

**An Archaeological Watching Brief during Pett Frontage Sea Defences
Year 5/6 Works at Winchelsea Beach, East
Sussex**

Planning Ref: ROTHER: RR/22/3

NGR: 591856 115997

**Project No: 2991
Site Code: PET 07**

**ASE Report No: 2008176
OASIS ID: archaeol6-49215**



Teresa Hawtin BA MSc AIFA

October 2008

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Abstract

Archaeology South-East was commissioned by the Environment Agency to undertake an archaeological watching brief during groundworks associated with improvements to the Pett Frontage Sea Defences (Year 5/6 Works) at Winchelsea Beach, East Sussex between October and December 2007.

During excavations around the uprights of Groyne W6, layers of dark, clayey material were encountered below the shingle of the beach. These deposits could relate to the silting up of Smeaton's Harbour after it went out of use. No further finds, features or deposits of archaeological interest were identified on the site.

The surviving remains of Smeaton's Harbour did not suffer any physical damage during the works. Some vibration of the timbers was visible during the compression piling activities, but there was no obvious damage and the timbers did not appear to have moved within their settings.

The shingle extraction processes at Nook Point did not appear to be causing any impact on potential archaeological deposits, and the nearby pillbox was not being affected.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Site Background

1.1.1 Archaeology South-East (ASE), the contracting division of the Centre for Applied Archaeology at the University College London Institute of Archaeology, was commissioned by the Environment Agency to undertake an archaeological watching brief during groundworks associated with improvements to the Pett Frontage Sea Defences (Year 5/6 Works) at Winchelsea Beach, East Sussex (hereafter referred to as 'the site') (NGR 591856 115997; Figs. 1 and 2).

1.1.2 The main site is located on Winchelsea Beach, to the south-east of Dogs Hill Road, and is bounded to the north by the concrete sea wall. An area at Nook Point, immediately west of the western arm of the Rye Harbour entrance, was also monitored.

1.2 Geology and Topography

1.2.1 The underlying geology of the site is illustrated on the 1:50000 British Geological Survey map (Sheet 320/321, Hastings & Dungeness) as comprising alternating north-east/south-west trending units of clay-based Marine Alluvium and Storm Gravel Beach deposits (shingle), which reflects the geomorphological history of Rye Bay. To the west of the site are the Fairlight Cliffs, which are formed from heavily faulted Cretaceous sandstones and clays, and the remains of a partially submerged prehistoric forest exist along the foreshore between Cliff End and Winchelsea Beach.

1.2.2 The site comprises a sandy foreshore backed by a steep shingle bank. To the west of Winchelsea Beach the shingle is narrow and topped by a concrete sea wall, with the low-lying reclaimed marshlands of Pett Level to the north. East of Winchelsea Beach the shingle barrier is much wider, and is backed by low-lying alluvial flats, some of which contain flooded gravel pits. Beyond are reclaimed marshlands and older, now land-locked, shingle ridges.

1.3 Planning Background

1.3.1 Planning permission was granted by Rother District Council for the scheme (Application Ref: RR/22/3), which consists of the temporary construction of a shingle extraction area at Nook Point adjacent to the Western Harbour Arm, the construction of new timber groynes in front of Cliff End and Winchelsea Beach and recharging the system with shingle taken from Nook Point. The scheme is scheduled to run over a period of approximately 8 years (subject to ongoing monitoring and assessment of the beach) commencing October 2003 (Year 1 Works).

1.3.2 The County Archaeologist of East Sussex County Council (ESCC), in his capacity as advisor to Rother District Council on archaeological planning matters, was consulted by the Environment Agency at an early stage. In light of the archaeological potential of the site it was recommended that a programme of archaeological works be implemented on the site in line with advice given in PPG16 (the Government's advice on *Archaeology and Planning*). Condition 6 of the planning permission therefore states that:

No development shall take place until the applicant has secured the implementation of a programme of archaeological works in accordance

with a written scheme of investigation which has been submitted by the applicant and approved by the planning authority.

