



Dreading *the dredge*

Local campaigners take their Goodwin Sands SOS Campaign from East Kent to Number 10 Downing Street

📷 Kaz Russell-Graham



Dover Western Docks Revival (DWDR) has exciting plans for Dover. It aims to build a new marina with shops, bars, cafes and restaurants to attract visitors, creating jobs and allowing further development of the cargo business. But the work requires a large amount of aggregate, and in May 2016, Dover Harbour Board applied to the Marine Management Organisation to dredge 3.5 million tonnes of sand and gravel from Goodwin Sands – the iconic, 10-mile long sandbank off the coast of Deal.

However, the application sparked local and national controversy, in the wake of which, Goodwin Sands SOS was born: a call to stop the dredging. The internet and social media have helped spread interest, with local and national press coverage, and messages of support from prominent parties such as Wolf Hall and Dunkirk actor Mark Rylance.

Joanna Thomson is one of five

coordinators who set up Goodwin Sands SOS, which wants to ensure that everyone, including expert parties, is fully informed about the application. Three main issues have been highlighted: marine wildlife, coastal defence and, perhaps most emotive of all, the potential disturbance of shipwrecks, mariners' graves, and the war graves of World War Two pilots.

Protecting the few

It was seeking clarification and evidence of war graves that took Joanna to the Kent Battle of Britain Museum at Hawkinge, where a helpful curator confirmed the presence of many air crash sites around the Goodwins. It was a light bulb moment, because the team realised that the myth of these planes was in fact a reality.

"After two months' cross referencing," Joanna recalls, "he found that 60 planes and 70 British, Polish and German pilots had

gone down over the Sands – with 21 British and Polish not recovered."

This total included Pilot Officer Keith Gillman, the iconic RAF poster boy who was just 19 years old when he lost his life. Joanna is too keen to point out that they are not against the regeneration, but that sentiment runs high with this particular issue. "There's a feeling that the Sands should be a respected resting place," she says.

Fellow coordinator, Fiona Punter, agrees: "As The Few protected us then, we must protect them now," she says. Another supporter uses stronger terms: "Hoovering up the remains of drowned mariners and Battle of Britain pilots to be used as rubble in Dover is morally abhorrent."

The subject of coastal erosion is a further contested issue, with the Harbour Board presenting a report declaring no detrimental effect, and campaigners certain that effects cannot be predicted.



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They also suggest that money recently spent on trying to reduce coastal erosion could potentially be wasted.

Campaign Coordinator, Amanda Mount, has lived in Kingsdown for 30 years. She feels that the beach has never been in such a bad state, but that the Goodwins do act as a natural sea defence. “No amount of computer-based wave modelling is going to convince me that lowering the level of the Goodwins is going to have ‘no residual impact’ on the coastline, as Dover Harbour Board’s ‘experts’ claim,” she says.

Taking it to the top

A petition was started in June, addressed to the Marine Management Organisations’ CEO, John Tucket, stating simply that the signatories did not want a harbour licence granted. Charlie Elphicke, MP for Dover and Deal, suggested taking it to Number

10 – and by 31st October it had more than 12,000 signatures. Standing at the iconic door to Number 10, Joanna was immensely proud of all that the campaign and the supporters had achieved together, and is determined to keep going: “We can’t just stand by and let Dover Harbour Board destroy our rich natural environment, with its long maritime heritage, for its own financial benefit.”

Coordinator Esme Chilton agrees, recognising that cost forms part of the dilemma for those making the final decision. “It may be Dover Harbour Board’s cheapest option, but it comes at a very high price,” she says. But Joanna also has an eye on the future, wary that granting a harbour licence now could open up the doors to other companies wanting sand for construction. “We need to preserve the Goodwin Sands intact for future generations to enjoy,” she says firmly, “as we are able to do now.” ■



Did You Know?

- There are many literary references to the Sands: Shakespeare, W.H. Auden and Ian Fleming to name but a few.
- The Sands are notorious for wrecks, including the first recorded in 1298, and much later, ships such as the Rooswijk in 1740, sunk with all 300 people on board.
- Seals ‘haul-out’ there for rest and breeding.
- Whilst you can walk on the Goodwin Sands at low tide, at high tide they become treacherously submerged.