



## Ramsgate Royal Harbour

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<https://www.thanet.gov.uk/locations/ramsgate-royal-harbour/>

Ramsgate Royal Harbour is located on the East Kent coast, owned and operated by Thanet District Council's Port of Ramsgate authority. Aside from its exceptionally well-preserved Georgian maritime infrastructure, the harbour contains a significant number of historic vessels listed on the National Register of Historic Vessels, including two National Historic Fleet vessels and various maritime skills providers.

The harbour is not currently undergoing any significant regeneration projects, although there have been efforts to revive the harbour's function as a regional and national tourist attraction. The Ramsgate Coastal Community have recently restored the late Victorian Pulhamite Rock Gardens (2018), while the Ramsgate Tunnels are being developed into a visitor attraction with Heritage Lottery Funding to open in 2024. There is a high degree of civic and heritage involvement in the harbour's historic character, and it is likely that future developments will be sympathetic. The primary threat to the harbour is derived from local economic decline, with Ramsgate suffering, as have all seaside towns, from a decrease in recent years of seaside holidays in favour of travel abroad, and also from reduced footfall due to COVID lockdowns.



## Brief history of Ramsgate Harbour

Ramsgate Royal Harbour is located on the East Kent coast, owned and operated by Thanet District Council's Port of Ramsgate authority. The harbour today is used primarily by cross-channel freight, with connections to European ports from Boulogne and Calais north to Rotterdam, and by small working and pleasure boats. Construction began in 1749 in response to its crucial role as a safe harbour for local vessels during the Great Storm of 1748 and was finally completed in 1850. Numerous additions were made during the later 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries by renowned architects and civil engineers, including lighthouses designed by Samuel Wyatt (1794) and James Shaw Jr. (1842); a new Dry Dock with elaborate sluicing systems by John Rennie (1816), and a Seamen's infirmary (1848).<sup>1</sup>

Its royal designation by George IV in 1821 marks Ramsgate with national historical significance, being the only Royal Harbour in Britain. Whether this was in gratitude for its hospitality and congratulations for his embarkment to Hanover for accession to its crown, or to spite Dover for its warm welcome of his much-hated wife Caroline of Brunswick in 1795, Ramsgate continued to hold unusual national significance.<sup>2</sup> Where it was designated into the defensive confederacy of Cinque Ports in the medieval period, it went on to play a major role in the Napoleonic Wars (1803-15) for both departing and returning vessels, and in Operation Dynamo (1940) where almost 80,000 troops disembarked at Ramsgate, and a third of all Dunkirk survivors were rescued by Ramsgate's 850 'Little Ships of Dunkirk'.<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Wyatt's Clock House (1817), designed in the harbour on the Ramsgate Meridian Line - being 5 minutes, 41 seconds ahead of GMT – currently houses the Ramsgate Maritime Museum.

Alongside its defensive functions, Ramsgate also transformed into a seaside leisure resort in the 18<sup>th</sup> century: a progression which can be dated to the first canopied bathing machine on Ramsgate beach in 1754. It is during this period that associations were forged with historical figures of political, cultural and even religious significance. Princess Alexandrina Victoria of Kent, later to become Queen Victoria, first visited Ramsgate in 1823, staying in Townley House and later Albion House (both still extant). Vincent Van Gogh visited in 1876, as did Charles Dickens whilst staying at Broadstairs, who went on to write the short story 'The Tuggs at Ramsgate' (1837). A.W.N Pugin and his son E.W. Pugin, both accomplished 19<sup>th</sup> century architects, worked in Ramsgate, and much of their work can still be seen. A.W.N Pugin's work on West Cliff included the Roman Catholic St Augustine's Church and the Grange complex (1843-51), which have recently undergone restoration with Heritage Lottery funding (2017), and E.W. Pugin's Granville Hotel, complete with saline baths (1869).<sup>4</sup>