- 1.3.3 An Environmental Impact Assessment for the scheme was undertaken by the Environment Agency. As part of this process ASE were commissioned to provide a rapid desk-based assessment (DBA), including a walkover survey of the study area (encompassing an area within c.1km of the site boundary) and an archaeological survey of the remains of Smeaton's Harbour, an 18th-century harbour installation at Winchelsea Beach (ASE 2002).
- 1.3.4 Further consultation between ASE the Environment Agency and the County Archaeologist, ESCC, established the need for archaeological mitigation in line with the recommendations made in the DBA. The County Archaeologist stipulated that an archaeological watching brief should be maintained during specific groundworks associated with the development in the vicinity of Smeaton's Harbour.
- 1.3.5 A Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) outlining the requirements of the Archaeological Watching Brief was prepared by ASE (ASE 2007) and submitted and duly approved by the Local Planning Authority. Further archaeological mitigation for subsequent years' works will be covered under (a) separate WSI(s) in accordance with the recommendations of the DBA as required. Any further work will be agreed with the County Archaeologist.

1.4 Aims and Objectives

- 1.4.1 The main aim of the archaeological monitoring was to ensure that any features, deposits, artefacts or ecofacts of archaeological interest that were encountered during intrusive groundworks at the site were recorded and interpreted to appropriate standards. In addition to this, the archaeologist ensured that the remains of Smeaton's Harbour were not disturbed during the adjacent works.
- 1.4.2 Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the groundworks that were monitored during this project, which included:
- Construction of Groyne W6
 - Shingle extraction at Nook Point

1.5 Scope of Report

- 1.5.1 The aim of this report is to present the results of the archaeological fieldwork undertaken and to put these results into a local, regional or national context as appropriate.
- 1.5.2 The fieldwork was undertaken by Teresa Hawtin, between 31 October and 3 December 2007. The project was managed by Neil Griffin (fieldwork) and Louise Rayner (post-excavation).

2.0 ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The DBA (ASE 2002) provides full details of the known archaeological sites and associated historical information derived from documentary sources. Key elements are reproduced below with due acknowledgement.

2.1 Prehistoric

The presence of peat deposits covering the foreshore between Cliff End and Winchelsea Beach are recorded. The importance of peat for preserving archaeological and palaeoenvironmental information is well-known, particularly in regard to preservation of organic remains not generally found on dry-land sites. The potential of this area for containing deposits of archaeological significance is considered to be high. The potential for the area to contain deposits of palaeoenvironmental interest is considered to be very high.

2.2 Historic

The DBA concluded that the potential for archaeological remains of Roman and Anglo-Saxon date within the site is considered to be low. Medieval occupation in the general area is well attested, with three important ports (Rye, Old Winchelsea, New Winchelsea) in close proximity to the study area. Actual evidence of medieval occupation within the study area is limited to putative salt-working (or peat digging) sites on the peat bed.

2.3 Post-medieval

All of the study area (with the exception of the peat bed) was formed by natural processes in the last two centuries. These processes have destroyed without trace one group of important monuments, the Martello Towers which originally sat on top of the shingle ridge above the now exposed peat bed. Three linear earthen banks running across Nook Point are considered to be important in relation to the post-medieval historic landscape of the study area, indicating that the reclamation of farmland from the marsh has been an ongoing process.

2.4 Smeaton's Harbour (Rye New Harbour)

The deteriorating condition of the Rother estuary for navigation purposes was a cause for constant concern to maritime interests in Rye. An Admiralty survey of 1698 concluded that the harbour was not suitable for naval use, and that Camber Castle was now a landlocked ruin (Collard 1985, 31). It was decided to cut a new harbour straight through the shingle barrier and linking with the Brede just east of Winchelsea.

2.5 A similar scheme had been proposed by an Italian military engineer, Federigo Genebelli, in 1593, but had been dismissed by the Rye authorities as ludicrous, mainly as it would have benefited Winchelsea (Bendall 1995, 45). Work began on the New Harbour in 1725 with the digging of the canal and the building of two piers. The foundations of the west pier appear to have been finished by 1729, and a reference in the Rye Harbour Commissioners (hereafter RHC) Minutes for 9 February 1725 to 'good fir Timber proper for carrying out Two piers heads...' (RHC 1724-69).

