in the profits of their work. The Whitstable oyster fishermen, through their Company, also owned the rights to the oyster fishing.

Because many of these communities were ignored by their contemporaries, they have also been invisible to social and economic historians. Recently, however, detailed local studies have begun to reconstruct some of these traditional societies.⁴ The boatmen of Deal are a typical example. Deal is on the eastern coast of Kent, between Dover and Sandwich, seventy four miles from London and twenty five miles from the French coast across the English Channel. Its shingle beach extends for about a mile and a quarter from north to south, and is divided into North End and South End. About four miles offshore lie the Goodwin Sands, about ten miles long and four miles across at the widest part, partially exposed at low tide but covered to a depth of between ten and twenty-five feet at high tide. When covered, the Sands become 'quick' and can swallow a ship completely in days or even hours. In 1866 a Channel Pilot wrote

it is not without great risk of life as well as labour and exertion that the Goodwin is approached except in very calm and still weather, and even then the most experienced boatmen of this place do not care to trifle with it or act foolhardily. It is one of the most treacherous places in the world.⁵

Although immensely dangerous to shipping, the Goodwins form a natural breakwater, providing a safe anchorage known as the Downs between themselves and the shore. It was this combination of treacherous sands and safe anchorage at the narrowest part of the world's busiest shipping lane which created the class of mariners known as Deal boatmen. It was in the Downs that sailing vessels anchored to await a fair wind to enable them either to get around the North Foreland and into the Thames Estuary, or around the South Foreland and on down Channel. It was at Deal that outward bound ships dropped the pilots that had brought them so far and took on new pilots to take them to the Isle of Wight, while homeward-bounders signalled for a pilot for Gravesend, Newcastle or Leith, or one of the Baltic ports. Being the English waters nearest to the Continent, in time of war the Downs also sheltered the Navy. Up to 400 ships might be anchored in the Downs at once, sometimes for weeks at a time. While anchored, these ships required water, provisions and other services supplied from shore by the boatmen. Accident, illness or desertion among the crews of ships might necessitate the employment of Deal men in their place, while a night's rough weather could result in Deal boatmen supplying anchors and cables to ships which had been forced to slip their anchors to avoid collision, helping to refloat ships stranded on the Goodwins, or, if the ship was lost, to salvage her cargo.

The Deal boatmen's work was known as 'hovelling', which

embraced a variety of services. An 1866 report on the subject of wreck and salvage on the Kent coast defined it thus;

hovelling is rendering assistance to vessels passing or at anchor off shore. Sometimes the men put off shore to the vessel. Sometimes they provision a lugger and put off on a ten or twelve days cruise, seeking for jobs. Occasionally they put one of their number on board a vessel [as pilot] for which their experience of the channels and shoals in their neighbourhood peculiarly fits them.

Another writer described how the boatmen were 'constantly cruising round the Sands and down to the West'ard, giving information to ships, taking off pilots and bringing home friends or letters from outward bound ships, taking out anchors and cables to ships needing such articles or saving shipwrecked cargoes, for which salvage money is allowed'.⁶

At the peak of the boatmen's prosperity, the most used boats were the great luggers. These might be of twenty tons, forty feet long, with two or three masts. The front part of the deck, or forepeak, was decked over, giving the boats their alternative name of forepeakers. In the small cabin thus formed, there was a stove and space for perhaps three men to sleep. The main body of the boat was left open, for carrying anchors and cables or chains or salvaged cargoes. Six to eight men were the normal crew of a lugger, but more might be carried if necessary. The other type of boat used by the boatmen was the galley punt. These were twenty-one to thirty feet long, with one mast. They were entirely open, but their crews of three or four still remained at sea for several days at a time. Galley punts were used more and more towards the end of the nineteenth century as work for the big luggers was no longer available. Because they required a smaller crew than the luggers, and could be launched and beached more easily, galley punts were cheaper to use. The luggers and galley punts were stationed at intervals along Deal's steeply sloping shingle beach. They were launched by being allowed to run down the beach, their own impetus carrying them into deep water. On returning from a voyage, they were hauled back up the beach by capstans.⁷

In 1833, the cost of the bare hull of a lugger was £100. The owners would then have had to supply sails and other gear costing more than as much again. In 1866, the twenty-five ton lugger *Alexandra*, built by Isaac Hayward of Deal, cost over £600. The lugger *Pilgrim*, built by Bayleys, the other leading firm of Deal boatbuilders, cost £400 in 1872. In the 1860s, a new galley punt, with all her gear, cost about £160. Luggers and galley punts were normally owned by groups of four, six

or eight boatmen. One boatman might have shares in several boats. Each man in a boat's crew shared equally in the profits of a voyage, with the owners taking a 'boat's share' in addition. Thus every man, even those who were not boat-owners, was self employed and free to work when and with whom he chose.⁸

