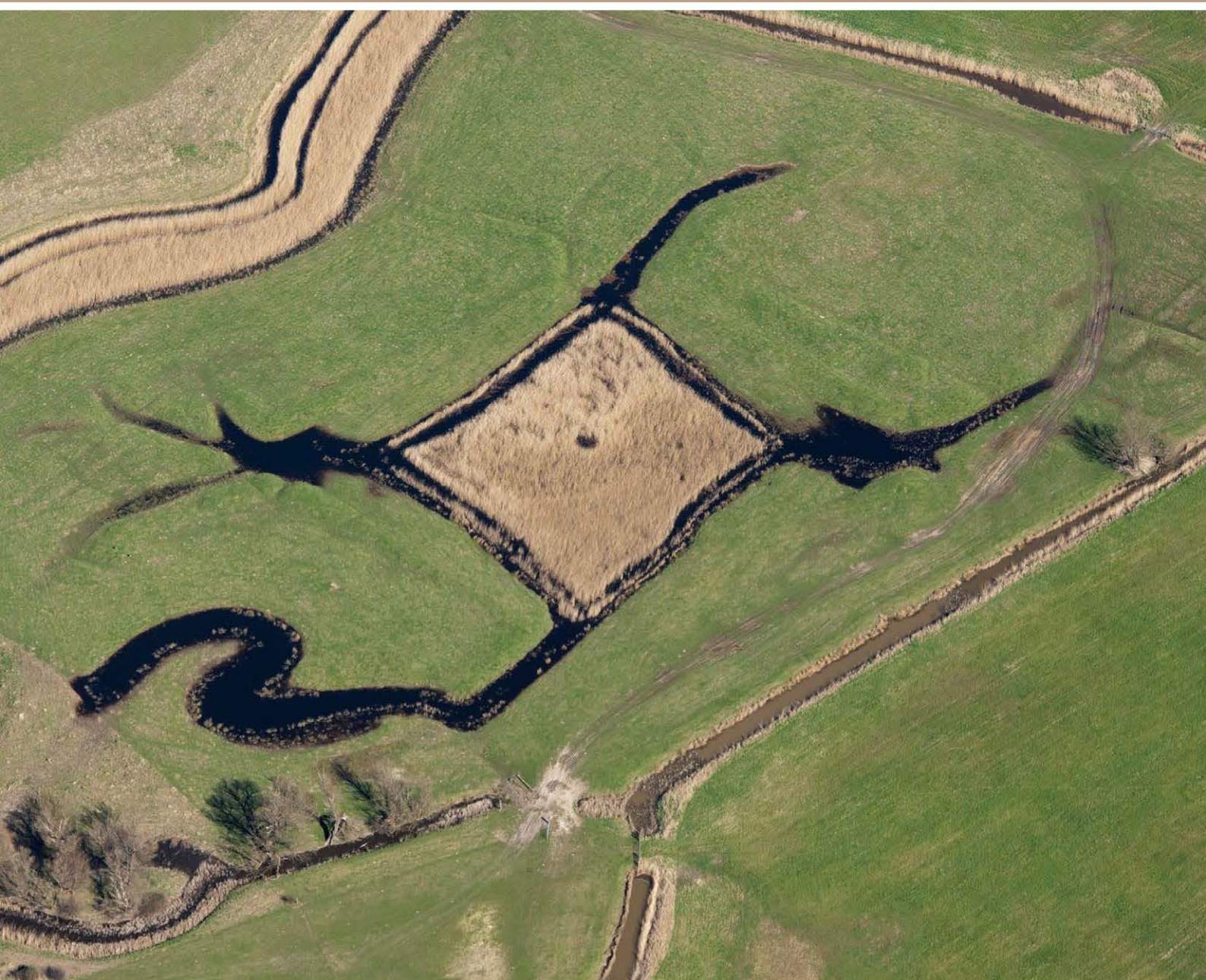


RESEARCH REPORT SERIES no. 17-2014

HALSTOW MARSHES, HIGH HALSTOW, HOO PENINSULA, MEDWAY, KENT HALSTOW MARSHES DECOY POND

ARCHAEOLOGICAL REPORT

Edward Carpenter



REMOTE
SENSING



ENGLISH HERITAGE

This report has been prepared for use on the internet and the images within it have been down-sampled to optimise downloading and printing speeds.

Please note that as a result of this down-sampling the images are not of the highest quality and some of the fine detail may be lost. Any person wishing to obtain a high resolution copy of this report should refer to the ordering information on the following page.

