Statement of Aims

The Romney Marsh Research Trust exists to promote, co-ordinate and disseminate research into the historical, social, economic and physical development of Romney and Walland Marshes and their immediate hinterlands.

The Trust invites individuals to become, on payment of a subscription, a Friend of the Romney Marsh Research Trust and to participate in lectures, conferences, field visits and research projects.

The Friends receive a biannual publication, *The Romney Marsh Irregular*, which publishes research notes and provides a forum for debate.

The Trust receives, raises and holds funds to meet grant applications from academic and other researchers, in order to support credible academic research into the Marsh, of a high standard, which can subsequently form the basis for a wider publication to the local communities.

The Trust produces monographs containing the most recent high quality research papers. To date, four such monographs have been published, to high academic acclaim.

Adopted by the Trustees of the Romney Marsh Research Trust 30th September 2008
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The Editor’s bit

Greetings for 2010 from a snow covered Malvern. For the RMRT one of the big events of 2009 was the launch of the two Rye volumes and this is covered in this edition of the *Irregular*; along with an article by Alan Dickinson on Rye’s troublesome neighbour. My thanks to Roger Nixon for the photograph of the AGM which is on the cover. This has four of the authors of the two Rye volumes, (from left) Barbara Martin, Jane Clebb, Gillian Draper and David Martin. The fifth author, your editor, was otherwise engaged.

In addition to the usual reports on the Trust’s activities during the last six months or so, Jason Kirby has contributed new radiocarbon dates for the peat deposits to the north of Lydd while Camilla Blackburn, Living Landscape Project Officer with Kent Wildlife Trust, has outlined the work of the Romney Marshes Living Landscape Partnership and its future aims.

This being the Spring *Irregular* it includes, as usual, the programme and booking form for the various events that have been organised through to October.


Alan Tyler
The Secretary writes ......

Understanding our own Romney Marsh sometimes requires looking at other, more or less, similar landscapes. In July, Martyn Waller led a Study Day at Pevensey Levels, walking out to the deserted village of Northeye. The differences, surprisingly to me at least, seemed to outweigh the similarities.

A couple of years ago, at the 2007 Spring Lecture, Mark Gardiner, of Belfast Queen’s University shared with us his comparative researches into the Fens and the Marsh. Among other things he was interested in how far landscape features can survive flooding and re-colonisation. Again, there were numerous lessons to be drawn from similarities and differences.

We now have a chance to take a bird’s eye view of the whole southern coastline at this year’s Spring Lecture, at Lympne Castle, once again held at kind invitation of the owner, when Peter Murphy of English Heritage will be telling us about Coastal Surveys and the Future of the Historic Coastal Environment. The talk is based on the Rapid Coastal Zonal Assessment, which uses the very latest techniques to identify likely coastal change. The date is Wednesday 24th March 2010.

Our 29th May Study Day stays more firmly on the Marsh, although with one eye across the Channel, as we consider the Napoleonic defences and their impact on the landscape. We have lectures in the morning, in the Bowery Hall at the Ship Hotel, Dymchurch, and in the afternoon a coach trip round the Marsh to look at, among other things, the Royal Military Canal.

Last year’s AGM, held in Rye on Friday 13th November, saw the climax of the three year long Rye research project, with the publication of two volumes. The lead authors, Dr Gill Draper and David and Barbara Martin gave excellent talks outlining their main findings. The session was chaired by Professor Caroline Barron, one of the country’s leading medieval historians.

The Rye research, and the publication of the findings, relied for the actual research on generous support by the Colyer Ferguson Trust and the Hawkins Trust and then by the Aurelius Charitable Trust for the history volume and by the March Fitch Fund and the Sussex Archaeological Society [a Margary Research Grant] for the historic built environment work.
The two books *Rye: A History of a Sussex Cinque Port to 1660* by Gillian Draper with David and Barbara Martin and Alan Tyler (£25) and *Rye Rebuilt: Regeneration and Decline within a Sussex Cinque Port Town, 1350-1660* by David and Barbara Martin, with Jane Clebb and Gillian Draper (£30) can be ordered through normal channels, including the Martello Bookshop, Rye.

Next year, the Trust will be publishing its fifth monograph of academic research papers with a Day Conference at Kent University on Saturday 11th September. This conference will give us all, professional academics and amateurs alike, a chance to identify research priorities for the next five or so years. We will have further details of the programme and speakers in the next *Irregular*.

Current and recent research has taken an ecclesiastic turn with Terreena Bellinger working on the monuments and families of Lydd Church while Alan Dickinson is looking at the construction of local church spires. The Trust is funding the dendrochronology that will be used to date suitable timbers.

Work also continues on defining the extent and duration of the great ombrotropic bog which appears to have stretched from Rye to Lydd. The most recent research has involved searching for and finding volcanic ash (tephra) from 12th century Iceland. It is now a question of the researchers working out what their findings mean for the Marsh and their relevance to other palaeoenvironmental research.

The Trust has become a partner in developing the cross-county boundary Living Landscape Project which aims to bring together the three strands of land management, nature conservation and heritage (which is where the Trust comes in, with its expertise in the physical and historical development of the Marsh). Camilla Blackburn, the Living Landscapes Project Officer at Kent Wildlife, provides an outline of the work of the project elsewhere in this *Irregular*.

Terry Burke
References received

Herewith a few references to publications relevant to the Marsh and adjacent areas that have been drawn to the attention of the Editor during the last six months.


Correction

(RMI34, p.24) Dr Gill Draper did not supervise Terreena Bellinger’s MA at the University of Kent; rather she oversaw her research project on Lydd for the Romney Marsh Research Trust carried out in summer 2009.

