

Botany Bay

A beautiful, almost pristine bay – a jewel in Thanet's chalky crown

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ATTRactions

Botany Bay is one of Thanet's remotest gems. Located on the northeast tip of the island, without concrete sea defences, it is an unspoilt bay of clean sand that piles up against its pure white cliffs and around its breathtaking chalk stacks. At low tide, the water exposes a flat beach with shallow rock pools full of sea life and, if you are lucky, the fossil evidence of similar life 80 million years older. At high tide there is plenty of soft sandy beach left, although the bay itself is cut off by the sea at each end.

Botany Bay has a darker human history; it is a smugglers' bay, favoured as a landing beach by the Callis Court Gang lead by Joss Snelling. On 20 March 1769, his band had started to unload contraband from their luger. The remoteness of Botany Bay, like the remoteness of the Australian place, could be one derivation of its name. Or it could be that it was named after the destination for so many of this coast's criminals. The luger could sit on the sandy beach at low tide while the men and women of the gang unloaded, unmolested by the customs. At high tide, the empty boat would free itself and be off. But on this particular night the gang was ambushed by an armed customs patrol. There was gunfire, a battle that saw 15 smugglers killed, six captured and hung at Gallows Field in Sandwich. Joss Snelling and four others scrambled up the Kemp steps only to meet an armed customs man, on horseback, at the top. Joss or one of his men shot the officer and the gang made their escape. The officer died of his wounds in what is now the Captain Digby Inn nearby. Customs men searched every farm and village house in the vicinity and found two of the smugglers, one dead and the other mortally wounded, in Rosemary Cottage in Reading Street.

Although the Callis Court Gang was a family concern, dominated by Joss, his son George and his grandson John, smuggling

itself was big business and its rewards and losses were felt throughout the small community of Thanet. The smugglers were fishermen but also labourers, butchers, farm hands, millers, shoemakers, bricklayers, and all shared in the bounty of what they called 'free trade' and, although squires and parsons did not feature on the list of the captured, they were often heavily involved as consumers. Many local houses were used as stores via underground tunnels. Waggoners helped unload the lugs; there were lookouts, heavies, tug-men and porters. Joss lived to a great old age, considered quaint by that time, and was even introduced to a young Queen Victoria.

On a dark night you can almost hear the battle, see the shadows of smugglers flicker under the cliff. The bay has not changed enormously since 1769. But to imagine what it was like when the chalk was formed is a leap indeed. 80 million years ago, this was a very different place. Ocean levels were very high and a warm, shallow sub-tropical sea covered our cliffs, the very top of which was the ancient seabed. The tiny shells of Protozoan, made from calcite, rained down to the sea bed over millions of years forming a limestone mud, which, under pressure and the lowering of sea levels, turned to chalk.

Botany Bay marks the beginning of the Margate Chalk Member, a newer, softer chalk that runs from Botany Bay to Birchington and the older, harder Seaford Chalk that runs from Botany Bay to Ramsgate. The Margate Chalk is rich in fossils but poorer in flints. You can find very soft chalk fossils of echinoderms (sea urchins), ammonites (squid-like molluscs) and belemnites (cuttlefish-like). The flints, we think, were formed by the gloop from dead sponges that filled burrows drilled by crustaceans. So when you hold a large nobbly flint, see it as a mould, a mould of a long dead creature's

tunnel, inside out; the flint is the hole.

The history of nature and man is written in the landscape of the bay. Today we look after these natural wonders and everyone benefits.

The bay is a Blue Flag beach and this means that it conforms to the highest standards in giving information and education, water quality, environmental management, safety and services. There is a small café on the sand, run by Ross Andrews, the sand artist featured on the front cover. The bay is accessible by wheelchair, has toilets, a first aid station and the RNLI have lifeguards on duty.

Words and picture: David Case

Go to visitthanet.co.uk for more information, or download the Beaches and Bays Guide app. There is also detailed information on thanetcoast.org.uk about our coast and events that encourage involvement with wildlife, coastscapes and the environment.

Botany Bay Hotel

Nearby on the cliff top, the hotel has a restaurant and beer garden overlooking the sea.

Marine Drive, Broadstairs CT10 3LG
☎ 01843 868641 📧 botanybayhotel.co.uk

North Foreland Golf Club

A professional golf course, with stunning sea views, that welcomes visitors.

The Clubhouse, Convent Road, Broadstairs CT10 3PU
☎ 01843 862140 📧 northforeland.co.uk

The Viking Coastal Trail (Regional Cycle Network 15)

Part of the cycle route hugs the cliff tops around the bay. 32 miles in length, the route loops round the island from its chalk and sand bays through quiet Kentish villages, past ancient buildings to the nature reserve at Pegwell.

📧 www.vikingcoastaltrail.co.uk