

The Port of Newhaven

Newhaven was the port of the chalk cliffs of Sussex: from Beachy Head to Rottingdean the cliffs are broken only by the estuaries of the Cuckmere and the Ouse. At several points the cliff top dips towards the beach and is easily accessible from it, but these 'gaps' did not see any regular, legitimate, trade. Nor did Cuckmere haven, though it was held by some to have great potential: the Dutch were reported to have offered, presumably in the early 18th century, Lim. for the privilege of anchorage, and schemes were placed before the Commission on Harbours of Refuge in 1844; but there was no hinterland for trade on any subsequent scale. (14) Our concern is therefore primarily with Newhaven, at the mouth of the Ouse.

Until about 1539 the river Ouse flowed behind a shingle spit which began under Castle Hill, on the west side of the estuary, and ended some two miles east near Seaford Head, where the river entered the sea. Then the commissioners of sewers made a new outlet, one mile long under Castle Hill, to improve land drainage. The cut ended the history of Seaford's harbour and caused the village of Meeching to be renamed 'New Haven'. It was unprotected by piers and the shingle bar which soon formed obstructed both shipping and drainage. On several occasions it was swept into the mouth and was dug out at the expense of the commissioners and local merchants. Around 1670 a pier was built on the east side in an attempt to stabilise the mouth, with a view to making Newhaven a harbour of refuge. But it was erected under royal letters patent, the licencees ran out of money after spending an estimated £5,000, and there was no provision for its maintenance. So, having served at least the needs of local traffic, it collapsed in the 1680s and was overrun by a new spit from under Castle Hill which was half a mile long by the end of the century and nearly a mile long 30 years later. Several attempts, between 1676 and 1680, in 1689 and in 1724, were made to complete the earlier works or to build anew, but the object was again refuge rather than trade and local support was lacking. (15)

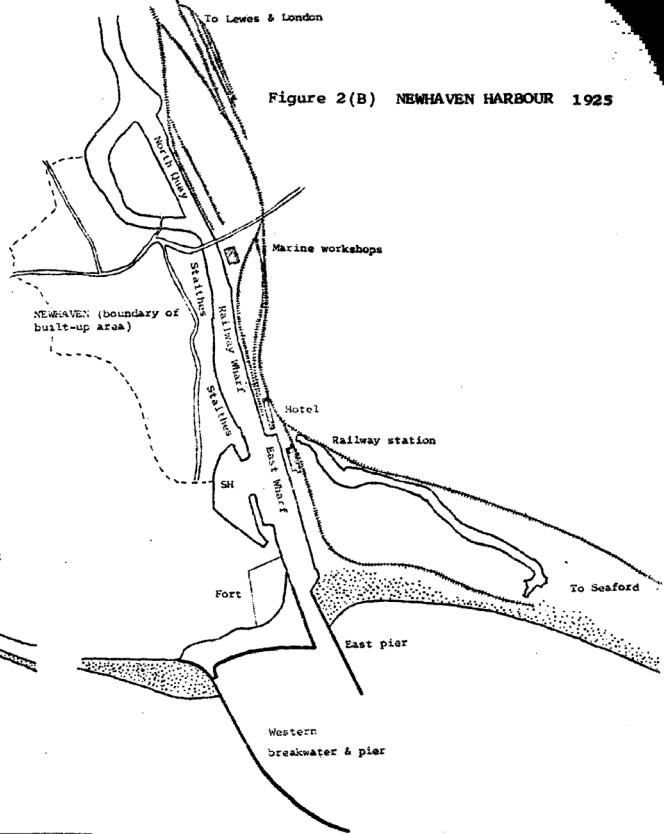
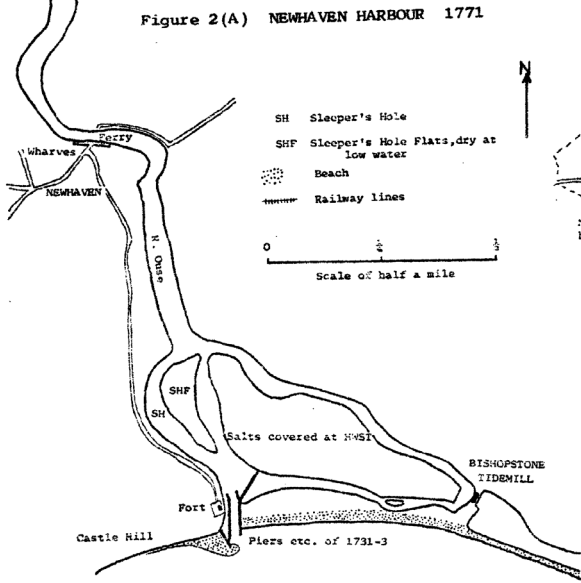
From, probably, a combination of a rising trade and a deteriorating harbour, the local traders were finally stirred to action in 1729, and a harbour commission was established by Act of Parliament in 1731. Its constitution was in the usual form for the period: a self-perpetuating, non-representative body, empowered to build harbour works financed by dues on ships and their cargoes when they used the harbour. The commissioners named in the Act included the majority of the then commissioners of sewers for Lewes and Laughton levels, and the two commissions collaborated in employing John Reynolds who in 1725 had been named as a 'carpenter of Popular, Middlesex building a bridge at Rye harbour. His scheme was for two piers under Castle Hill, to protect a new cut through the spit, and for a navigable sluice, or lock, a mile and a half up river. Fortunately for the future of both drainage and harbour, the sluice was damaged beyond repair and was taken up in 1736. The new entrance was opened in October 1733, and the piers and associated works were completed in 1735. The west pier, 200 feet long, protruded from the cliff; the east pier was twice that length and was extended northwards by a dam across the channel to the old mouth. The wharves had grown up on the north edge of the town, to the west of the landward end of the 1530s cut. (16)

