

# The Royal Military Canal

## **Introduction**

The Royal Military Canal is a key asset that belongs to an important collection of Napoleonic defensive structures that were constructed along the Kent coastline during the early Nineteenth century. It is a unique military structure that by the time of its completion in 1809, was no longer required to fulfil its purpose in the defence of the country's interior should invading Napoleonic troops land on the low-lying Romney Marsh. In fact, the canal has never been called upon in the event of an actual invasion, and has since served more recreational functions such as pleasure boating. Today it is designated as a Scheduled Monument and continues to be popular site within the District and wider county.

As well as an important historical site, the canal is also a key corridor for wildlife and boasts a number of important habitats. Some of the plants and animals that can be found here are national rarities, and many other species also thrive under environmental management plans to further enhance the local biodiversity. A number of community activities are planned throughout the year and held at the canal, and a range of enhanced features such as bridleways, interpretation panels and play areas further add to the recreational, tourism and leisure offering in addition to the canal's historical context and importance.

This case study sets out to highlight the ways in which the Royal Military Canal is enjoyed and explored not only as an important historic site, but also as a place for recreation, tourism and leisure. These wider functions can support and enhance the historic context and importance of the canal as well as attract wider audiences and provide a greater variety of ways to experience the site.

## **Site Description**

The Royal Military Canal runs for a total of 28 miles from Seabrook via Hythe, running along the relic coastline which borders the Romney Marsh and inland to Appledore to join first the River Rother at Iden Lock and then the River Brede where it turns back into a canal again from Winchelsea and finally to Cliff End on the East Sussex coast near Hastings. The section of the Royal Military Canal that is situated within the district covers the eastern section beginning at Seabrook near Folkestone and leaves the District at the western point where the parishes of Lympne and Burmarsh meet before entering Aldington of the Ashford District.

Folkestone & Hythe District Council owns the eastern section that runs for 7km between Seabrook Outfall and West Hythe Dam. This corridor has been divided into three distinct canal reaches that have been identified based upon their ecological characters;

**Reach 1:** Western most section which runs between West Hythe Dam and Scanlon's Bridge for approximately 4km. This reach forms part of the Royal Military Canal Local Wildlife Site (LWS) designation and contains significant biodiversity of species and habitats.

**Reach 2:** Central section of the canal that runs for approximately 1.5km in length between Scanlon’s Bridge and Twiss Road Bridge. The ecological value of this reach is limited as it is maintained as formal parkland.

**Reach 3:** Eastern section that runs between Twiss Road Bridge and Seabrook for approximately 2.5km. This reach forms part of the LWS though habitats adjacent to the right bank are maintained intensively and so have little ecological value. The left bank along this section runs parallel to a residential area with a golf course running along most of the length of the right bank.

As part of the Royal Military Canal Management Plan 2016-2020 produced by the District Council, these three reaches were further divided into four landscape character zones; rural, suburban, urban and maritime. These further illustrate the diverse character of the canal as well as the varied ecological value of species and habitats found along its length.

The canal corridor offers important opportunities to access natural and heritage assets that have previously been inaccessible which has ultimately resulted in a greater understanding of the canal and its diverse character. In 2004 the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) awarded a grant of £3.35 million to the District Council for a restoration programme along this stretch of the canal. The primary objectives of the project were to enhance the understanding and enjoyment of the Royal Military Canal as a heritage, ecological, recreational and tourism asset. As a result of this programme of work, a range of new and enhanced facilities are now provided which includes amenities such as improved footpaths and bridleways, interpretation panels and children’s play areas. Various activities such as horse riding, fishing and boating are also catered for as well as opportunities for educational interpretation and further environmental projects aimed at improving key areas.

The canal is designated as a Scheduled Monument as well as several sections being protected as parts of Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) and Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). As part of the scheduling the canal has been divided into various sections, nine of which are included within the district. The section that runs between Honeypot Cottage and Gigger’s Green Bridge is partially covered by the district but also runs into the Ashford District at the Aldington parish.

The main features that are found along the stretches of the canal that are included within the boundaries of the district are highlighted in the below table.

Name	Principal assets	Type of potential impact
Royal Military Canal, Shorncliffe Battery Wall (Sandgate)	Upstanding and buried remains of Shorncliffe Battery which forms an important part of the canal terminal at its eastern end.  Archaeological remains relating to the construction and use of	Direct physical impact on the Shorncliffe Battery, part of which is already separated by a modern road.  Setting of the Royal Military Canal and its eastern terminal.

