

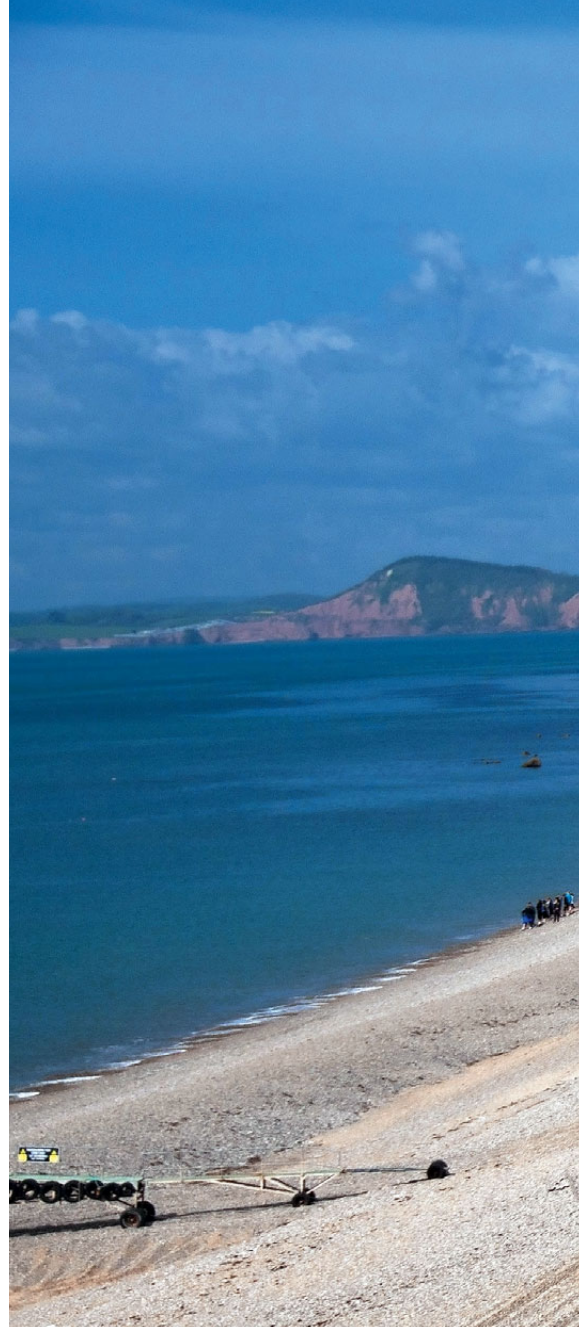
A Flotsam Furore

Although no stranger to shipwrecks and smuggling in centuries past, Branscombe hit the headlines in 2007 when a container vessel lost its cargo offshore, sparking a beachcombing frenzy. Mark Andrews reviews the impact on the town six years on

PHOTOS BY MARK ANDREWS



Local fisherman John Hughes offered tours of the wreck instead of the usual mackerel-fishing trips



“I was on the east cliff on the Saturday morning, and I could hear this rumbling noise in the distance,” says Anthony Sellick who, with his brother, owns The Sea Shanty and foreshore at Branscombe. “Then two tugs appeared around Beer Head pulling the *MSC Napoli*.”

The story began on Thursday 18 January 2007, when storms led to the *Napoli*'s hull being breached and the engine room flooded whilst off the Lizard. After the ship was abandoned, tugs set out to clear the vessel from the busy shipping lanes and tow it to Portland. With continuing bad weather and the ship deteriorating, shelter was sought off Branscombe, part of the Jurassic Coast. That night, containers were washed aboard and by Sunday the *Napoli* was truly beached.

Community police officer and village resident Steve Speariett describes the

The beach at
Branscombe, part
of the World
Heritage Coast
Insets below
MSC Napoli



early stages as “low key”. What started off on Sunday as mainly local beachcombers taking some of the goods soon escalated as news of BMW motorbikes being washed ashore hit the international media. Local publican Graham Williams, joint licensee of The Fountain Head, recalls one paper even publishing a map of how to get to Branscombe.

Hordes caused havoc as they descended on the sleepy village. Anthony says that they were lighting fires and taking away anything they could lay their hands on. Guy Bentley, licensee at The Old Bakery tea rooms, describes it as a scary time for his family. Then living near the tea rooms with two young boys (one and five), they found themselves – with the beach cordoned off – on the edge of the containment zone. “They were not particularly the sort of people you wanted hanging around your door,” says Guy.

“We bolted ourselves in.”

Despite the headlines and what some locals believe, Steve claims there were actually only eight instances of crime directly attributable to the *Napoli*. By Wednesday, the police had gained the upper hand and the frenzy of the first few days was over. Anthony believes “it happened on the wrong day of the week”; people were off for the weekend and agencies were slow to put a coordinated plan into operation.

Branscombe was no stranger to such scenes, as this part of the Devon coast was synonymous with smuggling. In the 18th and early 19th centuries, the illicit trade was rife and involved a dangerous game of

cat and mouse with the authorities. Branscombe church has the gravestone of customs officer John Hurley who in 1755 mysteriously fell to his death while trying to extinguish smugglers’ beacons. Retired archaeology professor turned local historian Barbara Farquharson tells how in the 1930s a collier ran aground off Branscombe and was relieved of its cargo within 24 hours!

The *Napoli* languished off Branscombe until August 2007, when explosives were used to split it in two and the bow was towed off. Work to break up the stern in situ was only completed in July 2008.

“On their holidays, visitors made a beeline for Branscombe, but they didn’t



“With the beach a tourist attraction for all the wrong reasons, it had a knock-on effect on trade”

tend to stay very long because of the recovery operation,” says Anthony when asked about the first summer season. Local fisherman John Hughes took around double the amount of passengers out on his boat; instead of offering the usual mackerel-fishing trips, he was doing tours to the wreck. Despite many birds being affected by oil leaking from the vessel, DEFRA tests of crab samples showed they were safe and John’s fishing was unaffected.

With the beach a tourist attraction for all the wrong reasons, it had a knock-on effect on trade, says Guy at The Old Bakery. “I believe it was detrimental – we lost a lot of regular customers who liked to walk on the beach and through Branscombe.”

However, for The Fountain Head pub, trade was up. Graham says they were asked to fill out a claim for loss of business but declined as they believe they saw the opposite effect.

It took The Old Bakery three or four years to regain lost customers. When they did return, people apologised, saying that the beach had been horrid. And it is this association that The Sea Shanty has had



problems shaking off. “Even today, some people still associate the beach with tar, whereas the reality is that there isn’t any. In fact, by year two there was very little tar on the beach,” says Anthony. Today it takes a really bad storm for any debris from the *Napoli* to wash ashore.

Six years on, things are as back to normal as they can be in the current economic situation. “People have short memories – the *Napoli* connection is gone,” says Guy. Anthony adds, “It’s like a Sunday paper: it’s in the bin by Monday. What people do still remember though is

Above: The *Napoli*’s anchor now resides on the foreshore of Branscombe beach, a permanent reminder of the events

Left: Guy Bentley, licensee at The Old Bakery tea rooms

Below: Anthony Sellick, owner of The Sea Shanty



the BMW motorbikes on the beach.”

When he’s on his beat, Steve still has some people asking about the *Napoli* and says, “I don’t think it’s done tourism any harm and long term it’s been a positive influence.” This is a view shared by The Fountain Head, which has a number of pictures of the disaster adorning the walls. Graham talks of some people stopping off on the way back from visiting Boscastle, scene of catastrophic floods in 2004. Aside from disaster tourists, he regularly has people asking where the *Napoli* ran aground. ■