

# Seaford

## Historic Character Assessment Report

March 2005



Sussex Extensive Urban Survey (EUS)

*Roland B Harris*



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in association with Lewes District Council



The Sussex Extensive Urban Survey (Sussex EUS) is a study of 41 towns undertaken between 2004 and 2007 by an independent consultant (Dr Roland B Harris, BA DPhil MIFA) for East Sussex County Council (ESCC), West Sussex County Council (WSCC), and Brighton and Hove City Council; and was funded by English Heritage.

Guidance and web-sites derived from the historic town studies will be, or have been, developed by the local authorities.

All photographs and illustrations are by the author.

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*Cover photo: 1-4 Marine Terrace, Steyne Road, Seaford.*

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background to the project

This report is an archaeological, historical, and historic urban character assessment of Seaford. It is part of the Sussex Extensive Urban Survey (henceforth Sussex EUS) that examines 41 towns across the ancient county.<sup>1</sup>

The Sussex EUS forms part of a national programme of such surveys initiated by English Heritage in 1992. The national programme is already well underway, with roughly half the English counties having been completed or currently undergoing study.

As the surveys have progressed, the approach has developed. In line with recent surveys, the Sussex EUS includes more modern towns, the main significance of which stems from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Another recent innovation is the introduction of the characterization concept, comparable with the map-based techniques adopted by historic landscape characterization. This approach was developed in Lancashire (2000-4), and is further refined in Sussex.

The Sussex EUS has been funded by English Heritage, and supported in kind by the commissioning authorities: East Sussex County Council, West Sussex County Council, and Brighton and Hove City Council. A wide range of stakeholders (including district and borough councils, and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty) has supported the project.

In West Sussex the Sussex EUS forms part of the *Character of West Sussex Partnership Programme*,<sup>2</sup> aiming to provide guidance and advice on the protection and enhancement of all aspects of character in the county. Other historic environment projects come under this umbrella:

- Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC) of Sussex
- Intensive Urban Survey of Chichester and Fishbourne
- Local Distinctiveness Study of West Sussex.

## 1.2 Aims and objectives

### 1.2.1 Aims

The aim of the Sussex EUS is to deliver a unique and flexible tool to aid the understanding, exploration and management of the historic qualities of 41 of the most significant towns in Sussex with a view to:

- archaeological and historic environment research and management.
- informing strategic and local policy.
- underpinning urban historic land and buildings management and interpretation.
- encouraging the integration of urban historic characterization into the wider process of protecting and enhancing urban character.

### 1.2.2 Objectives

Key objectives of the project include the:

- synthesis of previous archaeological and historical work.
- creation of a Geographic Information System (GIS) that maps and allows the analysis of archaeological events, monuments and urban plan components using information obtained from a variety of sources.
- analysis of the origins and development of each town by establishing and examining its principal plan components and existing standing structures.
- identification of county-wide Historic Character Types and attribution of the types to different areas within each town.
- preparation of a Statement of Historic Urban Character for each town, to include assessment of archaeological potential and Historic Environment Value.
- identification of gaps in the understanding of the past occupation and historical development of character of each town through the development of a Research Framework.
- advice to local authorities on the development of guidance derived from the town studies.

## 1.3 Outputs

The principal outputs of the project comprise:

- Historic character assessment reports. Documents (of which this is one) that, separately for each town, summarize the setting and pre-urban activity; synthesize current archaeological and historical research; describe the development from origins to the present day; assess the surviving historic character and historic environment value; and set out a framework for future research on the historic environment of the towns.
- Geographical Information System (GIS) for the historic environment of each town. The GIS underpins the analysis and mapping of the town



reports, and is available to local authorities as a unique tool to support their decision making. The EUS-generated GIS data includes historic buildings and archaeological data, and mapping of areas for which Historic Character Type, historic land use, and Historic Urban Character Areas have been defined. The GIS data will be maintained and updated by the West Sussex County Council *Sites & Monuments Record* (SMR) and the East Sussex County Council *Historic Environment Record* (HER).

- Informing historic environment management guidance specific to each local planning authority, for the 41 EUS towns and Winchelsea, produced under the new Local Development Frameworks, and subject to formal consultation procedures.
- Background papers for the Sussex EUS project. Documents that include the project design, a summary of the methodology and an overall bibliography.

### 1.4 The structure of this report

#### 1.4.1 The Setting

This introductory section describes the topography, geology, communications, and pre-urban archaeology of the town.

#### 1.4.2 History

The history of Seaford in this report can be a brief summary only. It aims to synthesise published research, and to provide a chronological overview of the development of the town as seen from documentary sources. The focus is placed on those matters – such as origins, economy, trade and institutions – that are most closely related to the urban historic environment today.