2.6 Work on the harbour ceased in 1748 as debts piled up, but resumed ten years later. In 1763, the eminent engineer John Smeaton was consulted, and he produced a report and survey (Smeaton 1763), in which he identified the problems facing the harbour and suggested various remedies to combat them, although his advice seems largely to have been ignored by the Harbour

Commissioners (Smeaton 1764). After a long series of further delays and modifications, involving timber extensions to combat encroaching shingle, the harbour finally opened in June 1787 when the sea broke down the shingle barrier across the mouth. In November of that year a petition to close the harbour was drawn up by the Commissioners of Levels, worried about the effect on the drainage of the surrounding lands, and agreed by the Harbour Commissioners (the same men sat on both Commissions!). Consequently, the New Harbour was abandoned after four months of use, having taken 63 years to build at a cost of £200,000 (c.£20 million in modern terms).

3.0 ARCHAEOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY

- 3.1 The County Archaeologist of East Sussex County Council (ESCC) was consulted early in the planning stages of this project and the positions of the new groynes in the area of Smeaton's Harbour were designed to provide a working area with adequate clearance from the remains. The DBA (ASE 2002) laid out the following additional methodology for the works:
- 3.2 *No construction plant or other vehicles should be driven over any part of the harbour remains until at least 1.5m of compact shingle covers such remains. This will need to be borne in mind for future shingle recycling activity. Works traffic along the beach should be restricted in the vicinity of the harbour to essential movements only. All other traffic should use the haul road/ public road to pass this area. Traffic seaward of the harbour remains should be avoided due to the unknown seaward extent of the two piers. However, if it proves impossible to avoid tracking around the southern side of the remains, movements should be kept to a minimum, only tracked vehicles should be used and operators should be informed of the need to avoid any remains that may be exposed by shifting sands.*
- 3.3 *No construction plant or other vehicles should enter the exclusion zones around the west and east piers until the said remains have been adequately protected by 1.5m of compacted shingle. The exclusion zones should be fenced and clearly marked to avoid accidental impingement during the works. The area of the remains should also be made clear to staff undertaking shingle recycling in the future. The exclusion zones give a 5m wide buffer zone on the west and east side of the known/ predicted harbour remains and a 3m wide buffer zone from the interior faces of the piers (due to the need to allow working space for the piling rig for groyne construction - see below). The northernmost extent of the piers is unknown, but the exclusion zones have been extended to the top of the beach as it is possible the existing shingle cover is too thin to afford adequate protection in this area.*
- 3.4 *The proposed groyne situated between Smeaton's piers should be pile driven through the existing shingle. The piling rig should gain access to the area from the north after this area has been adequately protected by at least 1.5m of shingle. Although the closest the proposed new groyne comes to one of the piers is approximately 11m, a wider working zone will be needed for the operation of the piling. For this reason the exclusion zones have been kept to a minimum (3m) in this area to allow for manoeuvring and positioning of the rig. This has created a working corridor with a minimum width of 15m (but usually 19m or more) which is adequate for the rig. The exclusion zone should be clearly fenced and an intermittent archaeological watching brief should be maintained during the construction of the three groynes and the beach recharge around the harbour remains.*
- 3.5 **Construction of Groynes**
Two exclusion zones were set up around the surviving timbers and stone piers of Smeaton's Harbour to prevent machinery and groundworks staff from causing any accidental damage to the remains during the project. Blue wooden stakes were used by the main contractor to mark these areas as it was not practical to construct barrier fencing around them.
- 3.6 The groundworks associated with Groyne W6 (Figs. 2 & 3-18), situated between the two piers of Smeaton's Harbour, were carried out under the constant supervision of an experienced archaeologist. The works in this area

were undertaken using tracked machinery, which maintained a suitable working distance from the harbour remains to prevent accidental contact. Additionally, all groundworks staff were briefed by the Site Manager about the archaeological exclusion zones.

