

The Coastguard Station (MBW 34) at Medmerry, near Selsey, West Sussex

Peter Murphy with contributions from
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Introduction

The foundations of this brick building were first observed by members of the Chichester and District Archaeology Society (CDAS), following recession of the shingle ridge, on 21st January 2020. The site was designated MBW 34 (Medmerry Breach West 34), following the site series established for the western side of the Medmerry breach. Some preliminary measurements and photography were undertaken during this initial visit. As soon as possible thereafter, Hugh Fiske obtained a series of photographs from which to develop a 3D photographic model and ortho-rectified scalable image (Fig 2). This is a technique that has become increasingly popular for recording heritage and archaeological objects, ground features, structures, and even landscapes when combined with the use of a drone (c.f. Historic England 2017). The model may be accessed using this link: skfb.ly/6SZNE.

Further fieldwork was difficult during the subsequent Covid-19 restrictions, but continued and repeated observation by Peter King showed that marine erosion had reduced the southern part of the building to a heap of rubble by 7th February 2021. By early January 2022, shingle recession had exposed the north wing, which was actively eroding on 1st March 2022.

Alongside fieldwork, Mike Kallaway undertook a map regression and James Kenny reviewed relevant historic mapping and census returns. The site is now almost completely destroyed (Fig 7).

Location of site

The Coastguard station is located approximately 3km NW of Selsey town centre (Fig 1).



Fig 1. Location of Coastguard Station on modern OS Map accessed 12th January 2024. Note that the coastline is constantly changing and the map may not reflect the very latest situation.

Fieldwork

Following initial inspection, measurements and photography, a series of photographs was taken by Hugh Fiske on 25th January 2020 to develop a 3-D model, from which an ortho-rectified plan of what was exposed then has been developed (Fig 2).



Fig 2 Ortho-rectified plan of the southern wing of the building, and part of the central range (still largely under beach shingle), based on survey on 25th January 2020. North at top, approximately. Metre scale to bottom right. Image by Hugh Fiske.

The plan enlarged by Mike Kallaway from the OS 25 inch map of 1875 (Fig 3) indicates the building's overall form. Only the southern half of the structure was recorded in detail, but the 19th century map shows that the structure was essentially symmetrical. The parts of the building recorded in detail comprised the southern wing and part of the central linking range. Locations were SZ 83144 94518 (SE corner of south wing) and SZ 83132 94518 (SW corner).

