

Historic Estuaries & Harbours

in the South Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty



Introduction

The coastline of South West England is indented with several deep river valleys. At the end of the last Ice Age, the sea level began to rise and these valleys were drowned, creating the tidal estuaries we see today. Their gently sloping shores were ideal places for boats to land and many settlements grew up on their banks, some of which grew into important trading ports, such as Totnes and Dartmouth.

With increases in the size of trading vessels from the 16th century onwards, quays began to be constructed, to enable larger vessels to be unloaded. They normally consisted of a broad flat jetty with vertical walls, possibly with vertical timbers to provide extra protection and act as mooring posts.

Several early quays survive around the estuaries of the South Devon AONB and are important for their contribution to our understanding of how estuaries were used and where trade was most important. There are over 100 quays of various sizes and dates on the estuaries of the South Devon AONB, with a few around the coast as well.

Occasionally, on large and complex quaysides, docks are found, sometimes with slipways at their inner ends. Docks might be found where a particularly muddy river bank prevented workmen or carts from getting close to the river bank, or where there was no room to moor ships at the outer end of the quay. Very few docks are found outside the large ports of Dartmouth and Salcombe.

Slipways were often found where a boat construction or repair yard was sited. Salcombe had several such yards, and many barges and small coastal ships were built there on the slips in the 19th and early 20th centuries, as with several other ports such as Kingsbridge and Dartmouth.

Distribution

There are five estuaries in the South Devon AONB, one of which, between Kingsbridge and Salcombe, is a rare type, not served by a river. The others, from west to east, are on the Rivers Yealm, Erme, Avon and Dart. Many ancient landing places and quays are to be found around these estuaries.

Most quays are to be found on these estuaries, although there are occasional landing places on the coast, mostly serving former fishing communities. Only two of these have man-made harbours, at Hope Cove and Bovisand.

Function

Until the 20th century, roads in South Devon were not really suitable for long-distance transport. It was much easier to carry goods by ship or barge where this was possible. Trade in agricultural produce, such as grain, flour, hay and straw was often carried by boat, as the estuaries passed through some of the richest agricultural land in the area. Occasionally, granaries or maltings were found near the quays, such as those in Ebrington Street, Kingsbridge, built in 1806 to supply the armies fighting Napoleon.

Larger quays, such as Square's Quay at Kingsbridge (now the Quay car park) shipped timber, which was cut up on the quay by hand, or later with steam powered saws.

From the medieval period onwards, many coastal ports, such as Dartmouth, Salcombe and Newton Ferrers had fishing fleets. Pilchards, herring and other fish were caught, salted and packed in barrels to be sent to market in places such as Plymouth and Exeter. Hope Cove had a reputation for its pilchards as far back as 1620.

How did they work?

Most quays were rectangular structures, built out towards deep-water channels. While barges, which had a shallower draught and flat bottoms, could beach themselves beside the quay, larger vessels needed to use the outer end of the quay, due to their deeper draught. They would tie up to mooring rings or bollards on the quay, which in addition to stopping them floating away, would prevent them from falling over when the tide went down.

If the cargo was loose or heavy, it could be barrowed along planks and tipped into the hold, while a crane on the quay might be used to load or unload awkward items such as timber or sand.



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Where lime kilns were built beside the sea or on an estuary, the vessels which brought the limestone and coal were beached at high tide and their cargoes unloaded into carts.

History & development



Bayards Cove is the earliest surviving quay in Dartmouth. Dates set in the cobbles confirm its antiquity, and it has changed little since 1539.

The tidal estuaries of South Devon have been used for at least 2000 years, and probably rather longer, for moving goods and people in boats. Until the medieval period, and for some considerable time afterwards, most landing places for boats were on beaches: boats landing at high tide and beaching themselves to load or unload between tides.



It was only with the increasing size of some trading vessels in the 16th and 17th centuries that quays became necessary on the estuaries. Before that time, quays were only found in major ports such as Dartmouth, the third largest port in medieval England, where large and heavy sea-going ships might be expected.

The earliest quays on the estuaries seem to date to the late 16th and early 17th centuries.

This one, at Slade's Mill, Waterhead Creek, near Salcombe (below) was constructed by Dartmouth Corporation in 1622 to transport grain and flour from a nearby water mill which they owned. Lime kilns are occasionally mentioned in 16th century and later leases to riverside quays.

Estuarine trade eventually died due to improvements in transport, such as railways, which enabled raw materials to be carried to their destinations much cheaper than by boat.

Most estuary quays in the South Devon AONB are likely to have gone out of use by the First World War, but many continued as the private jetties of houses close to them, such as Duncannon and Sharpham Quays on the Dart and Puslinch Quay on the Yealm.

There are also numerous river cruiser and ferry services, still regularly used by the public, and a number of quaysides and slipways have been restored or strengthened recently including Sharpham North Quay and Greenway Quay on the Dart, to cater for these services.

Detail

Construction

Quays on estuaries usually had coursed or pitched stone rubble faces and random rubble cores. Earlier examples often had drystone faces to a stacked rubble core, while 19th century ones used hydraulic lime mortar in their facings. Limestone was often used for construction or repairs, usually when a limekiln was sited on or near the quay. If the lime kiln has disappeared, its former presence can often be assumed if limestone is present in the quay structure

Associated buildings

Quays in towns were often the first to have warehouse buildings on them from the 14th or 15th centuries.

Mooring bollards and rings

Vessels needed to be tied up to prevent them from floating away at high tide. Sometimes wrought iron rings were stapled into the masonry of quays, or bollards were set into the surface. Mostly, these were of timber and have rotted away, but cast iron or stone ones sometimes survive.