- 3.7** Work began at the top of the groyne, adjacent to the sea wall. A shingle bank of up to c.2m in height was created along the working area, upon which the piling rig and tracked excavator sat (Figs. 5-15). This bank was extended as works progressed, utilising shingle brought in by road from the shingle extraction area and moved into position by tracked excavators in advance of the piling rig.
- 3.8** The groyne was constructed using compression piling techniques. Although some vibration could be seen, there were no obvious signs of permanent disturbance to the surviving timbers and stone piers, and the remains did not appear to have moved within their existing settings.
- 3.9** The piling of Groyne W5 (Fig. 13) was initially monitored, but it was decided that Groynes W5 and W7 were of sufficient distance from Smeaton's Harbour that there was little risk of any accidental impingement on the archaeological exclusion zones occurring.
- 3.10** Several weeks after the piling work had been completed, excavation was undertaken around uprights 5 to 21 (upright 1 being adjacent to the sea wall) in order to put the breastwork in place (Figs. 16-18).
- 3.11** This excavation was undertaken using two tracked mechanical excavators equipped with 1.5m-wide toothed buckets. Where potential archaeological features or deposits were revealed, machining was stopped and the excavations were inspected by the archaeologist. However, it was unsafe to enter the deeper excavations due to flooding and the presence of soft, waterlogged deposits. The spoil from the machine excavations was scanned for the presence of any artefacts when it was safe to do so.
- 3.12 Shingle Extraction**
The shingle extraction area at Nook Point (Figs. 1, 19 & 20) was also visited to monitor whether any disturbance to potential archaeological remains was occurring. The depth of shingle in this area was such that the tracked excavators were not encountering any deposits below it. The nearby pillbox showed no signs of disturbance and all machinery and site staff were maintaining a more than ample distance from it.
- 3.13 General Archaeological Methodology**
All encountered archaeological deposits, features and finds were excavated and recorded in accordance with accepted professional standards (IFA 2000 & 2001, EH 1991), the *Recommended Standard Conditions for Archaeological Fieldwork, Recording, and Post-Excavation Work (Development Control) in East Sussex* (2003) and the approved ASE Written Scheme of Investigation (ASE 2007), using pro-forma context record sheets. Archaeological features and deposits were planned at a scale of 1:50, with selected detail drawn at a scale of 1:20 or 1:10. Deposit colours were verified by visual inspection and not by reference to a Munsell Colour chart.
- 3.14** A photographic record of the work was kept and forms part of the site archive. The archive (quantified in Table 1) is presently held at the Archaeology South-

East offices at Portslade, and will in due course be offered to a suitable local museum.

Number of Contexts	5
No. of files/paper record	1 ring binder
Plan and sections sheets	0
Bulk Samples	0
Photographs	241 digital
Bulk finds	0
Registered finds	0
Environmental flots/residue	0

Table 1: Quantification of site archive

4.0 RESULTS

4.1 Table 2 lists the contexts recorded during this project.

Number	Type	Description	Max. Length	Max. Width	Deposit Depth
001	Layer	Beach shingle	-	-	Variable
002	Layer	Pale-mid yellow brown sandy shingle	-	-	c.0.50m
003	Layer	Mid grey sandy clayey shingle	-	-	c.0.15m
004	Layer	Dark grey clayey shingle	-	-	c.0.10m
005	Layer	Dark grey black sticky clay	-	-	≥1.00m

