

The Mouth of the River Blyth

Alan T. Rees



Editorial Note

This version is based on the one written when the author was completing a degree in geography in 1956. Changes in presentation have been made with additional illustrations but only sections of the larger plans and maps.

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Scope of the projected study.

The physical condition of the mouth of the River Blyth, in the County of Suffolk, has been subject to frequent change. It is proposed in this essay to trace the whole history of these changes, the circumstances and events giving rise to them and ensuing from them - (a) for the intrinsic interest of the history itself; (b) for the light that can be shed on the geographical evolution of the river and adjoining coastline; and (c) for the part played by geographical factors in the life and fortunes of Dunwich, Southwold, Walberswick and Blythburgh, which bound the area that is intimately associated with the river.

The recounting of difficulties encountered by the local people over the river's mouth will occupy the central part of this essay, and will be treated in some detail. The historical background will be briefly presented initially so that the details may be placed in their wider context. The purely physiographical factors that underlie the whole story, will be given their due prominence and their examination will throw into relief the ways in which problems have been handled in the past, and on the possible developments of the future.

The Mouth of the River Blyth

1. Introduction

The River Blyth rises in the parish of Laxfield in the heart of north-eastern Suffolk, and flows to the North Sea between Southwold and Walberswick. Prior to the tenth century it turned sharply southwards and flowed behind a shingle spit down to a mouth at Dunwich, where it was joined by the small Dunwich River. The Blyth from Blythburgh now flows in a wide and shallow marshland valley, much of which has been claimed as pasture. A considerable acreage below Blythburgh has been re-flooded but eastward from the confluence of Wolsey Creek, the river is again confined to an embanked channel down to an artificial mouth into the sea.

Along the three miles of coastline from Walberswick to Dunwich only portions of the old course of the Blyth remain, owing to the inland retreat of the shingle spit, or ridge, in line with the soft cliffs of crag and glacial drift at Southwold and Dunwich. (Fig. 1) The marshland here, though embanked and once profitable, is now but reedland and salt marsh.

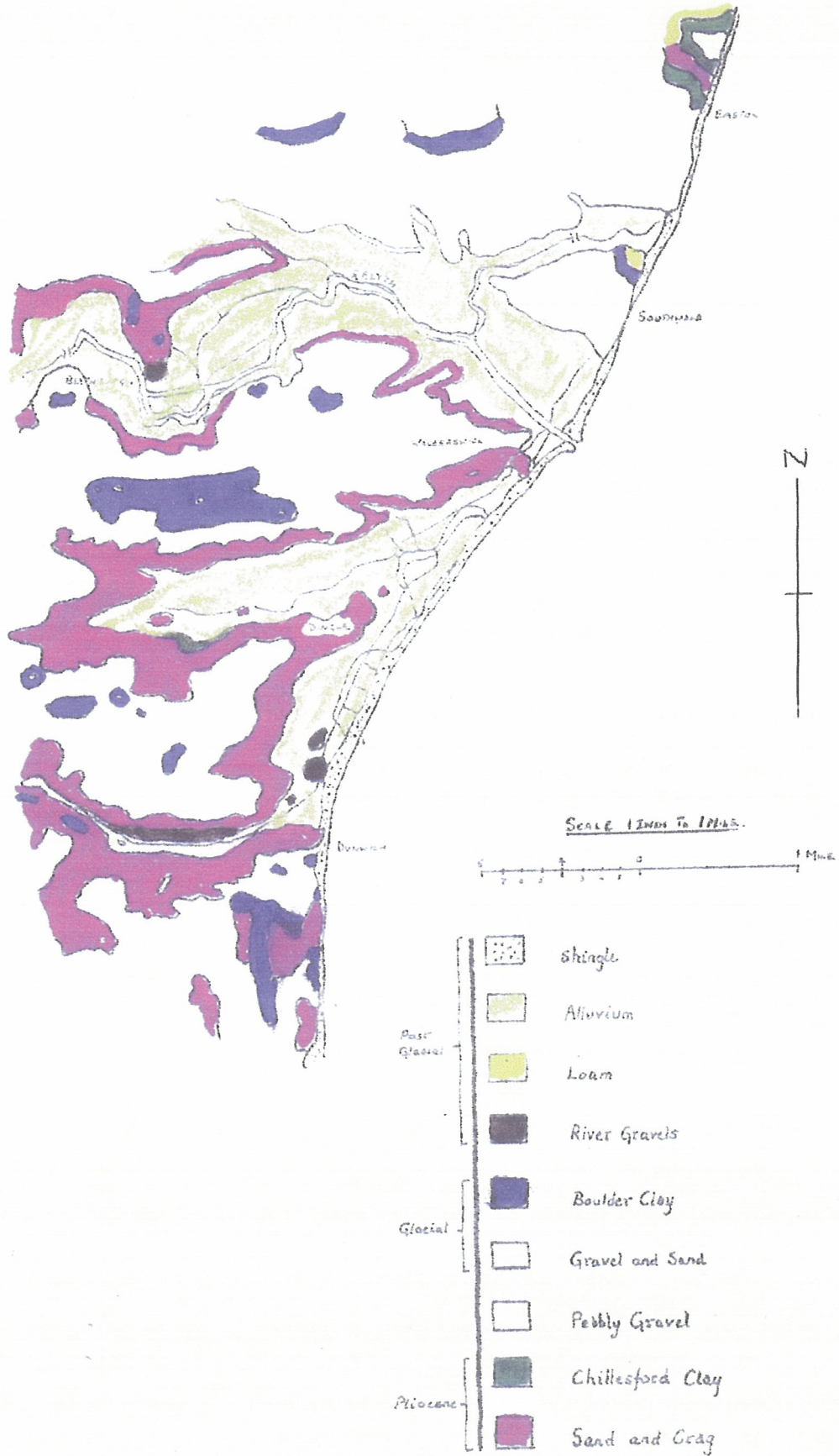
The towns or villages intimately connected with the River Blyth throughout the historic period are now of no great importance. Formerly, however, Dunwich was the principal city of East Anglia (2). It rose to the height of its prosperity in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It is thought to have been a Roman station of some importance (Sitomagnus); it became the chosen site of the first Bishop to the East Angles, St Felix; it grew to possess up to a dozen churches and two monasteries; it obtained its first charter from King John in 1199 A.D; in the thirteenth century it ranked above Yarmouth and Southampton, boasting 80 ships.

The city's decline was gradual but steady. It suffered land erosion by the sea as early as the time of the Domesday Survey. The city was being attacked at the time of its greatest prosperity and by 1325 it was reported that a third of the place had been destroyed. (1) At this stage the loss of the haven occurred - a crippling blow. By the mid-sixteenth century not a quarter was left, and by the mid-eighteenth only 30 houses, one church, the remains of the Greyfriars Monastery and 2 'hospitals' remained standing. Now the church, All Saints, has gone. The chapel of St James's Hospital is the parish church and the ruins of Greyfriars alone attests to former glories. In the 1951 census Dunwich had a population of 140 in 46 households.

To the north, Southwold is now the largest town in the area (population in 1951: 2,473). The town's first beginnings can be traced back as far as those of Dunwich, but true prosperity did not come until its southern rival had for the most

Fig. 1

Geological Survey 1882.



part fallen beneath the waves. Southwold obtained its charter from Henry VII and grew rich as Dunwich had done on the Iceland and North Sea fishing trade.

Changes in the position of the mouth of the Blyth set the seal on the reversal of fortunes. In 1654 Southwold had a population of about 2,000. Five years later, however, the town was swept by a catastrophic fire which destroyed 338 dwellings (plus the town records). After this setback, recovery was slow. Only midway through the nineteenth century did the population reach its former mark. Trade and fishing revived: only once more to fall away. The town has not attained the heights of prosperity hoped for at the beginning of this century and it remains a small but comfortably-placed community depending on its natural charm and pleasant situation to attract holiday visitors.

Blythburgh (14(a)) and Walberswick also have seen times of prosperity in the past. Blythburgh had a small priory and a large manor. The Lord of the Manor - Blythburgh, or Westwood Lodge - controlled the land and the marshes between and around both places, to the south of the Blyth and, in the thirteenth century, down to Dunwich. Both Blythburgh and Walberswick have large churches built at times of maximum opulence in the fifteenth century. The towns owed much to the fishing and wool trades: decline in both cases followed plague, fire and other misfortune.

Walberswick was the more closely concerned with the river's mouth and the events to be related in the sequel. The difficulty of maintaining the river's mouth as a consistently good harbour certainly had a dampening effect on the volume of trade and therefore the general wealth and size of all the towns, but in the case of Blythburgh and Walberswick the actual decline was principally due to the factors of historical circumstances from which natural advantages offered little chance of speedy recovery.

The historical fortunes of Dunwich, Southwold, Blythburgh and Walberswick cannot be related solely to the vicissitudes encountered over the matter of the river's mouth. The change in location of the mouth from Dunwich to its present position was undoubtedly of the greatest significance in the overall historical picture; but straightforward marine erosion suffered by Dunwich before and after 1328 was a single factor of equal, if not greater, significance in the decline of that city, although the distinction made here is only warranted historically - if at all - as both cliff erosion and the movement of shingle into and across the river's mouth are inseparably associated physiographically. After the mouth was artificially fixed in position in the eighteenth century, and indeed since the river attained its general position of outfall at Walberswick in the first decade of the seventeenth century, and losing all former connection to the south, what remains of the influence becomes harder to assess. From that time the story is of continuous struggle by Southwold and Walberswick to maintain the mouth and harbour open

for shipping. In terms of trouble, expense and trade lost, the influence is very strong and in the simple relation of the facts this becomes abundantly evident. To go beyond this entails a more detailed examination of the geographical and non-geographical factors that have operated, as well as a wider consideration to embrace the stories of Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth, rivals in trade and prosperity. This is too great a task to attempt here, where only the central theme of the changing mouth and the difficulties over the mouth and harbour can be told, together with an emphasis on the physiographical processes which lie at the very heart of the whole sequence of events.

2. Prehistory to 1328 - Dunwich's port in trouble

Speculation as to the configuration of the coastline during this period cannot be allowed much space. There is little factual foundation for such speculation. It is thought locally that there once existed two prominent headlands, Eastern Ness in the north (the most easterly point in Britain) and Dunwich in the south. The once prosperous settlement of Eastern Bavents stood on the northern headland but suffered the same fate as Dunwich. The Dunwich headland extended both seawards and northwards and a wood known as 'Eastwood' or 'The King's Forest' stood on the promontory, "*extending several miles south east of the town and early eaten into by the sea*" (2(a)). It seems unlikely, however, as suggested by W.R.Gower (5) and others (27), that there was any extension northwards to the order of two miles, though there was certainly some (compare Radulph Agas's map Fig.3). Christopher Saxton marks no headland as such on his 1575 map of Suffolk, though Eastern Ness is featured - probably in an exaggerated form. Nor is there evidence as to whether it was a headland in the true sense of the word or a shingle 'ness'.

On the Suffolk coast the dominant wind direction is from the north east. Similarly the region of greatest wave fetch is from that quarter. The result is a net movement of beach material to the south - though there may be some temporary reversal under other conditions - which has led to the formation of shingle spits originating and lengthening from actively eroding cliffs. Such a spit has been built up from Easton and Southwold cliffs and now extends to Dunwich. Similar situations are found to the north at Benacre and Easton Broads and southwards at Minsmere and Orford. The Orford spit which extends from Aldeburgh is unique in its way and differs from the other examples quoted in that it has not finally closed its bay or attached itself to land at its southern extremity. This is in part due to the configuration of the coastline, but mainly due to the strength of the River Alde and of the ebb-tide scour from the river estuary. The course of the River Alde presents a striking parallel to the former course of the River Blyth, though now on a different scale. But it is not without significance that the distance from Slaughden to Orford is roughly equivalent to that from Bavents to Dunwich. Orford itself, when a thriving port in the thirteenth century, stood at

the river's mouth and opposite the end of the shingle spit. (6) Dunwich had a very similar position at the mouth of the Blyth, but this mouth became difficult to keep open at the end of the thirteenth century and was finally stopped up in 1328. This was the final stage in the progression of the shingle spit from Easton and Southwold. Being on an exposed headland, Dunwich was less fortunate than Orford which still had access to the river mouth and remained protected from the sea by the shingle spit. Orford's subsequent decline must be explained in other terms.