	the canal.	
Royal Military Canal, Seabrook Lodge Bridge to Seabrook Sluice (Hythe)	<p>“Kink” in the canal at the western end demonstrating its design to allow for enfilading fire if a crossing was attempted by an invading force.</p> <p>Surviving features include the parapet on the north side and Royal Military Road (largely buried remains).</p> <p>Archaeological remains relating to the construction and use of the canal.</p>	<p>Direct physical impact on surviving features and buried archaeological remains.</p> <p>Setting of the Royal Military Canal.</p>
Royal Military Canal, Twiss Road Bridge to Seabrook Lodge Bridge (Hythe)	<p>“Kink” midway along the canal length demonstrating its design to allow for enfilading fire if a crossing was attempted by an invading force.</p> <p>Surviving features include the parapet on the north side (partially levelled), the Royal Military Road (largely buried remains) and Second World War pillbox.</p> <p>Archaeological remains relating to the construction and use of the canal.</p>	<p>Direct physical impact on the remains of the parapet on the north bank of the canal and other associated archaeological remains.</p> <p>Setting of the Royal Military Canal.</p>
Royal Military Canal, Town Bridge to Twiss Road Bridge (Hythe)	<p>Surviving features include the parapet on the north side (partially levelled) and the Royal Military Road (largely buried remains).</p> <p>Archaeological remains relating to the construction and use of</p>	<p>Direct physical impact on surviving features and buried archaeological remains.</p> <p>Setting of the Royal Military Canal.</p>

	the canal.	
Royal Military Canal, Scanlon's Bridge to Town Bridge (Hythe)	<p>The parapet on the north side survives in places.</p> <p>Buried remains of earlier 1809 and 1813 bridges.</p> <p>Archaeological remains relating to the construction and use of the canal.</p>	<p>Direct physical impact on surviving features and buried archaeological remains.</p> <p>Setting of the Royal Military Canal.</p>
Royal Military Canal, West Hythe Bridge to Scanlon's Bridge (Hythe)	<p>Surviving features include the parapet on the north side, the Royal Military Road, front and back drain.</p> <p>Five "kinks" along its length demonstrating its design to allow for enfilading fire if a crossing was attempted by an invading force.</p> <p>Archaeological remains relating to the construction and use of the canal.</p> <p>High ecological value for diverse habitats, fauna and flora.</p>	<p>Direct physical impact on surviving features and buried archaeological remains.</p> <p>Setting of the Royal Military Canal.</p> <p>Vistas across the Romney Marsh and Lympne escarpment from the western end of this section.</p>
Royal Military Canal, West Hythe Dam to West Hythe Bridge (Hythe)	<p>Surviving features include the parapet on the north side, the Royal Military Road (survives as an earthen terrace) and back drain (survives as a ditch).</p> <p>Archaeological remains relating to the construction and use of the canal.</p> <p>High ecological value for diverse habitats, fauna and flora.</p>	<p>Direct physical impact on surviving features and buried archaeological remains.</p> <p>Setting of the Royal Military Canal.</p> <p>Vistas across the Romney Marsh and Lympne escarpment from the western end of this section.</p>
Royal Military Canal, Honeypot Cottage to West	Surviving features include the parapet on	Direct physical impact on surviving features and

<p>Hythe Dam (Lympne/Burmarsh)</p>	<p>the north side, the Royal Military Road (survives as an earthen terrace) and back drain (survives as a ditch).</p> <p>Two Second World War pillboxes along the north bank.</p> <p>Archaeological remains relating to the construction and use of the canal.</p> <p>High ecological value for diverse habitats, fauna and flora.</p>	<p>buried archaeological remains.</p> <p>Setting of the Royal Military Canal.</p> <p>Vistas across the Romney Marsh and Lympne escarpment from the western end of this section.</p>
<p>Royal Military Canal, Gigger's Green Bridge to Honeypot Cottage (Lympne/Burmarsh/Aldington)</p>	<p>Surviving features include the parapet on the north side, the Royal Military Road (survives as an earthen terrace) and back drain (survives as a ditch).</p> <p>Archaeological remains relating to the construction and use of the canal.</p> <p>Three "kinks" along its length demonstrating its design to allow for enfilading fire if a crossing was attempted by an invading force.</p> <p>Hexagonal Second World War pillbox.</p> <p>High ecological value for diverse habitats, fauna and flora.</p>	<p>Direct physical impact on surviving features and buried archaeological remains.</p> <p>Setting of the Royal Military Canal.</p> <p>Vistas across the Romney Marsh and Lympne escarpment from the western end of this section.</p>

### **Archaeological and Historical Background**

The Royal Military Canal was an important element in a series of Napoleonic defences constructed along the south-east coast of England during the early nineteenth century. It is a unique defensive structure that was built for the purpose of strategic defence of the southern Kentish coast against a French invasion during the time of the Napoleonic Wars (1803 – 1815). It is the only military canal in the country

and is as such recognised as a significant component in the counties military heritage. The canal runs for a total of 28 miles from its eastern terminal at Seabrook near Hythe, along the relic coastline bordering the Romney Marsh and ending at its western terminal at Cliff End near Hastings in East Sussex. It is the third longest defensive structure in the country and further acts as an important testament to a time when modern Britain faced the most serious threat of invasion prior to the World Wars of the twentieth century.

