



Down to the Sea Cranbrook to Rye

Much has been written about the lure of the sea and possibly John Masefield expressed it best in his evocative poem 'Sea Fever' which opens with the simple yearning "I must go down to the sea again". "The cure for anything is saltwater", wrote Isak Dinesen "sweat, tears or the sea."

In **Cranbrook** when the urge strikes, you might be tempted to reach for a map of Kent to select the nearest beach. With one of the longest and most varied coastlines in England, Kent has much to offer including the oyster bays of Whitstable and the iconic White Cliffs of Dover. But closer and more similar in style and character is the delightful, medieval town of **Rye** in East Sussex. While Cranbrook nestles in a valley and Rye is perched on a hill, both towns are characterised by a higgledy-piggledy arrangement of white weather boarded or rosy-bricked houses with red-tiled roofs exuding a charm that has always attracted artists and writers to both visit and take up residence.

The 19th century Cranbrook Colony established an artistic tradition in the town that is very much alive today and Vita Sackville West, with her wide circle of bookish friends, has left her poetic imprint at **Sissinghurst**. Much of the cultural heritage of Rye revolves around **Lamb House** where Henry James wrote many of his celebrated works and entertained such literary luminaries as H G Wells, Ford Maddox Ford, Rudyard Kipling, Max Beerbohm and Edith Wharton. A subsequent tenant was E F Benson who reinvented Rye as Tilling and Lamb House as Mallards, where his delicious creations, Mapp and Lucia, fought for social dominance of the town. The publisher, Brian Batsford and the writer Rumer Godden also lived there and the House, now owned by the National Trust, is open to the public two afternoons a week during the Summer.

Other literary figures associated with Rye include Radclyffe Hall, Mabel Lucy Atwell, Conrad Aiken, Spike Milligan and Rye's own swashbuckling pirate, Captain Pugwash, whose creators John and Priscilla Ryan are part of Rye's vibrant artistic community. The roll call of artists who have lived or been inspired to paint in Rye is extensive and can be seen at the **Rye Museum**. The Rye Art Gallery has frequent exhibitions of local artists and the thriving potteries of Rye continue the fine tradition of working with clay.

The 20th century may have seen Rye emerge as a haven for the avant-garde, bohemian and unconventional, but in the 18th century Rye was the haunt of a much more dangerous breed of outlaw: the ruthless smuggler. The route from Cranbrook to

Rye was well trodden in those days by a notorious band of crooks from **Hawkhurst**. The Hawkhurst Gang dominated smuggling in Kent and Sussex until a locally raised militia finally brought their reign of terror to a bloody end in **Goudhurst**. Many of the watering holes frequented by the Hawkhurst Gang are still around today including the Mermaid in Rye, the Oak and Ivy and the Great House in Hawkhurst and the Star and Eagle in Goudhurst.

Today, Hawkhurst is showing us the way forward to movie going in the 21st Century with a pioneering digital cinema in the High Street. The **Kino** is discreetly tucked behind the façade of a Victorian Lecture Hall opposite a pretty colonnade of shops.

The twin pleasures of eating and shopping can also be enjoyed in equal measure in both Cranbrook and Rye. Both towns have successfully retained streets of individual, specialised and owner-run shops and can boast award winning, highly acclaimed restaurants and pubs. Locally produced meat (especially Romney Marsh lamb), fruit and vegetables are a feature of the cuisine of the area and a newly restored riverside wharf has guaranteed the future of the Rye fishing fleet. There are few greater pleasures than sitting on the dock eating freshly cooked fish and chips while greedy seagulls wheel and cackle overhead and the masts of the boats tinkle as they sway in the balmy air.

The steeply cobbled citadel of Rye affords commanding views over the marshlands that lead directly to the water's edge. The splendid sand dunes of **Camber**, and the pebbly strand at **Winchelsea Beach**, the salt marsh at Rye Harbour give unexpected variety to this stretch of shore. These are excellent sites for bird watching – particularly at the **Rye Harbour Nature Reserve** where lapwings hover and bitterns and egrets are sometimes spotted – and beachcombing for driftwood, shells and pebbles.

The “simple pleasure of messing about in boats” as advocated by Ratty in *Wind in the Willows* can also be indulged en route from Cranbrook at **Newenden** by a humpback bridge over the River Rother. From here you can putter up the river in a steamboat to the marvellous moated **Bodiam Castle** or hire rowing boats appropriately named Ratty, Mole, Badger and Toad.

Alternatively, head for **Northpoint Water** for the chance to go windsurfing, sailing, and kitesurfing or to **Bewl Water**, the largest lake in the South East, for cruising, canoeing and fishing.

Heading back inland from the coast, you are sure to pass one of many vineyards in the region. **Sandhurst, Lamberhurst and Biddenden** produce wines and ciders made from locally grown grapes and apples which confirm the status of Kent as the Garden of England.



