

# Rye: bucking the southeast trend

Investment in direct sales – and a valuable ‘safety valve’ after conquering post-Brexit export paperwork – are keeping port afloat

**T**HE HISTORIC PORT OF Rye, situated up the river Rother on the boundary between Sussex and Kent, is now several miles inland, with river flows at times reaching five knots, and accessible for only around five hours around high water.

However, the port continues to support a mixed fleet of netters, scallopers and trawlers,

By **ANDY READ**

with many vessels switching between gears and fisheries over the course of the year. Much of the fleet works 12-hour trips, when the weather allows.

“The fish auction in the harbour closed a generation ago,” Keith Chapman of Chapman’s Fish told *FN*. “It was

a case of either shut the doors for good, or find a different way to do business.

“When we took over the current market, there were just three people employed here. We’ve now moved that up to 16 staff in total, and we’re trying to absolutely maximise the benefits of locally caught fish to the town.

“We opened our retail shop two years ago. Rye is a pretty town – we are an hour from central London on the train, and the station is very handy for the harbour. About 50% of our sales at the fishmonger’s and in our seafood bar, we estimate, are day trippers, and 50% locals.

“We’re proud of what we’ve managed here. More to the point, we’ve kept boats in the local fleet going, when otherwise they likely would have sold up and left the industry. It helps that we will take everything a boat catches, not cherry-pick just the prime species. Bycatch species may not seem to add up to much, but over the course of a year, they can make a real difference to a skipper’s bottom line.

“As well as the Rye fleet, we take in fish from across Kent and Sussex, including Whitstable, Folkestone, Dungeness, Eastbourne and Hastings. We also have eight whelkers here. At the height of the season we are seeing 30t a week of whelks, and 30t of fish in a good week, as well as scallops. In total, we have about 45 boats that land to us.

“The majority of boats bring their own catches to us, but we do collect from some ports. We also have a daily delivery to Billingsgate, and we supply a few restaurants direct. This is a nice part of the job – we supply full details of the vessels that have caught the fish, and we’ve built up relationships with restaurants which mean they understand the seasonality of the fisheries here, and can pass this on to their customers. And again, every locally caught fish that the restaurants sell is keeping the value of the fishery circulating locally.”

Louise Chapman, who manages the operation, said that a mountain of pre-Brexit planning and preparation had paid off. “We do export fish and scallops to Zeebrugge market at times, and will sometimes work closely with Brighton and Newhaven Fish Sales to put



▲ Adam Stent and Daniel Chapman at the well-stocked counter at Chapman’s Fish. “We manage to get a lot of variety from the different boats that land to us over the year, and cook and pick our own crab, whelk, spiders and lobsters.”

together full loads.

“I sat down with the local environmental health officer ahead of Brexit, to really plan and prepare for the paperwork we’d need, and it has paid off. There were tears on day one, but we’ve never lost a consignment! There have been a lot of late-night calls, but it has worked, and was worth the effort. It means we have a safety valve for the local boats when landings are

high, and we don’t ever need to restrict their activity.”

Adam Stent, a third-generation Rye fisherman, said that while it was getting harder to persuade the next generation to enter the local industry, the service provided by Chapman’s was keeping the current cohort of fishermen in business.

“It is easy for a small fleet to lose critical mass, and then the job gets much harder for those



▲ Louise Chapman, manager of Chapman’s Fish, with part of the local Rye fleet alongside. The harbour, and the small fishermen’s stores, are run by the Environment Agency.



▲ Daniel Chapman with an early landing of whelks for the cold store. “We do cook some whelk for our fishmonger’s stall and for Billingsgate, but the majority of whelk landed through Chapman’s is destined for the Korean market.”



▲ Iced fish in the chiller that will be exported to Zeebrugge market – with the paperwork under control, this provides a useful extra outlet for fresh fish when landings are high.



▲ “It was a case of adapt for the future or die,” said Keith Chapman. “Our seafood bar has proven to be a hit with both locals and tourists, and has added extra jobs and local income, maximising the benefits of our fishing fleet to the town.”

# 'The Brixham model has changed the SE landscape'

"There has been a lot of talk in Rye about the recent arrival of Brixham Trawler Agents in the port," Keith Chapman told *FN*. "They've taken a refrigerated unit on the quay, and are offering a heavily subsidised collection of prime fish, for sale on Brixham auction – though they don't take bycatch such as dogfish.

"I can't see how they are making any money out of this at the moment – my concern is that they can afford to subsidise their operation after receiving some very large grants, and this makes for a very uneven playing field.

"Competition is largely a good thing. With poor fishing and escalating costs, our fishermen certainly need to find

the best possible price they can for their catch. But at what cost?

"The Brixham model has changed the landscape of small fishing ports across Essex, Kent and Sussex – and although successful, it is destroying our small fishing communities.

"Once local fish is in BTA's fridges here, it has to do a 250-mile trip to be auctioned, before it is then trucked off somewhere else. This is environmentally crazy. In addition to this, by sending fish to Devon, our local hands-on jobs within the local community will become redundant.