### **The Napoleonic Wars (1803 – 1815)**

The Napoleonic Wars were a series of major conflicts fought between the French Empire and its allies against a number of European powers that were formed into various coalitions. These European powers included Great Britain, Austria, Russia, Portugal and the Ottoman Empire. The wars stemmed from the French Revolution of 1789 and the deposition of Louis XVI of France which had sent shockwaves across the whole of Europe and ultimately resulted in the spread of warfare throughout Europe and its overseas colonies. The leader of the French Empire during this time was Napoleon Bonaparte (Napoleon I) who had seized power in 1799 and created a *de facto* military dictatorship over a French Republic. Britain became almost continuously engaged in wars with France until the final defeat of Napoleon in 1815 at the Battle of Waterloo.

Britain had declared war on France in 1803 which ended the uneasy truce that had been created by the Treaty of Amiens in 1802 and ultimately began the Napoleonic Wars that would rage until 1815. The Napoleonic Wars continued on from the Revolutionary Wars that had been fought by various European powers, including Great Britain, since 1793 through to 1802. The years of war with France had prompted the construction of an extensive new system of defences that were built in stages across Kent and other neighbouring counties. At this time, Britain was primarily a maritime nation which used naval supremacy as its first line of defence. However a number of beaches along the Kent coast that were especially accessible, in particular along the low-lying Romney Marsh and Dungeness Peninsula, became the focus for strategic coastal defences against a French invasion. The first phase of these included a number of small coastal batteries and gun platforms that were supported by earthen redoubts. During the Napoleonic Wars a more comprehensive series of defences were erected in the form of concrete redoubts, a string of Martello Towers and the Royal Military Canal.

### **Construction of the Royal Military Canal**

During the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, the Romney Marsh had been left almost entirely undefended in the belief that it could be quickly flooded ultimately making the land impassable to an invading force. However, the very real threat of a Napoleonic invasion called this strategy into serious question and it was ultimately rejected as unworkable largely due to the need for 10 days advance warning to adequately flood the Marsh as well as the potential embarrassment and chaos that would be caused by a false alarm.

The alternative idea for the Royal Military Canal came from Lt. Col. Brown, the Assistant Quartermaster-General at the time. He originally suggested that a canal be constructed that ran for 19 miles from Seabrook near Folkestone and then around the back of the Romney Marsh to the River Rother near Rye. The canal would have

sources of water from the sea as well as the Rother and would be 19 metres wide at the surface, 13.5 metres wide at the base and 3 metres deep. The soil that would be excavated during construction could then be piled onto the northern bank to form a parapet behind which troops may be positioned out of sight of the enemy. The canal was also designed with “kinks” along its length to allow for enfilading fire if the enemy attempted to cross. The completed canal would therefore separate the expected landing and deployment point of the Napoleonic troops along the coast of the Romney and Walland Marsh from the interior of the country.

In September of 1804 the Duke of York and Prime Minister William Pitt met to discuss the plans for the canal which they enthusiastically approved. A survey was then carried out and preliminary plans were quickly drawn up. John Rennie, a renowned engineer who had worked on previous projects such as the construction of the London and Waterloo Bridges, was appointed to the project as consultant engineer. It was then proposed that the canal be extended from the River Rother by a further 9 miles to Cliff End near Hastings and would also therefore incorporate the River Brede in the process. The total length of the canal now stood to be 28 miles, 22.5 of these which would have to be manually dug at an estimated cost of £200,000 and with a projected completion date of June 1805.

The support from the local landowners was easy to obtain due to the dual purpose of the canal in both helping to defend the country from foreign invasion as well as acting as a major drainage system for the Marsh which would greatly improve conditions. Pitt became popular with the local people and the canal began to be referred to as “Mr Pitt’s Ditch”. On the 30<sup>th</sup> October 1804 at the height of the invasion scare, the first sod of the Royal Military Canal was dug at Seabrook.

Once work had commenced on the canal late in 1804, it quickly became apparent that the projected completion date during the following year was wildly optimistic and was not going to be achieved. The first year of construction was plagued by harsh weather and severe flooding as well as difficulties in attracting adequate numbers of navvies (labourers). John Rennie had begun blaming the frustrating lack of progress on the incompetence and high prices charged by the contractors. By May of 1805 only 6 miles of the canal had been completed at the Seabrook end, and work ultimately had ground to a halt. Both the contractors and Rennie were subsequently dismissed by William Pitt, and the project was thereafter assigned to Lt. Col. Brown.

Work was restarted with navvies digging the canal and military personnel building the ramparts and parapets along the canal bank. Earth that was excavated formed the banquette and parapet on the landward side of the canal in order to provide cover from an invading enemy. Behind the canal an army supply route called Royal Military Road was established as well as tow paths and wharves on the opposite side, and back and front drains. The “kinks” along the length provided positions for guns that could provide enfilading fire should an invading force attempt to cross.