The piers certainly achieved the purpose of improving access to the harbour: in the 1720s a loaded vessel over 60 tons would not venture into it, while a visitor in 1754 found it frequented by ships of 150 tons, even though it continued to be plagued by a shingle bar. (17) To lessen the bar by a more rapid flow of the tide the river channel immediately inside the piers was straightened, with an embankment across Sleepers Hole. Probably this was done in the 1770s and presumably after the debt incurred in the 1730s had been paid off. Certainly in the 1780s income considerably exceeded expenditure, for by 1787 the reserves amounted to over £3,000, the equivalent of six years' dues in that £503 was collected in 1772. These went, in 1791-3, towards rebuilding the piers on a orientation

more to the east and so less directly into the run of the waves; the total cost was around £17,000. At the same time, work was in progress to improve the navigation of the river up to Lewes and to inaugurate navigation for a substantial distance above Lewes. Though the original plans were never completely effected, barges were more readily poled or sailed up to Lewes and could reach 23 miles from the sea in 1793 and 29 miles in 1812. (18)

A long period of intermittent activity directed to making Newhaven a harbour of refuge began with the wreck of H.M. sloop Brazen under Castle Hill in January 1800. The loss of 105 lives would have been avoided, people said, if the ship had been able to enter the harbour, but the minimum high water depth was only ten feet. Public meetings, led by the Earls of Chichester and Sheffield, memorialised the Admiralty and the Treasury and sought a grant, but encountered opposition from the commissioners who feared that they would be deprived of the harbour's management. Some unity of purpose between the philanthropic gentry and the hard-headed traders was achieved in 1809, when the latter's interest was threatened by plans for large-scale improvement at Shoreham. A subscription was raised for a report by John Rennie. A note by Sheffield that Rennie was a 'very expensive man. His improvements do not pay.' found substance in the proposals: to extend the piers by 930 feet (into six feet of water at LWST) and to build a 20 acre dock, at a cost of £320,000. The promoters immediately saw that the plan was beyond the realms of practicability. (19)

Lord Sheffield's activity was not unalloyed by material interest, for he was lord of the manor, granted a lease for the building of a modern warehouse (completed in 1807), offered a building lease for a new hotel, and was patron of the first cross-Channel packet service to be based at Newhaven, in 1814. But the net accretion to the harbour's trade was probably not significant: the initiatives were not particularly successful. Renewed moves for harbour improvement at Shoreham in 1815-16 provoked a flurry of activity, but the Collector of Customs, in organising a petition for a Newhaven Act, observed: 'all that is to be done at Newhaven must be accomplished by Strangers for the people of the neighbourhood are dead to the Interest of themselves and the rising generation.' (20) The opening of the new entrance at Shoreham in 1818 affected the competitive position of Newhaven in relation to the Brighton market, and may well have induced the commissioners, in 1820, to retain Josias Jessop as consultant engineer, who recommended modest but effective improvements. One costless and perhaps unforeseen improvement came from some thousands of tons of boulders being picked off the foreshore each year and shipped to the Staffordshire potteries and Lancashire glassworks, a trade dating from at least 1819; the effect was to loosen the hard deposits outside the mouth and to deepen the channel. In 1823, the interior was considered the harbour's worst defect, because the embankment of the 1770s had been built over a partly submerged island of chalk. Following his appointment in 1827, the highly, practical and dedicated harbour master, William Stevens, attacked this problem with nothing more sophisticated than a pick and shovel. Small scale improvements continued under the sympathetic oversight of Jessop's successors as consultant engineer, William Cubitt and James Walker; the large items between 1825 and 1845 cost only £8,000 in all.' The crucial work was later held to be a trap groyne erected in 1843-5 100 feet west of the west pier, 500 feet long and directed to' the south-west: 'This simple and inexpensive work created the port of Newhaven; 'it stopped, to a great extent, the travel of shingle to the westward.' Stevens claimed to have deepened the entrance by nine feet, to a minimum of 17 feet at high water, and at the same time to have greatly improved the drainage of the levels. It was this depth of water which attracted the London, Brighton & South Coast Railway and led to the transfer of the company's activities from Shoreham. (21)



