

Prologue

The best time to visit Rye is on a misty winter evening, when the tokens of the modern world—tacked on to old buildings—are obscured. Your restricted vision makes you more aware of the lumpiness of the cobbles under your feet, and, over your head, the protruding jetties on some of the half-timbered houses. On one such gloomy damp November evening I walked up the hill from the station through the dimly lit streets. Through a lighted window, a 16th century wall painting of a ship was visible. Near the top of the hill, I turned a corner towards the churchyard, and was brought up short by a sudden brilliance—the church lit up by floodlights. On down Watchbell Street, I merged again with the grey wetness. It was raining in earnest by the time I reached the door of my weekend bed-and-breakfast.

The looming physical presence of the old buildings seemed to evoke the town's past—yet this was misleading. Something essential was not there. The streets are indeed still laid out as in the 17th century town plan, and many of the houses survive, even if some are fronted with 18th century brick facades. Other changes are more superficial—the half-timbered houses which would traditionally have been whitewashed are now marked out in black-and-white; there are no dunghills outside the houses being picked over by dogs and pigs, nor precarious wooden chimneys. But the ancient source of the town's life is missing—the sea, which has disappeared beyond the horizon.

In the 16th century the sea surrounded the town at high tide, and you could have smelt the salt water, and the rotting fish on the Strand, from Watchbell Street (see town plan on page vi). Walking back to the churchyard and down a few yards to the Gungarden, you would have had a commanding view of the huge estuary—the *Chamber*, or *Camber*—which extended a couple of miles south to the main sea, fed by the rivers Rother and Tillingham sweeping down on either side of the town. In the early 16th century, this estuary had been the main harbour of refuge in foul weather for Channel shipping.

On the cover of this book is shown a delicately drawn 16th century plan of the town and harbour at low tide, when mudflats, rocks and sandbanks were exposed by the retreating sea. If you look closely, two men can be seen playing bowls on the gungarden below the 14th century

castle, Baddings Tower, and two cannons are trained over the Rother where it opens out into the estuary. The Strand is denoted *the Key*.

Rye was virtually an island, connected to the mainland over the saltmarshes to the north only by a causeway. As the sea gradually receded during the 17th and 18th centuries, taking with it the livelihood of most of the population, the town was left stranded, like a piece of jetsam abandoned on the mudflats.

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Not that the sea has always been receding. Over the centuries it has engaged in a complex dance, redrawing the coastline according to its whim, unimpeded by any natural obstructions on the vast expanse of Romney Marsh stretching out to the east. The one constant point in this part of the marsh is the hill on which Rye stands, a lump of sandstone rising up from the soggy clay below. Even while I was there, the river—swollen by a freak high tide—threatened to flood the children's playground, below the town's cliffs, on what had been the old saltmarshes (dried out enough by the 18th century for the gallows to be sited here).

Back in the 14th century Rye had had too much water swirling around its feet. The tidal reaches of the River Rother so undermined the side of the hill that—over a couple of centuries—the streets near the cliff gradually subsided into the waters. The Rother was, however, a relatively new factor at that time in Rye's fortunes. It had changed its course following some violent storms a century earlier, abruptly abandoning the erstwhile port of Old Romney, and taking a more direct route to the sea past Rye.

The antics of the sea often benefited one port at the expense of a rival. In the early 16th century it left neighbouring Winchelsea bereft, high and dry above the waters (this was the second Winchelsea to fall victim—'Old Winchelsea' is now sunk deep *under* the waters). Winchelsea's trade transferred to Rye, which by the middle of the century was experiencing a level of prosperity unparalleled in its history.



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For fifty years at most, the sea lavished its favours on Rye, and it became one of the busiest ports on the south coast. Grain was shipped from west Sussex, coal from Newcastle, wine from Gascony, woodfuel, timber and iron shipped to London and woodfuel to the Netherlands, and woollen cloth to Antwerp and later France. Numerous other products were imported and re-exported, ranging from pepper, raisins, dyestuffs, salt, glass, silk, ivory combs, spectacles and quails to elephant tusks. Its fishermen ran the main passenger service between London and the continent (via Dieppe), and often carried the royal posts. They also supplied the Royal household with most of its fish. By the end of the 16th century, however, Rye was being abandoned in its turn. It was towards the end of this period of prosperity that the events occurred which form the subject of this book.

