The 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-west and south-east, on the top edge of the shingle beach, lie the remains of a Great War Royal Naval Air Service sea-plane base and a 1930s children’s hospital. 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 in the early 19th century, remained in use after the closure of the mill and was used for a variety of purposes including the housing of railway/harbour workers and stables. Its civilian population was eventually moved out at the beginning of the Second World War due to the danger of invasion. The ruins were used by Canadian troops to practise street fighting, resulting in the destruction of most of the buildings. 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 industrial complex and settlement still survive as a jumble of walls amongst tall vegetation.

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.

![Image](image.jpg)

*Fig. 2: The three tunnels that fed the waterwheels*

**The Project**

Due to the great archaeological/historical value of this site and its continued decay, a multifaceted community project is being undertaken by the Sussex Archaeological Society. This started in 2006 and aims to bring together what is already known of the site and record the surviving physical remains before further evidence is lost.

The project is envisaged as being undertaken in two integrated parts: an historical survey and an archaeological field survey though it is intended to fully interweave these in due course.
Continual erosion is gradually destroying the site. Here a wall has collapsed into the creek.

**Documentary and Cartographic Survey**

This will aim to collate the vast amount of fragmented primary and secondary information on 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 that have been consulted by the historical volunteers 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! To date over 100 photographic images, numerous maps and documents have been located and even some oral history interviews undertaken with the last few former residents. This process has brought the project to the present day and it is clear the descendants of many of the former residents and/or local people alike have a strong bond with the site.

**Archaeological Field-Survey**

This element is running alongside 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.

With the aid of David McOmish of English Heritage the upstanding remains on the site were surveyed prior to the start of the main fieldwork. This has provided an accurate overall plan of the site to which the more detailed plans produced after vegetation clearance/excavation can be added.
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 scaled photography. To date all of the upstanding wall elevations have been cleared and recorded with overlapping scaled photographs. This has already justified itself as some walls recorded in this way have since collapsed. Relationships between different features, e.g. walls or modifications to walls, are also being recorded on feature sheets in order to help phase the structures.
Although it is not our intention to excavate the whole site, the recording of the upstanding remains has gone hand in hand with targeted excavation in order to fully understand each structure. This has proved extremely interesting on a number of fronts. Firstly, these excavations have shown the site to be far more complex than previously thought, with many different phases of building simply not being depicted on maps or photos. There is evidence of the recycling of building materials on a massive scale, generally poor building and a ‘veneer’ of show on the outward face of the complex. Totally new structures have been discovered that do not appear on any of the maps or photos, ranging from early 19th-century horticultural buildings to World War 2 huts and command posts. As such the site is of national importance in assessing the use of archaeology on late post-medieval sites. The end result will be a comprehensive archive of the standing and buried remains.

**Fig. 6: The Stationmaster’s Cottage following excavation**

**Results and Volunteers**
Since 2006 the majority of the area has been recorded and sampled by excavation. Currently work is being undertaken in the heart of the domestic settlement. This has exposed a multi-phased row of workers’ cottages together with their associated yards and sanitary arrangements, storage buildings, a communal wash-house and the World War 2 toilet block, complete with officers and other ranks compartments. There are areas to the south, including the massive horticultural buildings owned by the miller, the mill office and base of the mill itself that await investigation. Following the completion of fieldwork, post-excavation work will begin with the aim of producing a report outlining the results. It is hoped that volunteer involvement will continue at this stage and that, an interactive website and popular printed publication will also be forthcoming.
This is a community project and its success relies on the many volunteers who have given, and continue to give their time, both in historical research and in the field. We believe good archaeology can also be ‘fun’ archaeology and as such adopt an informal jovial working regime! The team has included a huge range of people from the community, from 5 to 77 years. Although some have archaeological experience, most have started with none and learn on the way. English Heritage, through its outreach programme, has already involved the Sussex Probation Service in vegetation clearance. The current team includes trained archaeologists, interested local people, descendants of former residents and volunteers of the South Downs National Park authority to name but a few. 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. The fieldwork season runs from the beginning of May to the end of October. E-mail Luke Barber on research@sussexpast.co.uk or by phone on 01273-405733 (be warned – no answer machine!) letting me know which aspects of the project you would like to participate with.