

Review Article

New Light on the Cinque Ports

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Gillian Draper and Frank Meddens, *The Sea and the Marsh: The Medieval Cinque Port of New Romney revealed through Archaeological Excavations and Historical Research*, Pre-Construct Archaeology Monograph 10 (2009), pp. x + 143, £16.95; Gillian Draper, *Rye. A History of a Sussex Cinque Port to 1660*, Phillimore (Chichester 2009), pp. xvi + 270, £25; David and Barbara Martin (with Jane Chubb and Gillian Draper), *Rye Rebuilt: Regeneration and Decline within a Sussex Port Town, 1350–1660* Domtom Publishing for the Romney Marsh Research Fund (2009), pp. viii + 306, £30; Helen Clarke, Sarah Pearson, Mavis Mate and Keith Parfitt, *Sandwich. The 'Completest Medieval Town in England'. A Study of the Town and Port from its Origins to 1600*, Oxbow Books (Oxford and Oakville 2010), xviii + 326, £35.

This is a rich collection of books drawing on a wide range of expertise from different disciplines and skills – archaeology, climate study, dendrochronology (and timber-frame typology), history, standing buildings research, topographical analysis and so on – which produces a thought-provoking series of texts. The authors and sponsors of the works are equally diverse, English Heritage, local authorities, charitable trusts, museums, Sainsbury's plc, a range of universities, and last but not least an army of volunteers whose contributions were indispensable. The roll-call of those involved in these works is also testimony to their high quality: university scholars from Belfast, Kent (and Christchurch, Canterbury), Kingston, London and elsewhere and a range of specialists across the disciplines. The key person in three of these four works is Gillian Draper whose background bridges the swirling torrent which so often divides local history from academia – she is Development Officer for the British Association for Local History and an associate lecturer at the University of Kent. This divide has been unfortunately enhanced in recent years by muddled rewarding

of so-called 'international' scholarship by the universities Research Assessment Exercise (henceforward Research Excellence Framework). These works may focus on a range of apparently small towns in east Sussex and Kent, although c.1550 Rye was the largest town in either Kent or Sussex. The quality of the scholarship in many areas shines through and is of wider than local significance in urban studies.

The original Cinque Ports, arguably co-ordinated before the Conquest of 1066, were Sandwich, Dover, Hythe, New Romney and Hastings. Winchelsea and Rye were added to the group thereafter along with other settlements. Thus the books reviewed here provide a section through the group, including both pre- and post-Conquest constituent towns, but excluding Dover, Hythe and Hastings. There are surprising contrasts, as well as similarities, in the development of the three towns. New Romney, a pre-Conquest town with a mint; (Old) Winchelsea, which until it was drowned after 1250 neighboured Rye, probably had a mint as early as the reign of Edgar (973–9). Rye, origin uncertain but probably the '*Novus Burgus*' of 64 citizens in 1086, had a mint in the reign of Henry I (c. 1115). Sandwich had a mint from the beginning of Edward the Confessor's reign (1042–66). These mints indicate royal interest and patronage, as might be expected for a group of ports involved both in trade with the continent and in the defence of the realm. The defence turned out to be unsuccessful in 1066, though it is notable that the Conqueror outflanked this 'Meginot line' to the west by landing at Pevensey.

New Romney, Rye and Sandwich are now inland by several kilometres. (Old) Winchelsea lies under the sea. The three surviving ports flourished from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries, finding the going difficult as the 1200s proceeded. In that area of Britain, still sinking today, the increasingly violent storms which heralded the beginning of the cooler period, the little ice-age from c 1300, are noted. They contributed to the destruction of Old Winchelsea and the partial desertion of New Romney. Perhaps most remarkable was the great storm of 1287 (or storms in 1287–88) which caused 'tsunami-type' destruction and apparently left considerable areas covered in 'coarse sandy material over much of the townscape' of New Romney, where the detritus of preceding periods was truncated, stirred up and redeposited, thus contributing to the headaches of specialists dealing with finds from the former foreshore, whose task was already more complex because of unstratified materials brought in by metal detectorists. In this regard Geoff Egan's report on these demanding finds is exemplary (*New Romney*, pp. 85–95, 113). All the towns were affected first by the deteriorating climate and famine after 1300 and second by the Black

Death, which may have reduced the population of Sandwich by half between c 1350 and 1400, perhaps from 5,000 to 2,500. By the mid-fifteenth century there were maybe as few as 1,000 people at Rye. To the trials of intermittent plague were added the effects of recurrent war – Rye was captured briefly by the French in 1216 – but worst in the French raids of the early part of the Hundred Years' War after at Rye, sacked in 1339, and at Sandwich when again looted by the French following the end of the war, in 1457. New Romney, by contrast seems to have escaped French attention paradoxically because it had no defences and also because by the mid fourteenth century it was in headlong decline. Although Rye held out longest, eventually all three towns were affected by the silting up of their harbours, changes in direction and alignment of the water-courses on which their maritime trade and commerce depended and became, as they are today, inland towns.