At the projects peak there were around 1500 men working on the canal which was entirely dug by hand. Flooding continued to be an issue and progress was often hampered despite using hand pumps day and night to keep the trench from filling with water. Eventually powerful steam-driven pumps were used which could better clear any water. Once sections of the canal had been dug its walls were then lined

with clay. However, the final dimensions were significantly reduced from the original plans due to the problems encountered throughout construction and the time pressure to complete. Most of the canal's length is around half of the projected width, though the 28 mile route was completed from Seabrook to Cliff End. By August 1806 the section between Seabrook and the Rother was open. Iden Lock was completed later in 1808 which finally linked the canal to the River Rother and Rye Harbour. However the final completion date of the canal was not until 1809.

By the time the canal was completed in 1809, the threat of invasion had passed following Napoleon's defeat at the Battle of Trafalgar. The canal became somewhat obsolete and was never used for the originally intended purpose. It does however remain as a unique coastal defence work and an important example of the Napoleonic defensive strategies employed along the south Kent coast during the nineteenth century.

### **Post-Napoleonic Function**

The total cost of the canal ended up at £234,310, which was a substantial amount of money in Georgian England. When it became clear that it would not be needed for its intended purpose, it became an embarrassment for the Government who had used a significant amount of public money to construct the canal. Alternative uses which would recoup money and utilise a now redundant structure were desperately needed.

In 1810 the canal was opened for public use and tolls were collected for use of the Royal Military Road between Iden, Rye and Winchelsea. A regular barge service also ran between Hythe and Rye which took around 4 hours to complete. Traffic along the canal was never heavy, and once the Ashford to Hastings railway line opened in 1851 traffic was further diverted away to other means of transport. The cost of maintaining the canal as well as efforts to recoup the money invested in its construction became a heavy burden for the Government who later leased the stretch between Iden Lock and West Hythe to the Lords of the Romney Marsh for 999 years during the 1860s. The town of Hythe then purchased the remaining section that ran through the town and converted it to ornamental waters. The sections of canal west of Rye were sold to four individual owners and by the late nineteenth century trade had almost entirely disappeared. The last toll was collected from Iden Lock in December of 1909.

By 1935 it appeared that the canal could again become useful as a defensive structure when it was requisitioned by the War Department as the risk of a German invasion was rising leading up to the Second World War. The banks were lined with several pillboxes as the nation awaited a possible invasion. These small reinforced concrete or brick buildings came in a number of shapes and forms and some still survive along the banks of the canal today. They were designed to house infantry, anti-tank guns or field artillery and were located alongside other defensive structures at vulnerable or strategically important points such as the Royal Military Canal which defended the low-lying coast of the Romney and Walland Marsh. However, like before, an invasion never occurred and so the canal again was not needed to fulfil its intended purpose.



## **The Canal Today**

Although the canal has never been able to fulfil its originally intended function, it is a valuable heritage, tourism, ecological and recreational asset that continues to serve many other purposes such as sustaining important wildlife along much of its length and acting as a recreational facility. A range of available facilities and activities cater to wide audiences and further provide opportunities to better understand and enjoy this important site. It has also made significant contributions to the improvement of conditions on the Romney Marsh through acting as a sink for the extensive network of drainage ditches that criss-cross the Marsh. During summer months water is pumped from the canal into the drainage ditches to irrigate the land, and then during the winter if there is risk of flooding water can be taken from the ditches into the canal and let out at Iden Lock or the sluice at Seabrook. This vital role of the Royal Military Canal is managed by the Environment Agency.

### **Walking, Cycling and Horse Riding**

A network of footpaths, cycle routes and bridleways are featured along the length of the canal. They provide many opportunities for varied routes accessible to a range of users who are able to enjoy the picturesque and rich surrounding landscape. These routes also incorporate interpretation materials that highlight the canal's significant heritage such as information panels and life-size bronze soldiers and navvies illustrating the origins and intended purpose of the canal.

The Royal Military Canal Path runs along the entire length from Seabrook to Cliff End. It follows a path that passes between the openness of the Romney Marsh and the wooded hills of the Lympe Escarpment and relic coastline allowing for an appreciation of these distinct landscapes. The views across the flat and open Romney Marsh also highlight the purpose for which the canal was originally constructed; namely the defence of the low-lying and easily accessible Marsh coastline against a Napoleonic invasion. Several interpretation panels are located along this route to promote better understandings of the canal as well as picnic areas and benches which further add to the amenity offering available.

Sections of this long distance footpath have been upgraded to bridleways to better cater for cyclists, horse riders and disabled visitors. For example, the south path from the Seabrook Outfall through to Twiss Road Bridge was upgraded to a bridleway in 2003. The footpath from West Hythe Dam to Aldergate Lane has also recently been upgraded to a bridleway and is now connected to the National Cycle Network Route 2 and Saxon Shore Way long distance path. The 3 metre wide Royal Military Road which runs on the northern side of the canal further provides better access for walkers, cyclists, horse riders and disabled users.

These means of providing better access to a broader choice of routes that take in the length of the canal and its surrounding landscape allows for wider audiences to enjoy and explore this monument as well as build a better understanding of its original defensive purpose. A number of public footpaths link to the Royal Military Canal Path and so it is easy to plan varying circular routes that take in sections of the canal. The Romney Marsh Countryside Partnership further arranges regular guided walks and activities along the canal to encourage the ongoing appreciation and care for this special landscape and monument.