#### 1.4.3 Archaeology

The archaeology section of this report draws on published and unpublished reports of excavations, archaeological assessments, and records of finds. This section also includes analysis of historic buildings (listed and non-listed) and the topography, the latter drawing on large-scale maps of the town from 1839 onwards. Again, this section follows a chronological structure, and focuses on aspects of the material evidence of the town's past that relate most closely to the historic environment today.

#### 1.4.4 Statement of Historic Urban Character

Whereas sections on history and archaeology (above) explore the development of Seaford over time, this part of the report considers and defines the physical evidence of the past in today's townscape. It does this by means of a character-based approach, operating at three different scales: areas of common Historic Character Type; larger and topographically familiar Historic Urban Character Areas; and the whole town. Assessment is made of the Historic Environment Value of each of the Historic Urban Character Areas, taking account of the archaeological potential.

### 1.5 Principal sources

Seaford has been the subject of only limited archaeological and historical interest. The principal sources drawn on during the writing of this report are listed below. Many other sources have been used too, and full references have been given by use of endnotes.

#### 1.5.1 History

There is no authoritative historical study of Seaford, though aspects of its trade have been examined in wider studies by **R. A. Pelham**,<sup>3</sup> and **Mark Gardiner** has considered the medieval history (and the 1563 rental) in an article on the town.<sup>4</sup> **Pamela Combes** has considered the origins of the parishes of Seaford and East Blatchington in relation to the putative extent of the minster *parochia* of Bishopstone.<sup>5</sup>

#### 1.5.2 Archaeology

Seaford has had three excavations within the historic town since the 1960s. In chronological order they comprise:

**Post Office, Church Street** – 1976<sup>6</sup>

**The Crypt, Church Street** – 1993<sup>7</sup>

**1-3 High Street** – 2001.<sup>8</sup>

Minor archaeological excavations and evaluations have been undertaken too and comprise those at **Steyne Road** (1977<sup>9</sup> and, at a separate site, 1979<sup>10</sup>) and **Broad Street** (1980).<sup>11</sup>

The **East Sussex Historic Environment Record** (HER) database has been invaluable for identifying unpublished sites, and for providing the pre-urban archaeological context.

**Mark Gardiner** has been the principal archaeologist studying the town in recent times and, within his excavation report on The Crypt



site, has produced a broader analysis of the development of the medieval town.<sup>12</sup>

### 1.5.3 Historic buildings

No systematic analysis of the historic buildings of Seaford has been undertaken, with the 1937 monograph on the church by **J. G. Taylor** remaining an isolated detailed study of a single building.<sup>13</sup> English Heritage’s statutory list of historic buildings is also of use, though many of the descriptions date from the 1950s and early 1970s and were necessarily produced without internal inspection. Very limited fieldwork only was possible during this assessment and focused on correcting dating derived from such sources, identifying hitherto ignored buildings of historic interest (e.g. outbuildings of 19<sup>th</sup>-century date), and re-evaluating the dating and function of key buildings and monuments.

### 1.5.4 Geology and topography

The contextual discussion of the solid and drift geology has principally derived from 1:50,000 British Geological Survey digital data. Ordnance Survey Historic 25” maps for Epochs 1-4 (c.1873 onwards) have proved invaluable, especially as these have been used in digital form, allowing overlaying with each other and with other data. The 1839 Tithe Map (*East Sussex Record*

*Office*) captures pre-railway Seaford at a large scale. This has been digitized and rectified to fit the National Grid to allow comparison with other maps and data. Vertical air photo coverage of 2000 provides a useful snapshot in time. All analysis and maps utilize the most recent large-scale Ordnance Survey mapping (digital MasterMap data).

## 1.6 Area covered by the report

The Sussex EUS assessment of Seaford covers the historic core of the town (including the seafront from Dane Road to the Martello tower) as defined c.1875. Although the widespread suburbs (mostly 20<sup>th</sup> century, and especially post-1945) are covered by the parallel project of the Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC) for Sussex, they have engulfed three earlier rural settlements that are, thus, included as detached parts of the EUS study area: East Blatchington, Sutton, and Chinting (subsequently known as Chington, or Chyngton, Farm).

Seaford is one of five towns in Lewes District that have assessments such as this. The others are Ditchling, Lewes, Newhaven and Peacehaven.