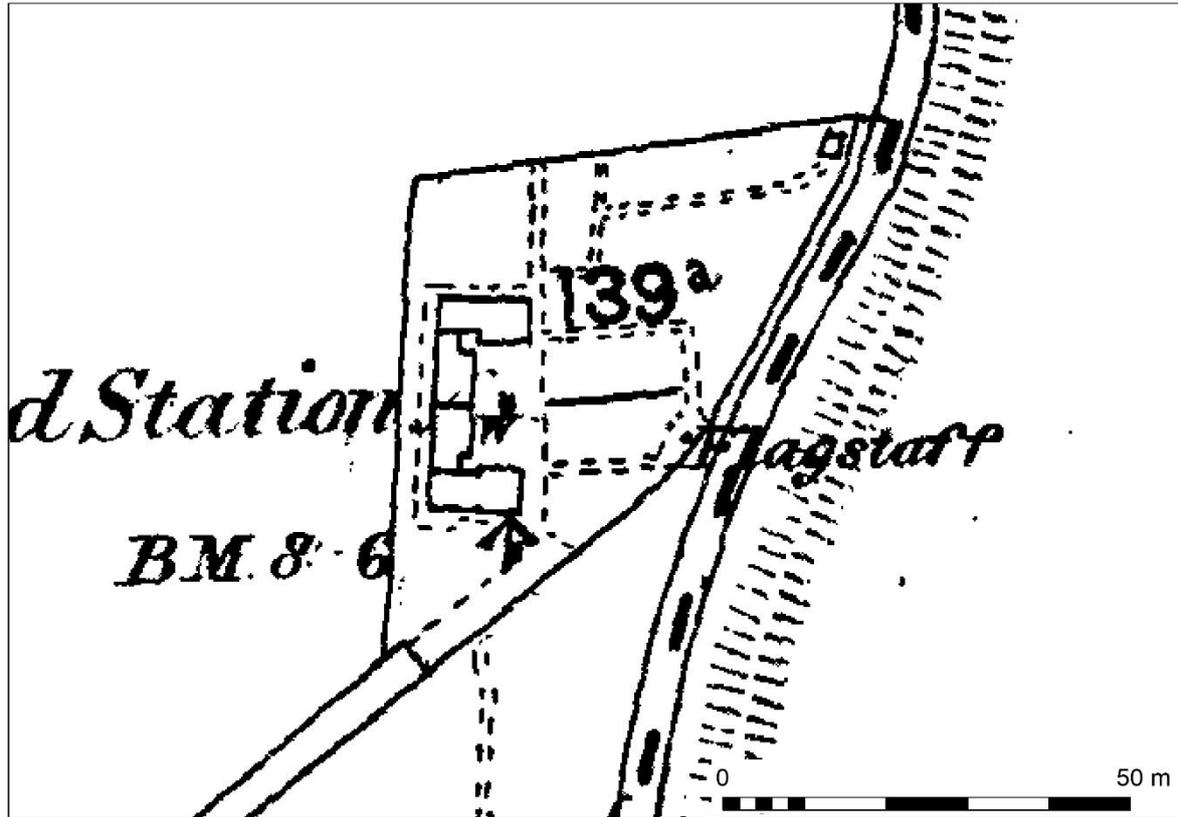


Fig 3 Enlarged portion of OS 25 inch 1875 map showing the Coastguard Station and drainage channel running alongside to the East.

The foundations comprised up to five courses of unfrosted red brick with lime mortar on a flint rubble and lime mortar base (Figs 4-5). They had been built on a firm base of Tertiary sediments, on which a very dark grey-brown surface including charcoal, clinker and soot (a disturbed palaeosol) had developed. The outer walls were approximately three bricks thick, two bricks thick for internal walls, though bricklaying was irregular at this low level. Overall dimensions of the south wing were 10.54 x 5.35m. The eastern part of this wing was subdivided into four small rooms, with an outer flanking corridor to the north, and with four further rooms to the west. There was a central setting of two small brick features resembling fire-places supporting a chimney, though these showed no sign of burning at this low level. The central range of the building to the north was exposed over a distance of 9.7m, with a porch and threshold facing to the east. On the south side a pathway, 1m wide and parallel with the wall, was delineated by vertically placed slates (Figs 2 & 5). A French drain, cobbled surface and brick threshold were also recorded (Fig. 6).



Fig 4 Foundations of the southern wing of the building as seen on 21st January 2020, looking NW. Photo by Peter Murphy



Fig 5 Wider view of the building, showing vertically-placed slates alongside to south, defining path, and palaeosol. 21st January 2020. Photo by Peter Murphy.



Fig 6 French drain. 21st January 2020. Photo by Peter Murphy

On 9th January 2022 Peter King first photographed the northern wing (Fig 8). By 1st March 2022 this was actively eroding, but enough survived to show that it was symmetrical with the southern wing, comprising a mirror-image set of four rooms grouped around a four-way fireplace and a corridor to the south. Detailed planning was impractical but a series of photographs showing the progressive exposure and destruction of the northern wing of the building is given in Figs 8-9. Leading from the NE corner of the northern wing a gravelled path, heading NE, delineated by sandstone boulders, had been differentially eroded. The gravel had been largely removed by marine erosion, so it had a ditch-like appearance.



Fig 7 The southern part of the building, destroyed by marine erosion, 7th February 2021.
Photo by Peter King.



Fig 8 The northern wing of the building, exposed in a semi-ruinous state, 9th January 2022.
Photo by Peter King.



Fig 9 The north wing actively eroding, 1st March 2022. Photo by Peter Murphy.

A few scattered loose bricks were seen in the vicinity of the foundations, but nowhere near enough to comprise fallen walls. It is therefore plain that the building had been demolished and the reclaimed bricks removed. Finds from the vicinity comprised the base of a port or wine bottle, some blue-on-white transfer-printed china plates or bowls, and a sherd of a pipkin. Apart from the latter, which could be post-Medieval, these are all thought to be of 19th century date.

In a subsequent visit in March 2023 Mike Kallaway observed remnants of a channel running roughly N-S and slightly to the E of the Coastguard Station (see Fig 10). GPS readings taken along the edges of the channel confirmed that it was the one shown on the map in Fig 3.



Fig 10 View of remains of channel looking North, remnants of Coastguard station are visible just below the skyline. Photo Mike Kallaway

A summary of the cartographic and historic records

There are few historical sources which mention the Coastguard station. The picture presented here is largely built up from maps and census records.

The Preventive Waterguard was formed in 1809 to counteract smuggling. In 1822 it was amalgamated with the Admiralty and Excise revenue cruisers and the riding officers, or land guard, to form the Coastguard (National Archive Records of the Coastguard). A Board of Customs Preventive Station is shown on the Selsey Tithe Award map of 1839, on the coast between Thorney and Medmerry (Fig. 11; no. 433), with another shown at the end of West Street, Selsey, at Danner Green. By then they were manned by coastguards who lived with their families: the 1841 census records six coastguards, five wives and 19 children at the West Street Station, whilst at 'Thorney alias Old Thorney Station' there were six coastguards, three wives and seven children.

