

## The Cinque Ports

Prior to the Norman Conquest, King Edward the Confessor had contracted the five most important Channel ports of that day to provide ships and men “for the service of the monarch” and although this was frequently as a “cross-Channel ferry service”, it was not exclusively so. Under the Norman kings this became the essential means of keeping the two halves of their realm together, but after the loss of Normandy in 1205, their ships (the fore-runners of the Royal Navy) suddenly became England’s first line of defence against the French.

These ports – Hastings, Sandwich, Dover, Romney and Hythe – became known as the Cinque Ports (from the French word five, but always pronounced ‘sink’ not ‘sank’). They were granted many freedoms (for example from militia service, from market and port tolls) and privileges, the most prized being the right to carry the canopy over the King at the Coronation and the very profitable, the running of the international Herring Fair on Yarmouth strand.

Silting-up of harbours had bedevilled these ports almost from the start. In 1191 to help Hastings, the worst sufferer, Rye and Winchelsea became Limbs of Hastings and remained so until early in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, when they were admitted as full members of the Confederation, with the title “Antient(sic) Towns”. From the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, the five, and then seven, Head Ports acquired “Limbs”. At the height there were thirty such Limbs, big and small, which were administered as outlying parts of their Head Port, making it necessary in many cases for its Mayor to appoint an officer termed the “Deputy”.

Edward I is the King who established what was to become the permanent organisational framework of the Confederation of the Cinque Ports and it was he who, in 1278, granted the first detailed Cinque Ports Charter as distinct from separate charters to each Port. He wanted to harness the Ports’ too-often disruptive energies, to one end and weld the Confederation into a more effective weapon against the French, whilst binding it in a personal loyalty to the monarch. There had been the occasional Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports before - now he made the post a permanent one. He decided it should be held by the officer in charge of the royal fortress of Dover, the country’s strongest land defence against the French and that the fleet of the Ports must always be under his command. Hence the office, always and solely in royal gift, of Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports, Constable of Dover Castle and Admiral of the navy of the Cinque Ports. The headquarters of the Lord Warden are therefore at Dover Castle, but since early in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Walmer Castle has been his official residence.

The Lord Warden administered the law not only within the Confederation and on its shores, but over the whole of the Thames estuary. As fighting duties passed to the Royal Navy, these legal duties became the more important. Finally, his jurisdiction extended from just beyond Beachy Head in the south to the Naze in Essex at the north and “half-seas over” towards the Continent. It covered matters of pilotage, wreck, salvage, violence at sea and mercantile law. He had his Court of St James for Admiralty matters and a Court of Shepway for his transactions with the Cinque Ports, both ultimately at Dover.

Meanwhile the Ports developed their own Court of Brodhull, to co-ordinate resistance to encroachments by the Lord Warden and latterly to defend their privileges against growing criticism, but above all, to organise the annual Yarmouth Fair in advance and take stock of it afterwards. They held their last Fair in 1663. By then, with the silting-up of their havens, the increased size of ships needed in warfare and the growth of the Royal Navy, they had become an anomaly.

And today? A picturesque survival and a memorable one.