AGM 2009

After an epic journey from Malvern to Rye, that included rounding the M25 in heavy rain and spray, we arrived at the Community Hall in Rye to a welcoming glass of wine and a hive of activity. The mayor of Rye, Cllr. Sam Souster, was present wearing his chain of office, copies of the two Rye...
volumes were being collected/purchased from a table at the back of the hall presided over by David Williams and many friends were standing/sitting around exchanging news and gossip. We were at the appointed hour called to order and Martyn Waller dispatched the AGM in usual RMRT fashion, followed by a commercial from Roger Nixon, the membership secretary, inviting visitors to join and reminding members/friends that subscriptions were now due. Professor Caroline Barron, one of our trustees who provided both expert advice and external scrutiny to the Rye Project Steering Group throughout the gestation of the project then introduced the main speakers of the evening. Gill Draper set the Rye project in context and outlined what has been achieved while David Martin outlined the main findings from the building survey (and gave us some idea as to his and Barbara’s next big project). Questions and discussion then followed, including one from Caroline regarding ‘inning’ that was lucidly answered from the floor by Jill Eddison. So the meeting came to a close and we set off, for Maidstone.

Alan Tyler

As a Medieval historian with a particular interest in London, Caroline provided the following snippet to the AGM.

In May 1327 the Mayor, Aldermen and Commonalty of London wrote letters of complaint to the Mayor, Barons and Bailiffs of Rye and of Winchelsea. It would appear that the men of these two towns, led by Simon Birchet of Winchelsea, had engaged in a bit of privateering and had seized ‘in time of war’ a ship of Abbeville that had contained barley, garlic, onions and onion seed belonging to Adam Lucas, a London stockfishmonger. When Adam had sold the goods in the market at Rye he had been compelled to pay toll. London citizens had, however, been granted exemption from paying tolls in other towns by a royal charter of Henry I but, for obvious reasons, this caused resentment in other English towns as London citizens were able freely to use local market facilities to sell their own goods.

The Mayor, Barons and Commonalty of Rye replied to the London letter in August of that year. The men of Rye wrote that they were not prepared to restore the toll taken from Adam Lucas but said that if Lucas would sue those who had exacted toll from him, justice would be done i.e. they were not prepared to take corporate responsibility for the actions of the local tax gatherers, but expected Lucas to pursue the matter at a personal level. The
mayor and Barons of Winchelsea replied in a similar vein. If Adam Lucas chose to sue Simon Birchet, or any other man by name, they would ensure that right was done in their court.

This response from the men of Rye and Winchelsea was not ‘deemed satisfactory’ and so in September the Mayor, Aldermen and Commonalty of London unanimously decided that withernam should be taken from the men of Rye and Winchelsea, this meant that goods belonging to the men of these two towns could be seized in lieu of those deemed to have been taken illegally. So, as a result of this decision, thirteen casks and two pipes of red wine and one cask of white wine, belonging to Richard Selern of Winchelsea were seized in London as withernam. Selern did not sue for their return and so the wine, valued at £23 6s 8d was handed over to Adam Lucas.

This is an interesting case which shows the economic and judicial dominance of the city of London whose Mayor and Aldermen could effectively chastise those who infringed the city’s chartered privileges. Adam Lucas, who went on to serve as sheriff of London in 1340-41 did, however, do well out of the dispute since he secured large quantities of wine in place of the toll paid on some garlic and onion seed!

Caroline Barron
Royal Holloway College

Reference

Rye Rebuilt in retrospect: A challenge completed
Some research projects are quickly completed, others take a little longer. Our work on the buildings of Rye certainly falls into the latter category - our first architectural survey within the town was completed over thirty years ago! With the help of Alan Dickinson, by 1992 just under a hundred of Rye’s houses had been recorded. By then it had become clear that what survived was one of the most significant concentrations of late-medieval and Tudor urban buildings in south-east England. But a collection of surveys is just that; nothing more than raw data. As always, the challenge is to use the data, combined with other source material, to reconstruct the past in a meaningful way. Such work is very time consuming and during the 1990s, with growing
family commitments, all work on Rye effectively stalled. In autumn 1999, English Heritage commissioned us, through University College London, to draw together past research into Rye’s sister town of Winchelsea. With the successful publication of that body of research in 2004, the obvious progression was to carry out a similar analysis of Rye. On account of the town’s extraordinary survival of buildings, it was accepted that this would prove to be a far greater challenge.

An idea for a project is one thing, getting it off the ground is quite another. But sometimes fate steps in and that was to be the case in this instance. Enter the RMRT that, under the then chair Helen Clarke, was at precisely the same time developing the idea of an interdisciplinary study of Rye. And so the RMRT’s Rye project was born. Our building analysis has, of course, formed only a small part of the project but it has benefited greatly from the interdisciplinary approach, working as we have done with Gillian Draper and her team of Trust volunteers.

So, in brief, what did we discovered about the medieval and post-medieval buildings of the town? The late 14th and 15th centuries provided few surprises. Rye can be shown to have been a typical example of an average, relatively successful, local coastal port. Given that it was served by the only good sheltered harbour along this part of the south coast, one might have expected more. But at this date it stood in the shadow of its more dominant and successful neighbour, Winchelsea, that at this time dominated foreign sea trade and maritime activity along this section of the coast. Indeed, the surprise is that Rye prospered to the extent it did. The extant domestic buildings portray it as successful but un-crowded, with survival of an above-average number of well-built timber-framed open-hall houses. All this changed during the 16th century. The catalyst is well known - the collapse of Winchelsea due to silting of the River Tillingham. Rye not only usurped Winchelsea’s role but developed it and, for a short period, became a port of national significance. By 1565 it had the largest number of households of any port in Kent and Sussex - greater than Sandwich, Faversham and Dover. Furthermore, it is estimated that by this date one in every five houses which existed in the Rape of Hastings was located within the town; yet the Rape covered a total area of 250 square miles, compared to only 36 acres for Rye!
As architectural historians, it is this 16\textsuperscript{th} century period of prosperity which has proved to be of greatest interest. The buildings of this period are sufficiently well preserved to show how the townsfolk coped with the major changes they were facing. Initially the additional population was principally accommodated by infilling gaps in the street facade, with only very limited expansion of the built-up area. However, the population continued to rise. The footprint of the medieval town could not be enlarged to accommodate the increase; the topography of the site, surrounded as it was by marsh and sea, would not allow expansion. This forced existing houses to be sub-divided into multiple units. Because much of the existing housing stock was at that time still new and well built, there was no large-scale redevelopment - thus the increase in population was mostly accommodated by adapting the existing houses. Unlike the earlier buildings, these modifications produced houses with internal layouts of distinctly ‘urban’ character.

