

3 HISTORY

3.1 Origins: 11th-16th centuries

3.1.1 Place-name

The self-explanatory place-name *Newhaven* derives from the artificial creation of a new mouth for the River Ouse (on or near its present site) c.1539, and the name was used from the mid-16th century. In the 1572 Register of Coasting Traders Newhaven was given a separate entry from the earlier village of Meeching,²³ and in a survey of the Sussex coast in 1587 the river mouth was labelled *Newehaven* and the village *Michin*.²⁴ Thereafter use of Meeching declined, though as late as 1724 the parish was referred to as *Meeching alias Newhaven*,²⁵ and Meeching survived as a minor place-name within Newhaven, as at Meeching House (now the site of the convent, but recorded by the street-name of 19th-century Meeching Road) and at Meeching Court House (or Court House Farm). It is first recorded as *Meechinges* c.1090 and *Meechinges* c.1095,²⁶ most plausibly, but by no means certainly, meaning 'dwellers at *Mece* (The Sword)'. This Old English use of words with a primary meaning of 'pointed weapon' for landforms is found elsewhere and here would have applied to the long spit deflecting the River Ouse towards Seaford.²⁷



Fig. 4. Newhaven Marina with the River Ouse beyond.

3.1.2 Church

The earliest reference to a church at Meeching is c.1095, when it was granted by William de Warenne to the Cluniac priory of St Pancras at Lewes.²⁸ In 1537, the advowson was transferred to the king at the surrender of the priory.²⁹

3.1.3 Meeching village

Although there has been little study of the documentary history of medieval Meeching, it is clear that it was a small village located near its church on the right bank of the River Ouse and, in that sense, it was similar to other settlements nearby on the estuary edge at Piddinghoe and Southease. Although not recorded before c.1090 and absent from Domesday Book (1086), the Old English place-name suggests Anglo-Saxon origins for the settlement.

In addition to the church, a mill and four acres of land at Meeching were granted by William de Warenne to the priory at Lewes (c.1090).³⁰ The manor of Meeching was held by William de Warenne (V) c.1212, and it descended with the Rape of Lewes.³¹ A ferry at Meeching is first recorded c.1253-62, and appears to have been at the same location as it was when it ceased in 1784.³² There were 37 taxpayers in the *Villat' de Meeching* in 1327, suggesting a population of perhaps around 180 in the parish.³³ The impact of the Black Death and deteriorating meadowland in the Ouse valley are probably key factors behind the low population in the late medieval period, with only eight taxpayers recorded in Meeching parish in 1524.³⁴

3.2 The 'new haven' c.1540-1845

3.2.1 Changes to the River Ouse

The evolution of the lower reaches of the River Ouse is fundamental to the development of the port of Newhaven, yet continues to be misunderstood.³⁵ While the river mouth in the Iron Age and Roman period was located approximately where it is today, subsequent longshore drift had created an extensive shingle spit so that in the medieval period the Ouse exited 4km to the east-south-east at Seaford. The continuance of this process was exacerbated by reclamation, or inning, of salt-marsh by the early 14th century, reducing tidal scour and increasing silting. As a result, in the late medieval period access to the port of Seaford by marine trade became increasingly difficult, with the port in terminal decline by the early 16th century. The impact on drainage of the

valley was equally severe, so that by this date formerly valuable meadows were now mostly under water and devalued. As a result a radical solution for both the navigability of the Ouse and, especially, the drainage of the valley was sought by the Prior of Lewes and other Commissioners of the Sewers.

The solution was an artificial cut made c.1539 through the shingle bar creating an outfall approximately on the present site. Longshore drift and renewed inking meant that gains were short-lived. A shingle bar had slightly deflected the mouth of the Ouse by 1587 and there were attempts to keep the new outfall open by clearing it throughout the 17th century and by the building of an eastern pier between 1664 and 1673. None of this prevented the mouth of the Ouse shifting 750m eastwards as it broke through the spit (possibly during a storm) near the later Tide Mills, probably after the collapse of the pier in the 1680s and certainly by 1698.