## Associations and interested parties

**Governmental and sub-governmental:** Ramsgate, partly by virtue of its remarkably well-preserved and complete Georgian architecture and picturesque harbourside location, has several parties and initiatives interested in the protection of its heritage and setting. Natural England has advised the creation of the Thanet Coast Marine Conservation Zone (2013), extending to the northern wall of Ramsgate harbour, which protects the harbour waters and its species over-development and pollution. Heritage England (HE) created the Ramsgate Heritage Action Zone (HAZ) in April 2017, seeking to *"...help grow Ramsgate into a prosperous maritime town where outstanding heritage and architecture coupled with new investment and development strengthens the economy for the benefit of the community"*.<sup>5</sup> HE also designated the Ramsgate High Street Heritage Action Zone (HHAZ) in March 2020 to protect and redevelop its historic high street with government funding of £1,110,965 which reaches to the harbour-end of Ramsgate high street.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Geraint Franklin et al, 'Ramsgate: the town and its seaside heritage' (2020), 16, 52, 154.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.bbc.co.uk/kent/content/articles/2005/06/24/coast05walks\\_stage2.shtml](https://www.bbc.co.uk/kent/content/articles/2005/06/24/coast05walks_stage2.shtml) (Accessed 12/4/22)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.citizen.org.uk/blog/2020/Jun/03/ramsgate-harbour-dunkirk-80th-anniversary/> (Accessed 12/04/22)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.landmarktrust.org.uk/search-and-book/landmark-groups/ramsgate/#Search> (Accessed 12/04/22)

<sup>5</sup> <https://historicengland.org.uk/services-skills/heritage-action-zones/ramsgate/> (Accessed 12/04/22)

<sup>6</sup> <https://historicengland.org.uk/whats-new/news/funding-for-historic-high-streets-recovery/> (Accessed 12/04/22)



Thanet District Council has designated Conservation Areas in the harbour and its surroundings. Under its direction, additional planning controls are implemented on account of:

*“...a valued distinctive character which the Council considers deserves special protection. Key elements of a Conservation Area include the architectural design or historic interest of buildings, the materials, colour and texture; the contribution of green and open spaces; street patterns and spaces between buildings and views in and out of the area.”*

The need for connection between harbour and high street heritage has been discussed by HE, acknowledging Ramsgate harbour as “an obvious focus for heritage-led development...increasing public access and improving the connection between the town and the harbour could stimulate Ramsgate’s economic development”.<sup>8</sup> There is a particular interest, on the part of HE, in the revival of a local fishmarket for the sale of catch from Ramsgate’s fishing fleet, for instance, which had existed at York Street (1839) and later on the harbour crosswall (1880). Through the restoration of a local harbourside industry, a focal point for residents and visitors could be located in the harbour, and local residents, businesses and restaurants could sell locally caught fish.

The Coastal and Intertidal Zone Archaeological Network, CITiZAN, in partnership with HE and various parties, has created a digital Low Tide Trail (LTT) for Ramsgate Harbour.<sup>9</sup> The organisation seeks, in all its LTTs, to encourage the recording and investigation of archaeological features exposed on foreshores at low tide. While the significant evidential histories of Ramsgate harbour commence from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, there is potential for medieval and prehistoric studies around the harbour landscape. The wider coastal context and inland high street heritage are both ongoing interests of organisations which would be of relevance to any future heritage works.

**Local interest groups:** The Ramsgate Society has a wide remit, including the monitoring, protection and promotion of historic buildings; organisation of litter-picking and tree-planting activities; involvement in town planning and design; and engagement with local schools, community groups and charities. It has a significant social media presence, with a mailing list and monthly newsletters, as well as Facebook and Twitter pages. It is also a partner in the Ramsgate HAZ. The Ramsgate Historical Society group on Facebook has a sizeable following, with which historic photographs of Ramsgate are shared and discussed.<sup>10</sup> The local group who run guided tours of the Ramsgate Tunnels also share an interest in any local heritage schemes, with the subterranean WW2 air-raid shelters being a relatively unknown but sizeable heritage asset of both town and harbour.<sup>11</sup>

There are also youth projects and groups, who have worked with local heritage, or would benefit from doing so. The Project MotorHouse charity, formed initially to save a derelict site on Ramsgate seafront, continues to produce heritage-based projects and opportunities for training in heritage conservation. The Ramsgate & Broadstairs Sea Cadets and the Thanet Lifeguard Club also use harbourside facilities for skills training, water safety talks and community activities.

**Maritime infrastructure and businesses:** Ramsgate has a well-established base of maritime skills and service providers, registered on the Shipshape Network Directory of Skills & Servicesills. In March 2022, the ‘Ramsgate Conservation Area Appraisal’, drafted on behalf of Thanet District Council, demanded consideration of the

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<sup>7</sup> Franklin, 146.

<sup>8</sup> Franklin, 144.