The prosperity of Deal, and the Deal boatmen, peaked during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. In this period, 'the defences in East Kent were centred upon Deal, with its Castle and Naval Yard'.⁹ A Naval Squadron was continually in the Downs and many Naval officers' wives and families took up residence in the town. The early census returns indicate the expansion of Deal at this time.¹⁰ In 1801, there were 945 inhabited houses in Deal, eleven uninhabited. By 1811, there were 1,348 inhabited houses, ten uninhabited, an increase of nearly fifty per cent in the decade. The total permanent population had grown from 5,420 to 7,351. At various times, the town's population was swollen still further by troops awaiting embarkation for Continental expeditions. About 14,000 troops were embarked from Deal beach in one week in September 1799. *The Times* reported that 'the town was so full that the officers, many of them, are unable to procure beds and sleep upon carpets in the different inns and many of their soldiers on their baggage on the beach'.¹¹

The boatmen were in constant demand, ferrying stores out to the ships, and officers to and from the shore, delivering mails and assisting in the embarkation of troops. The collisions, strandings and other accidents that were inevitable with so many ships in so restricted an anchorage provided many opportunities for the boatmen to earn salvage money. The Sea Fencibles, a local defence force, paid a few shillings to members, while a less patriotic but more profitable activity was the smuggling for which Deal was notorious, which continued throughout the war and beyond. Meanwhile, ashore, the Naval Yard, handling stores and repairing ships, provided employment for local craftsmen, and there were also 'not less than a dozen boatbuilders' shops in full work, employing many hands, and several ropewalks.¹²

After 1815, all this prosperity ceased. Between 1811 and 1821 the population of the town fell to 6,811 and the 1821 Census returns show 1,321 inhabited houses, 262 uninhabited. The Naval Yard was rapidly run down. In 1814, the quarterly wage bill for civilian workers was over £1,200; in 1834, the last full year for which paybooks survive, the quarterly civilian wages totalled only £97.¹³ William Stanton, a nineteenth century Deal pilot who composed his autobiography, wrote of the 1820s and 1830s that there was 'nothing but extreme poverty on every side about this time',¹⁴ and William Cobbett painted a very depressing picture of the town in the early 1820s.

Deal is a most villainous place. It is full of filthy looking people. Great desolation of abomination has been going on here; tremendous barracks, partly pulled down and partly tumbling down and partly occupied by soldiers. Everything seems upon the perish. I was glad to hurry along through it, and to leave its inns and public houses to be occupied by the tarred, and trowsered, and blue and buff crew whose very vicinage I always detest.¹⁵

Stanton ascribed the boatmen's distress in the early nineteenth century to the system of making salvage awards then in operation. He described the Salvage Commissioners'

ignorance of nautical affairs . . . [they had] no judgement whatever of our services. . . . There was a farmer from the county, Vicar of the parish, and others, that scarcely knew a buoy rope from a cable. . . . Through this great injustice and grievance in great measure the boatmen and their boats fell into a most deplorable and distressed state.

Stanton records that at this time the normal award for taking an anchor and cable from the shore to a ship in the Channel in a gale was £30–£45. This had to be shared between twelve to fourteen men after deduction of the expense of launching the boat and hauling it back up the beach again. Stanton observed that the boatmen were getting little more than a labourer's pay, and concluded pointedly, 'There never was an award given anything like justice in any case. . . . They seemed determined that a poor man should not have the possession of money, as if it were to keep him in a servile condition.'¹⁶

In 1832, Stanton was one of seven boatmen who, on behalf of their peers, petitioned Trinity House on the subject of their difficulties. This led to an inquiry by the Select Committee on the Cinque Ports Pilots. Evidence given by the boatmen and others amply demonstrated the extent to which their fortunes had declined over the previous fifteen to twenty years. Edward Darby, ship agent's clerk, when asked what was the present state of the Deal boatmen, replied 'it is deplorable; the men have not a shift of clothes . . . they have no fires to sit by, and not sufficient animal food'. On referring to his records, Darby found that 'in the year 1809 the office for which I act I paid the Deal boatmen, for services to ships, £11,000; in 1819, £2,000, in 1829 £3,000 and in 1832 £650'. Lt. Kelly Nazer R.N., collector of light and harbour dues, observed 'the greater part of the boats on the beach are in debt and in a very bad state'. Thomas Trott, a Deal boatman for forty years, recalled 'sixteen years ago I had seven boats, now I have but one and she is seven years old'.¹⁷