Table 2: List of recorded contexts

- 4.2 During the excavation around the uprights of Groyne W6, deposits of dark grey, clayey material were recorded (Figs. 16-17). The majority of the excavations reached the top of the very dark clay (context 005), which was seen at depths of between 2 and 3m below the upper horizontal beam of the groyne (which is c.1.5-2m below the top of the uprights). Between uprights 17 and 20 (upright 1 being adjacent to the sea wall) the excavations reached c.0.5m into this context, and between uprights 6 and 8 this increased to c.1.0m. The top of the clay was visible at a deeper level closer to the sea wall, and appeared to run on a gentle slope down the beach.
- 4.3 These deposits were carefully monitored and did not appear to contain any preserved organic remains. ASE's environmental specialist was consulted regarding sampling of these deposits, but it was decided that the material would not yield any new information to add to what is already known about the harbour. In addition, as it was unsafe to enter the excavations, samples would have had to be taken from the spoil that was removed, resulting in a high degree of contamination.
- 4.4 Between uprights 13 and 14 of Groyne W6, the remains of the breastwork of an *in situ* 20th-century groyne were seen running approximately north-east to south-west along the beach.
- 4.5 No further features, finds or deposits of archaeological interest were observed on this site.
- 4.6 **Summary**
Layers of dark, clayey material were seen to underlie the shingle of the beach, which could relate to the silting up of Smeaton's Harbour after it went out of use. No further deposits, features or artefacts of archaeological interest were identified. In addition, the remains of Smeaton's Harbour did not appear to have been suffered any damage during the works.

5.0 THE FINDS

- 5.1 No finds of archaeological interest were recovered during the monitored works.

6.0 THE ENVIRONMENTAL SAMPLES

- 6.1 No deposits were encountered that were thought to warrant environmental soil sampling for archaeological purposes.

7.0 CONCLUSIONS

- 7.1 During excavations around the uprights of Groyne W6, layers of dark, clayey material were encountered below the shingle of the beach. These deposits could relate to the silting up of Smeaton's Harbour after it went out of use.
- 7.2 No further finds, features or deposits of archaeological interest were identified on the site.
- 7.3 The surviving remains of Smeaton's Harbour did not suffer any physical damage during the works. Some vibration of the timbers was visible during the compression piling activities, which was unavoidable. Close inspection during and after the work did not reveal any obvious damage and the timbers did not appear to have moved within their settings.
- 7.4 The shingle extraction processes at Nook Point were not causing any impact to potential archaeological deposits. The nearby pillbox was receiving more than adequate clearance by the plant machinery and lorries and did not appear to be affected by the works.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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SMR Summary Form

Site Code	PET07					
Identification Name and Address	Pett Frontage Sea Defences, Winchelsea Beach, East Sussex					
County, District &/or Borough	East Sussex, Icklesham CP					
OS Grid Refs.	591856 115997					
Geology	Clay-based Marine Alluvium and Storm Gravel Beach deposits (shingle)					
Arch. South-East Project Number	2991					
Type of Fieldwork	Eval.	Excav.	Watching Brief	Standing Structure	Survey	Other
Type of Site	Green Field	Shallow Urban	Deep Urban	Other		
Dates of Fieldwork	Eval.	Excav.	WB. 31 Oct –3 Dec 2007	Other		
Sponsor/Client	Environment Agency					
Project Manager	Neil Griffin					
Project Supervisor	Teresa Hawtin					
Period Summary	Palaeo.	Meso.	Neo.	BA	IA	RB
	AS	MED	PM	Other Modern		
<p>100 Word Summary.</p> <p><i>Archaeology South-East undertook an archaeological watching brief during groundworks associated with improvements to the sea defences at Winchelsea Beach in 2007.</i></p> <p><i>Layers of dark, clayey material were encountered below the shingle of the beach, which could relate to the silting up of Smeaton's Harbour after it went out of use. No further finds, features or deposits of archaeological interest were identified on the site.</i></p> <p><i>The surviving remains of Smeaton's Harbour did not appear to suffer any damage during the works. The shingle extraction processes at Nook Point were not impacting potential archaeological deposits and the nearby pillbox was unaffected.</i></p>						