Although the town had two physically quite separate focal points, the church/market and the Strand/fish market, it was so small and compact there was no need to concentrate commercial activity in one confined area; everywhere was close to everywhere else. This point is clearly indicated in the distribution of shops - they were spread evenly across most of the town. Therefore, as the town filled up, no one part was put under extreme pressure. Had Rye occupied a larger site, or been able to expand, it may have developed a discrete commercial district within which demand for space may have become intense. Under such circumstances, regardless of the recent age of the buildings, economic pressures would have caused wholesale redevelopment within the commercial core as buildings rose ever higher in an attempt to maximize floor space. The result would have been a very different streetscape from that which we see today, far more akin to that found within the principal streets of places such as Canterbury and Sandwich. Significantly, by the end of the century such high-rise developments were beginning to appear. If the population had continued to increase at its 16\textsuperscript{th} century rate it is quite likely that lofty, narrow-fronted houses would have become far more numerous, utterly transforming the townscape within the commercial heart. As it was, the reverse happened. Population levels dropped and many of the houses which had been divided were returned to single occupancy. Port activities shrank to a fraction of their 16\textsuperscript{th} century levels, leaving the areas closest to the quay seriously impoverished and in places deserted.
Despite the downturn, because there was no local rival community the town’s land-based market activities survived, concentrating commercial enterprises towards the eastern end of High Street - the present trading centre. But even here, despite an increase in the pace of redevelopment during the late 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries, the pressures never became such that wholesale redevelopment occurred. Thus the town we see today came into being, its unique character a product of its past. It is this sequence which has preserved the houses so well and given us such a rich resource for study. There have been many exciting moments as totally unexpected features and house-types have come to light during the RMRT stage of the project. Of these, perhaps the most memorable was the discovery of the remains of John Shurley’s urban mansion. Having been divided into several dwellings, the discovery was made piecemeal, over a period when we were giving a WEA course on the houses of Rye. The participants, mostly Rye residents, were able to hear of the unfolding story as it occurred. To find more out about this and the other architectural gems which have come to light, please read Rye Rebuilt.

The publication of Rye Rebuilt, together with that of Gillian Draper’s companion volume, Rye: A history of a Sussex Cinque Port to 1660, marks the completion of the project. It has proved a challenging, but intellectually very rewarding four years. So what next? For us the challenges continue but not in Romney Marsh. Following on from Rye, funding from English Heritage has already allowed us to undertake similar architectural studies of the towns of Battle and Hastings and over the next two years we turn to the rural houses of the Rape of Hastings. Perhaps one day we will return to the Marsh, but for the moment it only leaves us to thank RMRT and its membership for all their help and encouragement.

David and Barbara Martin

Rye History: A wider perspective

November 2009 saw the publication of the results of the Rye and Hinterlands research project with its detailed work on the medieval and early-modern history and buildings of the town. In the same month Pre-Construct Archaeology’s monograph on the history and archaeology of New Romney appeared, covering the same periods. Since 2004 very substantial studies of New Winchelsea, Lydd and Dover have also been published, as well as a study of the evolution of Dungeness and Romney Marsh. Andrew Butcher,
formerly lecturer at the University of Kent, often said, and quite correctly, that it is impossible to understand the Romney Marshes without studying the towns on and around them. These studies go a long way towards doing just that, particularly perhaps Rye History which examined the town in relation to 36 local settlements. The importance of St Mary’s Marsh to the town of Rye and its townspeople became clear, as well as that of other marshes in the Brede valley and towards Broomhill and Winchelsea.

Of the towns around Romney Marsh, Hythe still lacks a full study. Sheila Sweetinburgh has recently given a conference paper which emphasised the interaction between the townsfolk of Hythe and the agrarian economy of the nearby marshes and I have compiled a preliminary bibliography of material on the town with a view to writing a history of it. Rye, Winchelsea, New Romney, Dover, Lydd and Hythe were all Head Ports, Ancient Towns or members of the Cinque Ports confederation and we look forward to the imminent publication of work on two remaining Cinque Ports; the study of the town and port of Sandwich from its origins to 1600 and David and Barbara Martin’s work on the historic buildings and environment of Hastings. Sandwich and Hastings are some way beyond the Romney Marshes but, as Cinque Ports, must be considered together with those on and near the Romney Marshes. Time and again the Rye and Hinterlands project demonstrated how the men of the various Ports acted in concert, notably as pirates. It also showed that the urban governments of the various Ports employed a balance between joint action, especially in times of political crisis, and assertions of their individual rights, for instance in debt cases between the towns. Studies of other aspects of the Cinque Ports confederation could now be undertaken, drawing on these recent publications and also on Murray’s Constitutional History of the Cinque Ports. For example whether and how a collective identity was perceived, constructed and developed. Such work might focus, say, on the chronology of production of the custumals of the various towns, the connections between their urban elites and town governments, or the use of urban, and particularly ecclesiastical space, for ceremonies and burials; subjects that Sheila Sweetinburgh has already examined for New Romney and Terreena Bellinger for Lydd (RMI 34, autumn 2009). There are many possibilities now that the groundwork has been carried out and published and an interesting and important element would be to investigate change over time.
A traditional element in the historiography of the Ports is ‘ship service’, which included the provision of vessels for transporting monarchs, members of the royal household, high-ranking officials and horses for war across the Channel. The comparative decline of the significance of the Ports in providing ship service, both in relation to each other and to other ports in the south east, was linked to the deterioration of their harbours or their beaching facilities, which took place at different periods for the various towns. This decline and variation are set out in the recent studies, something which both David Martin and I mentioned at the Rye launch. Beyond this we need to look at two aspects of the place of the Ports in the wider picture of medieval maritime and commercial history, one regional and one national. An examination of the provision of timber and iron for shipbuilding points to the rise of towns and settlements on the River Medway and Thames Estuary in the 15th century. The ship service required from places such as Maidstone, Snodland and New Hythe on the Medway and the existence of dockyards at Deptford, Chatham and Woolwich before their great development in the 16th century, reflect the diminishing significance of the Cinque Ports in providing vessels for royal use (Draper, forthcoming). The loss of the Ports’ harbours, the general increase in the size of vessels, the end of the Hundred Years’ War and the changing maritime economy of the south east all lessened their importance for ship service and thus their political and economic significance to the monarch. Rye, however, remained the biggest and best of the confederation ports until the early 17th century when it was overtaken by Dover, with its new artificial haven, while Hastings found a new role as a seaside resort from the late 18th century.