Research Report Series 17-2014

**HALSTOW MARSHES
HIGH HALSTOW
HOO PENINSULA, MEDWAY, KENT
HALSTOW MARSHES DECOY POND**

Edward Carpenter

NGR: TQ 7827 7778

© English Heritage

ISSN 2046-9799 (Print)

ISSN 2046-9802 (Online)

The Research Report Series incorporates reports by the expert teams within the Investigation & Analysis Division of the Heritage Protection Department of English Heritage, alongside contributions from other parts of the organisation. It replaces the former Centre for Archaeology Reports Series, the Archaeological Investigation Report Series, the Architectural Investigation Report Series, and the Research Department Report Series.

Many of the Research Reports are of an interim nature and serve to make available the results of specialist investigations in advance of full publication. They are not usually subject to external refereeing, and their conclusions may sometimes have to be modified in the light of information not available at the time of the investigation. Where no final project report is available, readers must consult the author before citing these reports in any publication. Opinions expressed in Research Reports are those of the author(s) and are not necessarily those of English Heritage.

Requests for further hard copies, after the initial print run, can be made by emailing:

Res.reports@english-heritage.org.uk

or by writing to:

English Heritage, Fort Cumberland, Fort Cumberland Road, Eastney, Portsmouth PO4 9LD

Please note that a charge will be made to cover printing and postage.

Cover Image:EHA 27949_019 16-MAR-2014 © English Heritage

SUMMARY

Situated on Halstow Marshes on the Hoo Peninsula, Medway, Kent are the well preserved and partly water-filled remains of a post medieval wildfowl decoy pond. Ponds such as these were introduced into Britain from the Netherlands in the 17th century, often built by the gentry, and gained wide popularity during the 18th and 19th centuries. Wildfowl that landed on these ponds were lured along the pipes, which would have been enclosed by netting, and caught in their narrow ends. Decoy ponds are found across England but most were situated on the eastern coast from Yorkshire to Essex. Despite Kent's east coast location only four definite examples of this type of decoy pond are known for the county and of these the pond on High Halstow is the only example that survives as an earthwork. These earthworks also include what may be the remains of an earlier and slightly larger pond on the same site. A decoy pond may have been in existence at this location by the late 17th century but it is not clear when it fell out of use, though mid-19th century sources suggest it may have been abandoned by that date.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to my English Heritage colleagues Peter Kendall, Sarah Newsome and Helen Winton for their comments on this report.

Figures 1 and 2 are taken from an online copy of Sir Ralph Payne-Gallwey's 1886 *The Book of Duck Decoys, Their Construction, Management, and History*. This was accessed from <https://archive.org/details/bookofduckdecoysx00payn> where it is listed as being Not in Copyright.

ARCHIVE LOCATION

English Heritage Archive
The Engine House
Fire Fly Avenue
Swindon
SN2 2GZ

DATE OF RESEARCH

2014

CONTACT DETAILS

Remote Sensing
English Heritage
The Engine House
Fire Fly Avenue
Swindon
SN2 2EH

Edward Carpenter; 01793 414925; edward.carpenter@english-heritage.org.uk

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
DECOY PONDS.....	2
HIGH HALSTOW DECOY	4
OTHER DECOYS IN ENGLAND	7
DECOYS IN KENT	8
ASSESSMENT.....	8
REFERENCES.....	10

CAPTIONS

Figure 1 Location of Halstow Marshes decoy pond.....	1
Figure 2 Plan of a decoy pond with four pipes.....	3
Figure 3 The use of a dog to lure the ducks along the pipe of a decoy pond.....	4
Figure 4 The area occupied by Halstow Marshes decoy pond and the decoyman's cottage.....	5
Figure 5 Halstow Marshes decoy pond in 1947	5
Figure 6 A transcription of Halstow Marshes decoy pond as seen on aerial photographs.....	6
Figure 7 Halstow Marshes decoy pond as depicted on the 1:2500 1885 Ordnance Survey map.....	7
Figure 8 Halstow Marshes decoy pond photographed in 2014.....	9

INTRODUCTION

The open and unpopulated marshes of the Hoo Peninsula, Medway, Kent have proved attractive to people looking for 'space, silence and solitude' (Church 1948, 232) as well as to a wide variety of bird life. Situated on the northern side of the peninsula, the High Halstow National Nature Reserve, Cliffe Pools Nature Reserve and Northward Hill Nature Reserve testify to the abundance of birds that visit this part of the Thames estuary. Within the Northward Hill reserve, whose boundaries extend across parts of Whalebone Marshes and Halstow Marshes, are the earthwork remains of a post medieval decoy pond (Fig 1). This pond was identified for further work during English Heritage's Hoo Peninsula Historic Landscape Project (Carpenter et al 2013). Decoy ponds such as this were built from the 16th to the 19th century and were used to lure and then trap wildfowl. Its survival acts as a reminder of the long history of exploitation of these birds for food that was undertaken on this and other marshland landscapes in Britain.