The boatmen's greatest complaints concerned the pilotage

regulations introduced in 1826 'which puts it in the power of a Pilot to supersede any licensed boatmen who may be conducting a ship from the Westward into the Downs, without the boatman having any claim to one shilling of remuneration'. Other causes of distress identified by the Committee were 'the diminution of employment arising from the substitution of chain for hempen cables and . . . the suppression of smuggling'.¹⁸ Chain cables were less likely to part under stress than hemp. A Deal historian writing in the 1860s described how 'many thousands of pounds annually used to be paid for hemp cables and for the loss of anchors, which has become a comparatively small matter now'.¹⁹

Other measures, praiseworthy in themselves, contributed to the boatmen's hardship. From the early 1820s there were moves towards greater safety in merchant shipping. Samuel Plimsoll's campaign in the 1870s against the overloading of ships is the best known of these, but the better education of captains and mates was also important. Some ships' officers were so unfamiliar with the waters through which they had to navigate their vessels that they sometimes mistook Walton-on-the-Naze for the South Foreland, the Thames Estuary for the English Channel, and the North Kent coast for the coast of France. In 1843, one ship's captain ran his vessel on to the French coast, with considerable loss of life, because he mistook the light of Cap Gris Nez for that of Dungeness.²⁰ The result of improved navigational skills by the late 1850s was that, 'the vessels which . . . anchor in the Downs, it is invariably found of late years that they are better supplied and better manned and officered than they used to be, and consequently have less need either of Deal boatmen or of Deal marketing'.²¹

From the early years of the nineteenth century, efforts were made to place lights on the principal hazards around the British coast, including the Goodwin Sands. The North Sand Head lightship was established in 1809, followed by a light at the South Sand Head in 1832. The Royal National Lifeboat Institution was founded in 1824 by Sir William Hillary. He intended to establish a national service, but this took time and in the interim a number of local and county organisations were set up. The Dover Humane Society placed the first lifeboat there in 1837. The first R.N.L.I. lifeboat serving the Goodwins was established at Ramsgate in 1852. The R.N.L.I. took over the Dover lifeboat in 1855 and followed this by placing lifeboats at Walmer in 1857, and Deal and Kingsdown in 1865. A further lifeboat was stationed at Broadstairs.²²

The lifeboats were a mixed blessing to the boatmen. Apart from the coxswain and second coxswain, they had no regular crews, being manned by the first twelve men to reach the lifeboat house and seize the lifejackets on the alarm. Since, in addition to any salvage award

that might be made, the Lifeboat Institute paid ten shillings to each crew member for a daytime and a pound for a night launch, competition for places in the boat was keen, and men actually fought over the lifejackets.²³ Sailing in the lifeboat also had the advantage that any damage to the boat would be borne by the Lifeboat Institute, while damage to the boatmen's own luggers had to be paid for by themselves. The men of North Deal probably benefited from the lifeboat being placed there; to the men of South Deal, however, who were too far away from the lifeboat house, it probably seemed like unfair competition. The rivalry between the lifeboat and the luggers is illustrated by the events of 7 February 1866. The ship *Iron Crown* was aground on the far side of the Goodwins. The North Deal Lifeboat and the South Deal lugger *England's Glory* were launched simultaneously. So anxious were the crew of the lugger to beat the lifeboat and claim the hovel that the former sailed dangerously across the Sands on a falling tide.²⁴

Steam power is often referred to as a major factor in the nineteenth-century decline of Deal. The first regular cross-Channel steamer service began in 1820, but 'the transition from sailing ship to the iron and steel cargo steamer was not completed for another three decades or more after 1850; the great days of sail lie not before but after the middle of the century'.²⁵ This generalisation did not apply in the case of Deal, Steam tugs obviated the need for sailing vessels to wait in the Downs for a fair wind, and vessels at anchor in the Downs could be supplied from places other than Deal. As a local newspaper correspondent complained in February 1869, 'during the whole winter a great number of chains and anchors have been lost in the Downs and they would not give a Deal boatman a job at any price to bring them off, but telegraphed to London and had them sent down in a steam tug'. In cases of wreck, the steam tugs berthed in Ramsgate and Dover harbours could reach a ship more quickly and often assist more efficaciously than the Deal luggers. After 1850 steam tugs took an increasing share of the boatmen's traditional salvage awards. The steam tugs *Champion* and *Vulcan* took half the £7,122 5s. awarded for the salvage of the *Iron Crown* in February 1866, the remainder going to two Deal luggers and the Deal lifeboat.²⁶