<sup>9</sup> <https://citizan.org.uk/low-tide-trails/ramsgate-harbour/> (Accessed 12/04/22)

<sup>10</sup> ‘The Ramsgate Historical Society’ Facebook group has 10, 182 followers as of 13/04/22

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.subbrit.org.uk/sites/ramsgate-air-raid-shelter-and-scenic-railway/> (Accessed 18/04/22)



“local distinctiveness that stems from the continuation of a variety of traditional activities” in future developments, and specifically included “sail lofts on the harbour” and “small industrial workshops”.<sup>12</sup>

- Ramsgate Harbour Slipways
- Ramsgate Marine Services Ltd.
- Mike Roberts
- Cory Yachts International
- Northrop Sails Ltd.
- Pedro Boats UK/ Dover Sea School
- George Hammond PLC
- The Dinghy Store<sup>13</sup>

Ramsgate Harbour Slipways operates three historic slipways in the Royal Harbour, which are currently in commercial use, as well as a significant complex of berths for 700 craft.<sup>14</sup>

### Condition of heritage assets

**Existing protections:** Ramsgate town and harbour has 450 listed buildings, one Scheduled Monument, and one Grade II listed Parks and Gardens site. Many of these sites are concentrated on the harbourside and include numerous examples of Georgian civil engineering and 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century functional buildings. The Royal Harbour is Grade II\* listed, incorporating much of the surviving infrastructure including Rennie’s Dry Dock and sluicing system, the basin gates and Dundee steps.<sup>15</sup> There are seven vessels on the National Historic Ships Registers associated with Ramsgate, including *Cervia* and *Sundowner* are National Historic Fleet vessels. A number of registered vessels were, like *Sundowner* and *Medway Queen*, associated with the Dunkirk evacuation, and others also saw military service. In light of growing interest by national groups in cataloguing and protecting assets associated with WW1 and WW2 on the south coast,<sup>16</sup> the mooring of such vessels could be contained within wider histories of wartime Ramsgate, as will be discussed in ‘threats and opportunities’.

### Registered Historic Vessels associated with Ramsgate Harbour:

Registered vessel	Details
<p><i>New Britannic</i></p> <p><a href="https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/543/new-britannic">https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/543/new-britannic</a></p>	<p>54ft passenger vessel, built in 1930 by Frank Maynard of Chiswick.</p> <p>Originally ran excursions to Goodwin Sands/Deal, later working in Weymouth and the Scilly Isles.</p> <p>Restored by Dunkirk Little Ships Restoration Trust (1991); returned to Ramsgate in care of East Kent Maritime Trust (1997).</p>

<sup>12</sup> Alan Baxter, ‘Ramsgate Conservation Area Appraisal’ (2022), 377.

<sup>13</sup> [https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/shipshape-search?search\\_api\\_fulltext=ramsgate](https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/shipshape-search?search_api_fulltext=ramsgate)

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.harbourguides.com/harbours/Ramsgate> (Accessed 12/04/22); Franklin, 144.

<sup>15</sup> <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1336324> (Accessed 12/04/22)

<sup>16</sup> See Alistair Highton et al, ‘South Coast Ports in the First World War’ (2018).



<p><i>Cervia</i> (National Historic Fleet)</p> <p><a href="https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/5/cervia">https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/5/cervia</a></p>	<p>113ft steam service vessel, built in 1946 by Alexander Hall &amp; Co. of Aberdeen.</p> <p>Employed in towing duties between Channel ports, later capsized and sank in 1954 with the loss of her master and four crew.</p> <p>After being raised and restored in Ramsgate, returned to cross-channel services until loaned to Ramsgate Maritime Museum in 1985. <i>Cervia</i> is currently seeking a new home and is at risk of deconstruction.</p>
<p><i>Sundowner</i> (National Historic Fleet)</p> <p><a href="https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/96/sundowner">https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/96/sundowner</a></p>	<p>52ft naval pinnace, built in 1912 by the Admiralty at Sheerness Royal Naval Dockyard.</p> <p>Converted in 1930 to a private motor yacht, a configuration to which it was returned by conservation programme in August 1986.</p> <p>Wheelhouse was completely rebuilt after being blown off during hurricane of 1987. Engine re-installed at HM Dockyard, Rosyth in 1990.</p>
<p><i>Starbuck</i></p> <p><a href="https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/3502/starbuck">https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/3502/starbuck</a></p>	<p>50ft fishing trawler constructed in 1943 by Carnie in Scotland, under commission of the Admiralty.</p> <p>Decommissioned and sold to Brixham Fishing Fleet in 1945.</p>
<p><i>Ferry Nymph</i></p> <p><a href="https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/675/ferry-nymph">https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/675/ferry-nymph</a></p>	<p>40ft passenger vessel built in 1939 and, with sister ship <i>Southern Queen</i>, ferried passengers across entrance of Poole Harbour.</p> <p>Returned to original operations after Dunkirk evacuations until sold in 1963 to Ramsgate fisherman as herring drifter.</p> <p>Sank in Thames Estuary in 1994, but was salvaged and restored by Dunkirk Little Ships Association.</p>
<p><i>Sheemaun</i></p> <p><a href="https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/1939/sheemaun">https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/1939/sheemaun</a></p>	<p>45ft pleasure yacht constructed by James Noble &amp; Co. of Fraserburgh.</p> <p>After service in Merchant Navy, eventually came into possession of Pangbourne Nautical College as a training vessel.</p> <p>Underwent major refit between 2001-2004.</p>
<p><i>White Lady</i></p> <p><a href="https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/2134/white-lady">https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/2134/white-lady</a></p>	<p>45ft medium sized picket boat built in 1943 by John Thornycroft of London, commissioned by the Royal Navy.</p> <p>Stationed at Port Edgar (1943-68), later became Queen's Harbour Master's Launch in Devonport until 1981.</p>