Figure 1 Location of Halstow Marshes decoy pond. Background mapping © Crown copyright and database right 2014, all rights reserved. Ordnance Survey Licence number 100024900

Although there are no details of the early exploitation of birds on Hoo, in various parts of Britain from at least the Middle Ages vast numbers of wildfowl were caught in the summer months. This was done by driving birds that were moulting, and therefore temporarily flightless, into pens formed by funnelled netting that had been positioned

along the edge of open water. Concerns about the damaging effects to wildfowl numbers, particularly as unfledged birds were also killed in this process, resulted in legislation during the reign of Henry VIII. The 'Act to avoid destroying of Wild Fowl' outlawed the taking of birds with nets during the summer months of May through to August (Mansel-Pleydell 1887, 3). After the passing of this Act fewer birds were available to be sold at market and the hardship endured by 'the poor people that were wont to live by their skill in taking of the said fowl' were the reasons presented for the successful repeal of the Act under Edward VI (ibid).

During the 17th century an alternative way to capture birds, though still using nets, was established in Britain. This was introduced from the Netherlands in the early 1600s and entailed the creation of a purpose-built pond with channels enclosed in netting which together were called an eendenkooi (duck cage). This name, anglicised and contracted became the English word 'decoy' and ducks that landed on these ponds were caught by being lured rather than driven into the netted areas. From these 17th century beginnings decoy ponds were built across much of England and some of Wales, though the vast majority were situated in the east of England. They were particularly popular in the 18th and first half of the 19th century but they are thought to have first been established in Norfolk during the 1620s (Heaton 2001, 5) and there is documentary evidence of a decoy pond in Cheshire in 1634 (Dennison & Russett 1989, 142). These decoys were owned by Sir William Woodhouse and General Sir William Brereton respectively and their titles clearly illustrate that the creation of decoy ponds was a gentlemanly pursuit; by 1665 King Charles II had a decoy built in St. James's Park (ibid). As such, decoy ponds can be seen as part of the gentry's growing interest in game and other wild animals that is evident from 1660 onwards (Thirsk 1985, 366). These interests were protected with legislation brought into force between 1660 and 1750 - including the reintroduction of the ban on catching birds with nets during the moulting season - that 'steadily and purposefully extended the gentry's control over foodstuffs that had once been much more fairly shared by all' (ibid, 368), but which can perhaps be seen as a reassertion of the rights that the gentry had enjoyed in the medieval period.

DECOY PONDS

A decoy pond consists of a central pond with a number of curving and gradually narrowing channels known as pipes leading away from the main body of water (Fig 2). Across the country there was great variety in both the shape and size of the pond and the number of pipes leading from it. The pipes were enclosed by netting stretched over hoops and these hoops decreased in size towards the end of the pipe. The pipes were curved so that their closed ends could not be seen from the main pool and a staggered line of screens tall enough to conceal a person were placed at intervals along one side of each pipe. The pond, with the exception of the very end of each pipe was surrounded by trees which provided seclusion for the birds. Decoy ponds were operated by a decoyman assisted by a trained dog and the relative remoteness of these sites meant that a cottage may have been provided close to the pond.

