

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE TIMEBALL

Although the history of the Timeball Tower goes back to 1796, the reason for its being at Deal at all begins in the mid-17th Century when the Naval Yard was established. This provided provisions and equipment for warships anchored in the sheltered stretch of water called “The Downs” between the Deal shore and the Goodwin Sands. This was the only anchorage between Sheerness and Portsmouth capable of accommodating a fleet, as well as being popular with merchant shipping.

The history of ‘The Timeball Tower’ is in three distinct phases:

1. **From 1796 to 1814** a shutter telegraph stood on the site, relaying information between the Admiralty in London and the Naval Yard, via a line of twelve shutter stations. Other lines ran from the Admiralty to Portsmouth, Plymouth and Gt Yarmouth (Norfolk).
2. **The present tower was built in 1820-21** to carry a semaphore - a signaling device that was faster and more efficient than the telegraph. Expense precluded the replacement of all the telegraph lines, so only that to Portsmouth was completed. The semaphore at Deal was used by the *Coast Blockade for the Suppression of Smuggling* to send information to other Blockade stations around the coast of Kent and Sussex. Deal was the headquarters of the Blockade until it was disbanded in 1831. Soon after this, visual signaling was replaced by the electric telegraph that worked regardless of the time of day or the weather.
3. **From 1855** the Tower carried a Timeball. This was linked to the Royal Observatory, Greenwich, by electric telegraph wires running alongside the railway. At 1 pm each day a signal was sent from Greenwich to all timeballs (including Deal) in England, thus synchronizing their drops. This time signal allowed ships anchored in The Downs to check the accuracy of their chronometers- essential for accurate navigation- before setting off on long voyages. It ceased official operation in 1927 with the arrival of Radio Time Signals.

TIMEBALL DROP

The Timeball is programmed to drop every day at 1300. Additionally, during the summer season (1 April – 30 September) the ball drops hourly from 9am to 5pm. The Timeball also drops at midnight on New Years’ Eve.

“The Drop”

The drop cycle is as follows:

At 5 minutes to the hour the ball goes half way up; at 3 minutes to the hour it goes to the top of the mast and drops on the hour. The drop cycle is automatic. The Timeball is controlled by the MSF Radio Time Signal transmitter located at Anthorn, in Cumbria.