Further similarities between the courses of the Alde and the Blyth at this period are observable on the map. Though now truncated, the old course of the Blyth shows a sinuous middle portion like that of the Alde. The latter encloses the Kings Marsh to seawards: the former the 'Kingsholme' (now named Corporation; Marshes). It is likely that the Blyth swung equally near the sea at Walberswick as the Alde does today at Slaughden.

Dunwich men started experiencing trouble with the river's mouth in the thirteenth century. Thomas Gardner (the Southwold historian) states (2(b)): *"In process of time, the said land (in Dunwich) being eaten away by the sea, the mouth of the port was subject to shift in so much that K. Henry III (1216-72) gave the Men of Dunwich 47.1.10.s for aid to remove and repair their port..."* This was in 1252.

From 1288 to 1295 *"the port was obstructed and the men of Dunwich laboured to open it, but could not bring it back to its former state so that up to the date of this inquisition (1325) great ships cannot enter it."* (7) The same document states that in 1294, *"the port was obstructed, and a port near Southwalde distant two leagues, was opened, and divers merchants and fishermen, who used to come to Dunwich went there."*

"Two leagues" may be taken generally and the reference doubtless is to an opening opposite Walberswick where only a comparatively narrow neck of shingle divided the river from the sea. (See Fig. 2 and Fig. 3)

In 1300 the Burgesses of Dunwich signed a petition complaining that: *"Whereas heretofore they in conjunction with men of the adjoining parts stopped up a port at Sothewold by order of Henry III, and afterwards that port was in great part re-opened by inundation from the sea, whereby merchants preferred to put in and take their goods there rather than to Dunwich, and carried on trade and paid toll there, to the loss of the said Burgesses of Dunwich, and on their own complaint the King commanded the Sherrif of Suffolk to inquire into the matter and close the port again by the distraint of the adjoining tenants, and whereby the said burgesses have by the King's Command applied 2,000s to enclosing thereof, yet some persons have come by night and day and re-opened that port and have*

Fig. 2

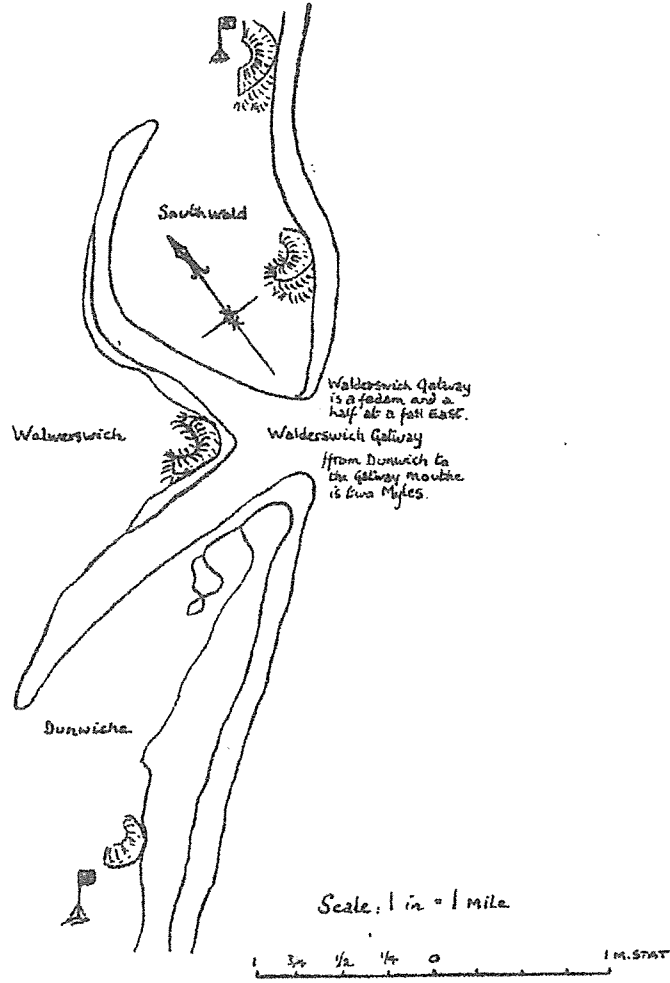
After:

MAP IN COTTON MSS. MEN. 8⁵. A.D. 1509-47

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PLATE 2. FIG. 6.



broken down certain causeways put within that port to strengthen the obstruction thereof, whereby the course of the water leading to Dunwich is impeded, so that merchants cannot come up to Dunwich as they were wont."

Dunwich was then the largest Suffolk port with 80 ships. All tolls from shipping sailing up the Blyth were taken, to the increasing irritation of Walberswick, Southwold and Blythburgh (9) and some active antagonism, which developed into open warfare when, after 1328, the 'New Haven' was opened at Walberswick. (11) Dues were to the order of 4d for every ship passing "and as much for anchorage without licence from the King." (2(b))

The Men of Dunwich were understandably reluctant to face the facts of the situation and played down the stoppages of 1294 and before.

..."the town of Dunwich has been impoverished and destroyed because most of its people were maintained by merchandize coming by sea and not by their land, and from time beyond memory until 15 Jan I Edw. III (ie. 1328) there was a large and deep harbour near to the town and a great quantity of ships came to land there; this harbour has been entirely obstructed by the action of the sea and another harbour has been made two leagues from the town, narrow and without depth, which is not much frequented by shipping because the entrance is perilous and access to the town difficult." (7)

The petitioners go on to describe the "ruinous state" of the town. It is hard to imagine the harbour being "large and deep" even since 1294. It may be assumed that the port was continuously, in Gardner's words, "subject to shift" throughout the latter half of the thirteenth century until 1328 when it was not recovered.

"On the 14th day of Jan 1328, (the "port")...was utterly choaked up by North-East and East-North-East winds; and for the recovery thereof, all means proved ineffectual." (2(b))

An entry in the first Patent Rolls for 1331 (12) suggests that some sort of a "port" may have remained open at Dunwich. Trade certainly continued and the town sent out ships and mariners. The quay was probably still served by the small Dunwich River which from the town to the new mouth remained a tidal creek. The flow of water along the channel from Dunwich to Walberswick was thus completely reversed. (Fig. 2)

3. 1328 to the 17th Century - the mouth at Walberswick

The exact location of the 'New Port' now forming the mouth of the Blyth is not known for certain. It is said to have been "two leagues" or two miles north of Dunwich and the old port, and also "*not far from Walberswick key*" (2(d)) - which is at the bottom of Stock's Lane, to the south of the present village - and is marked as Walberswick Old Quay on Radulph Agas's map of 1587. (See Fig.3 and also Page 7) Here the river ran close to the coastal shingle and was very likely the position of previous openings. (See Page 4 above.) To the south were the marshes formerly called 'Lenaldes-mersshe', 'Middlemerssche' and 'Chirchemersshe', subsequently named the 'Kingsholme' marshes by Dunwich men, and now the Corporation Marshes. (13)

After 1328, Dunwich claimed these marshes as their property on the grounds that their boundaries were marked to the north by the position of the river's mouth. This became the subject of much litigation and some strife with the former owners, the Lords of Blythburgh. The problem of boundaries and control of the harbour naturally re-occurred subsequently whenever the mouth was opened in a different position: the Dunwich parish boundary now runs north up the coast and along the former course of the Blyth, where it is still present, to a point just east of Walberswick quay and extending to the sea a little south of the harbour (ie, along the line of a former harbour - see Page 22). Roger Swillington (Lord of Blythburgh Manor, 1391-1418) paid 20/- a year to Dunwich that the vessels of his tenants might come through the Port of Dunwich (as the 'New Port' was still called) free of duties. But this arrangement only led to more trouble when a successor, John Hopton (1430-1478), refused to pay the annuity, upholding the right of his tenants to go free, and saying that the payment was not right but "*oonly for to have a pees and rest*". (14)

Returning to the measurements between the 'New Port' and 'the olde haven' (13) one might hope to locate the latter on the map. In fact this is very difficult on the evidence because apart from the retreat of the shoreline, the site of the 'New Port' can be a matter of probability only and also there are imprecise and conflicting references to "two leagues", "two miles" and a "large mile". (14(a)) Gardner (2(b)) quotes from an MS (untraced) which refers to "*Duas Leucas*", and he took this as two miles rather than two leagues. John Hopton placed the 'New Port', "*by a span of a mile from the old haven toward Eye cliff*" (ie Southwold) (15) Radulph Agas on his plan of Dunwich (1587) places the old haven a little over two-thirds of a mile from Maison Dieu Hills, parts of which still remain at present. This estimation fits in reasonably with the supposed location of the 'New Port', and just under two miles therefore is the distance between them. The position of the old haven allows for some north-eastward extension of old Dunwich (See Page 3) and gives a good indication of the amount of erosion that has taken place since the sixteenth century - when a quarter of the town was

said to have been destroyed. (See Page 1) There is no evidence that the 'New Port' was at the head of Buss Creek, north of Southwold. (27)

The origin of the 'New Port' appears to have been natural. (17(a)) It opened due to the "*pressure of the great quantity of water pent up by the stoppage of the old haven's mouth.*" (2(b)) According to Dunwich men it was "*narrow and without depth and not much frequented*" (7), but it seems to have been permanent enough to last out the century. Gardner (2(b)) states that it was "*stopped up about the beginning of the reign of King Henry IV.*" (1399-1413) This may have been purely temporary. In a land dispute between Sir John Swillington and Dunwich bailiffs, dated 1405, reference is made simply to the "*olde Havene*" and the "*New Havene at Walberswick...that is now by the coast of the sea on the East part and the stream of water coming down from the aforesaid Havene on the West part.*" (17(b))

The 'New Port' was finally rendered useless in 1435, and it was resolved by the men of Blythburgh, Walberswick and Southwold, under the leadership and licence of Sir John Hopton (of Blythburgh Lodge), to cut another one to the north on the land of Sir John. The now "enfeebled haven" had by agreement between Sir John Swillington and Dunwich been deemed the boundary between their lands (17(b)) and provision made that this should be so if a new mouth broke out anywhere else. In granting licence for a new cut Sir John now stipulated that it would not so mark the boundary, as it was made not "*be fortune of ye castinge of the gravell*" but by "*mannys hand*". It was proposed to plant a tree on the north "*brynke*" of the "*feeble-haven*" to mark the true bound, making doubly certain by measuring the distance to the new cut. This was 210 rods, about 1,155 yards. (17(a)) As the distance between the "*enfeebled haven*" and the position of the harbour as it is today is scarcely more than this, the figure quoted is interesting. The harbour today marks the virtually straight outfall of the Blyth and it is hard to conceive that in 1435 a cut should have been made to the north of this position.

Gardner (2) does not mention this episode of 1435 giving the impression that there was a haven originating in the early years of Henry IV's reign and lasting until 1464. The latter date may perhaps be taken as the closing date for the new cut made in 1435.

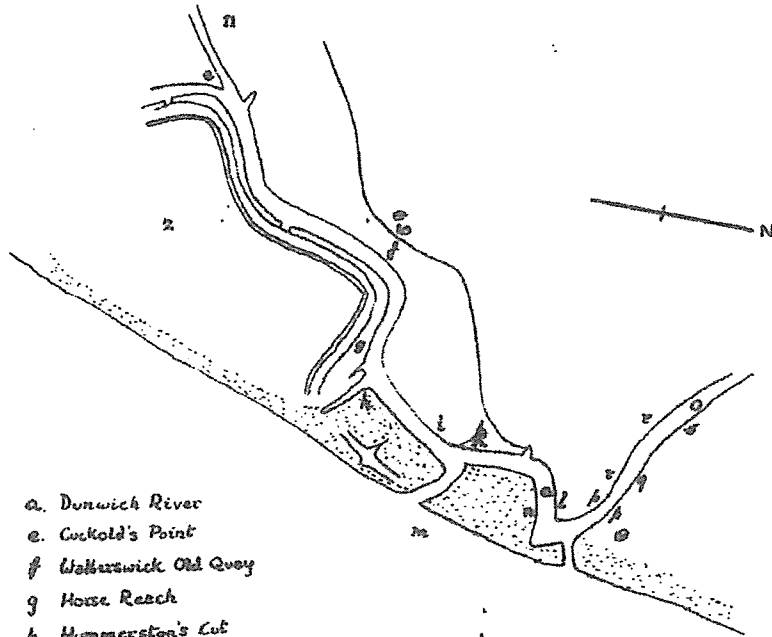
From this time for the next 150 years the sequence of events is not at all clear, and what evidence there is, is itself often confused and contradictory. Gardner's evidence is almost the only source for this period and has proved impossible to check. He described (2(b)):

- (a) a cut continuing until 1464
- (b) a period when the mouth was "often altering",
- (c) a cut called 'Hummerston's-cut', lasting until about 1589.