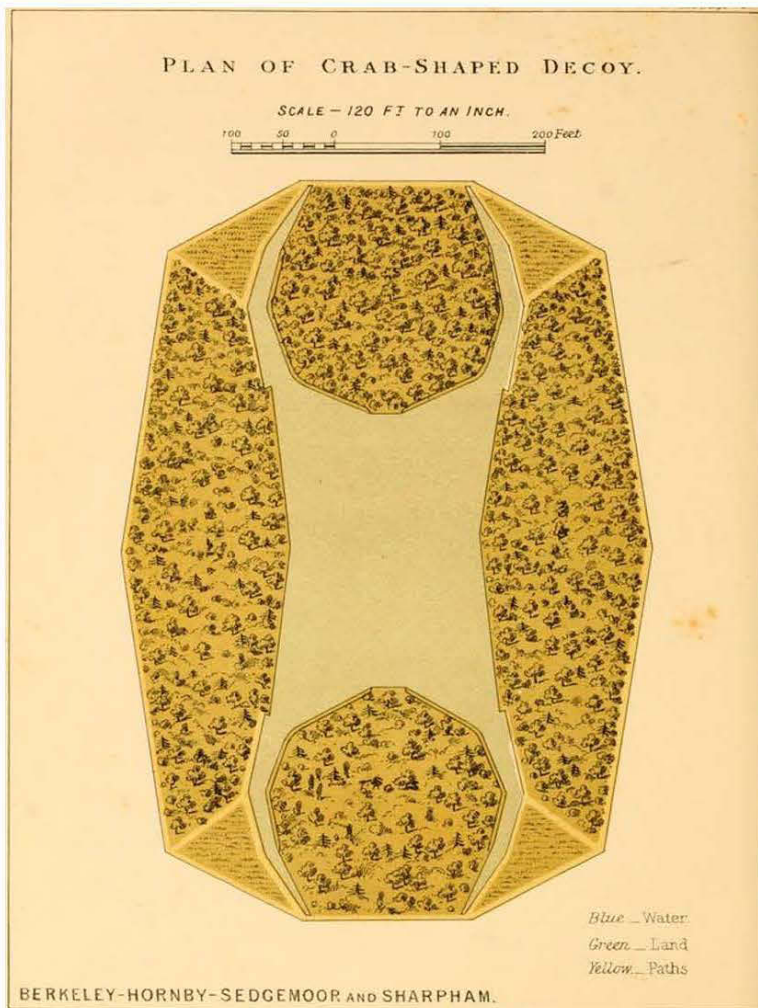


Figure 2 Plan of a decoy pond with four pipes. From Payne-Gallwey 1886 opposite page 93

<https://archive.org/details/bookofduckdecoysx00payn>

Once wildfowl were on the pond, and taking advantage of the fowl's tendency to keep predators within view, they could be lured by the dog. The dog would be made to run in front of and then behind a screen to get the wildfowl's attention and they were then lured further down the pipe as the dog reappeared from behind subsequent screens (Fig 3). Once they had travelled a certain distance along the pipe the decoyman would appear from behind a screen near the entrance to the pipe and the birds would be scared down to the narrow end where they could be caught. Because of the need to take off into a headwind wildfowl were reluctant to enter the pipe if they were travelling with the wind and the provision of more than one pipe increased the opportunities when a pond could be worked.

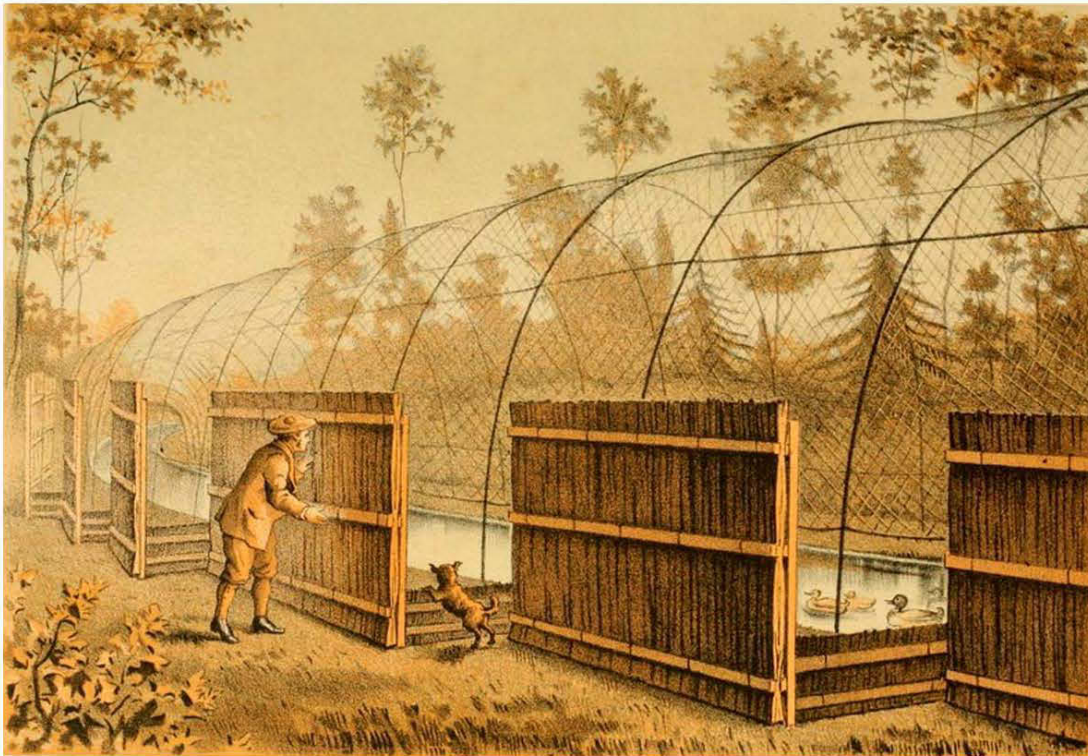


Figure 3 The use of a dog to lure the ducks along the pipe of a decoy pond. From Payne-Gallwey 1886 opposite page 26 <https://archive.org/details/bookofduckdecoysx00payn>

HIGH HALSTOW DECOY

The earthworks of this decoy are situated on Halstow Marshes south-east of and close to Decoy Fleet, which empties out into Egypt Bay (Fig 4). That part of the earthwork that still holds water defines a diamond-shaped pond with the remains of a pipe at each corner. Other earthworks that no longer appear to hold water not only indicate the original size and shape of the pipes but include other ditches and banks that suggests two phases of activity, possibly of two ponds, one superimposed over the other (Fig 5).