The new Tide Mills mouth was thereafter maintained until the present outfall was re-opened by the Harbour Commissioners in 1733. Piers were constructed on both sides, the eastern one extending northwards to cut off the channel to the Tide Mills. This channel was re-cut to form Mill Creek when the Tide Mills were built in 1761. In the 1770s the sinuous channel on the west side of Sleepers Hole (now Newhaven Marina) was blocked by an embankment along the right bank of the main channel in an attempt to speed the tidal outflow and prevent continuing blockages of the outfall. The piers were rebuilt on the alignment of the embankment in 1791-3 to prevent a bar forming between them.³⁶

The ferry crossing of the River Ouse was replaced in 1784 by an iron bascule bridge, or drawbridge, built under an Act of that year.³⁷

3.2.2 Newhaven harbour

Despite the subsequent difficulty in maintaining the new outfall of the Ouse cut c.1539, and the apparent preoccupation with improving drainage rather than navigability, the creation of a 'new haven' to replace choked up Seaford was permanent. With Seaford described as a 'duckpool' in 1539, it is probable that Newhaven already functioned as a harbour for sea-going vessels. There is little evidence, however, of the nature of the harbour and its trade until the 17th century. Local merchants, ship-owners and masters contributed to the cost of clearing the outfall in 1644-5 and 1647-8. The pier construction of 1664-73 was accompanied by two beacons on Castle Hill and was aimed at

improving the harbour rather than maintaining drainage of the Ouse valley. Vessels remained small during the 17th century (an average of c.20 tons), and the harbour could not provide for the deeper draught of naval or larger merchant ships.³⁸



Fig. 5. Mill Creek at Newhaven, looking eastwards towards Seaford.

The obtaining of a harbour Act and the appointment of Harbour Commissioners in 1731 led to the reinstatement of the c.1539 outfall and improvements to the harbour that allowed ships of up to 150 tons. Trade increased, but a lack of records for Newhaven harbour at this time means that the picture of the 18th century is sketchy. In 1701, Newhaven Port accounted for 11% of the Sussex coastal traffic, 12% in 1789-90, and 18% in 1841. Total tonnages entering and clearing Newhaven Port rose from 1,734 tons in 1701, to 11,854 tons in 1789-90, and to 48,890 tons in 1841: a 28-fold increase over the period. The significance of the harbour is accentuated by the fact that nearly all the traffic of Newhaven Port (with limits at Beachy Head and Rottingdean) came through Newhaven itself, whereas other ports had multiple landing places (e.g. Shoreham Port included Brighton). Corn was a major outward cargo at Newhaven, especially after the construction of the Tide Mill in 1761, with flour was shipped to domestic and foreign markets. Wealden iron products, including ordnance, were shipped from Newhaven, with the Ouse linking the port to the

central Weald and the concentration of gun-founders. Coal was a major import with 834 tons in 1714-18, rising to 6,592 in 1788 and 27,280 in 1829. Most of the 36,000 tons of coal imported in 1836 was barged up-river to Lewes. Lesser imports included foodstuffs (dairy produce from England; cheese from Holland; eggs and fruit from France; salt from the north-east, then, from the early 19th century, Cheshire) and building materials (stone from Devon and Cornwall, and Welsh slate).³⁹

