

Losing Seaford Head: a pilot study investigating how to deal with a nationally important heritage site at risk from coastal erosion

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An increased rate of coastal erosion associated with climate change is threatening numerous archaeological and heritage sites around the UK. *The Seaford Head project* will deliver a pilot rapid baseline survey to aid future management decisions and communicate the findings to the public.



Seaford Head looking west towards Seaford. Credit: Archaeology South-East/UCL

Current thinking

Managing responses to accelerated climate change, and what realistically can be achieved in terms of survey and research ahead of imminent loss, is of increasing importance for at-risk sites in the UK.

Several studies are currently focusing on this topic, including the EU funded *CHERISH* project, which is building capacity and knowledge of climate change adaptation for Irish Sea and Coastal communities, and the AHRC/UKRI funded *Landscape Futures and the Challenge of Change*, which is developing a new framework for heritage decision-making in the face of accelerated climate change.

In light of this, Archaeology South-East, University College London (ASE UCL), in partnership with the South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA), brought a project proposal to Historic England (HE) to develop a replicable methodology for the non-intrusive survey of a Scheduled Monument at risk from accelerated coastal erosion. As well as contributing to project costs,

the SDNPA is leading a programme of digital outreach to accompany the survey, including videos, podcasts and a short spoken-word performance by artist and writer Alinah Azadeh. The outreach elements aim to communicate the project's findings and begin the conversation about heritage loss linked to landscape change with local communities. The project is also fully supported by Seaford Town Council, who have enabled survey and film activity and provide on the ground advice and support. HE commissioned the project as a pilot study to assess the practicalities of undertaking such a rapid survey and on the basis that it addressed several key aims of the Historic England Corporate Plan and Research Strategy.

Why Seaford?

The prominent (and rapidly eroding) coastal headland at Seaford Head preserves a range of multi-period heritage assets both within and around a designated

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Aerial view of Seaford Head, East Sussex, showing the earthworks of the hillfort. Credit: Historic England Archive

Scheduled Monument (List Entry Number 1014523). The Scheduled Monument includes the surviving part of a large univallate hillfort dating to the Iron Age, a Second World War reinforced concrete structure and a Bronze Age bowl barrow. Other undesignated heritage assets, such as field banks, can be observed in aerial photography. Since the characterisation of the site by Lane Fox in the 1860s (Lane Fox 1877) little has changed in its interpretation and no systematic survey has been undertaken, either at the site or in the landscape immediately surrounding the Scheduled Area, making it a perfect candidate for assessment.

Seaford Head is a site where the more dramatic effects of coastal erosion are strikingly obvious. In recent years, the headland has suffered from numerous, significant cliff falls, including in March 2021, three in the space of a month in 2018 and two in June 2017. With each fall material is lost and the accessible extent

of the site reduced. This process is being repeated at countless sites around the country and poses a significant challenge for their future management.

Seaford town, to the immediate west of the monument, has its own history of flooding and threat from coastal erosion. Existing responses to such threats can be seen in the River Ouse to Seaford Head Coastal defence strategy and the 'Waking up Tomorrow' information boards, produced to communicate the issues at Seaford to local communities as part of the EU-funded *Coastal Communities 2150* project.

What the project will deliver

The project will be broken down into several stages and reported on in a single document to be released in HE's Research Report Series (RRS), including

- an initial desk-based assessment detailing documentary, historic and contemporary mapping, aerial and LIDAR data, along with previous work at the site and available and relevant coastal erosion studies
- a UAV survey of the cliff edge and Scheduled area to generate orthographic photos and a digital elevation model, which will be enhanced by further on-foot digital survey
- a gradiometer survey of the Scheduled area, enhanced with further earth resistance survey over any significant anomalies
- podcasts discussing the project methodologies and results with ASE archaeologists, and the wider implications with policy and practitioner leads, landowners and relevant agencies
- two short videos outlining the work undertaken and the findings made. A further short video combining film, still images and a spoken word performance by the artist Alinah Azadeh commissioned for this project will explore what heritage and landscape loss might mean to individuals and communities in the near future
- a report bringing together the background, methodology and results of the above, to also include an updated project design for evaluation fieldwork, scalable cost model to reproduce the project, and an evaluation of the impact of the digital outputs

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Vas Tsamis undertaking topographical survey. Credit: Chip Creative

The project will also provide a means to evaluate the ClfA Dig Digital toolkit, given the size of the digital archive the project will generate. These works are viewed as the first stage towards a better understanding of the monument and its value to local people. Longer-term fieldwork and monitoring will be needed, which will involve the community and require sources of funding other than Historic England.

Project delivery

Thanks to fair weather and a speedy mobilisation to site, the project fieldwork is now complete and the data is currently being processed and producing exciting results. The project report and digital outputs will be delivered by spring 2022 and updates and links to all reports, outputs and resources will be posted at <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology-south-east/seaford-head>, and via the hashtag #SeafordHeadProject on social media. The results of the project and lessons learnt will be presented to a wider audience via the HE-sponsored 'climate change and cultural heritage' webinar series.



Ed Blinkhorn setting up resistivity survey. Credit: Chip Creative

References

CHERISH (*Climate Heritage & Environments of Reefs, Islands and Headlands*) project website
<https://rcahmw.gov.uk/services/research-and-recording/cherish-climate-change-and-coastal-heritage-eu-funded-project/>

ClfA Dig Digital toolkit
<https://www.archaeologists.net/digdigital>

Coastal Communities 2150
http://w.seaford-sussex.co.uk/Notices/2014/Coastal%20Communities%202150/3805_Display%20Panels_final_June2014_LR.pdf

Landscape Futures and the Challenge of Change
 Towards Integrated Cultural/Natural Heritage Decision Making project website
<https://www.exeter.ac.uk/research/esi/research/projects/landscape-futures/>

Lane Fox, A, 1877 Excavations in the Camp and Tumulus at Seaford, Sussex, *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 6, 287–299

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ouse-to-seaford-head-coastal-defence-scheme/ouse-to-seaford-head-coastal-defence-strategy>

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Jon has managed numerous commercial and granted funded Archaeological and Geoarchaeological projects on behalf of Archaeology South-East, UCL over the last 15 years. He has research interests in the early British Neolithic, public engagement with archaeology and the combination of natural and cultural heritage themes. Jon co-managed the HLF funded Whitehawk Camp Community Archaeology project, which was highly commended in the 2015 CBA Marsh Archaeology Awards.