What may have been the original pond was closer to a square in plan and is defined by earthwork banks with the pipes aligned on the corners. The smaller and later pond sits within this square and aligned in such a way that the north-east and south-west corners of both ponds coincide offering a neat connection with the respective pipes which consequently describe a gentle curve. At the north-west and south-east corners of the later pond the pipes initially head straight for the corners of the earlier pond where they join the existing pipes and together describe a more exaggerated curve. Dry channels at the north-west and particularly one at the north-east corner of the earlier earthwork that follows a curving line may be the remains of earlier pipes (Fig 6).

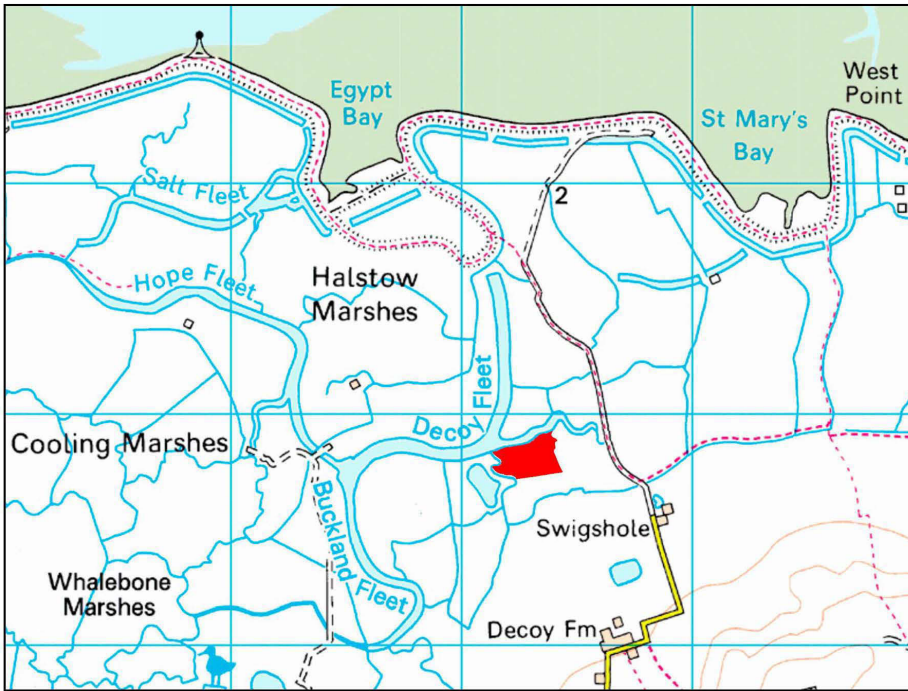


Figure 4 The area occupied by Halstow Marshes decoy pond and the decoyman's cottage; the grid squares are 1km across. Background mapping © Crown copyright and database right 2014, all rights reserved. Ordnance Survey Licence number 100024900



Figure 5 Halstow Marshes decoy pond in 1947, north to the top. The shadows cast by the low winter sun clearly pick out the earthworks of the earlier pond. Some of the earthworks in the field to the south give the impression of another pond, though this may just be a coincidence in the arrangement of natural and artificial features. Detail of RAF CPE/UK/1923 4026 16-JAN-1947 English Heritage RAF Photography.

Beyond the pond slight earthworks of natural channels, at times highlighted by standing water, appear to connect with the north-eastern pipe and suggest that the natural pattern of creeks and channels were utilised and so helped determine the placing of this decoy.

Though the site may be of two phases it is not clear if the original pond had been abandoned for a period of time or if the changes were made with no significant break in use. The most likely explanation for any alteration is that it was undertaken to improve the working of the pond. The diamond-shaped pond both reduces the surface area and accentuates the narrowing of the pond towards the pipes which together may have helped in encouraging the wildfowl into the pipes.

