

HISTORY

Thanet's Historic Pubs

Thanet's rich history can be traced by its taverns and pubs. Witness to war, recession and social and economic change, they have been born, adapted to change - or lost along the way. Kaz Russell goes on a historic pub crawl.



Illustration of the Queens Head in Ramsgate by David Case from the collection: *Iconic Buildings of Thanet* (see p25)

For most of history, alcoholic drinks were safer than water. Indeed, Ian Dickie from Margate Museum says there is evidence of Neolithic 'breweries', where it's probable that barley from baking got wet and fermented, leading to a healthy

(and happy!) increase in barley growing. The Romans catered for thirsty road travellers in 'Tabernae', shops that sold wine, from which tavern is derived.

In England, until after the Middle Ages, ale – produced from malt, unhopped, and sometimes fla-

“In the 1750s, Cecil Square and the assembly rooms, were for the grand people, including high class women, to drink and socialise,” explains Mr Dickie. “The hoi polloi drank elsewhere.”



The stained glass window at the Artillery Arms in Ramsgate

voured with herbs such as wormwood - was the national drink. Water was not safe, and milk, produced around calving time, was too valuable for drinking, being saved for butter and cheese. Ale was produced by women – ale wives or brewsters – and everyone, from children to adults drank it, in varying strengths, but always with some alcohol to provide a safe drink. It wasn't until the early 1500s, when the Dutch introduced hops as a crop in Kent, that beer was first brewed in England, using hops as a preservative, with the bittering effect gradually accepted by the English beer drinker. By 1550, beer, brewed with hops, was here to stay. Soon, an act was passed requiring innkeepers to have a licence to run a public house, and by 1577, there was reckoned to be an incredible one pub for every 200 people across the land. As one of Thanet's oldest pubs, **The Red Lion**, once the Red Lion, has been witness to so much of the isle's history. Dating back to the 1600s, drinkers will have supped here during the civil war, when Thanet, like the rest of the country, was at daggers drawn.

Some public houses brewed their own beer, while others were tied to breweries. Thanet was home to some of England's oldest breweries. Tomson and Wotton, founded in 1634 in Ramsgate, sadly no longer exists, but is England's oldest brewery, and Cobb and Co was the biggest brewery in Margate. Founded in 1673, it was purchased and then soon closed by Whitbread in the late 1960s, and the building demolished in 1971. A similar fate was met by Tomson and Wotton. But Kent is still served by Shepherd Neame, Britain's oldest brewery, based in Faversham.

However, the industry has adapted and a wave of proud, enterprising smaller breweries - led by Gadds' some 20 years ago, and including Wantsum, Northdown and Xylo - has arrived on Thanet's shores, ready to satisfy the thirst and taste buds of discerning drinkers.

Thanet pubs have always served different needs.

Whether reflecting the lives of fishermen or sailors, villagers who worked in agriculture, rascally smugglers, billeted soldiers, weary travellers, or the rich and fancy visitors expecting the highest level of establishment, Thanet provided a drinking establishment for them all. The region benefitted from the decrease in power of Sandwich as a cinque port. The popularity of bathing and the arrival of well-to-do visitors by steamer heralded high class establishments, with the resort of Margate held in high repute across Europe, and its hostelrys beyond reproach.

“In the 1750s, Cecil Square and the assembly rooms, were for the grand people, including high class women, to drink and socialise,” explains Mr Dickie. “The hoi polloi drank elsewhere.” Workers' houses, such as fishermen's cottages, were often tiny, yet might be home to several generations of a family – making it a good excuse for men to go to the pub after work. “If you saw a woman in a pub, you might assume she was a lady of the night,” explains Mr Dickie.

With so many residents connected to fishing and the sea, there have always been plenty of pubs for them to frequent. **The Queen's Head** in Ramsgate, now a sports bar, has hosted drinkers since at least 1835, when the landlord doubled as an auctioneer, and it was mostly frequented by seafarers. All that changed in 1933, when it was demolished and transformed into a very much grander pub/hotel establishment, which even incorporated a sweet shop on the corner of Lombard Street.

The Foy Boat in Margate was named for the foy boats which serviced the larger sailing ships awaiting the right wind. They also acted as lifeboats. It once stood alongside the Duke's Head Inn and The Ship, the latter and The Foy both dating from Margate's fishing village days. The Old Ship and adjoining Metropole Hotel, frequented by JMW Turner, were

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“The tables are said to be made from the timber of the Northern Belle and Turner is said to have stayed here, too.”

Tartar Frigate in Broadstairs



Ted Heath at the Tartar Frigate



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demolished in redevelopment after the war.