Early Quay at Slade's Mill, Waterhead Creek near Salcombe.



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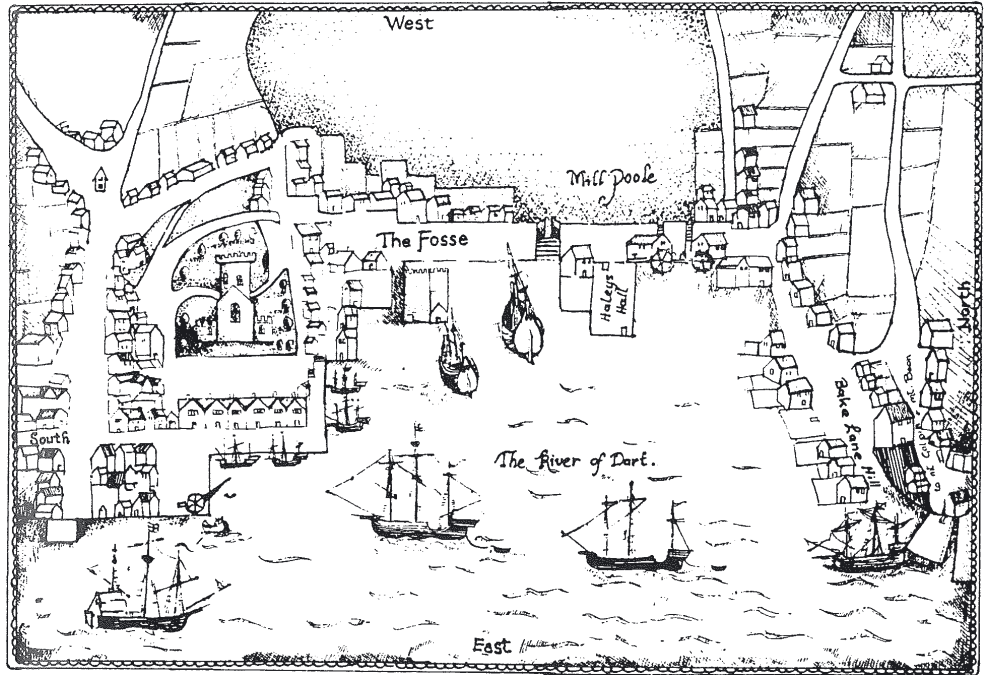


Slipways

Most of these are 19th or 20th century - see if they are built of stone or concrete. There are a few concrete slipways on the Dart and one at Mill Bay near Salcombe which were built for servicing landing craft in the run-up to D-Day in 1944. Sometimes the RNLI and Life Brigades had their own slipways, from the mid-19th century - a good one is at Inner Hope, fronting the former lifeboat house, dated 1861.

Boat houses

Many estuary-side quays had boathouses built on or near them, notably on the Dart, where many of the large country houses such as Sandridge, Waddeton and Sharpham had boathouses. Most of these are 19th or early 20th century, some being abandoned and in ruins.



Townsend's map of 1619 drawn as if from a boat in mid-stream, looking west. Note the ships where the Butterwalk was soon to be built. Reproduced by kind permission of Ray Freeman and Dartmouth Town Council.

Hulks

When of no use any more boats and barges were abandoned in creeks or by disused quays. Their rotting remains are still visible at low tide in many places, notably near Lincombe on the Kingsbridge Estuary and in Old Mill Creek on the Dart. These vessels are often of great interest to maritime historians and archaeologists, as they can tell us a great deal about past construction methods and hull design.

Where can I visit quays in the South Hams?

There are over 100 estuary quays in the South Devon AONB, but only a few of them are publicly accessible. Those still in use are usually private and are best viewed from a boat, but the following are accessible on foot and are well worth seeing:

■ Bowcombe Bridge Quay

Grid Reference SX 744 431

This large quay, near Kingsbridge square in plan, was built in the 18th century to serve the slate quarries which are found on either side of the estuary here. Its outer edge has sagged, due to being constructed on quarry waste. A pair of early 19th century lime kilns on the opposite side of the estuary are visible from the quay, but are in private



gardens. Bowcombe Bridge was built in the 1830s by the civil engineer James Rendel, with one span occupied by a swing bridge to allow barges to carry grain to Shindle Mill at the head of the creek. This was later replaced by a stone arch.

How to get there

The quay is beside Bowcombe Bridge, 2km out of Kingsbridge on the A379 Dartmouth Road.

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A small amount of parking is available by the lane alongside the creek. As the Kingsbridge to Stokenham road is very busy, especially in the summer, take great care when crossing the road.

Where can I find out more?

The Upper Tamar Valley a Century Back, by RT Paige, published by Dartington Amenity Research Trust in 1982, has a substantial chapter on the subject.

Frank Booker's *Industrial Archaeology of the Tamar Valley*, published by David & Charles, is now out of print, but is easily obtainable. It has a good chapter on quays and shipping.

For hulks, see *The Lost Ships of the Westcountry*, by Martin Langley and Edwina Small, published by Stanford Maritime Press in 1988

Author

This factsheet was written by Robert Waterhouse, BA, AIFA. He is a freelance archaeologist and has lived and worked in South Devon for most of his life. This websheet was produced in March 2005. It is one of a series of information sheets published by the South Devon AONB Unit. The material may be copied for private and non-commercial use provided the source is acknowledged.

Greenway Quay under restoration



Estuary Lime Kiln



Fishing boats at Kingswear



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