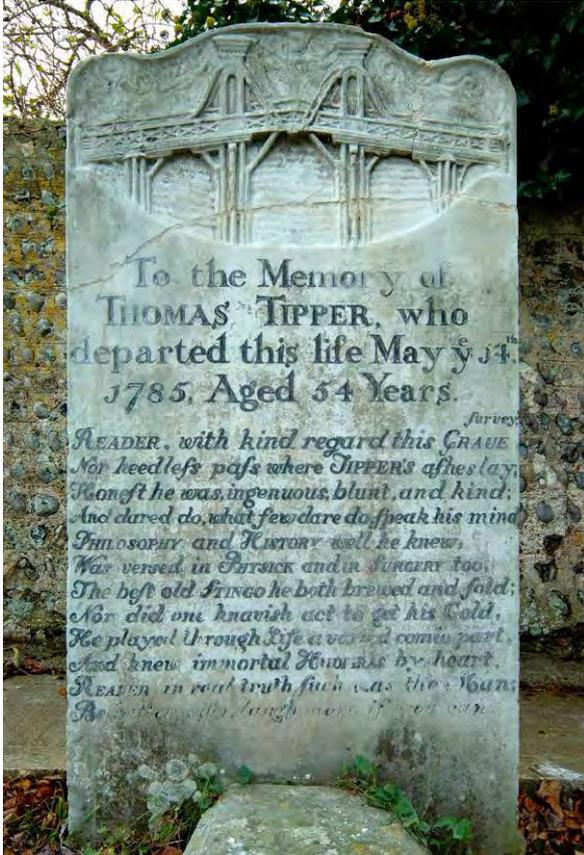


Fig. 6. Grave of local brewer Thomas Tipper in the churchyard of St. Michael's, decorated with a view of Newhaven bridge (built 1784).

Passenger services to France revived in 1763, using the Brighton-Dieppe route, with some boats based at Newhaven.⁴⁰ In 1825 the General Steam Navigation Company started a paddle steamboat service from Newhaven to Dieppe, via Brighton Chain Pier, but this lapsed immediately.⁴¹

Works to the harbour continued in the early 19th century as choking of the outfall remained a problem. The extension of the east pier to match the west pier (1835), the building of a massive 180m stone groyne just west of the west pier (1843), and the removal of chalk rock within the harbour over this period were undertaken by the harbourmaster and were more successful than previous works.⁴²

3.2.3 Defence

A French attack on Seaford in 1545 was symptomatic of coastal vulnerability that stimulated the apparent provision of a gun at Newhaven in 1540 and 1548.⁴³ A Survey of the Sussex coast in 1587, in obvious response to the greater Spanish threat, identified seven towns with artillery, and proposed 11 more earthwork batteries, including that at Newhaven. The proposed site of the Newhaven battery (to have one demi-culverin and two sacres) was on top of the cliff.⁴⁴ Further guns were added in 1596, and war with France resulted in re-armament in 1702.⁴⁵

Seven new brick batteries were proposed in Sussex in 1759, in response to the Seven Years' War (1756-63), including one at Newhaven.⁴⁶ The guns were installed in the completed battery in 1761, and in 1779 these comprised five 18-pounders, with the battery in good repair. The battery was again utilized during the greater threat of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1793-1815). Eight guns were recorded in 1798, the guns were 24-pounders in 1801, and in 1806 the defences comprised an open battery with four 24-pounders.⁴⁷ Volunteer infantrymen were posted to Newhaven.⁴⁸

3.2.4 Village and town

The creation of the harbour and the swift replacement of the place-name *Meeching* by *Newhaven* might suggest rapid development of a significant town, but this was not the case. Newhaven was little more than a village until the 19th century and, as a result, documentary evidence for the settlement (as opposed to the port) is minimal and hard to distinguish from the parish.

An indication of the small scale of 17th-century Newhaven is seen in the fact that its provision of guest beds and stabling in 1686 was substantially less than that of the other Sussex harbour towns, being almost identical to that of decayed Seaford.⁴⁹ That Newhaven was able to remain small in the face of its rising trade simply reflects the fact that between the 16th and 18th centuries the harbour was primarily the outpost of the diverse and successful market centre of Lewes, c.12km upstream.⁵⁰ However, it would be unfair to claim that the harbour had no effect on the village since the population in Newhaven rose from around 130 in 1676 to around 220 in 1724, contrary to usual population standstill at the period, and the growth from around 40 in 1524 was still more marked.⁵¹

Population increases continued throughout the rest of the 18th century, but as late as 1801 the total remained low (584),⁵² and there is little to indicate urban status before that. Thereafter, Newhaven expanded more rapidly, with the population doubling between 1800 and 1845 as village became increasingly like a town.

As a result of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, Newhaven was created as one of the new Unions (1835), covering an extensive area of downland and coastal parishes, and a purpose-built workhouse erected within the town that year.⁵³

3.2.5 Church and religion

The parish church continued in use throughout this period, seeing the rebuilding of the nave and the addition of aisles from the end of the 18th century, doubtless to accommodate the expanding population.