OASIS Form

OASIS ID: archaeol6-49215

Project details

Project name	Pett Frontage Sea Defences, Winchelsea Beach, East Sussex
Short description of the project	Archaeology South-East was commissioned by the Environment Agency to undertake an archaeological watching brief during groundworks associated with improvements to the Pett Frontage Sea Defences (Year 5/6 Works) at Winchelsea Beach, East Sussex between October and December 2007. During excavations around the uprights of Groyne W6, layers of dark, clayey material were encountered below the shingle of the beach. These deposits could relate to the silting up of Smeaton's Harbour after it went out of use. No further finds, features or deposits of archaeological interest were identified on the site. The surviving remains of Smeaton's Harbour did not suffer any physical damage during the works. Some vibration of the timbers was visible during the compression piling activities, but there was no obvious damage and the timbers did not appear to have moved within their settings. The shingle extraction processes at Nook Point did not appear to be causing any impact on potential archaeological deposits, and the nearby pillbox was not being affected.
Project dates	Start: 31-10-2007 End: 03-12-2007
Previous/future work	Yes / Not known
Any associated project reference codes	PET07 - Sitecode
Any associated project reference codes	2991 - Contracting Unit No.
Any associated project reference codes	1479 - Contracting Unit No.
Any associated project reference codes	RR/22/3 - Planning Application No.
Type of project	Recording project
Site status	None
Current Land use	Coastland 2 - Inter-tidal
Monument type	HARBOUR Post Medieval
Investigation type	'Watching Brief'
Prompt	Direction from Local Planning Authority - PPG16

Project location

Country	England
Site location	EAST SUSSEX ROTHER ICKLESHAM Pett Frontage Sea

	Defences, Winchelsea Beach
Postcode	TN36 4LX
Study area	4.00 Kilometres
Site coordinates	TQ 591856 115997 50.8813459721 0.263155953003 50 52 52 N 000 15 47 E Point
Height OD / Depth	Min: 0m Max: 5.00m

Project creators

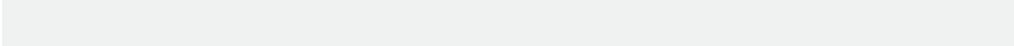
Name of Organisation	Archaeology South-East
Project brief originator	Environment Agency
Project design originator	Archaeology South-East
Project director/manager	Neil Griffin
Project supervisor	Teresa Hawtin
Type of sponsor/funding body	Environment Agency