**Successful restorations:** Ramsgate harbour has seen several successful heritage restoration initiatives in recent years. The Ramsgate Coastal Community Team was able to restore the Pulhamite Rock Gardens, supported by £50,000 from the government's Coastal Revival Fund (2018), which sought to initiate the regeneration of 'at risk' coastal heritage. A sizeable collection of artificial rockwork across five locations in Ramsgate Harbour, the gardens were commissioned between the 1890s and 1920-30s and are currently Grade II listed.<sup>17</sup> The Ramsgate Tunnels were awarded £84,500 by the Heritage Lottery Fund in January 2014, and are currently being developed into a sizeable visitor attraction to open in 2024.<sup>18</sup> S.D. Ahead's Royal Victoria Pavilion (1858) has been successfully restored, reopening as a J.D. Wetherspoon in 2017. Various registered historic vessels have been recently repaired or restored, including the paddle steamer *Medway Queen* which was towed to Ramsgate Slipways for repair and maintenance in 2021.

**Under threat or unknown:** The Clock Tower is currently on HE's Heritage at Risk register, and its maritime heritage collection has recently been damaged partly by leaks in the roof, and partly by a suspected arson attack in November 2020. Ramsgate Society has entered negotiations with the Steam Museum Trust to take over the site and its maritime heritage collection and is looking to seek assistance from the government's Levelling Up initiative.<sup>19</sup> The proximity of Ramsgate to the Goodwin Sands, containing 2,000 recorded shipwrecks dating as early as 1298, and to Dover and Folkestone, which were central supply ports in WW1 and WW2, the existence of submerged marine archaeological assets of significance is highly likely. HE's report 'Prehistory, landscape and Heterotopia' (2019) sought to emphasise Ramsgate's prehistory in association with its Heritage Action Zone designation, to:

*"...demonstrate conceptually the relevance of the archaeological past...and to present a set of stories that can be extracted for use in public engagement for the Heritage Action Zone project in Ramsgate".<sup>20</sup>*

Ramsgate's proximity to the Goodwin Sands and its sizable Maritime Museum collection, has led to excavation ships being docked on the harbour arm in Ramsgate, as did the team working at the Rooswijk wreck site (1740) in 2017.<sup>21</sup> Many of the artefacts similarly recovered from the HMS *Stirling Castle* (1679) in 1979-80 are displayed in Ramsgate Maritime Museum.

### Threats and opportunities:

Port of Ramsgate's Maritime Plan indicates that the harbour authorities are seeking to incorporate maritime heritage into their prospective development plans, and those restorations that have been completed are sympathetic to their heritage designations and their harbourside setting, largely due to Thanet District Council's Conservation Areas.<sup>22</sup> There appears to be a high degree of civic cohesion and communal identity invested in the historic harbour, with youth projects and organisations such as the Thanet Lifeguard club making use of the harbourside facilities, and heritage societies such as the Ramsgate Society organising open days and festivals to incorporate waterfront as well as high street businesses. HE has indicated the possibility for a nomination proposal for the Thanet-Ramsgate coastal area to be considered for UNESCO inscription, owing to its being "a key part of Britain's history and...[it's] unique marine archaeology".<sup>23</sup>

