LOST TO THE SEA

The Beleaguered Bawdsey Shoreline

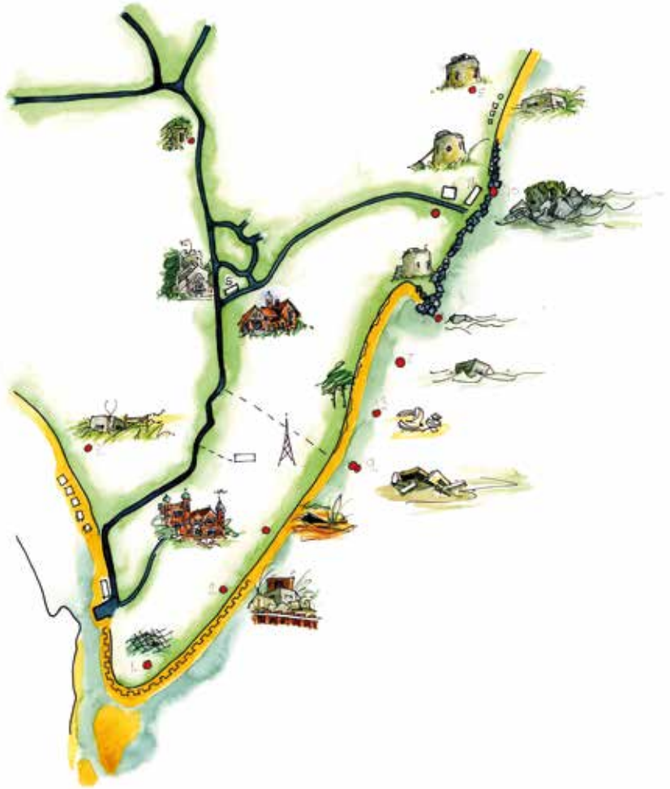
Recorded over time by Margaret Wyllie with text by Simon Read

This sketch map shows the current configuration of the Bawdsey cliff since the coastal management scheme for East Lane commenced in 2005, and the subsequent loss of land to coastal erosion since then

It also shows the current location of the wartime pillboxes relative to the Bawdsey shoreline as of 2025.

It is evident that over the time Margaret has been recording them, four have tumbled to the beach and are now well out beyond the tideline.

Striking a line through where they now lie in ruins, reveals what the alignment of the coastal margin would have been in 1940.



Introduction

This small publication was conceived as a part of 'The Co-produced Estuary: understanding the past to inform the future', a research project funded by the Environment Agency's 3C's programme and managed by Simon Read and Helene Burningham to explore a model for a more inclusive approach to knowledge gathering and sharing, very much in the spirit of the pioneering work of the community-run Deben Marine Centre at Bawdsey and the recent Deben Soundings research project.

The aim was to gain insight into the reciprocal relationship between human intervention and the morphological development of a site and how the evolution of one drives the adaptive response of the other. The intention was to explore the scope for local knowledge to enrich our understanding of the evolving landscape through lived-in and shared experience to compliment other ways of configuring knowledge as data.

In 1989 Jim Wyllie took a walk along the coastal footpath between Bawdsey and Shingle Street. In 2024 Jim and Margaret revisited it as an opportunity for Margaret to assemble a group of drawings, both new and produced over a period of more than twenty years, to chronicle the dramatic changes the coast has undergone.

These drawings focus upon the gradual demise of coastal fortifications caused by the mobilisation of the chain of 2nd World War pillboxes by coastal erosion.

Pillboxes

During both World Wars 1 and 2, pillboxes played a key strategic role in the defence of the Suffolk coast against invasion. Backed up by other measures such as the installation of anti-tank blocks, barbed wire and minefields, these small, fortified structures were put in place to present an interconnecting field of fire in the event of an amphibious assault.

Initially intended as a 'coastal crust' to protect the hinterland by holding the line for as long as possible against amphibious assault, this strategy was extended inland against the likelihood of any penetration by an invasive force, to impede and harass troop movements and also to prepare against the likelihood of airborne assault.