In the national religious census of 1696, five adult nonconformists (and 95 conformists) were recorded.⁵⁴ Bishop Bowers' diocesan survey of 1724 records that there were 49 families, and no 'dissenters or papists', but this may overstate conformity.⁵⁵ A chapel of Independents was founded in 1797, and was vigorous in 1851.⁵⁶ They became styled as Congregationalists in the 19th century, with the surviving chapel on what is now the corner of South Way and Meeching Road, dated 1841.⁵⁷



Fig. 7. Former Congregationalist chapel, South Way (1841).

3.3 Expansion c.1845-2004

3.3.1 Expansion of the port



Fig. 8. Cross-channel passenger ferries at Newhaven harbour.

The opening of the London Brighton & South Coast Railway (LBSCR) line from Lewes in 1847 connected Newhaven to London and had an immediate and long-lasting impact on the port. An Act was passed in 1847 for improving the harbour, and an extensive wharf for the new railway was built on east side of the River Ouse on reclaimed marsh land. In 1850, the eastern pier was rebuilt, widening the harbour entrance from c.30m to 46m. Permission was granted to straighten the river above the town in 1863, to give greater scouring power to keep the outfall clear, and the work was carried out the following year.⁵⁸ A swing bridge opened in 1866, replacing the drawbridge that now led only to the island created by the new cut.⁵⁹

The later 19th-century saw further expansion of the port. In 1878, the LBSCR gained control of the harbour, and works followed that allowed use, and timetables, independent of tides.⁶⁰ The existing harbour entrance was created in 1879-83 with the replacement of the east pier, the absorbing of the west pier into land built behind a new promenade wall, and the construction of the massive c.770m western breakwater.⁶¹ By 1879 the railway wharf was developed on the site of the pre-1864 river channel, immediately south-east of the swing bridge, and to the south of Mill Creek salt marsh was reclaimed for the building of the new east wharf and Newhaven

Harbour station. A planned dock to the east of this (i.e. between Mill Creek and the beach) was never built.⁶² In 1910, the estimated aggregate tonnage of shipping movements at Newhaven was 858,000, with Shoreham next at 104,000, and Littlehampton a poor third at 22,000.⁶³

A passenger service was re-started in spring 1847. The LBSCR line from Lewes opened in December that year, but the railway from Paris to Dieppe only opened in July 1848.⁶⁴ Early passengers arriving at Newhaven harbour included Louis Philippe, king of France, escaping revolution in February 1848.⁶⁵ In 1863 the LBSCR and the Chemin de Fer de l'Ouest agreed to run the Newhaven-Dieppe passenger service jointly, with no third party running the steamboats, and with co-ordinated London-Paris railway timetables. This ensured that Newhaven-Dieppe became a key route to Paris.⁶⁶ The London and Paris Hotel was opened in 1848 to accommodate passengers subject to a tidal service (demolished 1956).⁶⁷

3.3.2 Newhaven Fort



Fig. 9. Newhaven Fort, now restored as a museum.

In 1854 the 18th-century cliff-top battery was armed with eight 24-pounders, and the master gunner's house was occupied by the coastguard. The French threat to channel ports made additional defences necessary, so a new gun battery (the Town, Lunette or Lower Battery) was built in 1855-6 on the shore near the west pier at Newhaven harbour, although different guns to

the proposed six 68-pounders may have been installed.⁶⁸ In 1856 the 18th-century cliff-top battery was remodelled and equipped with four 68-pounders.⁶⁹ The decision to add a much more substantial fort to these batteries followed the report of the Royal Commission on the Defences of the United Kingdom headed by Lord Palmerston (1860). Building of the fort at Newhaven was largely under the direction of Lieutenant J. C. Ardagh, designs beginning in 1862, works proper starting late 1863 or early 1864 and completing by 1870-1. The new fort was equipped with 18 guns and had a barracks suitable for five officers and 240 ordinary rankings. A military hospital was built to the north of the fort by 1882, and probably in the 1860s.⁷⁰