## **Boats on the Canal**

The Royal Military Canal was never intended for navigation but was primarily a defensive structure. However, when the threatened invasions never came, alternative uses for the canal were sought in order to recoup the money that had been invested into its construction as well as for the ongoing enterprise of the canal for public use.

From early on in its history, the canal had been used by officers stationed at Hythe for sculling and taking their families out onto the water. Once the threat of invasion had passed, it was permitted to row on the canal; an activity which peaked in popularity during the 1880s when the ornamental gardens along the Hythe section had matured. Today it is possible to hire boats from the Boat Hut in Ladies Walk (Hythe) and row as far as the West Hythe Dam. It is also possible to take non-powered vessels onto the canal between Seabrook to Iden Lock though the appropriate licenses must be obtained prior to boating. An electric passenger boat service also operates from the Boat Hut (Hythe) throughout the summer and late autumn.

Pleasure boating continues to be a popular activity along the canal and allows for participants to enjoy and appreciate this special monument and its surrounding landscape. It also offers a unique vantage point from which to enjoy the diverse wildlife and habitats that are supported along the banks of the canal.

## **Fishing**

The Royal Military Canal was first stocked with fish in 1806 and continues to boast a large quantity and variety of species. Today it is considered as one of the best places for coarse fishing. Its waters are controlled by various clubs between Seabrook and Iden Lock from which permits are available to fish along these stretches of the canal.

## **Children's Play Areas and Picnic Sites**

A number of children's play areas as well as car parking and picnic sites are located along the canal making it accessible and enjoyable for families and younger visitors. As an example, the Seabrook play area boasts a multi-play unit that has been designed as a canal bridge to complement the theme of the Royal Military Canal. Wooden animal play structures which are located at various points along the canal further highlight the rich and diverse wildlife species and habitats that are supported here as well as providing a recreational facility.

## **Heritage Interpretation**

The canal was primarily built as an important defensive structure in response to the threat of a Napoleonic invasion during the early nineteenth century. Today it is the only example of a military canal in this country and forms part of a significant collection of Napoleonic defensive heritage assets within the District. The canal, which is a Scheduled Monument, can still be appreciated for its original purpose and this is enhanced by various interpretive materials that are placed along its length.

Interpretation panels can be found at various points along the Royal Military Canal Path and provide details of the historical context of the canal. Life-size bronze sculptures of soldiers and navvies who worked on the construction of the canal can

also be found alongside information panels again providing historical context. Examples of these are located at Ladies Walk Bridge and Prospect Road.

In addition to interpretation materials, remains of other military structures can also be viewed along the canal. “Kinks” along the corridor at regular 600 yard intervals highlight its design to provide points from which to place guns that could give enfilading fire should an enemy attempt to cross the canal. Today remains of some of these raised platforms can be found along the north bank by picnic sites and next to the footbridges at Seabrook. Other military installations include various Second World War pillboxes as well as the redoubt wall at Seabrook which was originally built in 1832. Stone slabs adjacent to the Military Road in Hythe also outline the staff corps barracks which were built in 1833.

There are also a number of opportunities to explore the district’s wider coastal heritage along the general route of the canal which includes the remains of Stutfall Castle, the Roman Saxon Shore fort at Lympne, Hythe’s role as a Cinque Port, some of the District’s castles such as Lympne and Sandgate, larger Redoubts at Hythe and Dymchurch as well as the string of Martello Towers that line the coast.

### **Events on the Canal**

There are a number of events and organised activities that highlight the Royal Military Canal as a heritage, ecological, recreational and tourism asset. The Hythe Venetian Festival and Hythe Festival are two major events that are both hosted on the canal biannually. Both are charity funded and attract thousands of visitors to the canal and surrounding area. The Hythe Venetian Festival is a floating carnival which sees float entries from local schools, community groups and businesses paraded along the canal during the afternoon and then again after dark. The festival was first held in 1890 and has continued to grow as a popular event. Other events that are held in association with the festival include guided tours and talks about the canal and local town.

The Hythe Festival is a 10 day event that is held throughout Hythe and the canal and includes activities such as canoeing, kayaking, fishing and concerts. An evening tour is carried out by the Romney Marsh Countryside Partnership where visitors are able to explore more about the history and wildlife of the canal.

Other events and activities that are carried out at the Royal Military Canal include fishing events, canoeing and guided walks and activities led by the Romney Marsh Countryside Partnership. These provide valuable opportunities to explore and enjoy the canal and its associated assets.

### **Canal Habitats and Biodiversity**

The importance of the Royal Military Canal for its diverse wildlife and rich habitats has led to part being designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and the remaining lengths becoming Local Wildlife Sites (LWS). It is an excellent place to view wildlife and to appreciate the rich natural landscape from the many pathways along the banks of the canal as well as by water. Many panoramic views and vistas are also available across the Romney Marsh and towards the Lympne Escarpment

which enhances understandings of the primary purpose of the canal in the defence of the low-lying Marsh against a Napoleonic invasion.