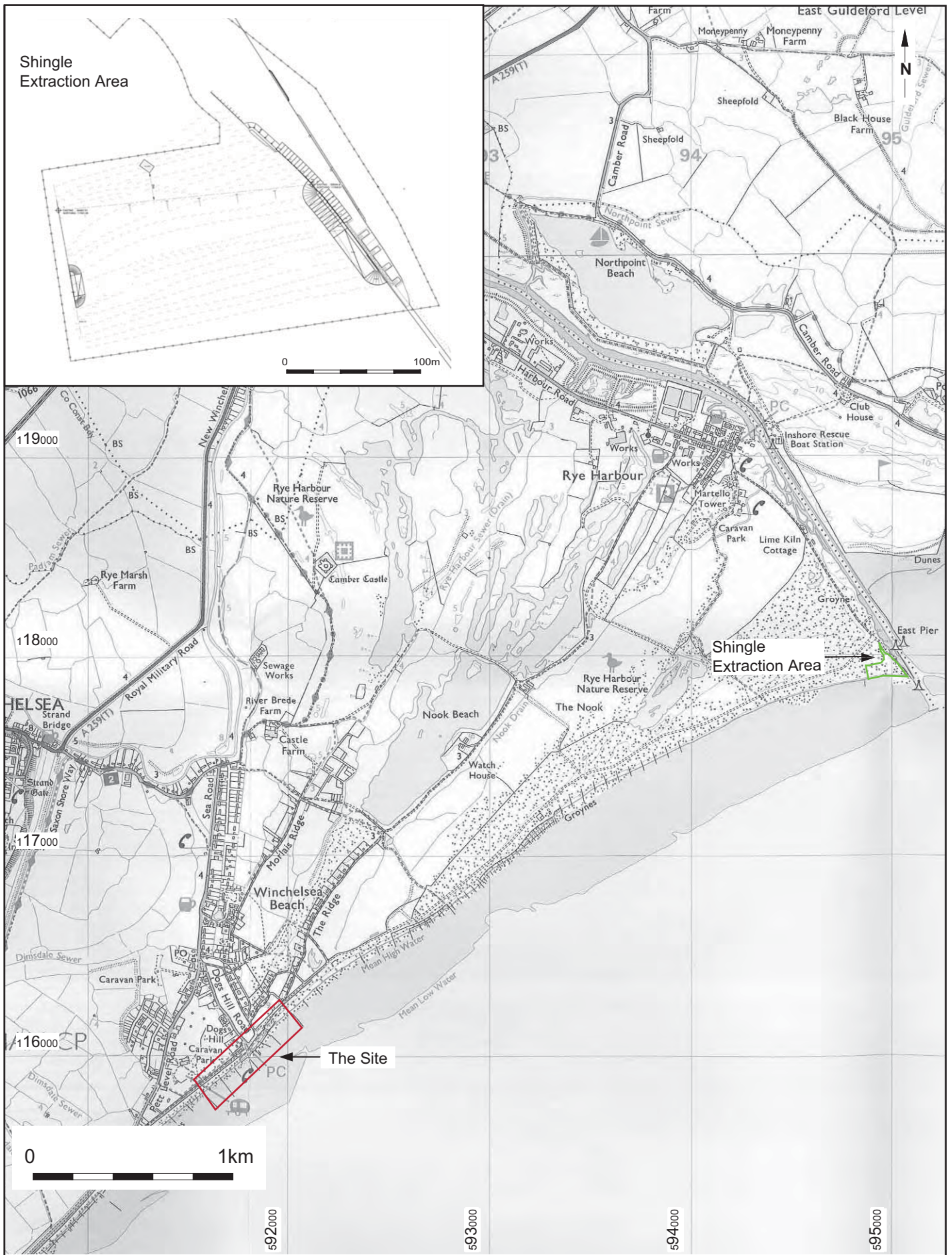
Project archives

Physical Archive Exists?	No
Physical Archive recipient	Local Museum
Digital Archive recipient	Local Museum
Digital Contents	'Survey','other'
Digital Media available	'Images raster / digital photography','Survey','Text'
Paper Archive recipient	Local Museum
Paper Contents	'Survey','other'
Paper Media available	'Context sheet','Report','Survey ','Unpublished Text'

