



# Cottage Industry

THE TINY SEASIDE TOWN OF  
WHITSTABLE IS EAST LONDON'S BEST-KEPT  
SECRET. MAURA EGAN SHACKS UP

**Photographs by**  
HARF ZIMMERMANN





The London papers have recently proclaimed Whitstable as the stylish summer spot for the city's groovier set. The locals refer to the artists and musicians who have come to colonize this quaint Edwardian seaside town in North Kent as D.F.L.'s—slang for “down from London.”

But when I descend from the train car after a 90-minute ride from Victoria Station in London and head to the water, I spot only a bowling alley and a pair of porcine, Mike Leigh-type characters loping along the beach path with their terrier. Where's Jarvis Cocker? And Bob Geldof? Instead of Islington by the Sea (as it is sometimes called, referring to the young and hip London borough), it feels like the end of the earth: there's the Hotel Continental and, on the hill above the beach, a cluster of Crayola-colored Victorian huts, which families have used as cabanas for generations. And on this early-spring morning, with a healthy layer of fog shrouding the sky and a chilly Norwegian wind rolling across the North Sea, Whitstable seems to be an unlikely place to throw down a beach towel and sunbathe.

I ask Katrina Brown, an inventor from London who bought her cottage on the hill five years ago, about the beautiful and the boldfaced who summer here. She can only come up with Peter Cushing, the 1960's horror-film actor who frequented the tea

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shops in town. In the 1880's, W. Somerset Maugham lived here with his uncle, the town vicar, after his parents died. There are some Krays milling about in town, distant cousins of Ronnie and Reggie, the East End gangster twins who ruled London's underworld in the 1960's.

All in all, though, the royal and the rich have been known to summer on the western coast, leaving the working-class beaches of Kent to the rowdies from London's East End. But just as this section of the city has undergone some gentrification over the last decade, so has Whitstable, although it still has a quirky, rough-around-the-edges feel. It's a secret getaway.

And if there are A-list Britons vacationing here, well, they don't want you to know about it. As the sun breaks through the Turneresque mist, some jauntily dressed thirsty-somethings start popping up around the waterfront. Some are tackling pints of bitter and baskets of fish and chips at Old Neptune, the raucous Victorian pub on the beach that attracts both local folks and low-key weekend visitors. “In the summer, you can leave London after work and come here and have a beer on the beach, and it's still light out,” says Mel Enright, a fashion publicist who moved from London three years ago. “The charm of Whitstable is that it has maintained its character.”

Unlike Brighton and other seaside resorts, there are no arcades or tacky shops clogging the waterfront. Instead, the shore is lined with shabby-chic cottages, many accessorized with small

**Shackadelle:** Wheeler's Oyster Bar, top right, is a local institution in Whitstable. The beach is rocky, but in summer the water is ideal for swimming, fishing and wind sailing. Previous and next spreads: beach huts line a hill overlooking the water.

but lush English gardens. The only sign of big business is the wind-sailing school, and today's warm weather has many folks dragging their crafts out to sea.

There's also a thriving harbor, where boats drift in each morning and fishermen unload their catch for the local markets and restaurants. Fishmongers traffic in wooden crates of whelks, cockles, cod, sea bass, prawns and oysters — the cash crop of Whitstable (hence the cutesy town nickname, the Pearl of Kent). It was the delicious bivalves found in the shallow water beds that first lured the Romans to the area. The local oyster boom reached its peak in the 1860's, when millions of oysters were raised and slurped down annually. There is even an oyster festival every summer, complete with a parade in town and the local clergy blessing the waters. But by the 1920's, the industry had dried up because of overfishing and parasites. Whitstable became another backwater in economically challenged Kent.

Then, about 10 years ago, Barry Green, who owned a tile company in town, replenished the depleted beds and turned the Royal Native Oyster Stores, an old warehouse, into a trendy seafood restaurant. Food critics started making pilgrimages from London. Green next took over the Art Nouveau Hotel Continental and polished it into a stylish inn with a bustling restaurant. Then he annexed the black timber fisherman huts and turned them into weekend rentals. (In summer, you need to book these a few months in advance.)

## THERE'S ALSO A THRIVING HARBOR, WHERE BOATS DRIFT IN EACH MORNING TO UNLOAD THEIR CATCH FOR THE MARKETS AND RESTAURANTS.

Inland, Harbour Street, the narrow high street, is a dotty jumble of teahouses, butcher shops and hokey art galleries selling shell sculptures and sunset paintings. While the streetscape looks as if it hasn't changed since 1950, there is evidence of colonization. The Horsebridge Arts and Community Center screens Kurosawa films and holds reiki sessions. The coffee shop Tea and Times could be in Seattle, with its pierced and dreadlocked staff and its panini menu. Graham Greener, the smart-looking garden shop, offers potted herbs and expensive hand creams. Across from the sewing machine store stands Manson, Sutcliffe & Treacle, a gallery and bookshop run by James Allen. There you can find Aleister Crowley first editions, original Andy Warhol prints and a series of erotic photographs of John Lennon and Yoko Ono. "A lot of the art here is a bit twee," says Allen, a longtime resident, who opened his space in February after years of commuting to London.

A few storefronts farther down, Wheelers Oyster Bar has been shucking oysters for loyal customers since 1856 and earning rave reviews for its seasonal seafood dishes. Dining in this four-table operation feels as if you are eating in your great-aunt's parlor. "We are written up in all the fancy food guides, but our space can't really accommodate that many diners," the chef Mark Stubbs says nonchalantly. He is sure he has served celebrities at his tiny outpost, but he can't remember any names. This amnesia seems to be pervasive when it comes to the tourists and fancy foreigners from London coming in to swoop up second homes. "Whitstable is still a working town," Stubbs says. Long may it be. ■