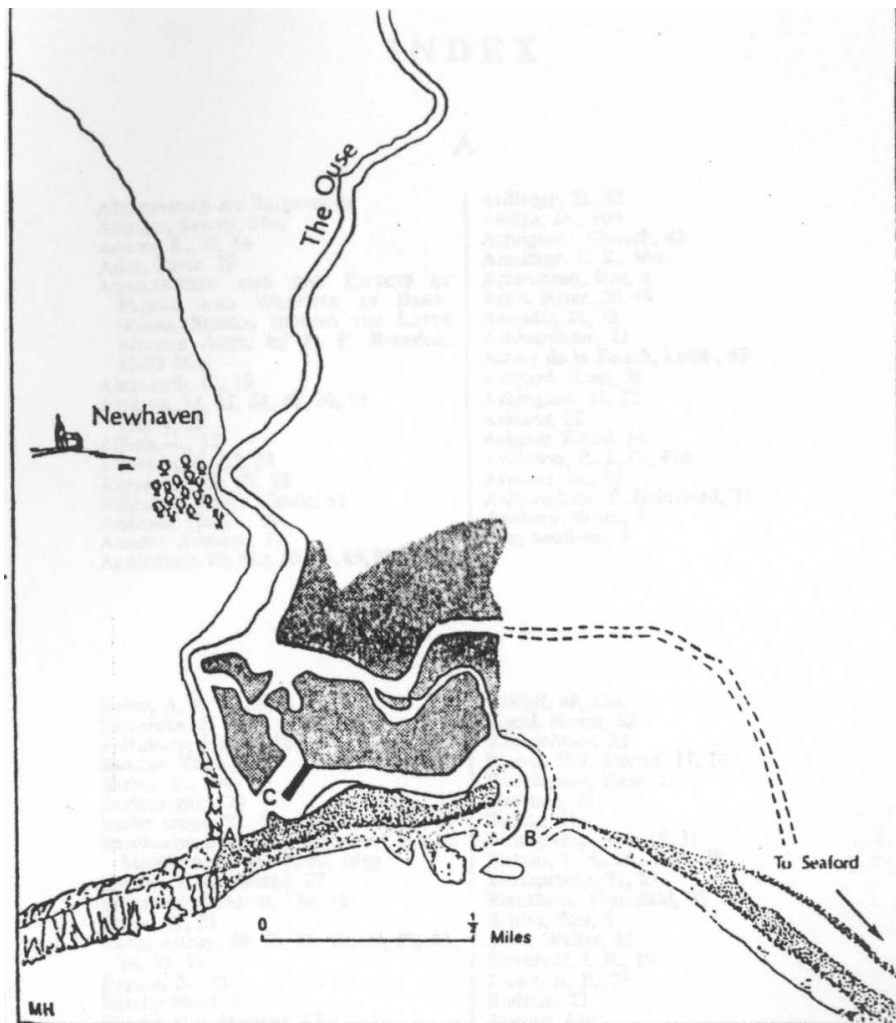


FIG. 3. The Ouse outlet in 1698 (based on an Admiralty chart). The site marked A was described as the 'ancient outlet' and that marked B was the 'haven's mouth' in 1698. Site C marks old wharfing ineffectually built to keep the outlet on its older course.

Fig.3 The Ouse outlet in 1698 (based on an Admiralty chart): The site marked A was described as the 'ancient outlet' and that marked B was the 'haven's mouth' in 1698. Site C marks old wharfing ineffectually built to keep the outlet on its older course.

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