Project bibliography 1

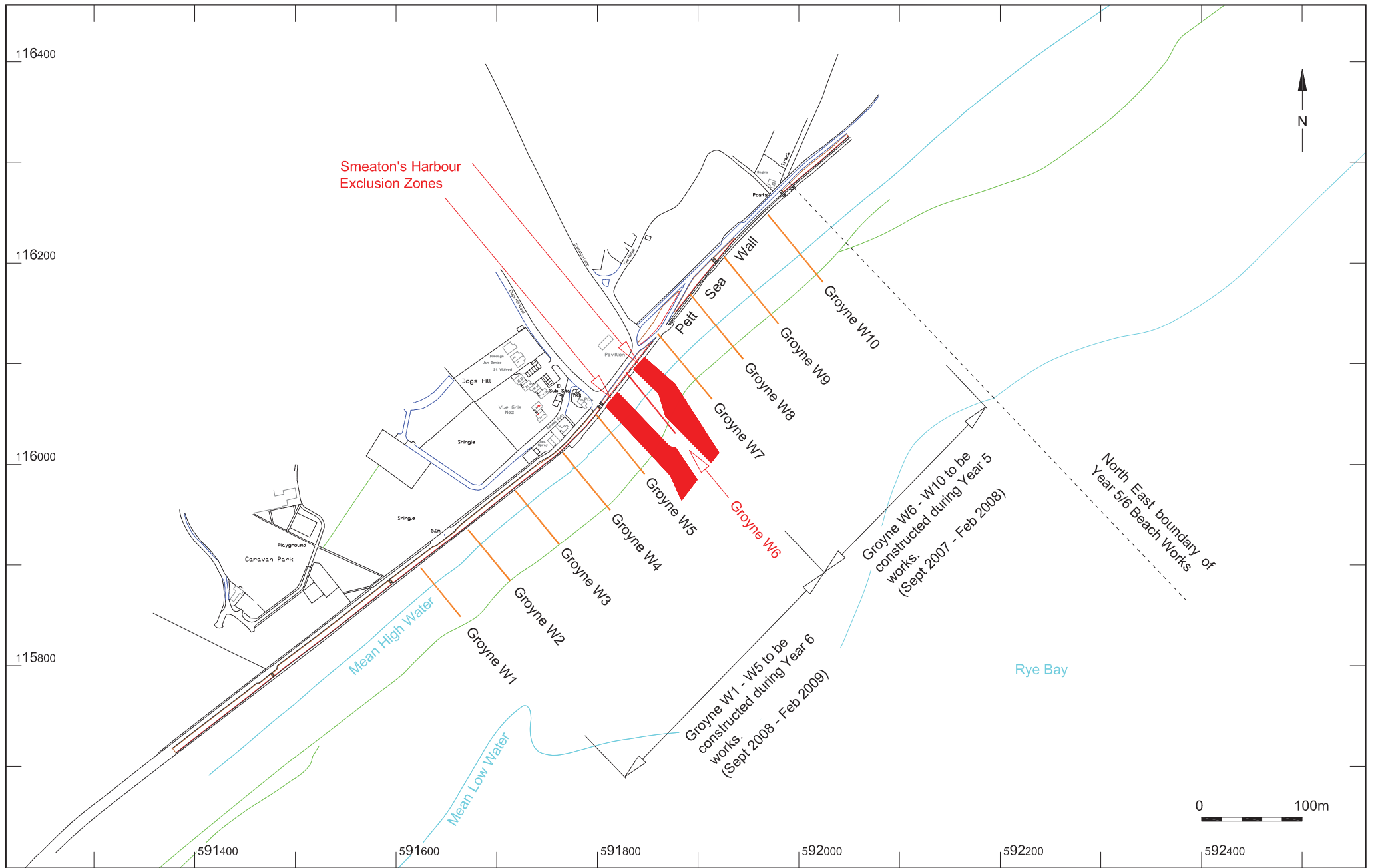
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© Archaeology South-East		Pett Frontage Sea Defences - Year 5/6 Works	Fig. 1
Project Ref: 2991	Oct 2008	Site Location Plan	
Report Ref: 2008176	Drawn by:HLF		

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Project Ref: 2991	October 2008	Proposed Development		
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Figure 3: Smeaton's Harbour before piling commenced



Figure 4: Smeaton's Harbour before piling commenced



Figure 5: Start of piling on Groyne W6

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Project Ref: 2992	October 2008		
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Figure 6: Piling on Groyne W6, showing East Pier of Smeaton's Harbour



Figure 7: Piling on Groyne W6, showing West Pier to left and East Pier to right



Figure 8: Piling on Groyne W6 in progress, showing East Pier to left of shot

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Project Ref: 2992	October 2008		
Report Ref: 2008176	Drawn by: DJH		



Figure 9: Work on Groyne W6 in progress, showing East Pier to left of shot



Figure 10: Work on Groyne W6 in progress, showing East Pier and West Pier



Figure 11: Work on Groyne W6 in progress, showing East Pier to left of shot

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Project Ref: 2992	October 2008		
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Figure 12: Work on Groyne W6 in progress, showing East Pier and West Pier



Figure 13: Work on Groyne W6 in progress, showing the start of Groyne W5



Figure 14: Groyne W6 between the two piers of Smeaton's Harbour

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Figure 15: Work in progress along the sea wall north of Smeaton's Harbour



Figure 16: Dark clayey deposits uncovered around Groyne W6



Figure 17: Excavations around Groyne W6

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Figure 18: Excavations around Groyne W6



Figure 19: Shingle extraction works at The Nook



Figure 20: Shingle extraction works at The Nook, showing nearby pillbox

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