A wide range of wildlife can be found along the canal. Some of the main bird species include the Mute Swan, Grey Heron and Kingfisher which can be viewed all year round. A number of insects and amphibians also flourish at the Royal Military Canal, such as the Emperor Dragonfly, Marsh Frog and Glow Worm. Mammals such as the Water Vole and Mink are also common. The back drains and adjacent ditches of the canal provide an ideal habitat for the endangered Water Vole which requires high water levels and thick side bank vegetation to survive. Various tree and plant species further add to the rich landscapes along the banks of the canal such as the Yellow Flag Iris, Bladderwort and Elm trees. Elms were the first trees to be planted along the canal parapet in order to stabilise the banks. Bladderwort is also a rare insectivorous plant that is particularly abundant at Bilsington Bridge in neighbouring Ashford District.

Various programmes monitor and manage the habitats along the canal and ensure that the diverse range of wildlife is able to flourish alongside large numbers of visitors. This includes the management of waterway vegetation to allow for recreational activities along the waterway as well as providing valuable habitats for various plants and animals. Tree planting is also managed as well as natural conservation projects.

### **Folkestone & Hythe District Green Gym**

The Green Gym scheme is currently focusing work on various sections of the canal banks following its success at sites in the Folkestone area. The scheme is led by officers from the District Council and works with volunteers who are experienced in several conservation tasks such as grassland management, scrub management and vegetation removal.

The Green Gym is currently working to manage the habitats and vegetation along sections of the canal whilst also opening up views across the water. This is greatly benefiting both the wildlife and visitors in a number of ways such as through the creation of new vistas that enhances the understanding and enjoyment of the Royal Military Canal as a heritage asset and important defensive structure. Numbers of various plants such as Pyramidal Orchids have also increased and other plants are better able to thrive through the natural conservation and management activities undertaken by the scheme.

The scheme is open to a wide range of participants and also has significant benefits for the health and wellbeing of those that take part. Improvements in physical and mental health have regularly been reported by participants and the group continues to advertise to recruit new members.

### **Statutory Protection and Designation**

The Royal Military Canal is designated as a Scheduled Monument, with the length of the canal being divided into sections that are designated separately. Nine of these are included within the district and run from the Shorncliffe Battery Wall in Sandgate at the canal's eastern terminal through to the section that runs between Honey-pot Cottage and Gigger's Green Bridge in the west of the District. This western section is

partially included within the district before passing into the Aldington parish in neighbouring Ashford District.

The canal also passes through the Hythe Conservation Area and the Lympe Escarpment Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Much of the canal within the district also runs parallel to and then through the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) primarily in the Lympe and West Hythe area. The vast majority of the canal is also designated as a Local Wildlife Site (LWS) with the section that runs through Hythe being the only section that is excluded from this.

## **Vulnerabilities and Opportunities**

### ***Introduction***

The Royal Military Canal and its surrounding natural setting should play key roles not only in the District's heritage offering, but also as an asset to be enjoyed and explored for recreational, tourism, educational and wellbeing purposes. The canal can clearly demonstrate that heritage may be explored and appreciated in a number of different ways by a wide range of audiences who set out with varying purposes. This can range from walkers who are able to enjoy the many footpaths that take in the entire length of the canal through to families who utilise the picnic and play area facilities. Each is able to explore and experience the canal in different ways whilst also being able to appreciate it as an important historic monument with a rich history relating to the District's military past.

The following section presents a number of vulnerabilities and opportunities that arise when considering the historic landscape of the Royal Military Canal. The intention is to provide a basis from which to raise issues for further discussion and consideration which will help to inform emerging proposals and programmes along the site of the canal.

### **Vulnerabilities arising from the Royal Military Canal as a heritage, recreational, ecological and tourism site**

#### ***1: The setting of the Royal Military Canal.***

Retaining and managing the setting of the canal is essential to providing context for this type of monument as well as in imparting a deeper understanding and appreciation for its originally intended function.

The Royal Military Canal was originally constructed as part of a series of important defensive structures lining the Kent coastline. These structures were parts of strategies to defend against a Napoleonic invasion which was threatened during the time of the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815). The Romney Marsh coastline was especially vulnerable given its low-lying land and accessible beaches, and so the Royal Military Canal was built between 1804 and 1809 to protect the interior of the country against Napoleonic troops that may land and deploy along the Romney Marsh coastline.

In order to fully understand the vulnerability of the Romney Marsh coastline to an invading force and therefore the significant defensive function intended for the canal, it is important to maintain the open and low-lying character of the Marsh as part of the canal's setting. The openness of the Marsh is a key feature of its landscape character and also plays a valuable role in allowing for a better understanding of the canal's military function. The canal would be vulnerable if elements of its open

setting were not retained, for example through obscuring the views available across the Marsh or allowing footpaths along the canal to become overgrown so that the monument cannot be easily viewed. It is important to be able to understand that the canal was deemed so necessary because of the low-lying and open nature of the Marsh landscape, and altering the setting would detract from this.