However, one ‘national’ aspect of the history of the Cinque Ports seems to have been explored very little. In the 1990s medieval historians expounded, or rather re-expounded, arguments about the growth of towns, markets and the general commercialisation of English society between about 1000 and 1300, with a particular focus on the relationships between the rural and urban, perhaps taking as their starting point the suggestion by early medievalists that the later 10th and early 11th century ‘may’ have seen rapid and pronounced urban growth in southern England (Astill 1991, 95; Bailey 1998; Britnell 1996; Masschaele 1997). Some, such as Langdon and Masschaele (2006) pursuing the commercialisation model with vigour, still perceive a frenzy of market foundations which they place in the second half of the 13th century;
they offer simplistic arguments about population growth which the evidence
cannot sustain, certainly not for the Cinque Ports and facile explanations (the
‘population-resources model’) about human responses to economic growth
which entirely fail to take into account more sophisticated understandings of
medieval demography and human responses to plague and war such as that of
Biller (2000). At first sight Rye, as a new town founded between the Conquest
and Domesday Book, ought nevertheless to fit somewhere into the
commercialising model and we should therefore be able to see its economic
significance, or not, on the national scale. Yet on closer examination the
model proves to have been largely constructed from evidence from northern
ports, and to a lesser extent eastern ports, with a mention of one or two in the
south such as Portsmouth and Poole. Apart from Dover, which could hardly be
left out since it had a burgesses’ guildhall recorded in Domesday Book, the
Cinque Ports were omitted from consideration; neither Sandwich nor Hastings
nor Hythe nor Romney nor Winchelsea (Old or New) nor Rye got a mention
in perhaps the most influential work, *A Commercialising Economy* (Britnell &
Campbell 1995).

The new studies of the towns of the Cinque Ports confederation are beginning
to show the very great variation in their origins and development, from those
of New Romney, for example, as a fishing settlement and beach trading place
in the 8th century to those of Rye founded as a new town in the eleventh
century. These towns do not in fact fit easily into the commercialising model
of the 1990s and may therefore something to contribute to its re-examination
in the future. Research funded and published by the Trust needs not only to
contribute to the study of Romney Marsh and the western river valleys, but
also to wider debates such as this.

G. M. Draper
University of Kent

**Recent studies of members of the Cinque Ports confederation and the Romney Marshes**

adaptation, settlement and economy of a coastal wetland: The evidence from
around Lydd, Romney Marsh, Kent* [Oxford: Oxbow]


**Forthcoming**


Draper, G. (Spring 2010) Timber and iron: Natural resources for the late medieval shipbuilding industry in Kent, In: Sweetinburgh, S. (ed) *Late Medieval Kent* [Kent History Project/Boydell Press]

**General studies**


Radiocarbon dating peat deposits north of Lydd

Recent new stratigraphic studies have revealed a thin (approx. 30cm) but spatially extensive peat deposit in a previously un-investigated area north of Lydd. This area is of particular interest since the deposits here are situated at the interface between the gravel barrier and the wider back-barrier main marshland deposits and contain important information on the late-Holocene evolution of the marsh. However, much of this area is dominated by minerogenic clays, silts and sands associated with the final inundation of the marsh (see Spencer et al 1998a & b; Plater 1992; Plater & Long 1995; Plater et al 1999) and datable in situ organic material is not common.

A core form the site was sampled and pollen analysis has been completed yet the sequence lacked a chronology. A grant was gratefully received from the RMRT enabling 3 radiocarbon dates to be obtained which constrains the age of the deposits and also provides a date for an important change in the pollen data. These dating results are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Depth below surface (cm)</th>
<th>Altitude (m OD)</th>
<th>Date (Radiocarbon years BP)</th>
<th>Calibrated age (cal. yrs BP) ± 2 sigma</th>
<th>Lab Code</th>
<th>Stratigraphic context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lydd</td>
<td>141-142</td>
<td>0.80-0.79</td>
<td>2240±40</td>
<td>2340 - 2150</td>
<td>Beta - 259386</td>
<td>Top of peat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lydd</td>
<td>149-150</td>
<td>0.72-0.71</td>
<td>2850±40</td>
<td>3070 - 2860</td>
<td>Beta - 259387</td>
<td>Myrica rise below LPAZ LYDD2/3 boundary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lydd</td>
<td>172-173</td>
<td>0.49-0.48</td>
<td>3370±40</td>
<td>3700 - 3480</td>
<td>Beta - 259388</td>
<td>Base of peat</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data from Lydd compare closely to the organic deposits found at Midley Church Bank both in age and depositional context (Long & Innes 1993; 1995) and it is likely that these organic deposits are associated with the final extension of the main marsh peat as it progressively spread out from the river valleys and upland edges of the Marsh and ultimately reaching it appears as far as the gravel, at least in this area of Lydd and west of the site at Sandyland on Broomhill level (see Irregular reports of Autumn 2007 and Spring 2009). Tidal channels associated with inundation of the Marsh in the last few
thousand years have stripped out much of the evidence for the ‘main marsh peat’ of Green (1968) at its southerly limit close to the gravel so deposits such as these are rare and of particular interest.