Taking pilots from the shore out to ships in the Channel, at a guinea a time comprised a steady source of income for the boatmen. From the 1870s, however, pilots landing at or departing from Deal could be brought to or from the recently erected pier by ships' boats, rather than being disembarked or embarked on the beach by the boatmen, exacerbating a decline from the 1860s as Deal pilots gradually transferred to Dover.²⁷ The boatmen themselves piloted ships down Channel or into the North Sea, another area of work declining during

the nineteenth century, as the authorities insisted on ships employing Cinque Ports or Trinity House pilots instead of the unqualified boatmen. Neither was the work especially remunerative. In 1863, Thomas James Bayley received £6 to take a vessel to Shields, but had only £3 left after expenses, and the remainder was shared with the other members of his crew. Eager for work in a declining occupation exposed the boatmen to exploitation, as exemplified by

The case of John Williams who, in the spring of 1862, was shipped on the *Royal Charlie* as she passed through the Downs, for the purpose of piloting the vessel down Channel as far as the Isle of Wight. A strong wind was blowing from the east at the time. On arriving off the Isle of Wight the wind had by no means abated. The captain of the ship was unwilling to lose the advantage of the favourable breeze, and did not stop to put in at the termination of the pilot's journey, but proceeded on his course, hoping to fall in with some vessel by which Williams might return. The *Royal Charlie* had gone some three hundred miles beyond the Channel when they fell in with the schooner *Ranshawe*, bound to Liverpool. Williams was transferred to the homeward bound vessel and eventually landed at Liverpool. For his services he was rewarded with the munificent sum of £2.²⁸

Moreover, competition between the boatmen to receive even the few shillings available for shipping a pilot increased.

When times are hard at Deal, it is no uncommon thing for the boats from our place to keep dodging one another as far away from home as Gravesend, in order to get the chance of hooking on to a ship and towing down astern until the pilot is ready to quit her. Indeed, the Deal galley-punts may not infrequently be seen up at the London docks themselves, lying alongside some vessel which the boatmen know will shortly be hauling out and getting under way.²⁹

'The men are sometimes, even in winter time, three days away in open boats, sleeping on the bare boards or ballast bags and wrapped in a sail. . . . To be towed in the teeth of a north easterly snowstorm from Gravesend to the Downs . . . is the common experience.'³⁰

The boatmen frequently complained that while they could be awarded considerable amounts for salvaging ships and their cargoes, there was no reward for saving life, a point made by a lugger crew to the local press in search of publicity in 1862. The writers asked for support after they saved the crew of the brig *Trio*:

principally to show that boatmen are not likely to receive any reward, however meritorious their services may be, for rescuing the lives of their fellow creatures at the risk of their own. . . . While cruising in the Gull

Stream, we saw part of a sunken wreck, and also a boat riding by it We made up our minds at once to proceed to the spot, although opportunities were not wanting for some profitable employment. . . . Only a few days ago the lifeless body of some poor fellow . . . was picked up and the sum of five shillings was forwarded for so doing; whereas for saving five lives it appears not the fraction of a penny is allowed.³¹

Similar circumstances arose in February 1876 when the British steamship *Strathclyde* was run down by the German liner *Franconia* just outside Dover. Although the *Strathclyde* began to sink immediately, the *Franconia* made no attempt to render assistance. The Dover Harbour steam tug put to sea on learning of the collision, but went to the aid of the *Franconia*, which was in no immediate danger, and could be salvaged rather than the doomed *Strathclyde*. The Dover lifeboat was not launched, although the collision was seen from the shore. There was heavy loss of life in the *Strathclyde*, with fifteen women passengers drowned. All the survivors were rescued by the luggers *Brave Nelson* of Walmer and *Early Morn* of Deal. The captains of the *Franconia* and the Dover Harbour tug later excused their actions by saying that they had believed the *Franconia* was also sinking, but in the protracted inquiries and court proceedings which followed the tragedy only the crews of the *Brave Nelson* and *Early Morn* emerged with any credit. It was emphasized that if they too had deserted the *Strathclyde* and gone to the *Franconia* they could have earned a considerable amount in salvage. As it was, not only did they gain no reward, they had to give up their time to give evidence at the various inquests. As some of the bodies were landed at the London Docks and proceedings thus took place at Poplar, this was not a small matter.³²

The Deal boatmen were urged by some to turn to fishing when their traditional sources of income declined, but fishing was no more regular than hovelling. The mackerel season was a short one, and was said to have failed more than once in the 1850s. In other years, there was a glut, with catches being left to rot on the beach because the price obtainable made marketing uneconomic. It was also claimed that the amount of shipping in the Downs made the risk of damage to nets unacceptably high, while French encroachment on English fishing grounds depleted the stock. Other reasons advanced for the Deal boatmen's not turning more to fishing were that the luggers were unsuitable as fishing boats, and that fishing made the boatmen unfit for their more important work of providing services to shipping. Luggers full of sodden fishing nets could not go quickly to vessels in distress. In addition, 'the qualities necessary to constitute the two men are opposed to each other; in fishermen there is slow patient plodding . . .