Fig. 3

PORTION OF MAP BY R. AGAS, 1587-1589.

from T. Gairner's 'Historical Account of Dunwich...'



- a. Dunwich River
- e. Cockold's Point
- f. Walberswick Old Quay
- g. Horse Reach
- h. Hummerston's Cut
- i. Old Ferry
- k. New Post
- l. Second Ferry
- m. Passely Sands
- n. Old Pier
- o. Southwold Haven
- p. New Piers
- q. New Quay
- r. Walberswick Quay
- s. Present Ferry

- 1 Kings Holm etc.
- 10 Walberswick Old Church

The first may perhaps be identified with the cut by Sir John Hopton in 1435. It is described as having on "*the South-East point thereof a strong Bank of Ouze*" which did "*turn back the (said) shingle*" against the rages of the of the north-east winds - that is, turning the river current at right-angles to the southerly movement of shingle. It is not clear if the ouze bank was natural or artificial. If the former, it may possibly have had some connection with Black Ness.

Gardner gives a cross-reference to a report (2(c)) by Radulph Agas, which includes a remarkably similar passage:

"Notwithstanding where it now runneth there have bie good happe lighted on the owse banke, at the South side of the Haven, which causes the back water to turn of(f) the beach, and to lie straight against the mouth, as hath happened divers times since the same was opened first..."

Agas was writing in 1589. Because of the similarity of the two passages, and since Agas goes on to describe a completely different state of affairs - and to illustrate it on his map (Fig. 3) - it can only be concluded that he is quoting an earlier document out of context. As given by Gardner, the report is probably incomplete (18(a)). It seems most likely that the two accounts are of the same cut or haven that closed up on 1464. Moreover Gardner states that this ouze bank "being washed away, the mouth was often altering".

The question of location is also tricky. Reference to the bank of ouze suggests that it was located near Black Ness, which formerly extended further to seaward, and some portion of it may have caused the river to swing at right-angles to the shoreline and subsequently to have been eroded away. Beyond observing that the north-eastern face of the Ness is aligned with the old portion of the river, there can be no evidence either way.

Finally, whether or not the cut licensed and (on the evidence) dug by Sir John Hopton and his men in 1435 can be identified with this cut with the bank of ouze, is a matter for guesswork. It seems preferable to separate them, but they are certainly close together both in position and in time. (See Fig.3)

On the failure of the cut in 1464 "the mouth was often altering" - probably over a fairly small range to the southward. (NB There is an entry in the Walberswick Churchwardens' Accounts for 1463 that the "*...haven was delved out.*" (3))

Gardner's next reference is to "Hummerston's-cut". No initial date of opening is given, but elsewhere (2(f)) there is mention of a Mr Humberston, Her Majesty's Surveyor in Suffolk, in connection with a sale of lead from Kessingland to Dunwich in 1578. The identity seems certain, though nothing is known about his work here on the river's mouth. On his map (Fig. 3) of 1587 Agas marks the cut

very near it seems to the original site of the 'New Port'. From the map it may be seen that the cut is well closed up, but the Agas map is actually dated 1589 so that this part of the map at least may have been added later. (See below Page 10) However, the closing date of the cut may have been considerably earlier for, as will be shown, another cut existed in 1588.

As regards the initial date of Humberston's cut, and the period since the beginning of the century, there is other evidence to add to Gardner's. This comes from statements made before a Commission of Inquiry in the long dispute which arose subsequent to 1589 between Dunwich on the one hand and Walberswick and Southwold on the other. (17(c)) A statement was made that: *"the mouth of the haven when the same was last cut out and made by Command of Her Majesty's Hon. Privy Council, was cut out and made in the same place or so near, as in estimation it was and went 60 years past."*

Also: *"a pier was made for the keeping of the mouth of the haven from the southwards at the cost and charges of Southwold, and that a pile about 30 years past was made on the fflatte on the Walberswick side or the keeping of the mouth of the haven from the southward at the cost of Southwold."*

This was evidence from the Southwold and Walberswick side. William Bowbroke, a bailiff of Dunwich stated that about 30 years past he did appoint *"where the haven should be cut out by Dunwich"*.

Walberswick and Southwold, as will be shown, were putting forward their case for a mouth north of Black Ness against which the shingle had accumulated to divide the river in two. Dunwich was pleading for a southern cut. The above evidence suggests that 60 years before, ie about 1530, a mouth was cut at or a little north of Black Ness. The mention of a pier and a pile being erected to stabilise matters is interesting. The mouth persisted at least until 1560 under this care. Then about 1570, Dunwich made a cut further south and it seems very likely in view of what has already been said that this was Humberston's cut. (See Fig.3)

The sequence of events which followed in 1588, 1589 and 1590, form the culminating point in Dunwich's attempt to retain the mouth of the Blyth for the effective use of its own ships and trade. It was a struggle, not basically against Man but against Nature. As has been noted, the slow retreat of the shoreline and the impingement of the coastal shingle on Black Ness divided the waters flowing from Dunwich from the much larger flow from Blythburgh. As a result there were often two cuts and the difference between the two towns over rights in the haven and port very naturally came to a head. Each side sued the other and fairly full evidence of the sequence of events comes out of the reports and inquiries of litigation. Thomas Gardner (2(e)) does not record the entertaining details, merely

stating that in 1589 it was resolved to have a new cut; “the Dunwich Men were for having the old port, or cutting it nearer their town: the inhabitants of Southwold and Walberswick were for having it nearer Southwold”, and the final outcome was “disagreeable to the Men of Dunwich”, and “occasioned a law-suit of more than ten years continuance”.

An important piece of geographical evidence comes from Radulph Agas’s map already referred to. It seems fairly clear that Agas made his plan of Dunwich in 1587 but that it was not produced until 1589. It is possible that the depiction of the river at Walberswick and up to Blythburgh was then added to help the investigators seeking to assess the merits of the rival claims. In a report (19(c)) in March 1589 reference is made to a ‘cart’ which illustrates the situation then existing. This provides a possible explanation for the river details beyond the Dunwich parish boundaries, for the detailed key, and for the slight discrepancy and exaggeration in scale on this part of the map. There are some difficulties in interpretation in the light of the written evidence, but these may be mentioned when the facts emerging from the latter have been related.

In November 1588 the haven was “*by the extremity of the north east wyndes and fowle weather... utterly stopped, as heretofore yt hath bene oftentimes*” (19(a)) This was not ‘Hummerston’s-cut’ as marked by Agas, as will become evident, and must have been later. It was probably to the north at Black Ness. (4) It has been suggested that “some violent gales which dispersed the Armada in the autumn of 1588” (20(a)) contributed to this obstruction. But the particular Armada storms occurred earlier in August and September, though a generally stormy autumn doubtless led up to the closure of the haven in November.

In February of 1589 Southwold and Walberswick men complained that although it was usual for the same haven to be subsequently re-opened (in fact they had put the work in hand); “*the bailif of Dunwiche in some disordered manner in the night tyme with great nombre of men attempted to cutt out a channell or havon in a place where never havon was and verie unfytt thereby drawing and diverting the streame of the backwater from the auncient havon of Southwold, whereby they have made frustrate the endeavours and charge of the inhabitauntes of Southwolde and Walderswyke...*” (19(a)) The complaint seems to have been that with two cuts there was insufficient scour. (17(c))

Southwold then endeavoured to “turn the water into their former work” and “laid some of their ships across the stream of the river.” Their efforts seem to have failed for they put in a plea (19(a)) to the “Lord of the Council” to inquire and consider which haven was most “fit to be continued”. (17(c)) Dunwich hastened to state their claims (19(b)) based on their old rights and privileges in the haven.

All this took place at the turn of the year: December 1588 - January 1589. The

inquiry was undertaken in February - March following, and decided that: *"the northernmost part of the ould haven hath ben and wilbe most convenient for the harboroughe of shippes and boates...;"* and *"that place where yt was of late hath ben usually digged out by the township's of Southwold and Walberswicke upon consideration of those raportes and certificates and the view of such plates as have been brought before us, we have thought good to praie your Lordship that there may be order taken that the three towne of Dunwich, Southwold and Walberswick maie joyne together according to the abilitie of eche towne to cutte forth the haven in the north most parte of the ould haven, where yt was lately cut forth by the men of Southwold and Walberswick, upon the mouth of the main river that cometh from Blythborroughe...."*

It was further suggested that a beacon or two be erected near the mouth to record the place should the haven again be stopped up; that all three towne should assist in making a cut through to the Dunwich river: *"for the avoiding and amending the flatt that lyeth from the point of the land on Dunwyche syde (ie Black Ness) right over against the ould ferry place, and so forward to the haven's mouth newe appointed to be opened and made..."* - in order that Dunwich should retain use of the haven and river's mouth; finally that the *"cutt made by the inhabitauntes of Dunwich be stopped up."*

The details may be followed on Agas's map. (Fig. 3) The two cuts are marked, though the northern one seems small and probably created temporarily. The river between them is marked as continuous, taking a right-angle turn inland, presumably at the head of Black Ness, and driven thus by the shingle "Flats" to the south. The river may have remained thus continuous, or alternatively Agas may have illustrated the way in which the new cut there was to have been put into effect as suggested by the inquiry report. (See above) Agas's own report gives very little help in this matter (2(c)). The position of the 'old pier' and the 'second ferry' on his map does, however, suggest that this was the former channel. (See reference to the pier above on Page 9)

The proposals thus put forward were not accepted by Dunwich and therefore not carried out. In November and December following (1589) Southwold and Walberswick decided to take forcible action. "They stopped up the mouth leading from Dunwich into the sea and caused Dunwich to cut out another haven for the passage of the river and of ships." (17(c))

"In January 1590, 200 people unlawfully assembled from Walberswick and Southold (and) with shovels, spades, pickaxes and other engines did cut and make a trench or great ditch for a haven's mouth bringing and conveying the river from that source or passage which they of Dunwich to their great change had made, turning the same out of the right course to bring it nearer Southwold... and that divers (men) of Southwold and Walberswick have laid their

ships across the stream of Dunwich to stop the course of the stream. And also in March then next following (they) did enter into the ground and soil of Dunich and did fill and stop up the channel and stream of Dunwich with timber and plank, spans and stones to hurt the channel and river and maintenance of shipping."

This is the version put forward by Dunwich whose turn it now was to petition higher authority.

There followed the law suit already mentioned, which lasted until 1600, when it was referred to the Attorney General, Cook. No official judgement has come to light, but by that time the river's mouth was 'de facto' in the hands of Walberswick and Southwold. It is, however, evident from the present parish boundary that Dunwich retained some legal right in part-control of the harbour and river mouth.

Gardner inserts a footnote from the Walberswick Account Books (2(e)): "*A remembrans that the Havenne was cout out the 12th day of April, and Dounwyche Men would not agree to it, and in the 31st year of Quenis Raigne Elizabeth in Anno 1590, by me Robert Richardson."*

Possibly this was some consolidation of the work begun in January, though there may of course have been a further blockage in the intervening period. Gardner says it was opened "as it now runs" (ie 1754) but although it cannot have been far off, he goes on to say that: "*This Haven being destitute of some means to secure the mouth thereof, was often stopped, and continued almost useless from the year 1614 to the year 1618, whereupon the Bailiffs of Southwold sued the Man of Walberswick concerning the Haven and the Flatts."*

In fact the mouth continued to oscillate somewhat, and new diggings were made, until the decade in which Gardner wrote. However this period is significant in that the subsequent movements were comparatively small and always to the north of Black Ness. It marks the close of Dunwich's effective interest in the mouth of the Blyth, though for a while some shipping, and therefore concern, remained in the harbour. But the principal concern, henceforth, lay with Southwold and Walberswick - to a lesser extent Blythburgh and Halesworth. The essence of the problems that arose was (a) the stabilising of the mouth in a fixed position and (b) the maintenance of the entrance free from silt and beach material.