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My arrival in Rye on that damp November evening was by no means my first visit. It was in fact about 25 years since I had first encountered Rye—not in its physical manifestation, but through its archives. These are extensive, providing materials for many a historical research project. But there is one curious cache of 17th century documents of which nobody has attempted to make sense, even if many people have looked at it. Twenty thousand words of evidence, or thereabouts, collected for a single witchcraft case—a phenomenal amount for the period. The problem is that the documents do not tell a clear story, but appear to be an aimless collection of anecdotes about spirits, buried treasure, unneighbourly opinions, and eventually (two years after the first evidence had been recorded), accusations of black witchcraft—of harming and killing people in the town by the utterance of angry words or some other unspecified supernatural method.

I was meant to be working on a different topic at the time, and the witchcraft case remained at the back of my mind while I explored other avenues. But these covered the same period as the case—the turn of the 17th century—and on looking at it again, these other materials gave me new ideas about the case. Gradually pieces of information began to fit together, comments made by the witnesses gained meaning, and a story began to emerge.

So most of this book just tells a story—an extraordinary story that I try to ‘make sense’ of in terms of the culture and economy of early modern England. I was tempted to call the penultimate chapter *Whodunit*,

if it had not sounded so flippant, because it is not till then that the identities of the accusers become evident. If this sounds contrived, it is to a great extent a consequence of the problems of reconstruction. Very little can be gleaned about the accusers from the case itself—other than that some, at least, of the magistrates seem to have been rather more involved than was compatible with their roles as justices. It is not until you delve into the relationships between those involved, going back decades, piecing together information from a wide variety of sources, that the main instigators of the court proceedings are revealed, and the reasons for their involvement. As I explored the prehistory of the case, it became clear that this was just one episode in a series of social dramas, as the anthropologist Victor Turner dubbed such events, which periodically, over a couple of centuries, rent the town into competing factions.

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Before turning to the story itself, I would like to consider for a moment what the town looked like in the early 17th century. We are able to do this because of the improbable survival of holiday snaps taken by one contemporary traveller. Anthony Van Dyck travelled through Rye on more than one occasion during the 1630s, en route between Antwerp and London. He was escaping from the towering shadow of Rubens to the court of Charles I, where—over the next decade—artist and king would each reign in splendid isolation in their separate spheres.

During his brief sojourns in Rye, Van Dyck sketched the town from different viewpoints, and in plate 1 you can see the town's cliffs surmounted by Baddings Tower (now known as *Ypres* tower), and in plate 2 the Church, as he would have seen them from a passenger boat sailing up the Camber before veering west towards the Strand.

The cliffs in plate 2 are rather lower than they would have been in reality, but in general Van Dyck is likely to have sketched what he saw—there was little or no market for landscape drawings at this period, so he would not have needed to compose his drawings to please potential clients. He used them instead as source material for the backgrounds to his portraits. Indeed his most evocative sketch of Rye (plate 3)—much copied by other artists—is captioned *Rie del naturale, li 27 Aug 1633* ('Rye from nature'). It is a view of the town as the traveller would have seen it as he started his journey by road to London (perhaps after staying overnight in one of the town's inns). Riding north through the town walls at the Landgate, along the causeway, and up Playden Hill, he might have

stopped for a moment to look back and admire the view spread out below. The negligent spray of bramble in the foreground emphasises how high we are above the town, and below can just be seen the causeway, with groynes in the sea to its left, curving back towards the Landgate.

As he got back on his horse (travelling by carriage was an unlikely choice on this road, rutted as it was by the combined effects of winter rains, clay soil, and the ironmasters' heavy carts), and set off into the Weald, he might have passed one of the daily cavalcades of horses carrying fish in panniers to the London fishmongers and the Royal Household. The fish must have been seriously jaded by the time it reached the capital, its reputation sealed in a quip by one of the Privy Councillors that some so-called 'news' was *as stale as Rye fish*.