The heavy concentration of defence works on the Suffolk coast, particularly between Harwich Haven and Orfordness, is partly due to the shock caused by the fall of France and invasion of the Low Countries in 1940 and the sudden realisation that, if this was to become a front line, the protection of strategic assets such as the Naval Bases at Harwich and Felixstowe, and the research stations of RAF Bawdsey and Orfordness would need to be seriously upgraded.

This precipitated the decision to transform much of the South Suffolk landscape into an off-limits and militarised zone. As an indicator of the sheer amount of concrete poured into this area alone, between 1940 and 1941, 263 pillboxes were sited along with associated anti- tank blocks and

Pillbox, Bawdsey Haven Yacht Club

gun emplacements, of which, there are many survivors, including those still on Bawdsey Cliff or below it on the beach.

Given that this is just one regional example of the mobilisation of resources towards a countrywide network of defence works against potential German invasion, it is difficult to imagine the huge logistical effort it demanded to reconfigure our national landscape according to its strategic defensive capacity.

Of the surviving pillboxes on the Bawdsey coast, all except one are variants of the Type 22 hexagonal pattern, with the addition in some cases of blast walls to improve safety of access. Many of these are still visible but not necessarily accessible today and are now considered a part of our historical heritage and a salutary reminder of wartime efforts to protect the UK.

Pillbox, Above the sheet piling, Bawdsey Cliff

“And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”

Matthew 7:26-27

Double pillbox, Bawdsey Cliff

Double pillbox subsiding, Bawdsey Cliff 2014

The beleaguered Bawdsey shoreline

When the sea is cast in the role of aggressor and the Environment Agency our protector, it is little surprise that the language of coastal defence should be configured in terms borrowed straight from the military handbook for which the decision to continue to maintain a coastal defence work is to 'hold the line' and when this is no longer tenable, withdrawing to a more defensible location is 'managed retreat'. But if all else fails, 'surrender' may be the only option.

Just as for the rest of the Suffolk coast, our beleaguered Bawdsey shoreline, has always been vulnerable to threat of invasion both by the sea and from the sea. Evidence of this survives as the remnants of coastal fortification reaching back through two world wars to the Napoleonic era.

Combined with generations of sea defence structures, these have become a rich jumble of crumbling hardware, to which our own age has added rock armour, the contemporary material of choice, to lend resilience to a soft coastline and to dissipate storm driven wave energy.

Whilst this is the approved expedient for coastal defence work, it is yet another layer of incongruity upon a foreshore already encumbered by a bewildering collection of wreckage, which although rich in heritage value and archaeological interest, represents generations of effort expended upon staving off a painful future when adaptation to incremental loss and inevitable failure may become the only certainty.