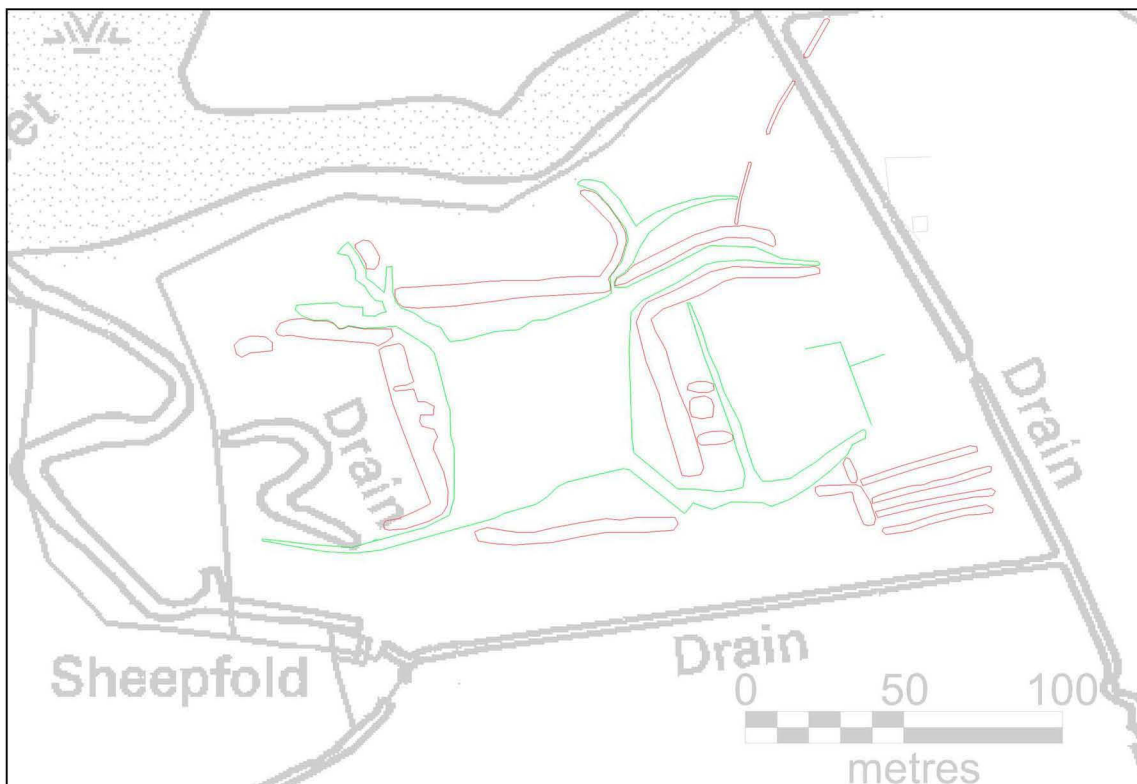


Figure 6 A transcription of Halstow Marshes decoy pond as seen on aerial photographs. Part of the drain to the right was straightened in the 1960s and the site of the decoyman's cottage is to the right of this. Background mapping © Crown copyright and database right 2014, all rights reserved. Ordnance Survey Licence number 100024900

The precise dates that this decoy was in operation are not known but it appears to be a relatively early example of a decoy and is recorded on a 1697 map of High Halstow (Robinson 2004, 127). The presence of a decoy here gave its name to both Decoy Farm c.800m to the south-east and Decoy Fleet to the north. A freehold sale in 1798 for a Decoy Pond Farm of 266 acres and in 1799 for a Decoy Farm of 265 acres may be referring to the same property (Anon 1797, 4 & Anon 1799, 4). The 1799 description of the property makes no mention of a decoy pond suggesting that it had already been

abandoned by that date, or alternatively that although named Decoy Farm, it did not own the pond. Further evidence that the pond had fallen out of use is in the 1839 Tithe Award Schedule that does not depict the decoy pond and although the field it is located in is named 'Decoy Yards' it is listed as pasture. The small building close to the pond is named 'Little Decoy House and Garden' but none of the buildings at the site of Decoy Farm have 'decoy' in their name. The 1872 OS map does depict the pond, trees and Little Decoy House and Garden but the pipes appear truncated and that to the south-west had by that date joined the remnants of a natural and sinuous channel (an arrangement also seen more clearly on the 1885 OS map in Fig 7). Subsequent map editions show the gradual loss of the garden and then building and the reversion of the pond to marsh.