4. The 17th and 18th centuries - attempts to stabilise the mouth.

In 1612, Thomas Dunne of Flushing “viewed the Haven” and made an estimate of its repair. (15) As has been seen it was then stopped up again between 1614 and 1618. King James granted the petition of Dunwich, Southwold and Walberswick for permission the sum needed for repairing port and erecting piers, jetties and quays, by collecting throughout England and Wales. (18(b))

Letters patent were put out: *“declaring the importance of maintaining the harbours of Dunwich, Southwold and Walberswick, Co. Suffolk, formerly producing 20,000 l of fish per annum, but now greatly decayed by violence of the water and losses of the inhabitants, through fire, pirates, shipwrecks etc. 6000s being necessary for the repair of the havens, a general collection is authorised to be made from seat to seat in churches, or at the houses of absentees, and the bailiffs or churchwardens of the three towns appointed receives thereof. Westminster. Jan. 23. 1619.”* (21(a))

Dunwich evidently still retained an interest in the state of the haven. But when the entrance was again stopped up in 1655-6 it is Southwold and Walberswick alone which petition for an *“enquiry into the state of their Haven and means to amend it: it formerly set forth many ships, but is spoiled for want of piercing”*. (21(b))

It is worth mentioning as an aside that there is reference to shipbuilding at this time at Walberswick (22(b)); and also that *“about 1650 the Brookes of Blythburgh Lodge seized the Paules Fen (see Agas’s map) opposite the Lodge, drove out the Walberswick and Dunwich people, put dams and sluices across the old Dunwich River, and thus effectively blocked the channel and excluded the tides.”* (22(a))

The state of the harbour again became critical in 1674 when Sir John Pettus, Knight, of Suffolk, gave in proposals (unspecified) to the Lords’ Commissioners of the Admiralty for mending the haven. (2(e)) In spite of the difficulties, the harbour must have on the whole remained in serviceable condition for, amongst other things, Blackshore Quay on the river became, in Charles II’s reign, a Free or ‘Legal’ Quay (cf Wright’s map of 1840. Fig. 5) at which goods brought from abroad could be legally landed, or goods embarked for exportation. Southwold had eleven North Sea fishing boats in 1670. On the other hand, The East Coast fishing trade generally was at this time said to be “distressed”. (18(c))

The Corporation of Southwold is possessed of no accounts previous to 1661, and it is not until 1680 that the accounts contain anything specific as to the changes in the harbour. From that year however, constant trouble, even if only minor, was being recorded. In 1714 the charge of *“digging and making a new*

haven" - also given as 18th Nov. 1715 (20b) - was £37.10.11½ at which time the annual income of the Corporation did not amount to £100. (18(c))

At this period (ie. from about 1680 - 1745): *"....the haven was fixed in no certain spot, but was occasionally to be found opening, on various points of the compass, from the N.E. to the S.W. under the control as it would appear of the wind, as when the wind was sufficiently strong from the N.E to raise the sea, the channel from the river opened into the S.W.: and when the wind from the S.W was strong to raise a sea from that quarter, the channel opened into the N.E: when the wind was N.W with a smooth sea, it opened into the S.E. In these changes the channel sometimes opened as much as 400 yards to the N.E. of the present pier; running inland not far from the present road leading to the present Haven: and at other times the channel ran to the southward, as far as the post called Sir Charles's post; perhaps about 400 yards S.W. of the present South Pier, the channel opening into the N.E. used sometimes to turn immediately at the jetty, and was North of it, not above but below it. On the West side of the river, the channel sometimes ran into the S.W being above the point opposite the jetty. Whether the harbour opened more or less into the N.E. or more or less into the S.W. it was always through a beach, which generally lay high and dry, even at high water; and this beach was in magnitude almost invariably in proportion to the distance at which the Harbour opened, on either side of a straight line drawn from the reach at Black Shore into the S.E. or S.E. by S. The Haven used frequently to beach up with a N.E and less frequently with a S.W. wind; and people employed in digging it out were assembled by beat of drum. When open the channel of the river was usually between six and seven, but scarcely ever exceeded eight feet in depth. The river above Black Shore was both wider and deeper than it now is; the vessels used to go up into dock upon the spring tide, some way up the Buss Creek, and light vessels used to go up to the town bridge."* (18(c))

This is an interesting passage for its detail and it illustrates well the uncertainty of the mouth, and the general conditions that must often have existed previously.

By April 1726 the Southwold Corporation was becoming convinced that the mouth of the river ought to be confined and stabilized, and orders were made that two jetties be built out into the sea at such places and in such manner "as the Bailiffs and Chamberlains shall think proper". (20(b)) In 1733 and in 1741 contributions were once more collected from "Gentlemen in the Country". In June 1736 it was argued that: "Considering the jetty belonged to ye said town and corporation (ie of Southwold) being greatly broken down and carried away by the raging tides and inundations, and it being judged absolutely necessary for shipping, for traffick and commerce, and considering ye great benefit and advantage it will be to our successors in the corporation aforesaid, it is agreed that in order to compleat ye said repairs to mortgage the town land lying in ye

common Inclosures for £150.” (20(b))

Gardner (2(g)) records great storms along the coast in 1739-1740 and also in 1746 and 1749. The former did great damage at Dunwich levelling the 40 foot high ‘Cock and Hen Hills’. It also flooded the ‘King’s Holm’ and other marshes, spreading shingle over them. These storms probably caused further trouble at the river’s mouth. There is reference to another new cut in 1741 and as part of the process, *“that several vessels of whom ye Masters or owners shall consent to be laid in order to stop ye old haven, if any change acrew by giting them off again, it shall be allowed by ye said Town (Southwold)”*. (20(c))

There is a description (mistakenly attributed by Robert Wake (23(a)) to a local man, Tobias Gentleman, who lived nearly a century later) of the state of the towns and the harbour at that time: *“About three leagues to the northward (of Dunwich) is Swold haven and in the towns of Swold, Donwich and Walberswicke is a very good breed of fishermen; and there are belonging to those three towns of North-Sea boats some twenty sail, and of Iceland barks some fifty sail, which yearly they send for cod and lings to Iceland. This town of Swold of a sea-coast town, is the most beneficial unto His Majesty of all the towns in England, by Reason of all their trade is unto Iceland for lings.....But these Men are greatly hindered, and in a manner undone, by Reason all their Haven is so bad, and in a Manner often stopped up with Beach and chingle-stone, the wind and the tide, and the sea do beat thither; so that many times in the season, when they be ready to go to sea, they cannot get out, when time is to go to sea; neither can they get in when they return form sea, but of times do cast away their goods and themselves: this haven, if that it had but a South Pier, built of Timber, would be a far better Haven than Yarmouth-haven; they are now suitors unto His Majesty. God grant they may speed; for it is pitiful that trouble that all the Men of these Towns do daily sustain by their naughty Harbour.”* (24)

The petition referred to here contained proposals for the First Southwold Harbour Act, and as such was presented before King and Parliament. On August 28th 1745, £50 was voted by Southwold Corporation in aid of a subscription towards obtaining the Act (20 George II Cap.14) which passed the following year; appointing Commissioners with power to raise rates and duties on vessels using the port, and goods imported into and exported out of it, for 21 years from March 25th 1747. Under the Act a North Pier was built in 1749 and a South Pier in 1752, towards each of which £50 was subscribed by the Corporation. (18(d)) Collections were again made, country gentlemen subscribing £1,440 though *“the sums were loans and were all repaid with interest out of the dues”*. (20(c)) It will be noted that final preference was given to a North Pier rather than to a South Pier as suggested by the writer of the above quoted description.

Table 1

Table of recorded events in connection with the Harbour and River:
18th and 19th centuries

Surveys & Reports	Piers North	South	Harbour Closed	Bad bar	Work on River	Remarks
1747 Mr Reynolds	1749					1747 1 st Southwold Harbour Act.
		1752				1757 Blyth Navigation Act.
			1776			Free British Fishery.
Mr Hayward	1780	1782-4 (extension inland)	1784			
		1788 (extension inland)	1790			1792 The 'Good Intent' in operation as a lighter.
		1792				
	1799 (extension inland)					
			1805			
1806 (1826) Mr Isaac Johnson			1806 (extension inland)	1806		Harbour dug out 13 times.
	1811 (repair)		1810-11 (x6)			
1812 Mr Smith					1815-17 improvement in shoals	The 'Good Intent' used as dredger.
			1817 (x2)			
			1818			
1819/20 Mr Rennie	(? extension)			Bar in existence		
			1827			
1829 Mr Cubitt			1830	1833	1833-37 improvement	Steam dredger in use.
						Lowestoft dredger hired.
1839 Lt. Ellis			1838-9 (x2)	1838-9		
1840-41 Mr Walker & Mr Wright						
					1844	
1844 John Washington					1848	
1845 R. Commission					1859	
					1859	
					1865	
					1880	
1884 O.S. 6" map						Harbour derelict
1907 Southwold Harbour project						

In 1747 a survey had been made by a Mr Reynolds on the basis of which the North Pier was constructed.

“Although it had the desired effect of preventing the river from breaking out to the N.E it was yet found to encourage the accumulation of beach at its head, turning the mouth of the harbour more uniformly to the south and south east and the channel running for some distance parallel with the sea, with a beach between, which terminated in a point; that beach was, by a heavy sea thrown into the channel, and obstructed the navigation. It was to remedy this evil that in 1751 a south pier was proposed and in 1752-3 built under a contract with Mr Reynolds the surveyor for the sum of £506.8.6” (18(d))

The building of piers brought considerable improvement to the harbour for a period of about forty years. The period when the mouth of the river changed its position was now at an end but the situation just described constantly reoccurred subsequently even with piercing north and south. The problem of periodic blockage remained.

There are records (18(e)) that the mouth was blocked in 1776 and in 1784, but this seems to have been due to the inadequacy of the piers, rather than to a bar at the seaward end. In 1779 the north pier gave way, and another was built in 1780. *“Both piers were found to require additions inland: those to the south pier made in 1782-3-4 and 8 were to the extent of 200 feet and upwards, and in 1799 a breakwater of considerable extent was added to the north pier inland; the object with respect to both, being to prevent the shingle - lying at the back of each - from being driven by heavy seas into the river.” (18(e))*

It is significant that first the north pier collapses, presumably under the weight of shingle now retarded by the direct outflow of the river (under ebb) into the sea, and that then the south pier needed the extension inland, due not only to heavy seas, but also to a regular wasting away of the shore here, the supply of shingle being more effectively shut off.

The situation had deteriorated again by 1790. It is worth noting that the period 1750-1792 was the life span of the Free British Fishery with its headquarters at Southwold. About 50 large herring ‘busses’ were fitted out in a depot on the Woods End or (as now) Buss Creek. (22(c)) The decline of the concern was attributed to a series of bad seasons, but the worsening of the harbour mouth after 1790 must have been an important, if not decisive, factor. The end was marked by the auction of 23 busses and other property at Southwold in March 1792.

Another result of the temporary improvement had been the passing of the River Blyth Navigation Act in 1757 by which the Blyth was made navigable up to

Halesworth. The project was envisaged by a group of Halesworth merchants, and carried out at a loss of £3,600. From July 1761 until the end of the nineteenth century, a fair amount of traffic was carried to and from Halesworth in wherries. (20(d)) Increased revenue brought health to the funds of the Harbour Authorities, almost doubling the former income. (18(d))

After 1790 there was renewed trouble. The existence of the piers made it harder for beach material to spill round the end and form a bar or spit. Eventually however, one would form either in the immediate entrance or some way out where the ebb scour from the river weakened. The harbour itself was in fact reported blocked in 1792 and in 1805, but the bar caused the greater mischief being *"frequently impassable...for many weeks together"*. In 1790 *"the masters and owners of the principal vessels had a lighter called the 'Good Intent' built at Yarmouth for the purpose of taking out part of their cargoes in the bay to enable them to enter the harbour. It was for many years a very profitable concern...as most vessels resorting to the port made use of it"*. (18(e))

5. The 19th century - continuous troubles

In 1806 the south pier was extended seawards. It was maintained (18e) that thereafter the bar was *"visibly and permanently improved"*. *"... laden vessels with full cargoes entered without difficulty: the lighter ('Good Intent') became altogether useless and unprofitable, and was sold in 1815... to be used as a dredger upon shoals in the river"*. But James Maggs who offered this opinion, mentioned that the bar was later frequently impassable in January/February 1837, and in 1833, and there is even reference to its existence in 1819. (16(a)) The north pier was repaired in 1811 to provide a better bulwark against the shingle (23(a)) but it was not extended in length seawards. (16(a)) (The north pier may have been extended following Mr Rennie's report (see Page 19) in 1820 or soon after. Contemporary maps are small in scale and suggest that both piers were of roughly the same length. There is no conclusive evidence on this point.)