Pillbox, cylindical model, Bawdsey Cliff

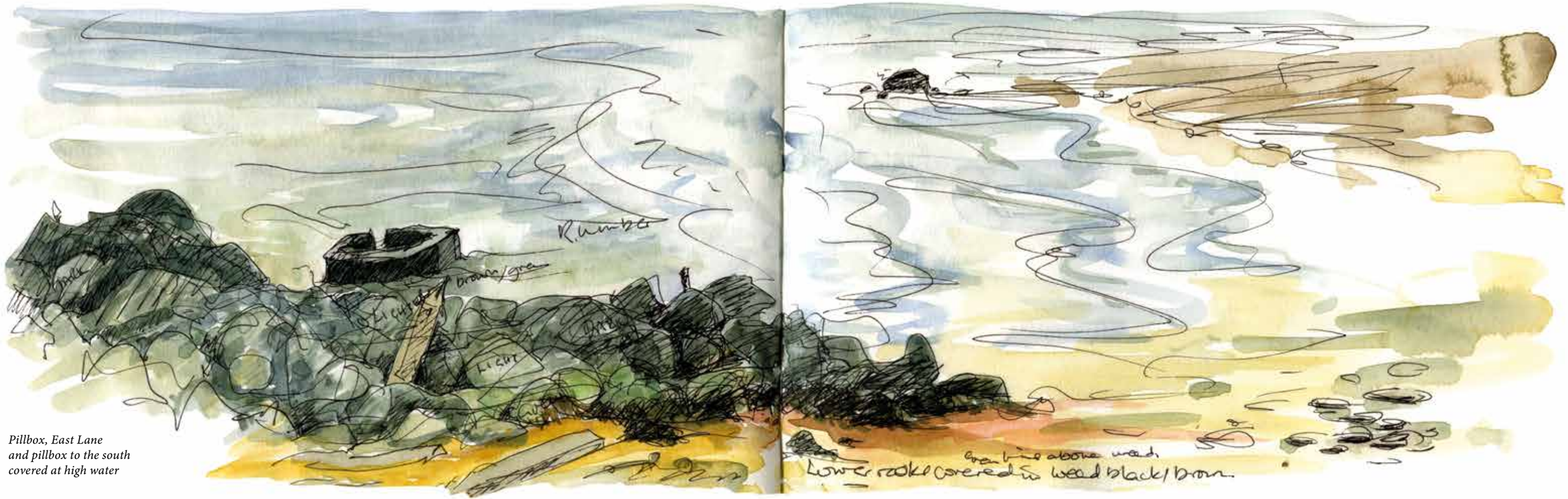
Fragmentary evidence of past human intervention exposed or dislodged by coastal erosion is a compelling subject for speculation. It is an opportunity to reflect upon assumptions of permanence or transience of precarious landscapes and their resilience against threat from wave action or military aggression.

Wartime fortifications such as the chain of pillboxes along the Bawdsey coast are symbols of defiance as permanent as the ground upon which they stand. If that ground is an eroding sandy cliff, they will in due course founder, tumble to the beach and, left behind by the retreating cliff, become a navigational hazard or subsumed by new coastal defence works.

This publication is an opportunity to consider the relationship between the military installations on the Bawdsey coast, how they have fared since the end of WW2 and how, in the eyes of artist Margaret Wyllie, whether teetering on the edge of the cliff or fallen to the beach, they are a poignant reminders of land lost not to enemy action but to the effects of erosion over the intervening years.

These exquisite watercolours of very un-exquisite structures are a far cry from the follies and romantic ruins of traditional English landscape painting, the act of painting them is a contemplative pause and an opportunity to reflect upon what they are, what they were and what they are likely to become.

As solid as they appear to be, they too are transient and on their own millennial journey to disintegration. The act of devoting time to record them as painting is a fitting way to dignify what would otherwise be no more than



Pillbox, East Lane and pillbox to the south covered at high water

military clutter but instead, acknowledge the important role they occupy in our cultural memory and sense of belonging.

The loss of land from the Bawdsey cliff is a living issue and strikes to the heart of a very modern cultural dilemma over the degree to which one should exert control over a natural system to keep it as it is and how much we should learn to live and work with it as it continues to change.

Although sustainability, adaptability and resilience have become our mantra, the inherent instinct to control is so hard-wired into our cultural behaviour that in matters of coastal governance, there is very little left of our busy national coastline that can truly be considered self-sustaining and, if left to its own devices, will not compromise the integrity of its immediate neighbours.

The lesson for coastal governance is the certainty that, once established, a policy of intervention is a long-term commitment that is difficult to row back from without causing a domino effect of coastal failure and ever more drastic intervention to contain it into the future.

My instinct is that coastal decision-making is as much a deeply cultural issue as it is an engineering challenge. The reference to Margaret Wyllie's work in this context is not so much a bid for the arts to become a player in the conversation but more to signify the potential of a paradigm for a broader disciplinary approach to the array of skills and sensibilities in the discussion than are usually brought to bear upon matters of landscape management.

Pillbox subsiding, 2014

The challenges we presently face are too complex to be addressed through singular problem-solution methodologies. They require a more integrated approach that challenges the implications of our current reliance upon increasingly specialised disciplinary silos that can hinder the sharing and application of knowledge.

This is a profoundly cultural debate that reflects the need for greater hybridity in the application of learning and understanding to foster a broader contextual grasp of knowledge and a spirit of generosity in its dissemination.