The fort was extensively updated in 1900-2, with rebuilding of the south and east batteries to take up-to-date breech-loading 6" guns and (from 1907) provision of telephone to aid range-finding. Further works took place in 1913, including provision of land defences in the form of trenches and barbed wire. During the First World War the fort offered considerable protection to Newhaven harbour, which became the main military supply port for the British Expeditionary Force in France. This involved the arrival of 19,750 goods trains and 9,061 shipments across the channel. Newhaven Seaplane Station (1917-20) was also located near the fort, at Tidemills. A drill hall/gymnasium was built next to the hospital north of the fort by 1928. Although largely outdated by the outbreak of the Second World War, Newhaven became a significant part of the coastal defences, especially in the aftermath of Dunkirk, and was given new guns, a radar station, observation points in the cliff face, and heavy concrete gun emplacements. Officers' accommodation in the form of huts was provided immediately north of the fort, next to the hospital and gymnasium. The works of 1941-3 included construction of three so-called Emergency Batteries, on the cliff-top west of the fort and outside the EUS study area. Military use ceased in 1956 with the end of coastal defence.⁷¹

3.3.3 The town and its institutions

The population rose from 1,358 in 1851 to 2,549 in 1871 then, at its most rapid, to 4,009 by 1881. In the latter year Newhaven Local Board was created and part of Denton assimilated, and in 1894 Newhaven began to be administered by an Urban District Council.⁷² Without a doubt, Newhaven was recognizably a town.

Expansion between 1850 and 1875 was concentrated on speculative development on the

south side of the town, on Chapel Street, Meeching Road and South Road, with sporadic terraces also built east to the river next to the stations and wharves (Railway Road) and south of the town on Fort Road. These areas were consolidated by 1900, and new speculative building expanded the town on the north and west, in the areas of the Lewes road and the (present) Brighton road. Further infill at these locations marked the period to 1939. Post-war expansion has seen development of large council and private housing estates west of the River Ouse, advancing up the slope of the downland. To the north-east of the bridge, development of the floodplain for industry and out-of-town retail has effectively linked Newhaven to neighbouring Denton, itself a small village until the post-war period.

During the 19th and 20th centuries Newhaven has seen the development of a range of social and public functions that did not exist previously. The detail of these is beyond the scope of this brief account, but the salient institutions are included.

The town's educational function was developed with the creation of a National School (1843: on the site now occupied by the multi-storey car park in South Way), this becoming the infants' school when a new school was built immediately to the east in 1868. A new school was built in 1884 on the site of the 1843 school (with the infants moving to the 1868 school) as Newhaven's new school board sought to deliver universal provision of elementary education (as required by the 1870 Education Act) to a rapidly expanding population. In 1971 the former National schools were demolished, and state primary education is now provided by Grays County Infant School, Brooks Close; and Southdown County Junior School, Church Hill; and Meeching Valley Primary School, Valley Road. Secondary education is provided by Newhaven Tideway School, and there is a further education centre, in Hillcrest Road.

A police station was built (on what is now the north side of South Way) by 1900, moving to the present building on the south side of the road (and on the site of Christ Church) at the time of the construction of the southern ring road (1971-4).

Sports facilities appeared during this period: the cricket ground was established outside the town, on Fort Road, by 1899, gaining a pavilion and football ground by 1939, and a bowling green and tennis courts since.⁷³ An indoor swimming pool and gymnasium in South Way formed part of the redevelopment following the creation of the southern ring road in 1971-4.

3.3.4 Church and religion

St Michael's church has remained intact as an institution throughout this period, though the rectory has been sold off since 1945, with a replacement built within part of the garden. The dramatic rise in population of 1871-81 provides a context for the construction of a second Anglican church in 1881 (Christ Church, South Street).

A Roman Catholic church was built in Fort Road (1898).⁷⁴ The convent of The Sacred Heart on the site of Meeching House, Church Hill, is poorly documented, but appears to have functioned from c.1878-1943.⁷⁵ Nonconformism strengthened in the later 19th and early 20th centuries, with a Baptist chapel (Chapel Street, 1875),⁷⁶ a Primitive Methodist chapel (South Road, 1885), a Mission to Seamen (harbour, c.1890), a Wesleyan Methodist chapel (Chapel Street, 1893), a Baptist chapel (Church Hill, 1901), and a Calvinistic Baptist chapel (Norman Road, 1904).⁷⁷



Fig. 10. Chapel of the former convent of The Sacred Heart, Church Hill.