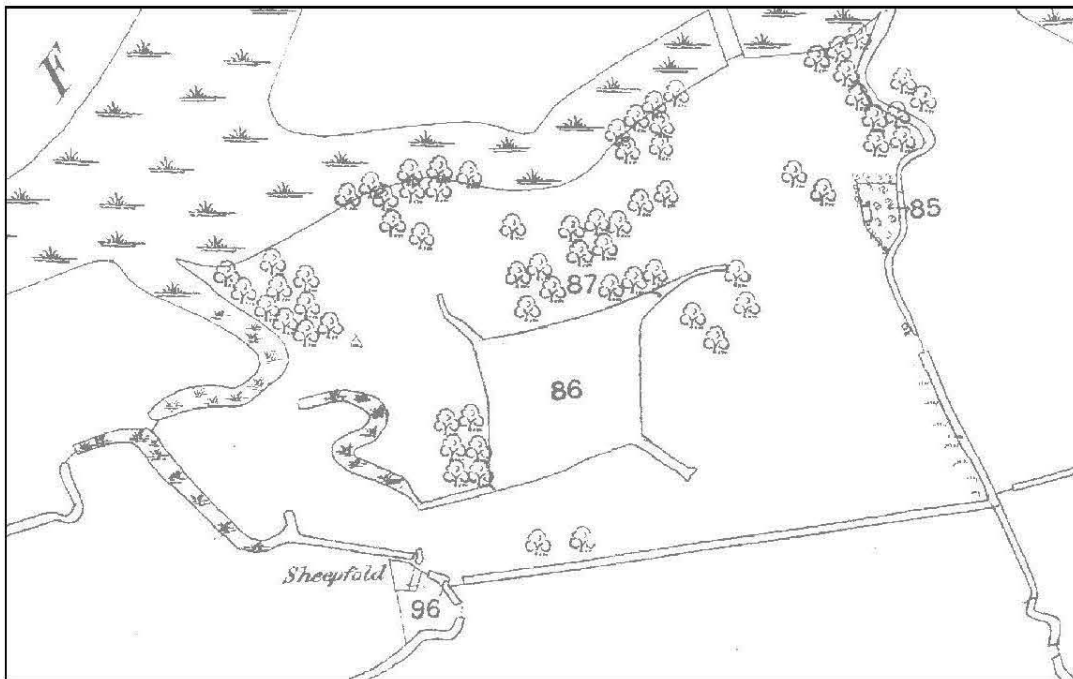


Figure 7 Halstow Marshes decoy pond as depicted on the 1:2500 1885 Ordnance Survey map. Little Decoy House and Garden are in the small plot to the right numbered 85. Base map © and database right Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group Ltd (All rights reserved 2014) Licence numbers 000394 and TP0024.

OTHER DECOYS IN ENGLAND

The basis for our understanding of the distribution of decoy ponds in Britain is Sir Ralph Payne-Gallwey's 1886 book on duck decoys (Payne-Gallwey 1886). This was written at a time when decoys had largely fallen out of use and it was his intention to record the method of construction and operation of decoys as well as compiling their history before this information was forgotten (ibid vii). Payne-Gallwey listed 188 decoys in England with a clear bias towards the east coast counties of Yorkshire, Lincolnshire, Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex which together accounted for 122 of the 188 decoys – Lincolnshire the clear leader

with 39. The remaining decoys were thinly distributed across the country with the notable exception of Somerset in which 14 were recorded.

For some parts of the country subsequent work has identified evidence of further decoys and in Somerset the total number of decoys that once existed within the county is now thought to be 45 (McDonnell 1984), exceeding Lincolnshire's total by 6. Further work elsewhere is likely to increase the number of decoys, though while nationally the total number may be revised upwards the general distribution may remain the same.

DECOYS IN KENT

For Kent there are a small number of records in either the Kent County Council's Historic Environment Record or English Heritage's National Record of the Historic Environment which have been indexed as decoy ponds. For some of these the indexing is uncertain while others are later ponds without pipes which were probably intended to be used to attract ducks for shooting, a sport that became popular in the later 19th century. The decoy at High Halstow is the only surviving example of three definite decoy ponds identified in the county, with Payne-Gallwey's reference to a pond at Kemsley bringing the total to four. Even with this increase, Kent is a notable anomaly for an east coast county in having had so few decoys; the four decoy ponds are:

1. Halstow Marshes, High Halstow; TQ 7827 7778; NRHE 46729; KCC HER TQ 77 NE 26; Survives.
2. Nagden Marshes, Graveney with Goodnestone; TR 0328 6418; KCC HER TR 06 SW 180; Levelled but visible as a cropmark, see Google Earth 2009.
3. Grovehurst Decoy, Coldharbour Marshes, Sittingbourne; TQ 9113 6728; KCC HER TQ 96 NW 62; Payne-Gallwey 1886, 98; Site built over but depicted on 1894 1:2500 Ordnance Survey map.
4. Kemsley, Kemsley Marshes, Sittingbourne; Payne-Gallwey 1886, 100. No trace.

ASSESSMENT

The remains of this decoy pond sit within an area of pasture within the Northward Hill Nature Reserve and as a result it would appear that the threat to this monument is relatively low. However the joining of the south-west pipe with a natural channel, if the result of natural processes, does highlight the gradual changes that may take place on a marshland site such as this. Changes to the drainage pattern in this area in the 1960s involved the straightening of the ditch to the east of the pond and this work cut through some of the remains of Little Decoy House and Garden (Robinson 2005, 234). Hand augering and test pitting undertaken in 2005 revealed further evidence of buried building remains at that location (ibid, 235).