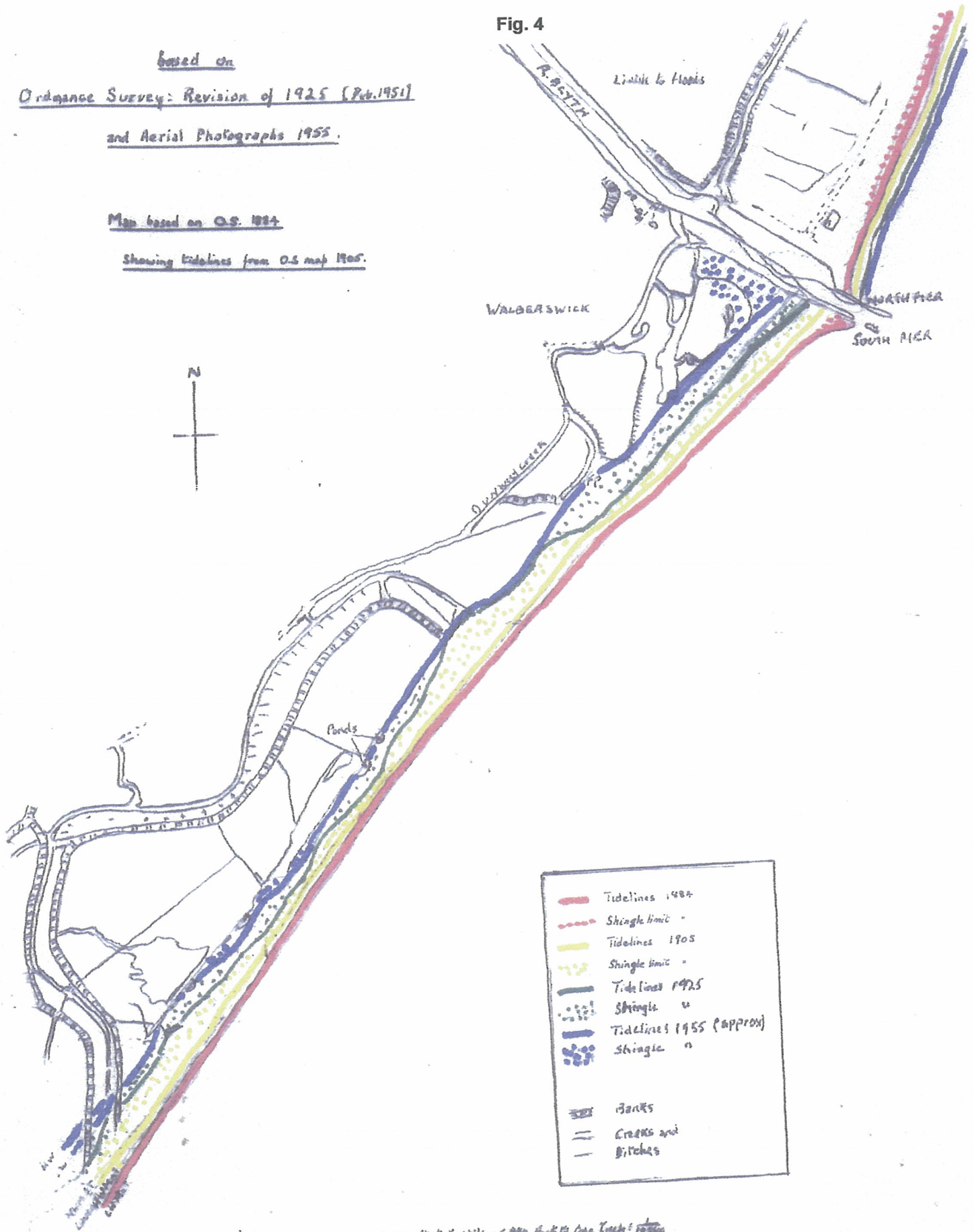
In fact the situation had deteriorated a stage further, the accumulating shingle being such that the harbour itself became constantly blocked. Between 1805 and 1818 it had to be dug out thirteen times, especially bad years occurring in 1810-11 when it was blocked six times, and in 1817 when it was blocked twice. (18(f): 20(e))

Shoals in the river were another problem. In 1806 Mr Johnson of Woodbridge was directed to make a survey, and he took soundings, tide readings, water depth and wind direction readings, recording them regularly for more than twenty years. (18(f)) The adverse effects of strong winds from the N.E quarter on the state of the harbour received emphasis in his conclusions.

based on
Ordnance Survey: Revision of 1925 (Pub. 1951)
 and Aerial Photographs 1955.

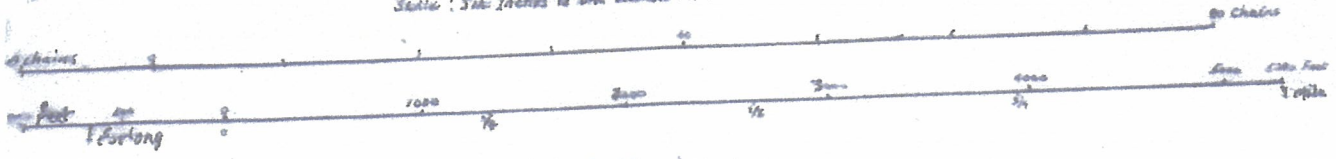
Map based on O.S. 1884
 Showing Tidelines from O.S. map 1884.

Fig. 4



- Tidelines 1884
- - - Shingle limit -
- Tidelines 1905
- - - Shingle limit -
- Tidelines 1925
- - - Shingle " "
- Tidelines 1955 (approx)
- - - Shingle " "
- Banks
- Creeks and
- Ditches

Scale: Six Inches to one Statute Mile or 800 Feet to One Inch



In 1812 Mr Smith was asked to make a survey, following the crisis in the preceding year. He made two reports - in October and November 1812. In the first he insisted that there was *"much more to fear from the shoals in the river than from the bar without"*. In the second he suggested as a means of improving the bar, that the piers should be abandoned, and *"a new cut made along the Old Dunwich Creek, with an outlet to the sea from the foot of the Island of hard land (ie Black Ness) which lies between Sir Charles Blois's sluice and the sea."*

He calculated that a new outlet might be kept open without works. The Commissioners of the Harbour may have been impressed, but found it impracticable owing to the "powers of the existing Acts". Mr Smith's first report was the more sane, but was apparently forgotten, though the 'Good Intent' did something to remedy the shoals in the river from 1815 until 1817. (18(f))

In the latter year the harbour being twice blocked up by the bar, the Commissioners were prompted to consult another engineer, Mr Rennie, who was then working at Yarmouth Harbour. In 1819 Mr Rennie made his survey and his report followed in the following year. (16(a)) He commented on the *"bar of shingle a short distance beyond the piers, which not only shifts its position, but varies much in height"*. He attributed much of the shoaling in the harbour and the growth of the bar to lack of scour from the river during the ebb tide. This in turn was due to the embankment *"of about 1100 acres of ground, over which the tides used to flow - of these about 550 are ancient embankments, - 200 were embanked about fifty years since, - 100 in 1780, - 100 in 1804, - 100 in 1907, and 43 in 1818... the greater part being at Blythburgh"*. He estimated that the diminished force of the current was in the proportion of about ten to four.

His observations at the river mouth were to this effect: beach material was moved both northwards and southwards, but the northerly tendency prevailed: the flood tide came from the north east (1 $\frac{3}{4}$ to 2 mph in a good spring tide) and ebbed to the north east; the north east and east winds bringing the heaviest seas accumulated shingle against the north side of the north pier and this set around its point into the harbour's mouth. When strong south west winds prevailed a similar process took place, in reverse. Thus the harbour became choked and channels were cut through on the inside of the piers.

He concluded that the piers should be of nearly the same length but that if anything the north pier should be the longer - the south pier was then twenty feet longer than the north pier. Rennie advised that the north pier should be extended about twenty-five feet which would give it an advantage over the south pier by about five feet. As to the river, he suggested that "reservoirs" should be created by the damming up of Dunwich and Howlett's creeks and opened at low tide to contribute to the ebb scour which was all important in sweeping the harbour clear. The upper river, he suggested, should be straightened as far as possible,

made regular in width, and the sides "regularly sloped".

Such was the main content of Mr Rennie's report. His reasons for suggesting the dominance of northerly drifting of beach material is presumably based on the greater effects of the ebb tide, although why he then hesitatingly preferred to lengthen the north pier rather than the southern one is difficult to follow. The previous evidence of the dominance of strong winds from the north east quarter, and the part played by wave action under their influence, escaped his observation. He gives no mention to the orientation of the piers as a factor of importance. Otherwise however, the conclusions that he reached might well have been taken to heart. But the Harbour Commissioners appear to have been discouraged and allowed "the report to be laid on the same shelf with that of Mr Smith". (18(f))

In January and February 1827 there were heavy gales and on the 24th of the latter month: ...*"carriages went to and from Walberswick during the day beyond the piers, being from 30-40 feet dry beach"*. (23(b))

In the following year the advice of Mr Cubitt, an engineer working on the new harbour at Lowestoft, was consulted. In his report (April 14th 1829) he was more encouraging than his predecessors had been (his proposals being less far-reaching?), and suggestions for deepening the harbour were put into effect, no doubt prompted by the renewed blockage in 1830 and the following high tide when there was *"10 feet of water"*. (23(c)) The old dredger was found inadequate and in 1833 was superseded by an expensive steam dredger. (18(f): 23(c)) The bar again increased and shoals appeared within the harbour.

In 1838-9 "not only persons, but even horses and carriages for many days passed outside the pier head. A great number of vessels were inside: no water flowed out; it was a perfect lake, and there was a number of vessels inward bound that could not get in, beating about for shelter in Yarmouth roads". (16(b))

Following this, it was found necessary to re-employ a dredger (the former one had been sold) and one was hired from Lowestoft and used throughout 1839, again at considerable expense. This action was hastened by the complaints of the shipowners and merchants who had to pay the harbour dues.

Lieut. Ellis RN made a report on the harbour improvements (June 27th 1839) which this came about, and Robert Wake (23(a)) writing in the same year, uses this report to show that things were then *"in a better condition than it is known to have enjoyed, at least in the memory of the present generation"*. The channel had been deepened - *"the Bellar shoal excavated and removed - the lower flat dispersed - the upper flat, a sand bank extending from Walberswick to near Black shore in the middle of the river, has been dredged out - the channel in the*

river contracted and made as regular in width as possible... - the sides regularly enlarged and sloped, and the waters of both flood and ebb made to pass in the same channel - the jetty removed - the Blackshore Quay made accessible to the shipping - the outlets from the salt and Dunwich creeks pointed towards the harbour's mouth". "418 vessels have arrived and sailed from our harbour during the year ending 25th June 1839"; 192 licensed boats in the port were engaged in shipping. (23(e))

Considerable improvement at last seems to have been made, but Wake rather oversteps himself in his desire to impress. He does not mention the stoppage of the mouth in 1836-8. He says that the recommendations of Mr Smith, Mr Rennie and Mr Cubitt *"have been carried into effect, upon a regular plan, as far as can be considered consistent with the power vested in the Commissioners"* or *"with the provisions of the existing Act of Parliament"*. (23(f))

The latter he notes prevented the adoption of Mr Smith's plans for an unpiered mouth at Black Ness, and those of Mr Rennie to create reservoirs of Dunwich and Howlett's creeks. Wake's own comment on the latter was that, if adopted, injury *"would accrue to the marshes"*. In fact the improvements put into effect were concerned primarily with the use of the dredger as applied in and along the river, measures which did not really strike at the root of the problem. One of the main difficulties in seeking even the preliminaries to a solution was the lack of unified action as seen in the division of interests, especially between the powers and jurisdiction of the Harbour Commissioners on the one hand and the River Commissioners (in charge of the Blyth navigation etc) on the other.

In their deliberations in August 1839, the Committee set up by the Harbour Commissioners considered all kinds of evidence and suggestions relating to possible means of improvement. *"Several of the River Commissioners..... contended that much might be effected by an addition to the north pier."* In support of this a local seaman suggested that it might be extended 50 yards in a S.S.E. direction. This *"would ensure a scour of the ebb tide and would cover half the superfluous width between the piers, and the angle being filled with beach would sufficiently narrow the Harbour's mouth"*. (18(g)) The suggestion is interesting in the light of later developments, but the argument is odd: apparently the existing mouth was considered too wide.