The relationship between these deposits and the surrounding marshland will be explored in a chapter to be published in the forthcoming Romney Marsh Research Monograph which integrates this new information from Lydd and Broomhill Level.

Jason Kirby
Liverpool John Moores University

References


The Romney Marshes Living Landscape Partnership

The Romney Marshes Living Landscape Partnership was formed over three years ago, with the aim of realising the potential of the landscape to deliver major benefits for wildlife as well as to maintain and enhance sustainable tourism, support the farming economy and involve, and engage, local communities. The Partnership has since grown to represent over thirty different organisations and individuals. Through chairing the partnership, Kent Wildlife Trust has had the opportunity to delve into the work of many stakeholders and find out which projects they would like to carry forward. In this article, I have attempted to highlight the key elements of this partnership working and the sorts of projects we envisage.

The old sea cliff with Romney Marsh in the distance.

The area we are looking at is the Romney Marshes Joint Character Area as described by Natural England. This encompasses all the land south of the Royal Military Canal but stretches to the north and west of the canal to include the Isle of Oxney, and part of the Rother, Brede and Pett levels in East Sussex.

Romney Marshes are portrayed in many a tourist guide as a land lost in the mists of time, a rural idyll where visitors can lose themselves in tranquil villages and unspoilt countryside before enjoying the delights of the nearest
coastal resort. To a certain extent, this is still the case in parts of the Marsh. However, it is also a slightly idealistic view; over the last few decades, Romney Marshes have seen a great increase in its economic prosperity through the building of two power stations, which overlook the whole of the Marsh. The advent of modern farming techniques has enabled the rich soils to be exploited to their full and, where there used to be traditional grazing marsh, there is often intensively farmed arable land dotted with large modern farm buildings. Tourism has also created big opportunities in the area, with visitor numbers to Dungeness alone amounting to more than 300,000 every year.

Against this backdrop of economic prosperity, there are nevertheless some important issues facing the area. The nuclear power stations have been one of the main employers on the Marsh since the 1960s, although they are now being decommissioned and plans for a new Dungeness C power station are uncertain. Some of the most deprived wards in England are found on the Marshes and unemployment, together with rural isolation, are real issues. Farming remains an important and highly productive industry but has become a fine balancing act between productivity, environmental regulations and concerns over the loss of biodiversity, not to mention the uncertainty of food prices and consequent variability in farming incomes from year to year. A major problem facing the area is, or will become, climate change. Most of the area lies between 0-5m above sea level and will therefore be heavily reliant on sea defences to maintain the land in its present form.

The work of the partnership needs to be carried out on many levels to help address some of these complex issues. All the partners have had a tremendous input into the area in terms of establishing it as a unique landscape and somewhere for people to enjoy accessing and learning about the built heritage and the natural heritage. We will be looking at opportunities to build on the extensive work already carried out over the last few years; be it working with landowners, schools, accommodation providers or local authorities.

As one might expect, one of the primary interests of the partners is the wildlife present in the area. The Marshes have been drained over the centuries to give us the present landscape but the wildlife found there now represents the impressive array of species which would have been found in past times; albeit heavily reduced in terms of distribution and density. The coastal vegetated shingle, mudflats, saltmarsh and parts of the grazing marsh are of international
or national importance for biodiversity and represent a haven for populations of overwintering and breeding birds. They are also noted for species such as water voles, medicinal leech, great crested newt, white-clawed crayfish, greater water parsnip, otter, marshmallow moth and several bumblebee species not to mention the unique flora present on the vegetated shingle ridges.

The Marshes were traditionally fertile wetland pasture and have developed unique landscape elements as a result of sheep farming. Current farming practice, however, shows a marked trend towards intensive arable cultivation and turf growing and loss of wildlife habitats is a big issue. A priority is therefore to encourage and support landowners and farmers to manage their land in a sustainable and wildlife-friendly manner, to restore grazing marsh habitat and to improve ecological connectivity on the Marsh. Partners are already encouraging farmers to enter agri-environment schemes and the uptake of the current environmental stewardship scheme in the area is considerable.

Since some farmers may feel that entering into such schemes is not the best financial option for their business so projects will also aim at raising awareness of the many things which farmers can do to help increase the permeability of their land to wildlife. Ditches, field margins and hedgerows are essential connective elements in any landscape and can also help wildlife to move through a more ‘wildlife friendly’ landscape in the face of climate change in response to varying temperatures and rising sea levels. Hedgerows are not a significant habitat feature on the Marshes, so the real possibilities lie
in creating wider field margins which buffer against nutrient run-off into ditches as well as providing much needed foraging and nesting habitat for small mammals, invertebrates such as bees, reptiles and birds. Approximately 90% of the ditches on the Marsh are privately owned and any maintenance is therefore undertaken at the expense of the landowner. Partners hope to identify funding to help with ditch restoration work, as well as developing a strategy for controlling the extent of invasive non-native species.

Otter – a species which is rarely seen on the marsh nowadays.

Biological recording is the key in allowing conservationists to work with farmers and landowners in assessing what measures can be taken to help wildlife and we will be developing or improving on current recording schemes to improve our knowledge of the biodiversity of the area. Part of this will involve training local people in wildlife identification skills so that they can continue monitoring for many years to come.