incompatible with the quick, daring, dashing intrepidity of the hoveller; to sink the boatman in the fisherman would be to destroy the spirit which creates him what he is.' Or, as a character in a nineteenth century novel about the Deal boatmen remarked, "'Fishing? . . . Deal hovellers have to be pretty hard up, I reckon, to take to that job".'³³

The dangers of the boatmen's work were as great as the potential rewards. In 1870–71, fifteen Deal boatmen were drowned in a period of just over twelve months, leaving nearly thirty children fatherless. Losses included the lugger *Reform* in January 1871, when eight men were drowned, the greatest tragedy in Deal in this period.³⁴

Table 1 shows how the boatmen declined during the second half of the nineteenth century.

Table 1

The Deal boatmen in the Census, 1831–1891

	1831	1841	1851	1861	1871	1881	1891
Number of boatmen	392	320	374	360	321	252	177
Per 1,000 population	53.9	47.8	52.9	47.8	40.0	29.6	19.9
Total population	7,268	6,688	7,067	7,531	8,009	8,500	8,891

The number of boatmen fell in absolute and real terms from 1851 onwards, the decline being most dramatic after 1871. The local newspapers agreed that the 1850s were the years when the boatmen began to suffer. In 1859 the *Deal Telegram* reported how, after a period of stormy weather, 'all the large forepeak luggers were called into requisition, which is a very rare circumstance. In fact it is but seldom that even one lugger of the tonnage of the *Tiger* is required, the smaller boats affording under ordinary circumstances sufficient convenience for the purpose.'³⁵ In 1858, the boatmen's situation was thought to be so serious by the local gentry that they established a scheme to assist those who wished to emigrate to New Zealand. Thirteen boatmen, with their families, took advantage of this opportunity.³⁶

During the second half of the nineteenth century, about ten per cent of boatmen were born outside Deal. Most of the immigrant boatmen came from the neighbouring, and similar, parishes of Walmer and Kingsdown. The proportion of the total population born outside Deal rose from 35 per cent in 1851 to 54 per cent in 1891. An increasing proportion of the town's population was therefore unfamiliar with the boatmen's work and way of life. The declining importance of the

boatmen is reflected in the changing attitudes of contemporaries. Until the late 1850s, published accounts of the boatmen tended to stress the importance of their salvage services. After this date, writers tended to focus more on the boatmen's alleged failings, especially with regard to wrecked goods. In addition to declining economic importance, the boatmen were not, in the eyes of the Victorian middle and upper classes, 'respectable'. According to Professor Best, 'respectable' people did not 'get drunk . . . or behave wildly; they maintained a certain propriety of speech and decorum of bearing'.³⁷ One only has to read the reports of Petty Sessions and Police Court proceedings in the *Deal* newspapers to see how far short of these ideals the boatmen fell. Neither did they show any desire to pursue that other great Victorian ideal, 'improvement'.³⁸

Possibly the most spiteful attack on the boatmen came in the form of a ten verse poem published anonymously in the *Deal Telegram* in 1865.³⁹

Our Boatmen

What if we spend a great part of the day
In drinking some quarts of Denne's Sparkling Ales
And lazily fritter the bright months away
Abiding the winter's tempestuous gales?
It's nothing to you!

What if we lie half the day on the beach
Or perch on the capstans like so many crows,
What if our pants are worn out at the breech,
And our shoes let the daylight peep in at the toes?
It's nothing to you. . . .

What if we claim to be dauntless and brave,
And fearless put off to the storm-driven bark,
To rescue the crew from a watery grave,
Then spend half we get in a glorious lark,
It's nothing to you. . . .

As Deal's maritime trade declined, the Borough Council and leading townsmen sought alternative sources of prosperity for the town. From 1834 onwards, attempts were made to develop and promote Deal as a holiday resort,⁴⁰ which generated conflict between the boatmen and other sections of Deal society over the use of the beach and sea front. Professor Daunton has identified the growing Victorian desire for

segregation of public and private space, with official attempts to regulate the activities taking place in the former.⁴¹ The actions of the nineteenth century Deal Borough Councillors show that, consciously or unconsciously, they subscribed to the contemporary desire for clear delineation of public and private space.