"Our boats have largely stayed with us – the extras we offer are a real incentive, and

perversely, when they started looking at the prices boats were getting in Brixham, skippers here realised that we were paying decent prices all along!

"But I do fear for the long-term implications that the Brixham model has for other small fishing communities – and that it will see small ports struggle to keep up any volumes of fish for BTA's trucks to collect in the medium to long term.

"I'd hope that in future, people making the decision to provide financial support to this kind of operation look not only at increased turnover and jobs in the port where the grant is given, but take into consideration the possible negative impacts on fishing ports elsewhere."

boats that are clinging on. Here the set-up is designed to make it as easy as possible for fishermen to concentrate simply on their fishing, with Chapman's taking as much stress off the shore side of the job as possible. That includes free ice and boxes, and any other support from ashore that's needed."

Louise also works closely with local schools. "We work with students on everything from sustainability to hands-on filleting of fish. It's really enjoyable seeing the kids get so excited about it, when many of them have never seen fresh fish

being prepared before. It has also give a wider boost to the profile of fishing in the town.

"Prior to this, there was a view that fishing was only for fishing families. Now we are seeing interest in the industry from youngsters who have no family background in the industry at all."

So how is the actual fishing at the moment? "The sole have really declined," said Keith. "Sole was the staple fish for a long time, but 2024 has been the slowest year we've ever seen. The quota is there now, but there are no fish.

"Bass stocks are doing well, but there the issue for many boats is the restriction to 5% bycatch. We have local boats that could make a living out of bass for much of the year, if they were allowed to – but they can't, which is frustrating.

"The only other species that we are seeing do OK are whelk and spider crab. Although the spider crab infestation can cause significant issues for the fishermen, we are able to cook them locally, rather than export them as live crab.

"We have to be positive about 2026, and hope that we'll get a better deal with the EU than the first Brexit deal, which did nothing, really, for the local fleet."



▲ "We really enjoy giving students hands-on experience with fish, and it has had the added bonus of not only increasing local sales, but raising awareness about the career opportunities that the fishing industry still provides," said Louise Chapman.



▲ John Button, grandfather of Chris Button, current manager of the fishmonger's in Rye, presented a basket of local bloaters to Queen Elizabeth when she visited the town in October 1966. Chapman's has recently purchased a smoker, and will restart production of bloaters, as well as other smoked fish, later this year.

## YOUR LETTERS

# 'Hub and spoke' model threatens local viability

Dear Editor,

At a time when things like foreign factory trawlers and climate change have conspired to make life even harder for our local heroes in Rye's fishing fleet, the arrival of a brand new route to market could be seen as a real opportunity. Brixham Fish Market has arrived on Simmon's Quay, in direct competition with existing local fish merchant Chapman's.

Simmon's Quay is managed by the Environment Agency, as is the rest of the harbour of Rye. Locals will be familiar with Rye Bay Fish, one of our local fishmongers, and also with Rye Fish Market and Seafood Bar, run by Chapman's. These outlets are at either end of Simmon's Quay.

Brixham Fish Market has benefited from years of funding from the former government, which has seen tens of millions of pounds go to the now market leader in southern England, whilst Chapman's, a fish merchant with a smaller market presence, has benefited from a lesser (but very welcome) £150,000 grant from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, secured last year by Cllr Christine Bayliss, leader of Rother Labour Group and deputy leader of Rother District Council.

With its funding, Chapman's set about creating the Rye Seafood Bar, where locals and visitors enjoy seasonal, fresh and high-quality seafood, often straight from the boat, prepared by locals, creating jobs and generating revenue locally. What does Brixham bring in comparison?

Brixham's model is one of 'hub and spoke'. It buys fish landed in Rye, puts it in a fridge (it also has these units at Hastings, Ramsgate and across the south), and then trucks it to Brixham where it is auctioned and trucked on to buyers. By law and regulations, it must be taken to Brixham first, even if it is landed in Rye, as confirmed by Matthew

Bailey of Brixham Fish Market. Brixham has developed its business model rapidly using government funding earmarked for our beleaguered fishing industry.

There are clear concerns about fair competition when Brixham has had so much funding compared with Chapman's. Secondly, the impact of thousands more food miles is far from sustainable (Brixham's sustainability statement is incredibly vague). And what will happen to Rye's fishing fleet when this economically and environmentally unsustainable model is no longer profitable?

Over the last 12 months, I have been writing to the Environment Agency and our former MP on this issue. We were promised a visit by senior Environment Agency managers, which failed to materialise.

How can we ensure our sustainable, local fishing fleet of small boats thrives and is supported by companies with an interest in our community, alongside a fair and equitable funding process?

Our new MP, Helena Dollimore, made reference to our local fishing industry in her maiden speech in parliament. We want to see a fair and level playing field for businesses of all sizes to prosper in, and for everyone to support our vulnerable fishing community, which is an intrinsic part of who we are as a town.

Cllr Simon McGurk  
Rother District Council

### HAVE YOUR SAY

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