Another priority for the project is to involve local people in project activities. Involving people makes them more likely to care about their environment. Involving local people means there is an even greater chance that the benefits of a given project will be felt at a much greater level and retained for longer; the best possible outcome being that locals take on an active role in carrying on a given project. There are many ways in we aim to encourage local communities to get involved; be it through projects such as volunteering on practical conservation tasks, recording wildlife, managing a local churchyard, organising guided walks, encouraging people to buy local produce, involving local schools with nearby farms and nature reserves, encouraging farmers to consider agri-environment options or training front-line tourism staff about green tourism options. It is only through engagement with stakeholders representative of the wider population that one can fully understand their needs and integrate these into projects.

The landscape on the Marshes is full of history; from the Royal Military Canal to the Martello Towers and Cinque Ports, there lies a rich heritage which
testifies to gradual reclamation of the Marshes from the sea, repelling of foreign invaders, smuggling, the fishing industry… the list is extensive. Part of our work will be to develop new projects to enthuse the public about this heritage. Projects might include oral history programmes, computer visualisation models showing the evolution of the Marsh landscape over the ages, teaching resource packs for schools, new interpretation materials for events, sculpture trails, restoration work on churches and research into the built heritage of New Romney. Partners are also hoping to do research into the palaeoenvironmental history of the Hythe area; much research has been done on the history of the Marsh but there is still more that needs to be done to enable a better understanding of the past landscape, that in turn can inform future conservation measures. This is becoming increasingly important since nature conservation and the built heritage are often inextricably linked and there is a need for conservationists and landowners to work together with heritage organisations to consider both the needs of biodiversity and what lies in the soil beneath.

Novel methods of bringing the history of Romney Marshes to life!
The Romney Marshes are one of the most extensive areas of tranquillity in the south east and they are becoming an increasingly popular destination for
holidaymakers and day-trippers alike. There is therefore great scope to develop green tourism. Visitors tend to be particularly attracted to the coastal areas, as they do in any part of the country, but one need only think of the Norfolk broads or the French Camargue region to realise how attractive marshland can be to the public! However, promotion and improvements to access would need to be carefully targeted to prevent areas such as Dungeness Point, which are already under a lot of pressure from visitors, from becoming more even more overwhelmed. Partners will be looking at promoting the area as a tourist destination, through projects such as a green tourism guide, a website, workshops for businesses on green tourism and benchmark schemes and training for front-line tourism staff.

The vision is long-term, stretching beyond 50 years. As readers will appreciate, the current action plan reflects this and will need to evolve accordingly. Ultimately, all the elements I have written about come together in a complex web of relationships between the local economy and the landscape. Any projects the partnership undertakes will need to exploit the links between nature conservation, sustainable farming and green tourism, in order to support the people and wildlife living in the area.

Camilla Blackburn
Living Landscapes Project Officer – Kent Wildlife Trust
Playden or Saltcote: Rye’s troublesome neighbour

The Romney Marsh Research Trust’s Rye Project has for the past four years investigated the origins, development and history of that town. The neighbouring settlement and parish of Playden is so close to the north that confusion arose in contemporary records, particularly regarding references to the Town’s Leper Hospital at the junction of the Borough with both Playden and the Foreign of Rye.

This article attempts to draw together themes from the interaction of Rye and Playden or Saltcote within the study period of the project (Pre-Conquest to 1660). It is based to a large extent on work carried out by Christopher Whittick and David and Barbara Martin in the Iden and Playden Topographical Survey commissioned by Sussex Archaeological Society and completed in 1993. That study included analysis of land holdings, building surveys and field archaeology, and Eric Wetherill’s fieldwork in Saltcote Street.

Playden occupies the high ground north of Rye to the east of the London and Iden roads. The parish extends northwards into the valleys at Houghton Green and northwards to further high ground at the Iden boundary. This high ground consists of sands and clays in the Hastings series and extends to about 600 acres [243 hectares] bounded on the east side by old shoreline and cliff. To the east a further 600 acres [243 hectares] or so of marshlands extends to the Kent border beyond the River Rother that is tidal to the Scots Float Sluice in the parish. The small size of Playden parish, particularly if one excludes the marshland, suggests similarities to the pattern of small parishes in areas settled early on the chalk Downland as distinct from the large parishes generally found in the High Weald.

The pre-Conquest origins of the present settlement are indicated by the Domesday entry recording a church and by the place names, derived from ‘Plega’s swine-pasture’ or ‘play swine-pasture’ where the animals sport while the alternative name Saltcote refers to the presence of saltpans (Mawer & Stenton 1969, 533).

Research into the origin of Romney Marsh parishes refers to evidence from elsewhere that pre-Tithe Map parish boundaries generally coincide with estate boundaries in 9th and 10th century charters (Eddison 2000, 56-58). There are,
however, indications that the western boundary of Playden may not have followed its present route along the main road from the earliest period. Firstly, the Rye Project research has proposed a date of between 1066 and 1086 for the foundation of the new borough of Rye. Before that date it seems unlikely that a major road ran down the hill to an empty site. Secondly, the 1993 study records a holding of Mote manor described as ‘in Playden’ in c.1460 but clearly located on the west of the road adjoining the lands of St Bartholomew’s Hospital on the south and Leasam Lane on the north.

The 1993 study also found references to a court of the Hospital manor held in c.1660 ‘at the manor house [of St Bartholomew] in Playden where widow Watts lived’. A rental of 1697 describes this as ‘a little piece (1acre/0.404 ha) where the manor house formerly stood’ on the east side of the road apparently otherwise surrounded by a field named Paradise, now the site of Mill Road. This ambiguity in the location of the Hospital may however be due to location of all or part of the buildings in Playden as distinct from the endowment land in Rye.

Playden is considered to have been part of a Saxon estate centred on a minster at Peasmarsh that included Iden, Beckley and Northiam (Gardiner 1989, 45). All are north of the River Tillingham which would have formed a natural boundary. To the west of Playden however the northern part of Rye, not taken into royal hands in 1247, intrudes into this area and includes two detached portions within Peasmarsh parish. It also contained Leasam, a sub-manor of Brede, itself originally part of the huge Saxon estate of Rameslie located at the eastern end of coastal Sussex.