Gillian Draper's *Rye* is a detailed and scholarly history of the town to 1660 (that carefully sidesteps the fraught issue of the date of original location and origins). The Martins' *Rye Rebuilt* was designed as its companion volume and contains, as might be expected from the experienced authors who have been working on the project since 1977, an impressive array of data – datings, drawings, maps and plans relating to buildings in the town and suburbs as well as an overview of the development of Rye. The two books are certainly stand-alone texts, each sufficient in their own right. However, they also complement one another: and in certain respects are indivisible. For example in *Rye* there is no street map of the town until p. 152 which shows the town in 1667 whereas in the *Rye Rebuilt* there are excellent, colour street maps including the 1667 map, larger scale and in colour on p. 18. The somewhat random and briefly captioned colour illustrations bound in at the beginning of *Rye*, which look like an afterthought, could usefully have included a coloured map of the town as seen in *Rye Rebuilt*. *Sandwich* on the other hand has splendid street maps repeated on the endpapers which provide a companion to the text. *New Romney* contains a series of GIS-generated street plans which recur throughout the text recycled to show different aspects of development, parishes etc within the town. Historic maps of all three towns are incorporated in the texts.

The detailed study of buildings is a major focus of two of the books: *Rye Rebuilt* and *Sandwich*. Of these collections of buildings, those at Sandwich are the more numerous and significant representing an estimated 15 per cent of the buildings required by the households in the early sixteenth century and 20 per cent of those required by 1560 – significantly higher than elsewhere. What is even more significant

is that the Sandwich houses represent the houses and workshops of the middling sort of people, 'those who prospered as a result of the opportunities presented by a severely reduced population' (p. 267). These houses emerge some generations after the Black Death, from the early fifteenth century, and display characteristics of organisation within the townscape (gable end to the street) and crowd into the centre of the town as the population declined and the town shrank. Indeed the authors feel it necessary to defend their study of the houses in a community which became 'a small regional town'. There is no necessity for them to hold back – medieval Southampton was perhaps never as populous as Sandwich while Winchester's population 11,625 to take Derek Keene's figure in 1300, was perhaps little more than a third of that size by 1400. Nor do the comparisons end there. In Winchester, similarly, the timber framed buildings begin again, like Sandwich, in the centre of the town about 1460 with buildings of smaller scantling end on to the street. At Winchester, as at Sandwich there is a building boom after the Black Death, largely of stone and institutional at Winchester in contrast to Sandwich's timber frames. Certainly a contrast in building types, but both towns experienced a building boom in these years.

As a collection these four volumes show widely differing approaches to their topics. Gillian Draper's *Rye* is first and foremost a work of history. Apart from a diversion into discussion of work in 2007 by 'gouge auger' in St Mary's Marsh and a discussion of the architectural development of the church, the focus is always documentary. This research has been prodigious and is especially valuable for the pre-1350 period where the Martins take up the story in *Rye Rebuilt*. The illustrations include photographs of documents, tally-stick and other elements of historical sources. There is a mass of data ranged through the period according to the survival of the sources. This will be a treasure trove for historians looking for details of pre-modern urban existence. There is a summary concluding chapter at the end, but summaries along the way would have assisted the reader. *Rye Rebuilt* provides the buildings evidence not found in the purely historical account. It is in many ways more accessible with many maps and the drawings of the many buildings which have been surveyed over the years.

New Romney integrates historical sources with the material remains from the excavation and other available data from metal detectorists and others. This provides a rounded picture where archaeology contributes in its own right to the account provided of the development of the town. *Sandwich* is the fullest account in any of the four volumes, in some respects not surprisingly given the depth of support and sponsorship of

the work and the volume. It shows how the integration of the different approaches can enrich the study of a town providing the opportunity for gaps in the written record to be filled by evidence not available in the written record. These four books all have significant contributions to make and all will be of value to scholars interested in seaports, trade, commerce, buildings, local government etc across southern England and elsewhere. The use of the A4 format for three of the four books – all except Rye – is a great success allowing ample space for copious illustrations, GIS generated maps, reconstructions of houses etc. The constricted, and rather old-fashioned layout and appearance of *Rye* published by Phillimore, certainly inhibited attempts to include more illustrations. In the end, however, the contributions to knowledge are contrasting and Gillian Draper is to be congratulated on her generous contributions to all the work on Rye and New Romney. Her knowledge and energy have helped to bring all three works to publication. *Sandwich* lacked the detail of the historical account, its strength being in the work especially of Sarah Pearson in the exceptional study of the buildings in that most northerly of the Cinque Ports.

These are complementary texts which bring into focus a group of ports which are perhaps more important and significant in the wider study of southern England than their authors and contributors allow. They deserve a wider readership than their apparently 'local' focus perhaps suggests at first sight.