It is also important to retain the open setting of the Royal Military Canal in order to continue providing recreational and educational facilities that take in the canal corridor such as walking, cycling and boating. Whilst many of these activities can be purely recreational, there is always the facility to further act as an educational resource either regarding the historical context of the canal or the important habitats and wildlife that it supports. There are important programmes of work currently being undertaken to maintain the pathways and routes along the canal and their open views of this significant historic monument which will be essential to maintain. Many of the facilities along the canal have recently been enhanced, but will not be able to provide means to explore and enjoy the canal if the open setting is compromised. This will also apply to future proposals for development along or in the surrounding area of the canal.

### ***2: The need to protect the important military remains at the canal.***

The potential for archaeological remains relating to the canal and its construction are high and could be disturbed or lost if the site and immediate surrounding area is developed. A number of the surviving historical features are also vulnerable to development or disturbance such as the remains of the Royal Military Road in places and the parapets along the northern banks. Damage could be caused to these features either by natural or human influences, and so efforts should be made to prevent this and preserve these important archaeological remains for future investigation as well as for the current enjoyment and appreciation of visitors. These features as well as any buried remains are important to the overall understanding of this unique defensive structure as well as being valuable survivals relating to the only military canal in the country.

### ***3: Retaining the views and vistas from and around the Royal Military Canal.***

The panoramic views and vistas that can be enjoyed from the canal which reach across the Romney Marsh and along the Lympne escarpment are a key part of its local landscape character as well as to its attractiveness and appeal as a place to enjoy and explore. A number of the activities and events that are centred on the canal are enhanced by this opportunity to enjoy spectacular views across such a distinctive landscape as the Marsh. It will be important to retain this as a key part of the local character and overall appeal of the canal. Changes to this, such as building developments or planting vegetation that will obscure and interrupt this openness, may be damaging and detract from peoples experiences of this site and historical monument. It is also the case that maintaining these open views and vistas is essential to the better understanding of the canal as a defensive monument which was strategically placed to repel Napoleonic forces should invading troops ever land along the Romney Marsh coastline.

### ***4: Ongoing management of the canal and its associated habitats.***

The Royal Military Canal plays an important role in the maintenance of land conditions across the Romney Marsh by acting as a sink for the extensive network of

drainage ditches that criss-cross the land here. During the summer months when rainfall is potentially low, water can be pumped into the ditches to irrigate the land. In the winter when there is a risk of flooding, water can then be taken into the canal and let out at Iden Lock or via the sluice at Seabrook. This vital function of the canal is managed by the Environment Agency. Programmes to remove silt from the canal are also managed in order to prevent the waterway from becoming blocked and inefficient in its environmental role.

The canal is therefore vulnerable to silting if ongoing management is not maintained which will negatively impact its role in maintaining good conditions across the Marsh. This will also have harmful impacts on the important habitats and wildlife that exist along its banks. As much of the canal is a Local Wildlife Site and other parts are designated as part of wider SSSI's, it is of even more importance to maintain conditions along the waterway.

### **Opportunities arising from the Royal Military Canal as a heritage, recreational, ecological and tourism site**

#### ***1: Creating links between the Royal Military Canal and adjacent historic sites.***

There are a number of opportunities to create links to other heritage assets that can be reached when following the general route of the Royal Military Canal. These include Stutfall Castle at Lympne, the Romney, Hythe and Dymchurch Railway and some of the medieval churches on the Romney Marsh. This enhances the heritage offering of not only the canal itself but also of other heritage assets across the District. Heritage packages, trails or tours may be created that explore many aspects of the district's heritage and establish strong relationships between these sites to better tell the relevant stories and histories. Links to other military heritage sites such as to the Martello Towers, redoubts and batteries could also be created in order to enhance the significance and understanding of these important defence heritage structures. The district is particularly recognised for its strong military legacy, and so linking these sites may enhance the significance of each as well as recognising them as part of an important collection relating to the defence of Kent. In doing this, the tourism and educational value of the Royal Military Canal may also be enhanced and attract wider audiences whilst also raising awareness.

#### ***2: Improved accessibility.***

As part of recent regeneration programmes along the Royal Military Canal, access has been significantly improved that enables wide audiences to explore and enjoy the canal corridor as well as undertake a range of recreational activities such as cycling and horse riding. This includes the upgrading of footpaths to bridleways, the creation of an extensive network of pathways that covers the entire length of the canal as well as these paths being joined to existing and wider trails such as the National Cycle Network Route 2 and Saxon Shore Way long distance path. These improvements create important opportunities for wider audiences to visit and enjoy the canal such as families and disabled visitors. It can also provide opportunities to gain an enhanced understanding of the canal's historical context and significance through this increased accessibility and ability to explore further. Interpretation materials such as information panels and sculptures have also been added along these pathways at various points which again provide more opportunities to better understand the historical significance of the site.