Three possibilities therefore come to mind. Firstly that Rameslie formerly included the Peasmarsh minster area and retained enclaves on the establishment of the estate, secondly that the northern part of Rye within Goldspur Hundred (Vidler 1954, 129) was a part of the minster estate acquired by Rameslie for the benefit of the new borough and thirdly, and perhaps more likely, the Rye outliers resulted from early colonisation by Rameslie at or near successive inlets on the north side of the Tillingham estuary later surrounded by the minster estate.
Pre-tithe map parish boundaries – highlighting detached portions of Rye, East Guldeford as a new formation and Winchelsea and Broomhill as relics of submerged settlements

To the east the parish of East Guldeford was formed largely from land in Playden following grants of marshland for reclamation in 1478 and 1497 by the Abbot of Robertsbridge, Lord of the Manor of Playden (Eddison 2000, 89). The boundary between the two is an artificial straight line through former salttings. Detailed study of tenements in the 1993 project showed a substantial block of land at the north of the parish in the hands of the main manor, Playden Porter (the Robertsbridge holding), including demesne land described as New Innings in 1567. To the south a block including the whole of the fishing settlement of Saltcote Street, was held of the Manor of Iden. A large area to the north of Saltcote Street, the later Saltbarn Farm, had no manorial attribution recorded. This coincidence of the later farm name with the earlier alternative name for the parish, Saltcote, invites speculation that the Iden and
Saltbarn holdings may once have formed a distinct settlement or estate, later acquired and developed at least in part by the Manor of Iden.

An area to the east of the upland was held of the Manor of River, owned by the Scott family of Iden Moat. The presence of wild service trees on the old cliff edge suggests ancient woodland and it may be that the Scott family’s holding which the 1993 study identified as having harbour facilities, was cleared from woodland in the late medieval period.

Playden Porter was held latterly by the Moreland family of Court Lodge, Lamberhurst, and there was no manor house. In addition Iden Manor was held with Bodiam Castle in the late medieval period so one may speculate that the lack of a resident lord contributed to the looser control than that which the Borough of Rye wished was exercised so close to its boundary (see below).

Map of simplified manorial holdings within Playden showing roads, the settlement of Saltcote Street and tentative identification of separate early estates of Playden and Saltcote
In 1980 David Martin identified Saltcote Street as urban in character from the location of the surviving ruin of a 15th century Wealden open-hall house in the garden of New England and from an old photograph, both indicating that the houses were built on the street frontage (Dickinson 1981, 11).

His later work in the 1993 study resulted in a reconstruction of a regular layout of house plots on both sides of the lane, suggesting a possible planned development or improvement by the Manor of Iden. The study also reported on the wide range of medieval pottery discovered by Eric Wetherill dating from the 12th to 19th centuries with a predominance of middle/late medieval wares.

The extent of the fishing industry in Saltcote Street is apparent both from entries in Rye Port Records, recording tolls payable by the Saltcote fishermen (Vidler 1934, 35) and in the huge deposits of shell fish, medieval pottery and other rubbish up to two metres deep at the foot of the lane.

A decayed chapel is recorded in a Playden Porter manorial survey of 1567 described as ‘late in the ownership of John Finchwater, parson of Playden’. The chapel was located on the south side of the lane at the present Wistaria Cottage just beyond western end and highest point of the built-up settlement and outside the Iden Manorial holding. It was presumably for the benefit of the fishing settlement; a possible parallel being the provision of a chapel for fishermen at Dungeness in the early 16th century which was remote from the parent church of Lydd. (CKS: PRC 32/10, fol. 113) But at Playden the parish church is within a stone’s throw so the origins and purpose of the chapel remain a mystery; in addition John Finchwater is not recorded as one of the rectors of Playden.

The decline of this settlement in the 17th century is recorded in references to the decay and demolition of houses. It mirrors the serious economic decline of Rye in this period largely due to silting of the harbour and marsh reclamation (Hipkin 1995, 138).
Away from the urban settlement pattern at Saltcote Street and the main road, three lanes converged at Houghton Green. A further public highway ran north from the eastern end of Houghton Green through woodland known as The Common, originally highway waste of the Rape of Hastings, before returning westwards to link with the present Playden Lane and the village of Iden.

A pattern of scattered small land holdings, including some detached portions, is apparent from the 1993 study while 16th and 17th century manorial records indicate both the presence of houses since demolished and tofts indicating sites of houses which had already gone. Thus many sites are not known or are only indicated by pottery scatters in ploughland. Bishop’s transcripts of the parish registers also indicate a very small population during the 17th century and it appears that the economic decline locally was so great that it resulted in dereliction and loss of buildings.

Surviving evidence indicates a typical rural pattern of houses set back from and facing the lanes. Surviving buildings within the study period are extremely few in number, apart from the transitional Norman church built about 1190 and substantially surviving. Ship Cottage at Houghton Green is a small mid 16th century husbandman’s house and Old Turks a late 17th century rebuild of a farmhouse. Mockbeggar retains a 17th century central chimney within a later rebuild. A farmhouse west of Houghton Green was recorded as
ruinous in 1582 and was replaced in 1755. Other houses were replaced in the 19th century, including the Rectory and Saltbarn Farm.

Playden was in close proximity to Rye and overlooked the town. It lay on the direct route by road to the Landgate approach into the town and contained or adjoined St Bartholomew’s Hospital.

From the formation of East Guldeford in the late 15th century a ferry operated in Playden providing a transport link to other Cinque Ports. Traditionally considered to have operated from the foot of Saltcote Street; the road name Ferry Green Lane is recorded in an early 19th century estate map at the pre-1820 course of Rectory Lane immediately to the north suggesting a location at the end of a hollow way which remains west of Hawthornden, Military Road.