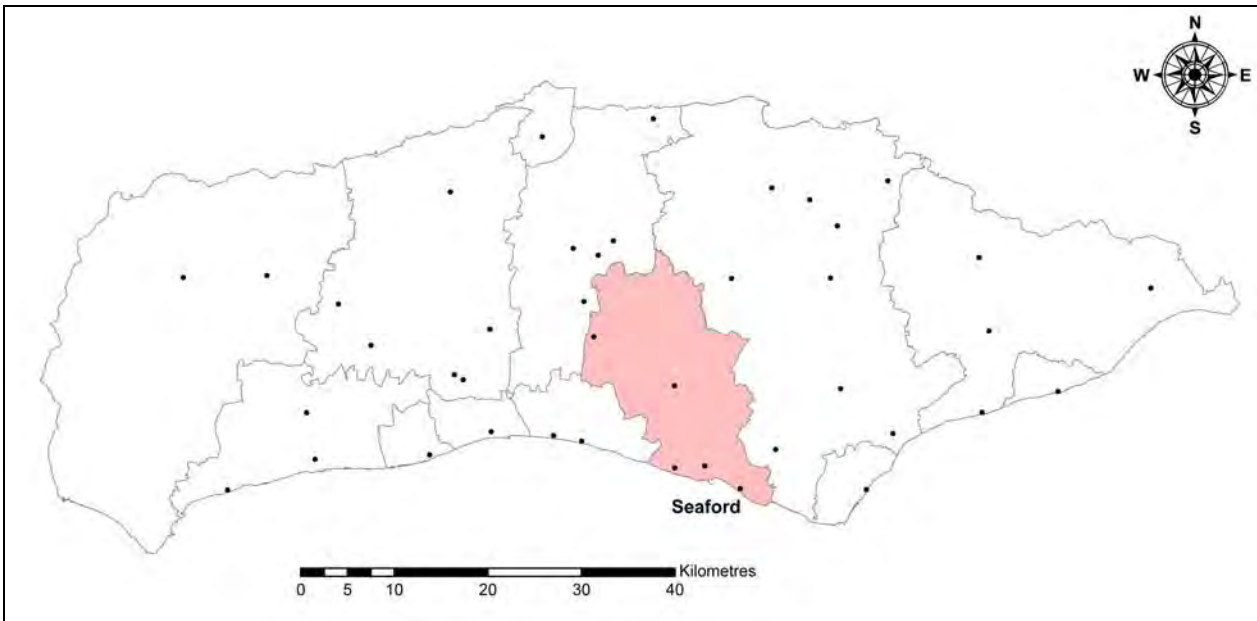


Fig. 1. Location of Seaford within Sussex. Lewes District is highlighted and points locate the 41 Sussex EUS towns.

## 2 THE SETTING



Fig. 2. The beach at Seaford looking west across Seaford Bay to the cliffs at Newhaven.

### 2.1 Topography (Map 2)

Seaford is located on the east side of lower valley of the River Ouse (which flows southwards through a gap in the South Downs), where it meets the sea. The historic town is set back from the modern seafront on a rising spur of the downs, behind what was previously marshland and, prior to that, remnants of an earlier river channel. To the east, cliffs rise immediately to Seaford Head (86.7m OSBM) and 4.5km to the north-west cliffs rise at Castle Hill, Newhaven. The area with a shingle beach between the cliffs is known as Seaford Bay

Off-shore contours measured by bathymetric survey are steeply sloped in the Seaford area and are not likely to be a product of erosion. This suggests that, despite the rapidity of recent cliff erosion, the prehistoric coast was within 1km of that today.<sup>14</sup>

Seaford lies on the old coast road (A259), although this was modified in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century so that it followed newly-built Clinton

Place and Sutton Park Road rather than Place Lane and Sutton Road to the south.

The town and the historic village of East Blatchington (now part of Seaford's suburbs) are both contained within Seaford Civil Parish, created out of the historic parishes of Seaford and East Blatchington, and parts of Bishopstone and Alfriston.

### 2.2 Geology (Map 2)

#### 2.2.1 Solid geology

Along with the whole of Sussex, the rocks in the vicinity of Seaford are sedimentary. The town lies on the South Downs, so that the entire area is underlain by the relatively pure limestones of, from youngest to oldest, the Culver, Newhaven and Seaford Chalk Formations (Upper Cretaceous). The uplifting and gentle folding of the chalk began 70-75 million years ago and continued beyond the end of the Cretaceous period (65 million years ago) until as recently as 1.8 million years ago. Most of the historic core of Seaford lies on the Culver Chalk Formation, but in the area bounded by Steyne Road, Pelham Yard, High Street and Ashurst Road, this is capped by the sandstone and mudstone (commonly clay) of the Lambeth Group, being Tertiary (Palaeocene) irregular beds laid down on the eroded chalk.