### **3: Community projects and activities.**

There are a number of opportunities relating to the community projects and activities that take place along and surrounding the canal. Various bodies such as the Romney Marsh Countryside Partnership offer activities such as guided walks and talks relating to the canal's military heritage as well as its natural significance for its habitats and wildlife. This is not only an important educational resource that helps to better understand the historical significance of the canal, but it also offers valuable opportunities for communal engagement and networking. This has significant benefits for social wellbeing as well as in attracting visitors from further afield and raising the profile of the canal and its local community. It is also important to raise awareness regarding the valuable wildlife and habitats that are supported along the canal which need to be protected and preserved. As access to the canal corridor has been increased, it is perhaps of even more importance to ensure that increased visitor numbers will not impact negatively on the local environment, but can be made aware of its significance and sensitivities.

These communal projects and activities are also an important opportunity for people to become involved in the care and protection of the canal which further encourages feelings of pride and ownership in the local communities. This has benefits both for the ongoing conservation of the site and its landscape, as well as for the improved mental health and wellbeing of those involved. A number of the activities along the canal also promote better physical health by increasing levels of activity such as through walking and cycling. Being outside and reconnecting with the landscape will further have significant impacts on improving mental health and wellbeing.

Some of the community projects, such as the Green Gym Scheme, present significant opportunities not only for communal engagement but also for the enhancement of the Royal Military Canal and the wellbeing of those who participate. The Green Gym Scheme, for example, involves physical activity undertaking various natural conservation tasks whilst maintaining the landscape along the canal. This is important in raising activity levels outdoors but also in improving other aspects of health such as social networking, building confidence and reducing social exclusion. These important health benefits are valuable opportunities in contributing to innovative ways of social prescribing and preventing or reducing some health challenges that are currently putting substantial pressure on the NHS and Public health, such as obesity, diabetes and depression.

Projects such as the Green Gym are also important in enhancing historic sites such as the Royal Military Canal. The work undertaken is a significant opportunity to manage and enhance the landscape setting of the canal as well as some of its features, most importantly in keeping it open so that the historical context of this defensive structure can be fully appreciated and also enjoyed as part of recreational activity. The panoramic views and vista across the Romney Marsh are important to the local landscape character as well as to its appeal and attractiveness, and so again this work is a valuable opportunity to maintain that.

### **4: Reuse of a historic monument.**

The Royal Military Canal was never intended for navigation and was primarily built as a defensive structure to repel a possible Napoleonic invasion along the Romney Marsh coastline. However the threatened invasion never came, and even when it



was again used as a defensive monument during the Second World War in response to the threat of a German invasion, it was for a second time unable to fulfil its intended purpose.

Alternative uses for the canal were originally sought in order to recoup the money that had been invested into its construction as well as for the ongoing enterprise of the canal for public use. Today the canal is used for a number of recreational activities and events such as leisure boating, fishing and the Hythe Venetian Festival. This highlights the significant opportunities that can arise from reusing a historic monument for wider functions, such as for recreation and education, where it is possible and appropriate. Utilising the canal for navigation and other activities has provided valuable opportunities for enhancing the overall offering at the canal in terms of tourism, recreation, local economy and education. This also has significant benefits for the site as a historic monument in that it raises awareness of the canal, attracts visitors to the area and also engages the local community in programmes that manage and maintain the site in a way that allows people to explore, enjoy and appreciate its historic significance. Programmes of regeneration and conservation are also active along the canal and regular events such as guided tours and walks further raise awareness of the sensitivities relating to the canal's historic landscape as well as means to conserve and protect it.

Reusing the Royal Military Canal for navigation and leisure also highlights the adaptability of heritage assets where appropriate, and how they can continue to evolve and play active roles within the local communities and wider area.

#### ***5: Archaeological potential at the site.***

There are continued opportunities for the future discovery of buried archaeological remains relating to the construction of the canal and its use during the nineteenth century which would be important to enhancing understandings about this type of monument. Evidence suggests that archaeological remains have survived well along much of the canal corridor and so future archaeological investigation may yield additional valuable evidence to what has already been documented and recorded.

### **Conclusion**

The Royal Military Canal continues to be a popular place to visit within the district and can be enjoyed and explored in a number of different ways and through a variety of activities and events. The historical significance of the canal as a Napoleonic defensive structure remains at the centre of its value; however it can also be enjoyed as a place for recreation, leisure and education. These wider offerings support and enhance the historical importance of the site by allowing people to appreciate and learn about its historical context through a range activities such as walking, cycling and leisure boating. Guided walks and talks further highlight its importance and also raise awareness of the natural assets that are significant to the site and protected by various designations.

This case study has highlighted the opportunities that arise from reusing a historic monument where appropriate and enhancing its recreational, tourism and educational offering. The canal appeals to wide ranging audiences through a variety of activities and events which in turn supports its place as an important historic monument which will continue to be appreciated and understood by those that visit.