

Bishopstone Tidemills Project

Introduction

The remains of Bishopstone Tidemills and associated village lie between Newhaven and Seaford (TQ 459003). The site sits either side of a tidal creek on low-lying reclaimed land just to the north of the high shingle beach of Seaford bay. To the south-east and south-west, on the top edge of the shingle beach, lie the remains of a sea-plane base and children's hospital which date to the first half of the 20th century. The mill itself was established in the 1760s and continued in use until the later 19th century when production ceased due to numerous factors. The village, which had been established to house the mill-workers and their families, remained in use after the closure of the mill and was used for a variety of purposes including the housing of railway workers and a stables. It was eventually largely demolished during the Second World War due to the danger of invasion. The ruins were used by Canadian troops to practice street fighting. By the end of the war the uninhabited ruins were left to decay. Despite continuing decline brought about by weathering, rabbits, vegetation and vandalism, substantial remains of this former settlement still survive as a jumble of walls amongst tall vegetation.



An aerial view of the site

The Site's Importance

The site is deemed of local and regional importance for a number of reasons. Tidemills are not common industrial sites and as such are of interest in their own right. However, Bishopstone Tidemills is particularly unusual in that it includes an integral village built specifically for its workers which has not been altered or subjected to redevelopment since the last war. The relationships between industrial complexes and the domestic sites reliant on them are often difficult to discern clearly and the present site offers the opportunity to start to understand this complex inter-relationship.

The wider landscape setting of the site is also seen as one of the main interests of the project. The reclamation of marginal land, its use for an industrial complex, with its resultant alterations and improvements, is just part of the history of the site. The coming of the railway, with the station and siding to the mill, along with the sea-plane base demonstrate at one site the revolution in transportation during this period.

Another aspect of the study will be the evaluation of the different sources of evidence; archaeology, standing buildings analysis, cartographic, pictorial, photographic and documentary sources as well as oral testimonies, in an attempt to see how well they correlate.



The tunnels under the bridge that fed the waterwheels

The Project

Due to the great archaeological/ historical value of this site and its continued decay a multifaceted project will be undertaken to bring together what is already known of the site and record the surviving physical remains before further evidence is lost.

The initial project is envisaged as being undertaken in two main parts: an historical survey and an archaeological field survey (in two stages) though it is intended to fully interweave these in due course.

Documentary and Cartographic Survey

This will aim to collate the vast amount of fragmented information already known about the site into one comprehensive historical account of the site's development both socially and economically. This account will include the mill, village and environs, the sea-plane base, children's hospital and station. There are numerous sources to be consulted and a trawl through Newhaven Museum has already produced a wealth of material. There are many other museum archives which need to be searched as well as Record Offices and other reference library collections. Sources will need to be carefully checked in an attempt to sort out fact from fiction!

Archaeological Field-Survey

This element will be undertaken in two stages and will run consecutively with the ongoing historical work. The aim of the field survey is to make a record of the surviving extant remains at the site. This will allow a comprehensive feature by feature database to be compiled which will show the degree of survival at the site and provide a basis for both interpretation and preservation. It is hoped that the extant remains will be able to be closely integrated with the results of the historical and cartographic

elements in order to clarify feature/building function (to aid public interpretation) and site development.

Stage 1

This will involve the production of an accurate plan of the surviving remains and landscape features of the site. Although some detailed survey work has already been started the overall plan is still to be undertaken. David McOmish of English Heritage should undertake this initially, hopefully this winter, though there will still be much detail to add. Help will be needed in filling in the detail on the plan for areas of the site.

Stage 2

The second stage of the survey will start once Stage 1 is complete. The remains themselves (walls, floors, wooden piles etc) will be recorded on record sheets and elevations will be recorded by the use of measured sketches and photography. Relationships between different features, ie walls or modifications to walls, will also be recorded on the feature sheets in order to help phase the structures. The end result will be a comprehensive archive of the standing remains.



Continual erosion is gradually destroying the site. Here a wall has collapsed into the creek.

Results and Volunteers

Following the completion of the first phase of work, and subject to any ensuing second phase, a report will be produced outlining the results. It is hoped this will form the basis of either an article in the Collections or a separate book/booklet. Phase 2 works, including targeted excavation, may be considered after the completion of the first stage.

The success of this project will be dependent on volunteer's help, both for the historical research and the on-site survey and recording/photography. Hopefully this will be a diverse community project and will involve/benefit a range of people, both local residents (young and old) as well as others who visit or are interested in industrial remains and landscape issues. English Heritage, through its outreach program, have already involved the Sussex Probation Service in vegetation clearance which is making it possible to undertake the survey in the first instance. The work this group has done has already resulted in the discovery of previously hidden remains and a number of very informative notice boards being erected at the site. If any members are interested in becoming involved with the project, whether on the historical or archaeological side, then please do not hesitate to contact me. Fieldwork, and its preceding training, is not likely to start until late Spring though historical research can begin earlier. E-

mail Luke Barber on research@sussexpast.co.uk or by phone on 01273-405733 letting me know on which aspects of the project you would like to participate with. Once the size of the volunteer team is known a more precise task list and meeting will be arranged.



Volunteers excavating in the creek