The Harbour Commissioners decided yet again to call in outside advice, and the evidence of the Committee was submitted to Mr James Walker. In his report (16(c)) he enlarged on the theme propounded by Mr Rennie in 1820, giving further details of the acreage of marsh enclosed and the number of cubic feet of water thus excluded. (See Table 2) He recommended the deepening of the main channel, and the conversion of Salt Creek *"into a basin for backwater"*.

Table 2

From Mr James Walker's Report: 1841

"Table showing the area of the embanked lands, formerly overflowed by the tidal waters of the R.Blyth: with their situation and level below a 6 ft. 6 in. spring tide; and the quantity of back water excluded thereby from scouring the Harbour."

Parish in which situated	No. of acres reclaimed including walls etc.	Av. level below a tide of 6' 6"	cu. ft. of water excluded	Claimants	
No.	Marsh	Acres	Ft. in.	cu.ft.	
1.	Southwold	171	3. 3	24,208,470	Southwold
2.	Ditto.				
	New Marshes	36	0. 6	784,080	Corporation
3.	Reydon (from Wolsey Creek)	254	3. 6	38,470,840	Col. Barne E. of Stradbroke
4.	Reydon with Easton	94	1. 9	7,165,620	Sir T.Gooch and others
5.	Walberswick	79	2. 6	8,603,100	Walberswick Town
6.	Ditto	146	1. 9	11,129,580	Ditto
7.	Blythburgh East of Bridge	83	2. 0	7,230,960	Sir Charles Blois
8.	Bythburgh West of Bridge	72	1. 0	3,136,230	Ditto
9.	Bulcamp	150	2. 3	14,701,500	Ditto
10.	Ditto	105	3. 0	13,721,400	E. of Stradbroke
11.	Ditto				vice
	N.E of Blythford	80	2. 6	8,712,000	Sir John Rous dec.
12.	Ditto				Ditto
	N.W of Blythford	86	1. 9	6,544,780	Ditto
13.	Ditto @ Bulcamp	58	0. 6	1,263,240	Ditto
14.	Ditto				
	S. side of River	60	0. 9	1,960,200	Ditto
15.	Wenhaston	30	0. 6	653,400	Wenhaston Parish
		1504		148,296,490	
16.	Dunwich				
17.	Westwood	1200	sluice	118,637,192	Sir Charles Blois and Col. Barne
18.	Dingle Marshes				
		2704		266,933,682	
	Add				
19.	Rous's sluice 1747 drains about -	500	sluice	49,432,162	Earl of Stradbroke Vice Rous.
	Old Tidal Reservoir:	3204		316,365,844	

He stressed the need for *“perfect understanding between Harbour and River Commissioners, whose interests are almost the same”*. (cp 18(h))

On the basis of this report, the Harbour Committee *“passed resolutions recommending application to Parliament for a new Act, so framed as to reconcile and unite the interests of the Harbour and the River, with a view to consolidating the two Commissions”*. (18(h)) The Harbour Commissioners gave their approval, but the River Commissioners *“declined to have their Commission consolidated with that of the Commissioners of the Haven”*. This decision was but an indication of the diversity of interest between the two bodies, the desire to reclaim valuable land on the one hand and the desire to maintain a good harbour with an adequate scour on the other.

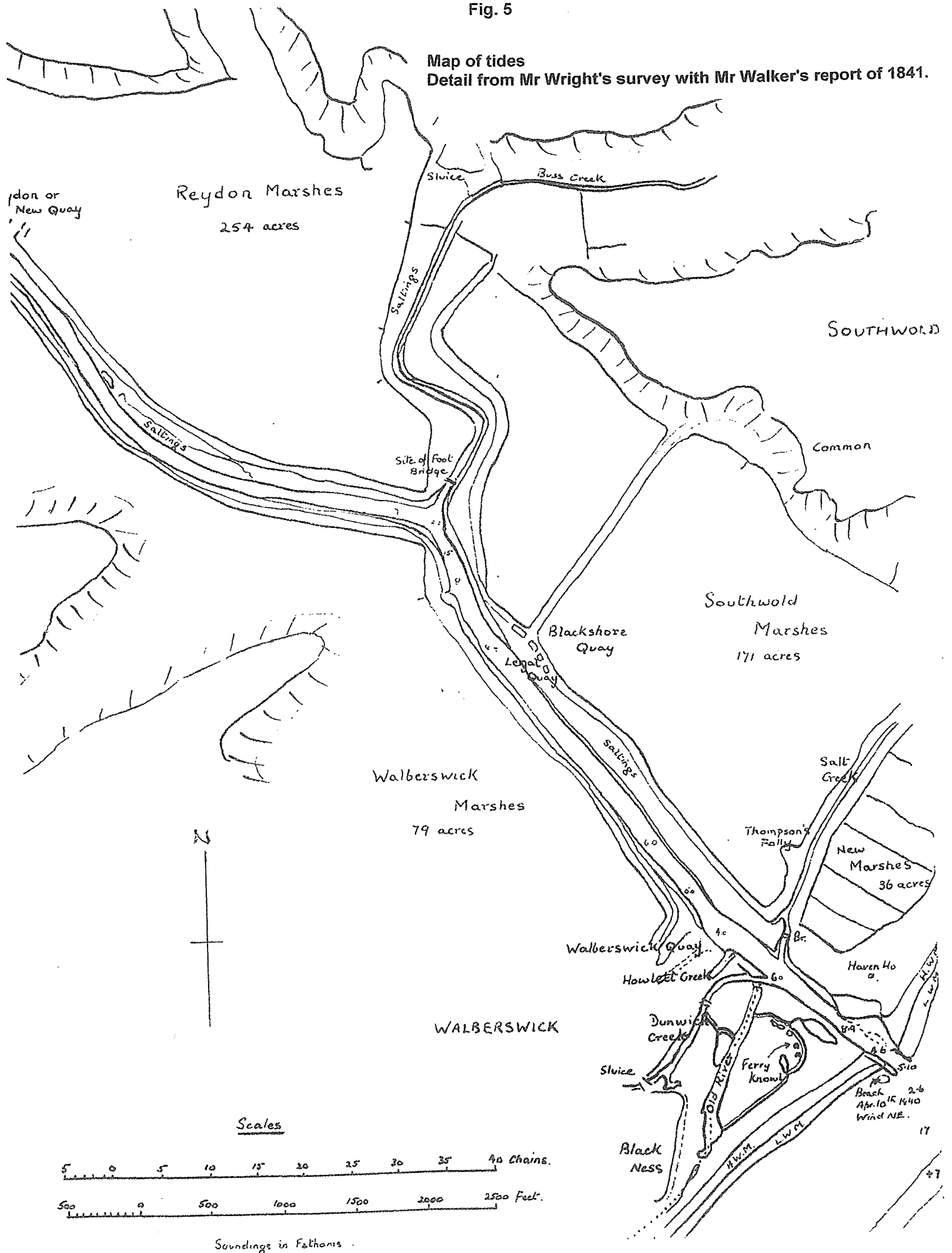
August 1844 saw yet another report (16(d)) on Southwold Harbour and the River Blyth, this time by and Admiralty surveyor, John Washington. He took evidence from the Harbour Commissioners and others, and had access to the previous surveys and reports. Some preliminary remarks and description were based on Mr Wright's survey which accompanied Mr Walker's report. (Fig. 5) He also supported Mr Rennie in condemning embankment. The river was navigable on the flood for vessels of about 200 tons as far as Reydon Quay, at 1½ miles from the mouth, and then by wherries or barges four miles further up to Bulcamp lock, the limit of tidal water. The average range of tides at the mouth was five feet with an average rate of two knots. Embankments had reduced the area covered by tidal waters from 2000 acres to 450 acres, thus excluding 150,000,000 cubic feet of water at a common spring tide. The law in regard to these embankments (Act 46 Geo. III c.153) stated that: *“all land subject to the flux or reflux of the sea and the soil of all navigable rivers in England belongs to the crown”*. Further, *“no length of time can legitimise such encroachments”* as have been made.

From a depth of three fathoms at a quarter of a mile from the coast, the sea floor rose to a ridge called 'Sand Haile' or 'Hill's Knoll' within 250 yards of the shore and extending parallel to it, having a depth of only six feet. *“Between this and the shore, the water again deepens to 12 and 15 feet, until we approach the 'Harbour Shoal' a sandy flat, caused by the meeting of the outset of the river within the coast stream; and on this, as a base, a shingle bar rests, usually in a crescent like form but varying in shape and height, according to the prevalent winds”*. (Fig. 5)

His suggestions for improvement were that (a) there should be dredging and some straightening of sharp angles in the river, and (b) the piers should be

Fig. 5

Map of tides
Detail from Mr Wright's survey with Mr Walker's report of 1841.



extended about 100 yards (*) (12 feet at low water springs) and curved *“slightly to the eastward, till outer ends approach each other to within 80 feet, and, to open out to the E.N.E instead of to the S.E as at present”*. (See plan by E. K. Calver R.N. Fig.6) The idea was that the pier heads should be *“in the strength of the coast current”*, and that the opening of the harbour to the E.N.E would *“cause the outlet ... to harmonise with the ebb stream along the coast, instead of meeting it at right angles”*. A further suggestion was that groynes should be erected along the shore *“to retard beach drifting”* - an important, and apparently obvious point, hitherto ignored.

Washington admitted that in his plan some sand and shingle would collect in the harbour mouth periodically but this was, he said, *“a much less evil than having an impassable bar at its mouth”*. He agreed with Mr Walker that Salt Creek would form an *“admirably sheltered basin that ships could lie in”*. On the whole, however, whilst improvement was possible, he thought Southwold would never be a very important harbour, and *“certainly not a harbour of refuge”*.

In 1845 a Royal Commission on Tidal Harbours received a report (16) on Southwold Harbour, also stressing the reduced tidal scour due to embankment, but apparently the matter was overlooked. A petition (16e) to Parliament was presented (August 15th 1848) by a group of local men who had to suffer the *“bad bar a sluggish stream”* and also pay high dues. The dues on coal and corn were said to be 100% above those paid at Great Yarmouth. They complained that the Harbour Trustees were largely self-elected and included only one sailor. They wanted a *“Tidal Board of conservancy, free from local or private interests or prejudices”*. The Bailiffs of Southwold were themselves enclosing land and taking rent, which was not even put to improving the harbour and the river. (cp 20(f))

Even following this petition, there was no evidence of any action. No doubt the other *“interests or prejudices”* proved themselves the stronger.