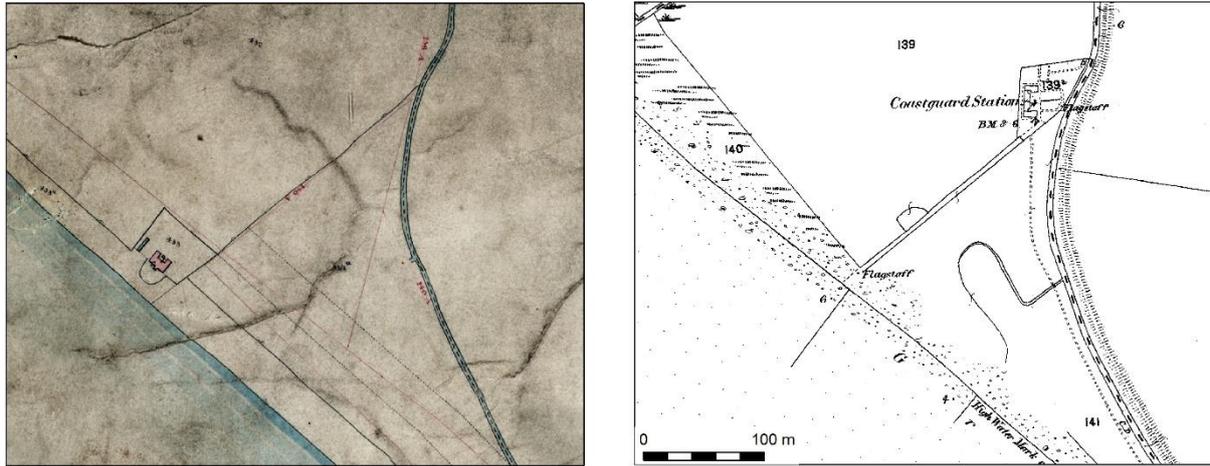


Fig 11. The Preventive Station shown on the Selsey Tithe Award map of 1839 and the new Coastguard Station on the OS 25" map of 1875

The Ordnance Survey first edition 25-inch map of 1875 (Fig. 11) shows the coastline having receded by about 43m since 1839 and the site of the old Preventive Station marked by a solitary flagstaff. A new Coastguard Station, shown about 200m inland, is clearly the same as the building recorded in 2020-22, but to confuse matters the West Street station is now shown as Thorney Coastguard Station. In the 1861 census the Description of Enumeration District for Selsey refers to 'New and Old Thorney Stations', and it seems likely that these are the new one and the old one at West Street. The 1871 census refers to the Coast Guard Station and the Old Coast Guard Station, but the 1881 census refers to a single Thorney Coast Guard Station, the 'new' station (the one we have recorded) having presumably gone by then. It is not shown on the OS second edition 25-inch map of 1898, by which time the one at West Street had also been lost to coastal erosion (at least 39m between 1875 and 1898) and replaced further inland by a Watch House and a row of cottages, still called Thorney Coastguard Station.

It seems likely, therefore, that the Preventive Station (Fig 11 :433) was built between 1809 and 1822, converted into a coastguard station and lost to coastal erosion by 1861. The new coastguard station (the one we have recorded) was built between 1839 and 1861, was disused by 1881 and was presumably demolished at about the same time.

Coastal change

It is clear from the above that Coastal change was the driving force behind the evolution of Coastguard stations along this stretch of coastline.

The Coastguard station was around 260m – 280m from the coastline in 1875. Currently it is submerged at high tide.

Coastal change at the site (taken from OS 25” maps)

1839-1875	43m
1875-1898	11m
1898-1912	12m
1912-1932	no change, groynes having been constructed before 1912
1932-1966	23m
Total up until 1966	89m

This indicates an erosion rate of c.0.9m a year until the establishment of groynes, then, following a 20-year stabilisation period, a rate of c.0.7m per year.

Since the breach was made the coastline has retreated a further 170m in this area.

Discussion of results

From an archaeological point of view, recording a demolished building but then being able to link the results to documentary evidence is informative. Other than what we can glean from the foundations we have little evidence on the construction of the building and its appearance. There does not seem to be a standard design for Coastguard stations. Looking at the historic maps the four stations mentioned in this report are all different in their plan. It is possible that there is a photograph or drawing of the station somewhere but it remains to be found.

From the time when the Coastguard station was first discovered in January 2020 until it was almost completely destroyed by March 2023 is a period of just over two years. This reinforces the need to make regular visits to the site to see and record the archaeology that is exposed as the shoreline retreats. CDAS should continue to undertake this work.

References

Goodburn, D.M 1987. Medmerry: a reassessment of a Migration Period site on the south coast of England, and some of its finds. *The International Journal of Nautical Archaeology and Underwater Exploration*, **16:3**, 213-224.

Historic England 2017. Photogrammetric Applications for Cultural Heritage. Guidance for Good Practice. Swindon: Historic England.

Louis and Duvivier. 1950. *Report on coastal protection for Chichester District Council.* [This report is cited thus by Goodburn 1987, but the writer has been unable to obtain a copy].

National Archive Records of the Coastguard

<https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C729> (accessed 09/01/2023)