Until the 1830s there were buildings along both sides of Beach Street, which runs along the shore from the south end of the town to its northern extremity. Access to the beach itself could be obtained only through narrow passages between buildings. Beginning in 1834, the eastern, seaward side of Beach Street was gradually demolished and esplanades or promenades laid out, providing access to the beach for all. At the same time, at the South End of the town, the boatmen's capstan grounds were gradually bought up by the Council, reducing the number of boats it was possible to launch from the beach.⁴²

As the seafront was opened to public use conflict began between the boatmen and others over the use of the beach and esplanade. In 1859, a letter in the *Deal Telegram* complained of the South Esplanade being occupied by boatmen 'smoking, spitting and giving audible utterance to such language which every decent person must revolt at'. The writer suggested that the Council should threaten to remove the boats from in front of the esplanade. In August 1861, a visitor wrote sarcastically to the same paper,

I was delighted to observe . . . the South Promenade fitted up with commodious seats for the use of vistor[s] and invalids . . . *if not previously occupied*. And Sir, who can but feel delighted at the burly appearance of those noble boatmen who universally occupy the two seats nearest the Custom House, and often the third, both night and morning.

In October of the following year another correspondent took up the complaint;

Some few years ago a most influential meeting . . . took place in Deal to take into consideration who had the most right to the seats on the Esplanade, placed there for the accommodation of the public. . . . It was unanimously decided that the seats were to be used by the 'truly thoroughbred English' to the exclusion of all sanguinary squatters and d——d foreigners of every description. That they have most religiously carried out this resolution . . . is a matter of everyday remark. . . . P.S. Would it not be advisable for the town authorities to place spittoons around the seats on the Esplanade?

In 1863, a visitor asked if the seats on the South Esplanade were intended for the use of the public. 'If so, it is hardly fair that visitors should be compelled to submit to the constant annoyance of a set of

idle men who are allowed to smoke and spit without the least possible restraint. . . . The language too frequently used is most abominable and disgusting.’⁴³ The apparent idleness of the boatmen often brought criticism from those who did not understand their way of life; it was part of their work to keep a lookout for ships signalling for assistance. Since the first Deal boat to reach a ship thus signalling won the ‘hovel’, and the payment, boatmen kept their eyes on the horizon.

Conflict between boatmen and visitors over the use of the seafront continued into the next decade, with letters. In 1870, again in a letter to the *Deal Telegram*, this time complaining about the sea view being obscured by sprat nets hung up to dry in front of the esplanade, and claiming that ‘certain persons had arrogated to themselves the right to use the beach as if it was their own freehold’.⁴⁴ By 1880, regard for the boatmen had declined to such an extent that the *Deal Mercury* (normally more favourably disposed to the boatmen than the *Deal Telegram*) also published hostile documents, advising that

some of the boatowners’ beach privileges ought to be bought over and they should be told to move on. The boats might be concentrated more than they are now. They disfigure many of the finest sea views and run backwards into people’s front doors. I would not see the maritime business destroyed, but I would have the boats subordinate themselves to other and quite as important interests.⁴⁵

As part of the attempt to promote Deal as a holiday resort, the *Deal Telegram* led a campaign to build a pier, which it was argued, would attract more holidaymakers and encourage passing ships to obtain provisions at Deal, since their own boats could go to and from a pier. When the boatmen complained that a pier would deprive them of work, compensation was suggested in taking increased numbers of visitors for sailing excursions.⁴⁶ The boatmen’s more serious complaints that the pier would pose a danger to boats launching from the South End of the beach in a south westerly wind were largely ignored in the town. The boatmen resorted to publicity in the county press, namely the *Kent Herald* only to be countered by the *Deal Telegram* with a jibe;

Our boatmen consider the Pier a great obstruction, very dangerous to vessels in rough weather, and hope it will soon be unscrewed. How very destructive to the interest of boatmen and how painful to their sensibilities, to see a vessel in danger. Cannot somebody devise a scheme for the removal of the Goodwin Sands for their benefit?⁴⁷

The pier was opened in 1864. The boatmen were tragically vindicated in January 1871 when the lugger *Reform*, launching from the South

End in a south south-westerly gale, was swept against the pier and sunk. Eight of the eleven men aboard were drowned. At the ensuing inquest, boatmen gave evidence that 'the boat and crew would most likely all have been saved if the pier had not been where it is', and 'the pier is so close to our launching stage that with the wind as it was . . . and a strong lee tide making against the pier, the least delay or accident renders it extremely dangerous and impossible to get round the pier'. The jury's verdict, predictably was accidental death. The *Telegram* made no comment on the boatmen's evidence, but the *Mercury* published a letter from a sympathetic reader;

The shocking catastrophe . . . has clearly and forcibly demonstrated the very great peril in which our South End boats are placed. . . . I can remember hearing more than one of the brave fellows whose loss we are now mourning point out the great source of danger and prophetically assert that some day or other the pier would be the cause of a serious loss of life.⁴⁸