The trade of Southwold declined with the utility of the harbour and the growth of Lowestoft, which was now well served by railways. It is true that Southwold also became the proud possessor of a railway in 1879, but it came late, was small with a narrow gauge, and did not, significantly, at once serve the harbour itself. In 1884 the Blyth navigation was closed and the Harbour Commissioners *“gave up the ghost in 1888, when this ancient Haven became derelict”*. (20(f))

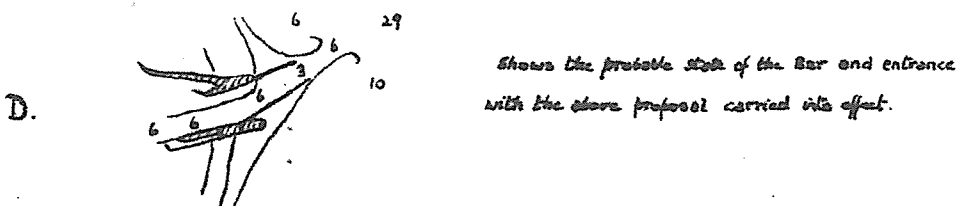
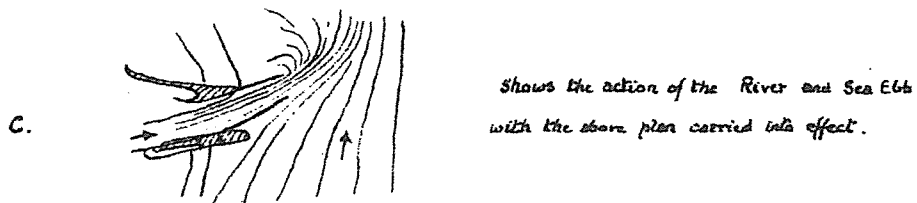
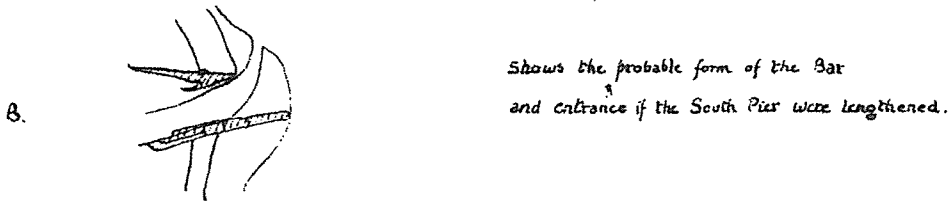
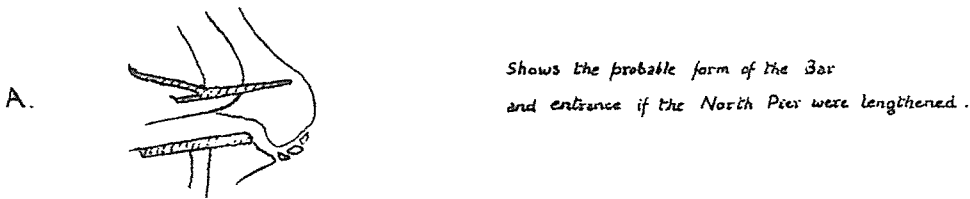
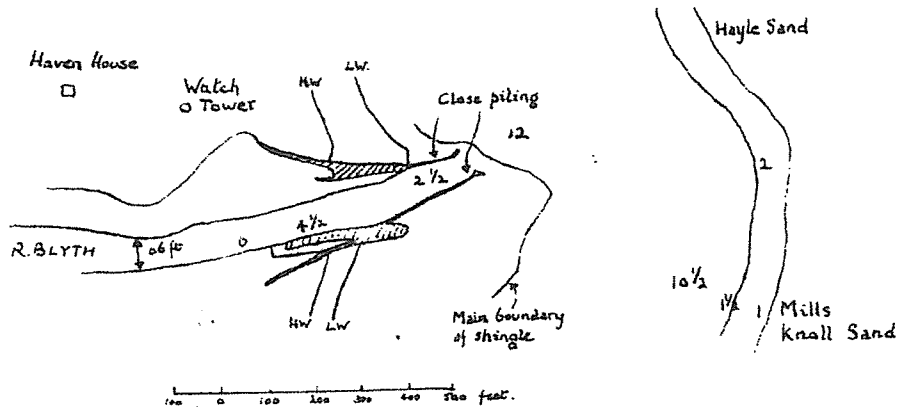
Since John Washington's report, troubles at the mouth of the river had continued. In 1859 people were able again to walk across the entrance and also in the spring of the following year. As the ferryman described it *“you might sit on*

(*) They already projected about 100 yards beyond the line of the coast. The width of the entrance was 15 feet.

Fig. 6

PLAN FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF SOUTHWOLD HARBOUR

E. K. Calver. R.N. 1844.



Soundings etc. taken from Mr. Wrought's Survey of 1840.

Depths in Fathoms.

the pier heads, the beach forming a convenient footstool below". (27) A contemporary observer described the movement of shingle around the two small piers: "A spit of shingle seaward of the North Pier Head overlaps it and spits lie off both pier heads. The proposal at present entertained by the harbour authorities to carry out the North pier 200 feet in 5 years, at the rate of 40 feet per annum, will, in all probability, barely keep pace with the attendant accumulation of shingle from the northward". (27)

A schooner of 60 tons burthen represented the maximum tonnage entering the harbour in 1861. The entrance was again reported blocked in July 1865 (27), and cannot have improved sufficiently down to 1888.

Throughout the century there was a continuous struggle at Southwold to find adequate protection from cliff erosion. Experiment was made with groynes and breakwaters at considerable expense and it became obvious to some that the checking of erosion at this point, and the long-shore movement of shingle and sand were not unconnected with the troubles at the harbour. (25)

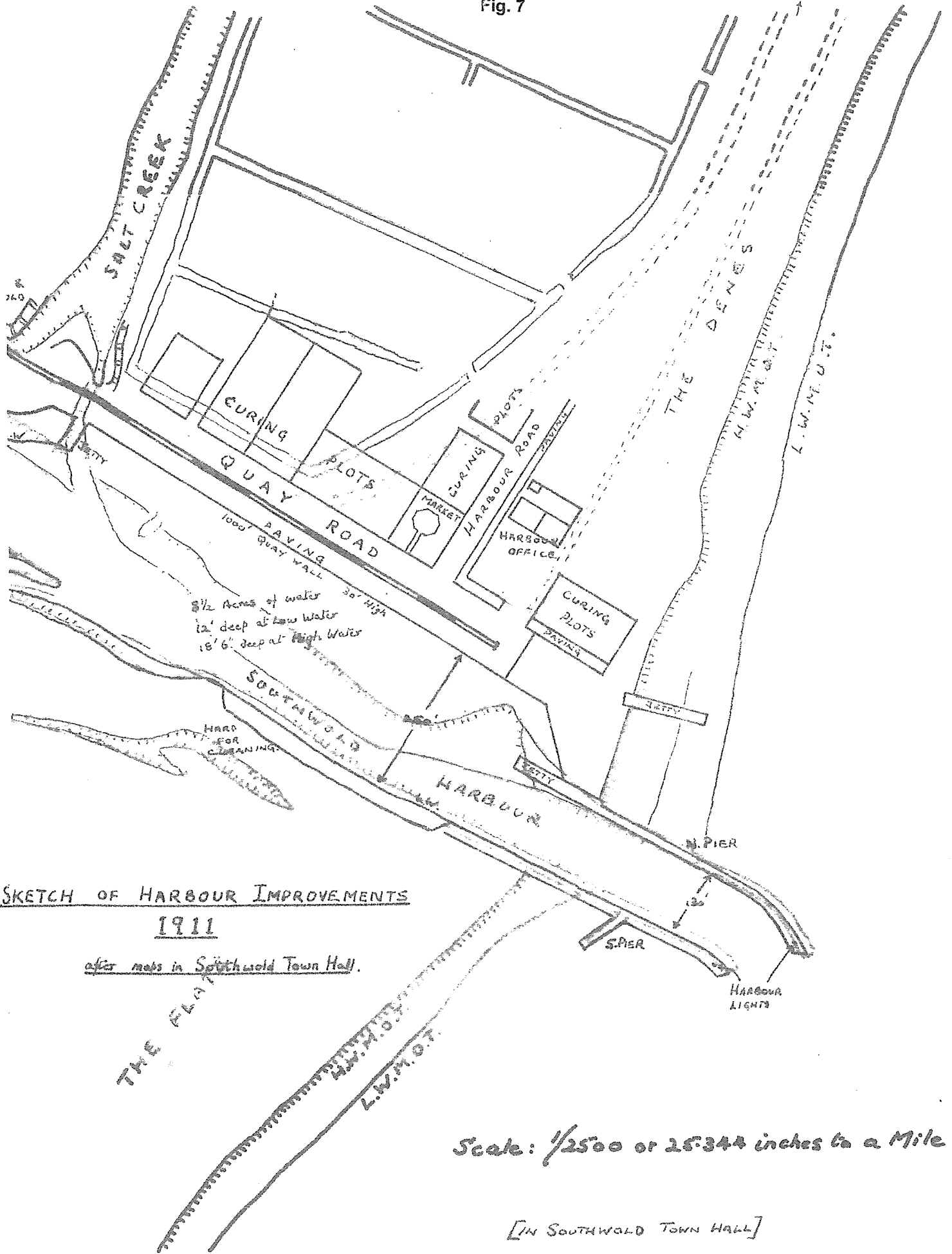
6. Into the 20th century - attempted revival

At the turn of the century a most extraordinary revival took place. The rapidity of its conception and implementation was only matched by that of its subsequent failure. In 1898 a Board of Trade authority was obtained, abolishing the old Commissioners and vesting the harbour in the Corporation. (22d) The North sea herring fishery had become extremely prosperous and the notion was that Southwold might capture some of the trade that at times proved too much even for the capabilities of her thriving northern neighbours, Yarmouth and Lowestoft. A scheme was worked out with the Board of Trade and Messrs. Fasey Ltd., London Contractors, for the development of Southwold as a fishery harbour to relieve congestion. The Government gave grants amounting to £21,000 and Fasey's were to find the rest, conditional on the harbour and adjoining land being conveyed to them free. (22)

The Southwold Harbour Act of 1898 "reinvested the Corporation with their ancient heritage" (20(f)) but they sold the whole undertaking to Messrs. Fasey, who formed and owned the Southwold Harbour Company. The work started officially in August 1906 (26) and was completed by 1908. E.R Cooper, a power behind the scheme, who lived to write of its failure (22(a)), wrote at the time (20(f)) in glowing terms of the "*busy hum*" of workmen, cranes and dredgers - the supposed "*resurrection of the dead sea port*".

The new harbour was dug out a little to the northward of the old one. (Fig. 7) A long and sturdy concrete wall and pier on the north side was backed by dredged out material to form a level piece of land for a quay and harbour buildings. With

Fig. 7



SKETCH OF HARBOUR IMPROVEMENTS

1911

after maps in Southwold Town Hall.

Scale: $\frac{1}{2500}$ or 25.344 inches to a Mile

[IN SOUTHWOLD TOWN HALL]

other refinements, the total cost was of the nature of £60,000.

In 1908 fishing and curing began and in the first year 300 boats brought considerable business; ordinary trading returns came to 6,483 tons. In 1909 the weather was bad but 761 craft used the harbour, the largest being 220 feet long and of 596 tons registered. A grant of £2,700 was obtained from the Government, and a light Railway Order was passed in 1913 for a branch of the Southwold railway to the Harbour Quay. But disagreements arose with the railway company so that the project was not finished when war started in 1914. By then trade had slackened and the grand project "*lapsed into disrepair*". (22(a))

The whole scheme was not taken up after the war. The Southwold railway found that it could not pay its way and ceased to run in 1929. The whole affair fizzled out.

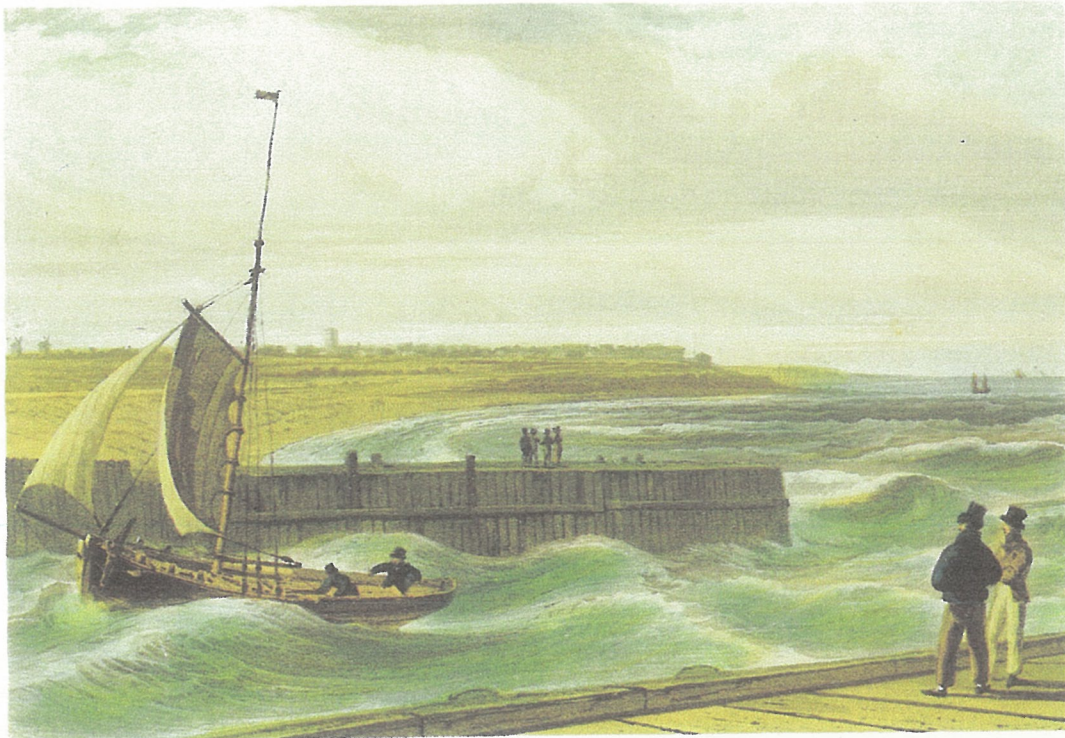
The harbour entrance itself had remained free for a period, but soon sand and shingle began to spill around the north pier and troubles began once again. During 1932, 20 vessels entered with 3,000 tons of coal, but in 1934 only 12 vessels came with 2,000 tons.