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.thanet.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/New\\_Ramsgate\\_Pulhamite\\_Leaflet\\_DL\\_A4-print\\_v2.pdf](https://www.thanet.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/New_Ramsgate_Pulhamite_Leaflet_DL_A4-print_v2.pdf) (Accessed 13/04/22)

<sup>18</sup> <https://theisleofthanetnews.com/2021/07/05/visitors-will-relive-two-pivotal-days-in-history-at-ambitious-ramsgate-tunnels-2024-project/> (Accessed 13/04/22)

<sup>19</sup> <https://theisleofthanetnews.com/2022/01/31/ownership-of-shipwreck-collection-at-ramsgate-maritime-museum-taken-over-due-to-concerns-over-poor-conditions/> (Accessed 13/04/22)

<sup>20</sup> Last, 2.

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.kentlive.news/news/kent-news/goodwin-sands-shipwreck-treasures-revealed-472056> (Accessed 13/04/22)

<sup>22</sup> 'Port of Ramsgate Maritime Plan' (2020)

<sup>23</sup> Franklin, 146.



A number of interested parties have expressed an interest in heritage-led development from the harbour, whilst also encouraging connectivity with its high street and the local economy. This can be seen most plainly in plans to reinstate a local fish market in Ramsgate, which is mentioned in HE's 'Ramsgate: Town and Seaside heritage' (2020), Port of Ramsgate's 'Maritime Plan' (2015) and Thanet District Council's 'Ramsgate Conservation Area Appraisal' (2022). The town has intermittently supported a fishing fleet since its medieval foundation, not becoming a commercial port until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which sold its catch on the quay and at fish markets on York Street (1839) and later on the harbour crosswall (1880). As HE has noted in its report, the construction of a fish market would revive a productive sector of the local economy, as well as providing a focal point for the cohesion of the local community as well as for tourists.<sup>24</sup>

Revival and regeneration of maritime industries would contribute to the preservation of a local trade as an intangible historic asset, and the employment and training of local people would aid its perpetuation, whilst also encouraging the consolidation of an historic communal identity at Ramsgate harbour. Such initiatives would attract tourism, Ramsgate having suffered as all seaside towns have done from the decline in recent years of seaside holidays in favour of travel abroad, and from reduced footfall due to COVID-19. With more visitors, thus more inflowing capital, businesses could invest more in local providers - the fish-market, for instance, could supply Ramsgate's restaurants with locally caught catch.

The current availability of berths in the Royal Harbour for 700 craft, the well-developed harbour authority which controls it, and the existing waterside skills and services providers would lend well to the docking of visiting historic vessels. Ramsgate's role in the Dunkirk evacuation is reflected through vessels such as *Medway Queen* and *Sundowner*, as well as the eighty-two 'Dunkirk Special Trains' transporting returning troops from Ramsgate station to Reading, via the North Kent Coast.<sup>25</sup> The harbour's role in Operation Dynamo could also be linked to other sites relating to its military history, including the network of subterranean air-raid shelters, and the conversion of E.W. Pugin's Granville Hotel into *The Granville Canadian Special Hospital* for shell shock and nervous injuries in 1915-17.<sup>26</sup> Given the amount of interest from local heritage societies, and the national significance of the Dunkirk evacuation in particular, there is potential for an oral history project to be initiated relating to the evacuation itself, as well as to the use of the air raid shelters and related infrastructures.

A similar initiative could be implemented relating Ramsgate's 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century history to that of the confederation of Cinque Ports, as well as the Napoleonic Wars. This is especially the case given the number of residential and functional buildings in the harbour dated to this period and relating to Britain's maritime history, and of the use of commemorative road names such as Nelson Crescent (1799-1809), Wellington Crescent (1818-24) and the Plains of Waterloo. Other historical associations could also be promoted, with lesser-known connections with literary and cultural figures such as Vincent Van Gogh, Charles Dickens and Jane Austen, whose brother Francis led the Ramsgate Sea Fencibles in defence of the Kentish coast during the Napoleonic Wars.

## Bibliography

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<sup>24</sup> Franklin, 146.

<sup>25</sup> [http://dunkirk1940.org/index.php?p=1\\_365](http://dunkirk1940.org/index.php?p=1_365) (Accessed 13/04/22)

<sup>26</sup> See also 'Ramsgate and the Dover Patrol'

[https://web.archive.org/web/20160415074304/http://ramsgatehistory.com/information/dover\\_patrol.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20160415074304/http://ramsgatehistory.com/information/dover_patrol.pdf) (Accessed 18/04/22)



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