



[It is intriguing to discover that there is an area of Britain that is subject to no controlling body – no planners, no public health authorities, no control by the Ministry of the Environment or the Department of Transport – it is free and unmolested though in itself it does pose a constant threat to one particular section of the community.]

One Evening in June

R. L. RATCLIFFE

S EVEN MILES EAST OF DEAL PIER there lies a large acreage of Kent over which no local authority has any jurisdiction. It is a sinister and peculiarly occasional land, this relic of the lost Island of Lomea, the very name of which has down the centuries struck terror into the hearts of the hardiest of seafarers. The bones of many a fine ship lie buried there, together with the bones of their crews, crushed in a thousand shipwrecks, frozen in winter gales or drowned as the tides twice daily reclaim the transient land which is the Goodwin.

It was thus with mixed thoughts that I took the opportunity to visit this place with a party organised by the Goodwin Sands Pot-Holing Club, a charitable organisation raising money for youth activities in East Kent. The fascination of discovering a new landscape was tempered by the knowledge of its past and of the graveyard that it is.

So it came about that I joined over 400 intrepid explorers at Dover's Hoverport on a glorious June evening, and what a mixed bag of extroverts they appeared to be. There were, of course, cricketers, for this sport has been a tradition of many a visit to the sands. There were those with picnic hampers, folding chairs, buckets and spades ... There were three gentlemen in evening dress, one in full mining gear complete with rope ladder, even

a “German” car park attendant, or rather U-boat park attendant. Eventually we were herded aboard the *Princess Anne* for the fifteen minute “flight”. Soaring out of Dover Harbour we were regaled by the standard bi-lingual tape about duty-frees, only to be told that this didn't actually apply! The sea was being the proverbial mill-pond (for those who could remember what mill-ponds once looked like) as we passed St. Margaret's Bay and the South Foreland. On north-eastward, we were advised by the captain that the two forlorn masts to port were those of the “Victory” ship of that name, the last of a trio of American ships that paid the price of false economy in not taking on pilots in the years after the Second World War. *North Eastern Victory* ploughed on to the South Sand Head at Christmastide 1946 and her cargo of grapefruit littered the shore from Ramsgate to Dover. Walmer lifeboat watched over her for three days and nights before the captain could be persuaded that his ship was finished and it was time for him to leave her.



Approaching the sands from the eastward, two miles north-west of the East Goodwin light vessel it was uncanny to be aboard a craft that was deliberately running ashore – quite safely – with 424 happy passengers intent on a “good time”. How many multiples of 424 would over the centuries have given all they possessed to be making the return trip. As it was, we landed twice. Once to disembark the TVS camera crew so that it could film us “arriving”, and then to allow us to land for a one and a half hour exploration.

Even at low tide there was a lot of water on the sands, in the form of shallow pools, though the sand in between was firm, unless you stood still. To the eastward the edge of the sand met the North Sea in a straight line reminiscent of any shore-connected beach, and we humans wandered along this sand, watching the seals that we had temporarily deposed, who in turn watched us in the knowledge that they would be the ultimate possessors. It was a glorious evening, with the sun sinking slowly to the westward over the Kentish shore. On that side the edge of the sand is far less finite, with a series of inlets, gullies and swatchways forming Trinity Bay. Some of the party wandered far off in this direction, to form specks on the horizon, though most stayed within a quarter of a mile of the Hovercraft, eating strawberries, sipping champers, or sitting on shooting sticks and gazing seaward.

I did none of these things, spending my time photographing others so doing, and eventually



shedding shoes and socks to paddle across the shallows rather than walk round them. From the waters of one such pool there rose from the depths two grotesque and weed-covered arms in apparent supplication, all that today remains visible of one of the guardians of the sands, the South Goodwin Light Vessel that the sands claimed for themselves, together with her crew, back in the 1960s. It was an odd feeling to realise that she – and they – lay just beneath our feet, along with countless other ships and their crews.

But now the little pools were growing, and were joining together. The sand beneath our feet was feeling softer, for the tide was on the flood, and it was time for us to go. Aboard *Princess Anne* we executed a farewell waltz as only a hovercraft can, and then headed back for Dover. Behind us the seals reclaimed their sandbank as we thundered past the masts of the *North Eastern Victory*, sentinel today of more recent strandings. Fifteen minutes later we were back in Dover, with our cricket bats and shooting sticks and pot-holing gear, to disperse back to our homes across the county. Meanwhile the rising tide had again enveloped the great ship swallower, and in doing so had eradicated the evidence – the sand castle, the cigarette ends, the footprints of the 400 who dared to invade it on such a perfect evening.



EDITOR'S NOTE:

Bob Ratcliffe has long been a pillar of the City of Rochester Society and is now its President. Our Chairman, Jack Woolford, has known Mr Ratcliffe for many years through the Kent Federation of Amenity Societies and, by chance, met on the Goodwin Sands Pot-holing trip, which resulted in this article.

Mr Ratcliffe is also an expert on the history of transport in Kent and may address the Society in 1994 on the coming of the railways to Dover in the 1840's and 50's.