Charles Dickens and Ted Heath both noted **The Tartar Frigate** in Broadstairs as a favourite drinking place. This flint building, in a prime spot opposite the harbour, is named after HMS Tartar, a frigate built in the local shipyard. It dates from the 18th century, though it's thought a pub has stood here since Elizabethan times. The earliest inns set up close to religious shrines to reap good trade, so **The Dolphin Inn's** proximity to the remains of St Mary's Chapel in the same town is no coincidence. Dating from at least 1600, The Dolphin was also hallowed by seafarers (it was reckoned dolphins would assist fishermen in distress), and passing ships would dip their top sails in salute. Beneath the pub are caves and tunnels suggesting possible smuggling connections, and in 1831, yeoman farmers held a vigilante meeting here to protect against vandalising disaffected farm labourers. It was even saved from flames in 1867 by enthusiastic regulars!

The Northern Belle, the oldest standing pub in Margate, emerged from two fishermen cottages. Built in 1680, when it served seafarers and was known as the Waterman's Arms, it later changed to Aurora Borealis. Its current name was bestowed after an American merchant ship ran aground off North Foreland in 1857. A heroic rescue by lifeboats ended tragically for the crew of one of them, Margate's Victory, which was lost at sea – and it's said to be haunted by a woman shrouded in white. Experienced landlady Sharon Summers is the licensee of the Northern Belle, where regulars enjoy the traditional atmosphere of a strictly 'no TV' pub. “The tables are said to be made from

the timber of the Northern Belle and Turner is said to have stayed here, too,” Sharon explains. The pub was recently highlighted on the BBC's *The Turner Prize*, which created a rush of interested visitors. Some things might not have changed, but Sharon assures that women can comfortably drink here without raising an eyebrow.

The controversial 1830 Beer Act, partly introduced to 'wean' the public off stronger drinks like gin, allowed ordinary houses to set up as pubs selling beer. It's likely that the original owners of **The Elephant and Castle** in Ramsgate took advantage of the change in the law. The name may come from the crest of the Cutler Company, which traded in ivory, or could be a corruption of 'the Infanta de Castile' (Spanish Princess). Their neighbours, **The Peacock** and **The Princess of Wales**, sadly no longer there, were also swift to benefit.

When the railway came in 1846, a different class of tripper arrived – and when bank holidays were introduced in 1906, a seaside trip became attainable for the lower end of the social scale. With so much history, it's no surprise that some changed name, or were named for an important event. **The Montefiore Arms**, once tied to Flint and Co of Canterbury, and now Gadds', started life as two cottages. Sir Moses Montefiore had deep connections with Ramsgate and was a great benefactor to the town's poor. When he died in 1884, the publican renamed the pub in his honour. The cellar at **The Rose in June** in Margate was once connected to tunnels and said to be the home of ghosts, but the pub was named after a boat once berthed in Margate harbour. It also supplies historical evidence of different social values, for in true Dickensian style, in 1832 this post-Beer Act 'front parlour pub' recorded payments for child labour openly on its books.

A town based on agriculture, shipping and a smidge of smuggling, Ramsgate benefitted from accommodating troops and curious hangers on during the Napoleonic wars. From then on, the desire for sea air and a view intensified property development. **The Artillery Arms**, Grade II listed and originally the Ash Arms, boasts leaded glass bow windows depicting soldiers and cannon from the Napoleonic wars, and is rumoured to have been used at various times as an officers' billet and a brothel. Believed to

The Montefiore Arms, named after Ramsgate's great benefactor, Sir Moses Montefiore (right)

be dated from 1840, the petition for its official licence in 1869 described it as being for “gentlemen of the highest respectability”.

The census of 1851 shows Margate and Ramsgate greatly expanded, and the 19th century was dominated by holiday trade, with accommodation often rented out for ‘the season’. More visitors meant more jobs – and more pubs.

Broadstairs had connections to dealers in contraband, including the notorious St Peter’s gang, with *The Fig Tree* a rendezvous for rascals and reprobates guaranteed to find smuggling work. Further away in Birchington, smugglers also frequented **The Powell Arms**. Named after Squire Powell Cotton of Quex, the High Sheriff of Kent in 1823, another connection was with ‘Jimmy Landy’, one of the last Birchington ‘owlers’ (died 1906), who was known to sell duty free contraband, such as brandy, gin, tea and tobacco. The pub has a long history, with evidence that it ‘evolved’ from its position next door to the church (parts of which may date to the 12th century) and was used as a village meeting place. Its original name of the New Inn indicates that it was built on the site of ancient hostelries, and in 1768, hoping for well-to-do clientele, it advertised accommodation to ‘the genteel company’.

Thanet’s pubs have catered for all sorts, from fishing village seafarers, to elite clientele, and as a hugely popular holiday resort, to visiting mods and rockers, and now art lovers, adapting to keep up, and even offering hotel accommodation. They suffered during the difficult years of the end of the 20th century and continued to close into the 21st century. However, in 2020, the pub industry looks like it is bouncing back, and for the first time in 15 years, there is even an increase in the numbers of pubs, in particular small and independent ones. There



are still huge differences in each pub’s character and clientele, though they tend to more readily cross the class divide, and are even welcome to women!

Whether old, new, closed, or still standing strong, exploring the isle’s amazing historic pubs, far too numerous to mention here, is a perfect way to absorb the region’s rich history – and its vibrant present.

With thanks and respect to *Thanet Pubs* by John Land

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