In the 1880s it was recognised that the boatmen's era was passing away. In 1882 the luggers 'lay on the beach for months together unused' and in February 1883 the Mayor, William Nethersole, declared that 'The old source of income of Deal was drying up, namely, that derived from the water. . . . The steam tug had encroached upon and superseded the calling of the boatmen. . . . The day for hovelling was gone by.'⁴⁹ In the following decade, nature and the Borough Council combined to hasten further the boatmen's extinction. The North End had always suffered from encroachment by the sea; Sandown Castle was so destroyed in the 1860s. During the succeeding decades, the problem worsened; possibly the pier aggravated the problem by acting as a groyne and impeding the northward and eastward drift of shingle. In the early eighties, North Ward councillors frequently and unavailingly urged the Council to take remedial action. About 240 feet of esplanade and sea wall at the North End had disappeared in three years, it was said, and another thirty feet were threatened. Further stretches had been seriously undermined by the sea. The Council was accused of neglecting the North End of the town while spending large sums of ratepayers' money on the improvement of the South End. In all the debate, however, there was no mention of the effect of the continued erosion upon the North End boatmen. Whether this neglect was a deliberate attempt by the Council to undermine the North End maritime community, or simply due to ignorance and parsimony, a series of violent storms in the nineties, swept away storehouses and capstan grounds and effectively preventing the boatmen working from the North End of the beach. At the same time, the Council persisted

with its schemes for improvement of the sea front, buying up capstan grounds as the opportunity arose to extend the esplanade.⁵⁰

The combination of the long Continental peace between 1815 and 1914 and technological advances meant that the Deal boatmen's decline was inevitable. Very little could have been done to delay it. A more favourably disposed Borough Council might have helped in the short term by protecting the boatmen's interests rather than opposing them, but nothing could have been done to slow the introduction of steam tugs, chain cables and lightships. Possibly the boatmen could have done more to protect their own interests by, for example, collectively opposing the pier or to force the Council to improve the sea defences at the North End. No-one spoke for the Deal boatmen on the Council, and although the *Deal Mercury* was normally favourably disposed towards the boatmen, it never promoted their interests in the way that its rival campaigned for the pier. The nature of the boatmen's work, rival crews racing each other to ships in distress to win jobs, and their frequent absences at sea, meant that they were less likely to be able to combine together in pursuit of a common interest. In any case, action taken locally could only have temporarily delayed the end of the boatmen's community, not prevented it. The story of the Deal boatmen in the nineteenth century is the story of a community in decline, so that in 1893 a journalist wrote:

One cannot but survey with regret the groups of these hardy seafarers, lounging about upon the steeples of the shingle, listlessly gazing away seawards, without heart enough to launch a boat and sail the barren tract of ocean in search of a job. Their day is past, their vocation all but dead. . . . With the last of the present generation will depart the good old type of Deal boatman . . . who snatched his livelihood out of hard gales and the distress of mariners.⁵¹

Notes

¹ A. Everitt, *Landscape and Community in England* (1985), p. 7.

² D. Higgins, *The Beachmen – the Story of the Salvagers of the East Anglian Coast* (Lavenham, 1987); S. Peak, *Fishermen of Hastings; 200 Years of the Hastings Fishing Community* (St Leonards, 1985).

³ L. and J.C.F. Stone, *An Open Elite? England 1540–1880* (1984), p. 412.

⁴ See note 2, above. Also M. Prior, *Fisher Row* (Oxford, 1982).

⁵ *The Times*, 26 Oct. 1866.

⁶ P[ublic] R[ecord] O[ffice] MT9/105A/75, Report on the Subject of Wreck and Salvage on the Coast of Kent. G.B. Gattie, *Memorials of the Goodwin Sands* (1890), 101.

⁷ T.S. Trearor, *Heroes of the Goodwin Sands* (1892); E.J. March, *Inshore Craft of Great Britain in the Days of Sail and Oar*, II (1972).