The south pier at that time extended inshore to above high water mark, but then ceased; and there was an open beach at Walberswick which acted as a spending or spreading beach for those waves which entered the harbour, dampening them down and reducing surge. The entrance as at present was completed shortly before the second world war. The end of the north pier now bends to the E.N.E. and serves to collect all the onshore waves compressing them into the channel, creating a nasty combination of breaking waves and cross currents on all but the calmest of days. Moreover, the spending beach was replaced by a concrete wall, running from the new south pier (also of concrete, built inside the old pier) along to Walberswick Quay with only a gap to allow the waters of the Dunwich Creek to pass through. The channel was thus constricted and even moderate waves travel right up the river, only dying down towards Blackshore where most craft now tie up.

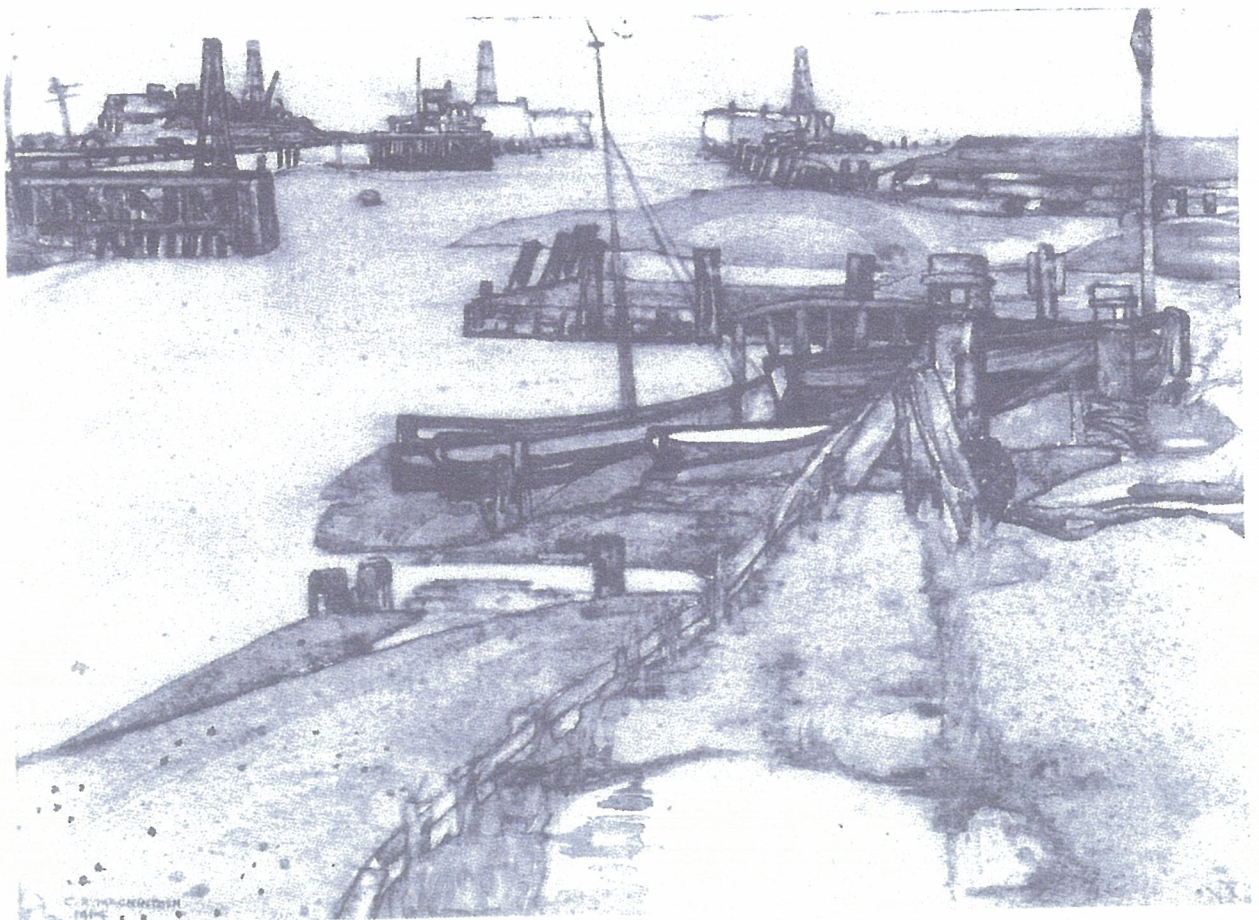
At the beginning of the last war, a gap of about 20 feet was made in the southern pier intending to release waters trapped by the bar which had begun to form at the harbour entrance. Later the Service departments took control of the harbour and enlarged the beach to 90 feet. (22(d))

In 1937 only 13 non-resident vessels entered the harbour, and now scarcely a visiting trader arrives, though some 20 fishing boats are still registered locally.

It is impossible to see any chance of improvement in the near future, though a series of experiments with scale models and a general estimation of the situation



Southwold Harbour 1822. William Daniel. Southwold Museum



Walberswick 1914. Charles Rennie Mackintosh. Private collection

has been recently completed by the Hydraulics Research Station at Walingford. Southwold Harbour was chosen for a study "not because of its economic importance but because it provides good opportunities for studying the techniques of operating hydraulic models on sand beaches". (28) However, the objects of the investigation are of very practical interest to the Southwold authorities and all those interested in the harbour. These objects were:

- (a) to cut down wave action in the harbour which would allow the ferry service to re-open,
- (b) to reduce wave action at the entrance and increase the depth of water for navigation,
- (c) to investigate the possibilities of constructing a barrage (in the neighbourhood of the Wolsey Creek confluence) to allow reclamation of marshes now flooded.

In regard to improving wave conditions in the harbour and river, it was found, after experimenting on the model, that the most satisfactory modification of the existing piers was to extend the north pier in a curve to cover the width of the mouth, thus giving a southerly orientation to the entrance. This arrangement was, on the basis of 50 'tides', also found to give the best results in maintaining a free entrance.

Whether the findings of the investigation represent the last word is open to doubt. (The final report has not been published at the time of writing.) The movement of the shingle along the coast would seem to require more detailed examination; the erection of a barrage on the river would cut down still further the power of the ebb scour. The problem of creating better wave conditions in the harbour may have been solved, and the best modifications within the limits of experimentation, to achieve a clear entrance, decided upon, but it is possible to learn from the past that it is the more gradual, insidious, long term processes at work that lie at the root of the problem.

7. Conclusions

Erosion has taken place along the coast since pre-historic times. It is not possible to estimate exactly the amount of land lost, or the rate of its removal prior to the first accurate maps. It has been estimated that the cliffs at Dunwich have been eroded at an average rate of between one and two feet per annum though the present rate is much less; at Easton Bavents and Covehithe the loss has been greater. (29 and 27)

As a product of erosion, and under the influence of wave action and the dominant north-easterly winds combined, beach material has moved in a southerly direction to form a shingle ridge from Southold to Dunwich, interrupted only by the mouth of the Blyth. It has been shown that the shingle south of the mouth had its origin from cliffs to the north, and not from those of Dunwich, and

that once the ridge was continuous, forcing the Blyth to flow down to Dunwich. (30)

The movement of shingle thus, has been the dominant factor in the changes and stoppages at the mouth of the river. The erection of piers brought a degree of permanence in position, but only temporary freedom from blockage.

Several opinions have been quoted suggesting the dominance of a northerly movement of material rather than a southerly one, notably by the writer of the Harleian Miscellany (24), Mr Rennie (16(a)) and James Maggs (18(g)). Such a state of affairs may have existed temporarily (as now at Covehithe) but there is no doubt over the range of history, as just implied, and the evidence as to the contemporary tendency is unquestionable. Fig. 4 indicates the scale of the shoreline retreat south of the river since the substantial harbour piers were built (1907-11). Both accumulation and erosion here threaten danger in the near future, to the river and to Walberswick respectively.

The movement of beach material has not yet been given sufficient consideration. In all past reports and surveys the problems concerned and their importance have either been ignored or underestimated. E.R.Cooper (25) saw the importance of checking cliff erosion and the inter-relation of this with the harbour difficulties. The erection of groynes along the shore met with opposition, and was found to be no simple process: they were soon buried or undermined and needed constant attention - in fact they presented in miniature the problems of the harbour piers. But without a remedy here, no improvement of any permanence at the river mouth can be expected.

The other problem outstanding is that of maintaining sufficient scour to keep the river and harbour clear. The flood tide now covers about 200 acres beyond the river channel: 80 acres have been recently reclaimed, and the possibility of a barrage is now being investigated (28), so that tidal water may be excluded altogether above the confluence of the Wolsey Creek. A barrage would bring improvement as far as navigation is concerned for it would reduce the tidal currents in the river, but such a development would make a solution of the problems along the shore even more imperative. But movement of sand takes place at considerable depths below low water and this is, as yet, impossible to counter by artificial means. In this respect a strong scour at the harbour entrance has no substitute. Constant use of a dredger would be, under all but the most favourable conditions, economically impracticable.

All these considerations are based on the assumption that the harbour could be made an economic proposition. This in itself is open to question. Neither the economic opportunity nor the natural advantages exist to allow Southwold to become a busy and thriving trading port, rival to Lowestoft. The aims must

therefore be to maintain the harbour in sufficient repair to allow a limited amount of local trade and navigation to continue. But to give permanence to this project a series of expensive measures are necessary at the outset, based on some further research, which will assuredly require constant and equally costly maintenance. The overall expense of keeping the harbour open and serviceable would therefore seem to be in excess of the benefits that would be reaped. However the one alternative would be the closing the mouth and the erection of a sluice as at Minsmere Level; a suggestion that would be highly unpopular. The decision one way or the other must be made soon for the situation is deteriorating again and threatens what trade remains as well as life and property because of the increased chance of flooding. The time to deliberate and to act is before the crisis, but temporary measures, so often resorted to in the past, are no solution.

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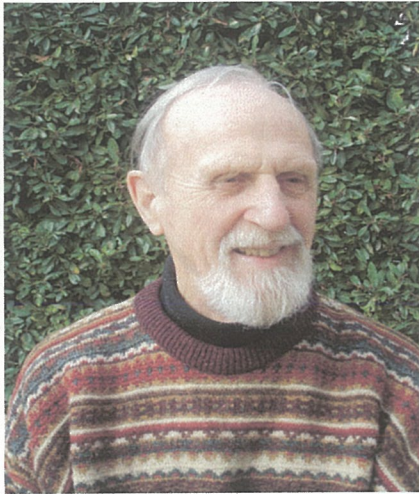
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About the author

Alan Tait Rees was born on 4th August 1931 in Shanghai, China, the son of Rev. Ronald and Janet Rees and brother to Joanna, Tony and Katharine (twin). He was educated at The Dragon School, Oxford and Kingswood School, Bath. After National Service with the RAF in England, Aden and Kenya, he read geography at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, graduating in 1956. He obtained a Certificate in Social Science and Administration at the London School of Economics in 1957. He worked in social development, youth and community services in Tanganyika (Tanzania) (1957-1962), Scotland (1962-1970) and Wales (1970-1975). After obtaining a social work qualification at Swansea University, he returned to Scotland in 1976 to take up a post as Assistant Director with the Edinburgh Voluntary Organisations' Council. He retired in 1993 and was awarded an MBE in December 1996 for his services to the community in Edinburgh, which included transport provision for disabled people and adventure play for children with special needs. He has remained active in these fields in Scotland and internationally, as well as pursuing an interest in painting at the Leith School of Art.

He married Alison Campbell in 1965 and they have four children and four grandchildren. His family has had a long association with Walberswick and Southwold. They had regular holidays in cottages in both places owned by aunts who were keen artists and nature lovers. One, Mary Rees, taught at St Felix School, Southwold, and took a leading role in the restoration of the windmill on Walberswick marshes in the early 1950s (later damaged by fire in 1960). His brother, Tony Rees, inherited Bramble Cottage on Walberswick Common and was active in the local history group until moving to Oxford in 2008.

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