Economic links to Rye presumably included the provision of a market for surplus agricultural produce and milled grain. Windmills are recorded on Rye Hill from the 15th century and a mill mound remains just within the old Rye Borough boundary.
However, relationships were not always harmonious. The Rye Corporation complained in 1575 that ‘the wandering sorte of vagabondes called Egipcions and divers sea rovers comynge from the sea’ frequent the Tippling House of Richard Abbot in Playden ‘in sort as our toune groweth in slanders and infamy that his house adioyninge so nere is thought to be within the Liberties of Ry’ (Dell 1965, 64). Moral disapproval is also evident in the old rhyme ‘Saukett Church, Crooked steeple, Drunken parson, Wicked people’.

The 1993 study recorded the lack of time within the research programme for analysis of the material under topics or themes and suggested future preparation of an article suitable for the *Sussex Archaeological Collections*. The extent of archaeological material found in the limited fieldwork carried out in 1993 suggests that close attention should be paid to future development in the area.

**Acknowledgements**

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Alan Dickinson

**References**


What can the Pevensey Levels teach us about the history and development of Romney Marsh? Martyn Waller, who chairs the RMRT Executive and is a professor at Kingston University, led some twenty of us across the Levels from the Star Inn, Norman’s Bay, to the deserted medieval village of Northeye, the nearby salt works and reclamation walls in search for an answer to this intriguing question.

Two differences between Pevensey and Romney Marsh were noted right from the start. While the bedrock surface in the Romney Marsh area is deeply buried beneath recent sediments, this surface is much more irregular near Pevensey and bedrock islands occur some distance out into the Levels. These have acted as focus for both settlement and reclamation. A second difference is that much of Pevensey Levels remains under pasture and as a consequence the surface features are well preserved.

The succession of recent sediments on Pevensey Levels is however comparable to much of the Romney Marsh area. Lower marine sediments were replaced by a peat which radiocarbon dates indicate formed from the late Neolithic through to the late Iron Age. Upper marine sediments form the surface layer, though there is some uncertainty as to when they were deposited.

Northeye, situated on one of the bedrock islands, is mentioned in a charter of 1229 which suggests it was a small port and limb of the Cinque Port of Hastings. There were clear signs of a main street with houses on either side, the site for the Chapel of St James (founded 1262) and two ponds to store fresh water. The precise location of the port was less obvious. A droveway linking the village to uplands to the north was also visited.
The spoil mounds of the medieval salt works stood out clearly from the flat alluvial land and were associated with a former creek system. The salt works are thought to have operated between 950 and 1250 AD. The medieval method of obtaining salt from sea-water involved scraping up the salt-rich surface mud and putting it into clay-lined troughs or pits with holes at the bottom. Saltwater was then poured in and the brine derived evaporated in pans over fires. The used mud was then thrown away so forming the mounds. The salt works, as on the Romney Marsh, were located alongside creeks but whether they used peat or firewood to boil away the brine is an open question. 12th century records of peat cutting at Otham Abbey on the western side of Pevensey Levels suggests peat may have occurred close to the surface and if so it is likely to have used as a source of fuel by the salt makers.

Pevensey Levels in Roman times is generally believed to have been an area of tidal marshland with extensive creeks. However, the occurrence of peat near the surface in the 10th-11th century would suggest it may have been largely have been fresh water landscape possibly used for grazing. The Roman fort of Pevensey was located on the mouth of the Ashbourne River – now shown on the Ordnance Survey map as Waller’s Haven. This is comparable to Romney Marsh which had its own Roman port at Stutfall, near Hythe, presumably on the mouth of the then Rother or Limen.
On Romney Marsh, the land which is east of what is now the Rhee Wall, was reclaimed from the sea during the Saxon period, while to the area to west of the Wall was reclaimed in a planned manner from the 12th century. It appears reclamation did not start on the Pevensey Levels for at least another hundred years. Some of the reclamation walls on Pevensey are exceptionally well preserved and differences in height between the inside (low) and outside (high, where sediment has built up) are clear. Reclamation, as in the Fens, appears to have been from the coastline inwards.

Both areas suffered in the 13th century storms, especially in the Great Storm of 1287, which inundated the large ombrotropic bog lying between Rye and Brooklands and effectively closed New Romney as a viable Cinque Port. At Pevensey, sea defences were subsequently improved leading to the rapid siltation of the tidal creeks and the loss of numerous havens to shipping. In fact these changes in drainage led to severe freshwater floods in the 1300 and 1400s, resulting in the necessity for drainage cuts to straighten the exits of streams and rivers, diverting the Ashbourne from Pevensey Castle to Norman’s Bay near the Star Inn.

The story of the shingle movement along the coast is now seen as being in two parts. Movement of shingle washed down into the Channel during the last ice age being moved landward and of much less importance the release of flint from the chalk cliffs between Brighton and Beachy Head. Shingle appears to have accumulated in the Eastbourne area during the medieval period as the gravel foreland known as the Crumbles was much larger in the 17th century, since when it has considerably diminished in size. One possibility is the storms of the 13th century allowed a lot of shingle to pass around the headlands (shingle transport is likely to be enhanced under storm conditions) building up The Crumbles. It can be hypothesised that the same stormy conditions took shingle around Fairlight Head, which along with the Crumbles shingle (eventually), went to build up the shingle ridges in the Camber Castle/Rye Harbour area.

The morning walk ended in lunch at the Star Inn, Norman’s Bay, followed by a brief visit to the beach. Everyone was filled with praise for Martyn for his interesting and highly illuminating field trip.

Terry Burke
Communications

For those Friends with access to the internet, the website of the Trust is **www.rmrt.org.uk**. Via this it is possible to view information about the Trust, forthcoming events and the archaeological gazetteer of Romney Marsh and the river valleys to the west. There are also links to other relevant sites including that of the Romney Marsh on the Web project that has been developed at the University of Liverpool.

The Executive appreciates that many Friends do not have access to computers and we will, of course, continue to communicate with them through the Irregular and the Annual Report. If however you are online it would be appreciated if would send details of your email address to **org@rmrt.org.uk**.

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