- ⁸ *Deal Mercury*, and *Deal Telegram*, *passim*. E.C. Pain, *The Last of Our Luggers and the Men who Sailed Them* (Deal, 1929).
- ⁹ P. Bloomfield, *Kent and the Napoleonic Wars* (Gloucester, 1987) p. 25.
- ¹⁰ The Deal censuses 1801–1831 survive among the Deal parish records and have been published by the Kent Family History Society as microfiche publications nos. 177 and 172.
- ¹¹ T.J. Sharp, 'How Does *The Times* Illustrate the History, Importance and Position of Deal, 1790–1815?' University of Kent at Canterbury, unpublished extended essay (1974), p. 4.
- ¹² S. Pritchard, *The History of Deal and its Neighbourhood* (Deal, 1864), p. 247.
- ¹³ P.R.O. Adm. 42/375, 378, Deal Naval Yard Paylists.
- ¹⁴ W. Stanton, *The Journal of William Stanton, Pilot of Deal* (Portsmouth, 1929), p. 11.
- ¹⁵ W. Cobbett, *Rural Rides* (Penguin, 1967 edn.), p. 203.
- ¹⁶ Stanton, *op. cit.*, p. 46.
- ¹⁷ B[ritish] P[arliamentary] P[apers] 1833, VII, 'Report from the Select Committee on Cinque Ports Pilots', pp. 533, 535, 542, 564.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 527. The boatmen's smuggling and wrecking activities will be considered in detail in J. Bower, 'The Deal Boatmen – Heroes or Villains', forthcoming.
- ¹⁹ Pritchard, *op. cit.*, p. 247.
- ²⁰ H. Benham, *The Salvagers* (Colchester, 1980), p. 4; Parliamentary Papers 1843, *Report from the Select Committee on Shipwrecks*.
- ²¹ *The Times*, 7 Oct. 1858.
- ²² R. Larn, *Goodwin Sands Shipwrecks* (Newton Abbot, 1977); J. Morris, *The Story of the Dover Lifeboats* (2nd edn, 1988).
- ²³ Treanor, *op. cit.*, p. 84; *Deal Mercury*, 15 July 1871.
- ²⁴ Treanor, *op. cit.*, p. 57; Pain, *op. cit.*, pp. 49, 81.
- ²⁵ G.S. Graham, 'The Ascendancy of the Sailing Ship', *Economic History Review*, 2 Ser., IX (1956–57), p. 74.
- ²⁶ *Deal Mercury*, 27 Feb. 1869 and 19 Nov. 1870.
- ²⁷ J. Laker, *History of Deal* (Deal, 1917), p. 405.
- ²⁸ *Deal Telegram*, 21 Nov. 1863. *Deal Mercury*, 12 July 1873. Pain, *op. cit.*, p. 66.
- ²⁹ H. Russell, *The Longshoreman* (1896), p. 97.
- ³⁰ Treanor, *op. cit.*, p. 52.
- ³¹ *Deal Telegram*, 1 Nov. 1862.
- ³² *Deal Mercury*, 26 Feb. and 11 Mar. 1876; Pain, *op. cit.*, p. 16.
- ³³ BPP, 'Select Committee on Cinque Ports Pilots', 1833, pp. 677, 682. BPP, 1863, 'Report from the Commissioners of Sea Fisheries of the United Kingdom' p. 439. Russell, *op. cit.*, p. 72.
- ³⁴ *Deal Mercury* and *The Deal Telegram*, various issues; Pain, *loc. cit.*
- ³⁵ *Deal Telegram*, 9 Nov. 1859.
- ³⁶ Pain, *op. cit.*, p. 128.
- ³⁷ G. Best, *Mid-Victorian Britain 1851–75* (1979), p. 283.
- ³⁸ *Deal Mercury* and *Deal Telegram*, various issues.
- ³⁹ *Deal Telegram*, 14 Oct. 1865.
- ⁴⁰ Laker, *loc. cit.* *Deal Mercury* and *Deal Telegram*, various issues. The railway arrived in Deal in 1847, but passengers from London had to travel via Ashford and Canterbury, then change at Minster for Sandwich and Deal. The inconvenience of this was given as another reason why a pier should be built. Passenger steamers would be able to berth alongside a pier and visitors would thus be encouraged to travel to Deal by water. The rail link between Deal and Dover was completed in 1881. The rail journey to Deal was shortened but remained longer than the journey to any other Kent resort.

⁴¹ M. Daunton, 'Public Place and Private Space', D. Fraser and A. Sutcliffe (eds.), *The Pursuit of Urban History* (1983), p. 212.

⁴² Laker, *loc. cit.*; Pain, *loc. cit.*

⁴³ *Deal Telegram*, 6 Apr. 1859, 10 Aug. 1861, 11 Oct. 1862, 1 Aug. 1863.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 3 Dec. 1870.

⁴⁵ *Deal Mercury*, 31 July 1880.

⁴⁶ *Deal Telegram*, June 1859, various issues.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 21 July 1866.

⁴⁸ *Deal Mercury*, 21 Jan 1871.

⁴⁹ Pain, *op. cit.*, p.167; *Deal Mercury* 10 Feb. 1883.

⁵⁰ *Deal Mercury*, 9 and 16 Apr. 1881. Pain, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

⁵¹ S. Gerald, 'Deal Beach', *The Pall Mall Magazine* (1893), p. 367.