#### 2.2.2 Drift Geology

The drift geology of the Seaford area shows alluvium marking the location of the former marshy estuary of the Ouse. Geoarchaeological study has shown that a high energy storm or barrier beach formed across the estuary, probably in the Middle to Late Holocene, with the removal of beach barrier conditions and the extension of estuarine and floodplain conditions across the valley in the last 2000 years.<sup>15</sup>

That the alluvium west of the historic core of the town (i.e. around Dane Close) is truncated by the beach deposits and the sea reveals erosion of the medieval channel of the River Ouse. This channel, or indeed channels, resulted from the development of the shingle spit that progressively moved the river outfall eastwards from under Newhaven Head in Roman times to Seaford by the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The medieval and post-medieval changeable course of the Ouse and its shifting outfall are discussed in sections 4.1.3 and 4.2.3.

The clay-with-flints deposits at Seaford Head and north-east of Blatchington church are a capping of reworked Palaeogene deposits.<sup>16</sup>

## 2.3 Communications

### 2.3.1 Water

Seaford was founded as a port and until the 16<sup>th</sup> century was located by the outfall of the River Ouse, when the harbour became blocked and the river was re-routed to Newhaven (4.5km north-west). Thereafter, direct waterborne access was limited to the shingle beach, suitable only for small fishing boats. The river between Lewes and Newhaven was canalized rapidly after the formation of the Lower Ouse Navigation Company in 1791, and from Lewes to Upper Ryelands Bridge (2.5km south-east of Balcombe) in 1790-1812, by the Upper Ouse Navigation Company.<sup>17</sup>

### 2.3.2 Road

Seaford lies on the A259 (the main Eastbourne-Brighton road). This avoids the historic core of the town and the other historic settlements engulfed by Seaford's 20<sup>th</sup>-century expansion. No roads in the immediate area were turnpiked. Roads reach the town from Lewes, either side of the Ouse valley: that via Southease, Piddinghoe and Newhaven is a rural lane, whilst the eastern road (historically, the main Lewes-Seaford road) is now a trunk road (A26). Former (probably drove) routes run northwards over the South Downs into the Weald. That through East Blatchington is now only a track beyond the built-up area, but that through Sutton and Alfriston is a minor road.

### 2.3.3 Railway

The London Brighton and South Coast Railway (LBSCR) opened a line from Lewes to Newhaven in 1847, and this was extended as single line to a terminus at Seaford in 1864.<sup>18</sup> The line remains in frequent use.

## 2.4 Evidence for pre-urban activity

### 2.4.1 Prehistoric

None of the excavations or evaluations in Seaford has revealed prehistoric archaeology, but prehistoric finds have been made elsewhere in or near the town, mostly at unspecified locations:

- Seaford area – Palaeolithic ovates, tranchet axes, microliths, Bronze Age knives, arrowheads, a broken Neolithic polished axe, hammer stones and numerous flakes found c.1910 [HER reference: TV 49 NE17 – ES1703].

- Chyngton Farm area – Bronze Age artefacts, including nine pieces of melted bronze, weighing 7lbs, found with Bronze Age pottery, found beside Eastbourne Road c.400m west of Chyngton Farm [HER reference: TV 59 NW9 – ES1721].

- Seaford area – Iron Age (800 BC-42 AD) Gaulish coin (Evans type A:3, uninscribed AV 1/4-stater) [HER reference: TV 49 NE9 – ES1695].

### 2.4.2 Romano-British

Although there are no major Roman roads in the vicinity of Seaford, Margary identified a Seaford-Firle Beacon-Heighton Street-Ripe route as Roman. This passes Sutton Place and goes over the golf course to Black Stone.<sup>19</sup>

One excavation has produced significant evidence of Roman activity in, or near, the EUS study area:

- Fitzgerald Avenue – Iron Age and Romano-British site discovered in 1937 with development of this part of the town, immediately east of Corsica Hall. An evaluation in 1985 preceded the construction of Sunningdale Close and appears to mark the eastern edge of the settlement, thus making the site quite distinct from the Romano-British cemetery excavated by Pitt-Rivers in 1876, now lying under the golf course to the east.<sup>20</sup>

Elsewhere in or near the EUS study area, there have been Romano-British find spots:

- East Blatchington church – two Roman urns of coarse pottery were dug up in the tower in 1860, containing charred bones and representing cremations [HER reference: TV 49 NE1 – ES1687].

- Near the old bed of the River Ouse at Seaford – Roman bronze figurine found beneath 4.6m of gravel. It was a representation of Harpocrates, the God of Silence, possibly brought to Britain by a Roman soldier as an amulet [HER reference: TV 49 NE22 – ES1708].

- Seaford area – Roman gold coins of Constantius II found while trenching at Seaford [HER reference: TV 49 NE2 – ES1688].

### 2.4.3 Early Anglo-Saxon

There have been no Early Anglo-Saxon finds in or near the EUS study area.

### **2.4.4 Implications of pre-urban archaeology**

The implications from all the pre-urban finds are clear: considerable evidence for Romano-British, and earlier, occupation in the vicinity of the EUS study area has been found and should be anticipated in any archaeological excavation in the area.