The earthworks remains are well preserved and most of the later decoy has been photographed holding water, though this does not extend along the entire lengths of the pipes and reeds occupy the main pond (Fig 8). Despite this, the general impression is of a

complete and easy to understand monument that has more in common with the restored and working decoy ponds now used for catching and ringing birds at Slimbridge Wetland Centre (Gloucestershire) or Abbotsbury Swannery (Dorset) than with other disused decoys such as the largely overgrown Stoneleigh Decoy (Warwickshire) which has now developed into a wet woodland (see Heaton 2001).

Most decoy ponds which survive in a near-complete state of preservation are considered to be of national importance and are scheduled. This pond is a unique survival in Kent of what was in this county a relatively rare feature in the landscape. Its location in the east of the country however does provide a link with the numerous decoys that were built further north in Essex and beyond. The survival of the earthworks of what may be an earlier pond and their modification to create a second pond are also of note and mark this out as an unusual site that would repay further study of both the earthworks and the documentary sources to better understand its origin and development.



Figure 8 Halstow Marshes decoy pond photographed in 2014. 27949/019 16-MAR-2014 © English Heritage

REFERENCES

- Anon 1797 'Freehold manor and farms, Kent'. *The Times* 19 Dec
- Anon 1799 'Freehold marsh land and capital farm near Rochester'. *The Times* 13 Apr
- Carpenter, E et al 2013 *Hoo Peninsula Historic Landscape Project*. Portsmouth: English Heritage
- Church, R 1948 *Kent*. London: Robert Hale
- Dennison, E & Russett, V 1989 'Duck Decoys'. *Somerset Archaeology and Natural History Society* **133**, 141-155
- Heaton, A 2001 *Duck Decoys*. Princess Risborough: Shire
- Mansel-Pleydell, JC 1887 'Decoys and swan marks'. *Dorset Natural History and Antiquarian Field Club* **8**, 1-8
- McDonnell, R 1984 'Duck decoys in Somerset, a gazetteer'. *Somerset Archaeology and Natural History Society* **128**, 25-30
- Payne-Gallwey, R 1886 *The Book of Duck Decoys: Their Construction, Management and History*. London: John Van Voorst
- Robinson, K 2004 'Duck decoys in Kent'. *Kent Archaeological Review* **156**, 125-128
- Robinson, K 2004 'An update on the search for Doug Squires and information on the duck decoy at High Halstow'. *Kent Archaeological Review* **160**, 234-236
- Thirsk, J (ed) 1985 *The Agrarian History of England and Wales* **5** (part 2). Cambridge: CUP



ENGLISH HERITAGE RESEARCH AND THE HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT

English Heritage undertakes and commissions research into the historic environment, and the issues that affect its condition and survival, in order to provide the understanding necessary for informed policy and decision making, for the protection and sustainable management of the resource, and to promote the widest access, appreciation and enjoyment of our heritage. Much of this work is conceived and implemented in the context of the National Heritage Protection Plan. For more information on the NHPP please go to <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/professional/protection/national-heritage-protection-plan/>.

The Heritage Protection Department provides English Heritage with this capacity in the fields of building history, archaeology, archaeological science, imaging and visualisation, landscape history, and remote sensing. It brings together four teams with complementary investigative, analytical and technical skills to provide integrated applied research expertise across the range of the historic environment. These are:

- * Intervention and Analysis (including Archaeology Projects, Archives, Environmental Studies, Archaeological Conservation and Technology, and Scientific Dating)
- * Assessment (including Archaeological and Architectural Investigation, the Blue Plaques Team and the Survey of London)
- * Imaging and Visualisation (including Technical Survey, Graphics and Photography)
- * Remote Sensing (including Mapping, Photogrammetry and Geophysics)

The Heritage Protection Department undertakes a wide range of investigative and analytical projects, and provides quality assurance and management support for externally-commissioned research. We aim for innovative work of the highest quality which will set agendas and standards for the historic environment sector. In support of this, and to build capacity and promote best practice in the sector; we also publish guidance and provide advice and training. We support community engagement and build this in to our projects and programmes wherever possible.

We make the results of our work available through the Research Report Series, and through journal publications and monographs. Our newsletter *Research News*, which appears twice a year, aims to keep our partners within and outside English Heritage up-to-date with our projects and activities.

A full list of Research Reports, with abstracts and information on how to obtain copies, may be found on www.english-heritage.org.uk/researchreports

For further information visit www.english-heritage.org.uk