For the sake of reference, nothing could be more eloquent of coastal loss than the sight of something so bulky as a concrete pillbox tossed like a toy upside-down on the beach, when, within living memory it was standing sentinel on the cliff top but now has become a poignant marker of where once there was land.

Simon Read

Pillbox in the tideline, 2024

Margaret Wyllie

Margaret and Jim Wyllie are volunteers on the ongoing citizen-science beach-level measuring project based in the Deben Marine Centre on Bawdsey Quay in collaboration with coastal scientist Professor Helene Burningham. The study area for the project extends across the sea-facing frontage of Bawdsey to the adjacent inlet of the Deben Estuary, which also happens to include a substantial concentration of coastal fortification works.

Through regular engagement with the beach measuring project and having become witness to the slow demise of the fortifications from Martello Towers of the Napoleonic era to pillboxes and gun emplacements of two World Wars, Margaret and Jim decided to make a living record of their progressive loss to erosion.

From cliff top sentinel to victim of subsidence, bereft of the land that once supported them, many of the pillboxes are on the tideline, upside down or disintegrating before becoming lost to the sea. These watercolour paintings are a diligent record made by Margaret of the sea-change our coast is undergoing.

Through the temporal act of making, it is possible to reach beyond bare fact to a scrutiny of slow death by attrition and tidal action. Even the sketchiest of sketches, demands time and a level of attention and seeks an equivalence between the subject and the infinity of choice that turns the activity of painting into a testimony.

Emergency Coastal Defence Battery and battery observation post

Deben Marine Centre

Deben Marine Centre started as a community initiative in 2010 to monitor the alarming rate of beach loss and coastal change along their immediate coastline. Since then, a team of volunteers from Bawdsey and Alderton have been measuring beach levels on a weekly basis accumulating a formidable amount of knowledge and data.

Over recent years, with the help of Coastal Scientist Professor Helene Burningham, they have created a database that provides crucial insight into the key influences upon sedimentary movement in the area, the effect that has upon sediment transfer along the coast and crucially the influence it has upon the behaviour of the shingle knolls at the entrance to the Deben Estuary.

The communication of data gathered from this activity has, until recently taken place mainly through the web, but with the recent acquisition of the disused ferry waiting room on Bawdsey Quay it now has a base and has become a public resource. This allows the volunteers to communicate their research through a rolling programme of displays and promote new data gathering initiatives such as the use of strategically located photo posts to encourage public engagement in the creation of fixed-point photographic records of ongoing coastal change.

The Deben Marine Centre is manned by community volunteers and open seasonally to the visiting public Thursdays and Sundays 11am-4pm.
debenmarinecentre.wordpress.com

Dug-in pillbox, Shingle Street

Keeping a low profile; pillbox in the seawall, East Lane

Where a sea defence wall was of sufficient elevation above mean high-water and afforded a commanding view over the immediate marshland or shoreline one variant for locating a pillbox to embed it into the wall so that if approached from either the sea or the surrounding marshland it would not interrupt skyline and could be rendered virtually invisible and consistent with the surrounding landscape.

Given that these dug-in pillboxes face outwards from a sea defence wall, it can be assumed that the reason for their deployment would be to cover vulnerable infrastructure such as a road crossing or pumping station as at Shingle Street, or the expectation of a threat coming from one direction only.

Sheltered access to these pillboxes was from the rear side of the floodwall via an armoured door and passage.

Martello Towers

Martello Towers are conspicuous features on the Suffolk Coast and at least one, Martello W at East Lane, stands on a reinforced promontory in close proximity to both 1st and 2nd World War coastal fortifications. Martello Towers were built against the threat of assault from the sea during the Napoleonic Wars but were never used in anger.

Although they do not feature strongly in this narrative, they were pressed into use as observation points and we have included just one of them, Martello Z, since, with the addition of a pillbox on the roof, it became a strong point housing a pair of heavy Vickers Machine Guns with sufficient range to easily cover the long beach of Hollesley Bay.

DEBEN ESTUARY PARTNERSHIP

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With thanks to Margaret Wyllie for the use of her drawings and to Jim Wyllie for the use of his original idea.