

## John James Jeal and the Sea View Bridge



The turn of the twentieth century in Hythe belonged to one man's vision: John James Jeal (1850–1920). Known locally as the “King of Seabrook,” Jeal was not simply a politician; he was a master builder, ambitious developer, councillor, and by 1902, Mayor of Hythe. Where others saw a quiet stretch of coastline, Jeal saw the potential for a thriving seaside resort.

At the heart of his plans stood the Sea View Hotel, a Victorian landmark intended to attract wealthy visitors and new residents to Seabrook. Jeal understood that a successful resort depended not only on impressive buildings but also on accessibility. Visitors arriving at the hotel needed a direct route to the beach and promenade, yet the Royal Military Canal formed a significant barrier between Seabrook Road and the seafront.

To overcome this obstacle, Jeal financed and constructed Sea Road together with a substantial carriage bridge across the canal. When John built Sea Road, leading across the first bridge on the Royal Military Canal to the seafront, he was doing more than creating a minor road. He was improving access between the newly developed residential roads and the coast. The local press described the bridge as “a

great convenience for carriages,” and in an era when private carriages symbolised wealth and status, easy access to the promenade increased both prestige and property value.

The original bridge was designed for horses, carriages, and vehicles, allowing direct access from Cannongate Road and Cliff Road to the seafront. It strengthened the connections between the inland villas, the railway, the coast, and the Sea View Hotel, helping establish Seabrook as both an attractive residential district and a fashionable destination for visitors.

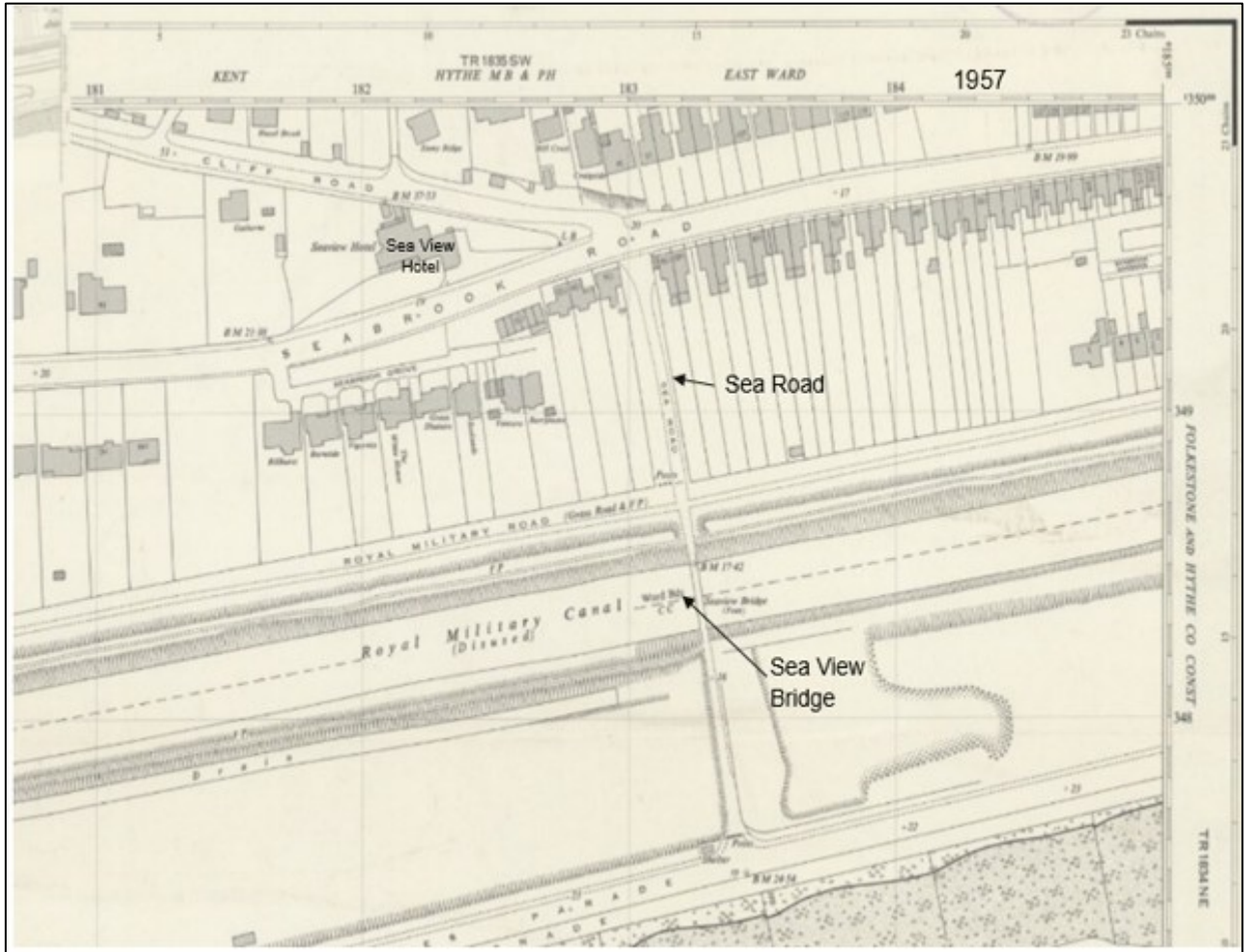
For nearly forty years, Jeal’s bridge carried residents and holidaymakers across the canal. Contemporary visitors would have heard the sound of carriage wheels and horses’ hooves crossing between the hotel and the beach as Edwardian tourists enjoyed the sea air.

John’s other major concern was proper drainage in Seabrook. He repeatedly complained that Sea Road was often a foot deep in storm water and became increasingly frustrated by the lack of action from the Council. In 1891 he refused to stand again for the Town Council, believing he could pressure them more effectively as an independent campaigner. In 1893 he resigned from all the local clubs and institutions of which he was a member — including the golf club — as a public protest. Eventually, the Council conceded that his concerns were justified, drainage works were carried out in 1894, and by 1897 Jeal had returned to the Council, elected unopposed for the East Ward.

The original Sea Road carriage bridge survived into the twentieth century but met its end during the Second World War. In 1940, with fears of German invasion growing along the south coast, the Royal Military Canal once again became part of Britain’s defensive line. The bridge was deliberately demolished as a wartime precaution to prevent enemy forces from using the crossing to move inland.

Although the original bridge was destroyed, the route itself survived. After the war, the crossing was replaced with a smaller pedestrian footbridge, preserving the historic connection between Sea Road, Seabrook Road, and the seafront.

Later mapping provides further evidence of the crossing’s continued importance. The Ordnance Survey map of 1957 identifies the footbridge as “Seaview Bridge,” a name likely connected to the nearby Sea View Hotel on Seabrook Road. Today, those walking across the bridge still follow the exact route first laid out by the “King of Seabrook” more than 120 years ago. The hotel has disappeared, and the carriages are long gone, but Jeal’s vision of linking the town to the sea remains firmly intact.



Views of the bridge





Source: Anne Petrie, "The King of Seabrook"  
Thank you to Ron Greenwood for the Aerial view of the bridge