THE HISTORY
OF COODEN MOAT

BY

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Academia Paper 40

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The Battle of Hastings and Cooden Moat

Aim

To raise awareness of a potential invasion route for the Norman Conquest in September 1066.

Introduction

In one of my other Academia papers: *Movements of the Norman Invasions Fleet*, I suggested that the invasion was planned as a distributed attack along the coast of southern England. There are several theories about the Battle location being at Senlac, Heathfield, Sedlescombe and the Brede Valley. I have now researched a likely route for the fleet of some 770 longships and perhaps 200 or more low barges. They would need to have a long shoreline to beach side by side to unload the horses, weapons and small timber castles. When the longships landed, it was traditional to remove the longship figurehead, and this activity can be seen in the Bayeux Tapestry. However, to come inshore was a matter of naval mechanics: oars rather than sails were required for close manoeuvring, and to make certain that one longship did not strike another, oar to oar, there would have to be a wide stretch of shoreline of perhaps 1.5 to 2 kilometres to beach safely and avoid chaos. It would have been impractical to operate an efficient queuing system in which longships once beached had to reverse to make space for another incoming vessel to be unloaded. Everyone would have been impatient to land, and there would be special concern for the pairs of battle horses for each knight, which had been kneeling for the whole journey to keep longship centres of gravity low – once again, the Bayeux Tapestry shows this.

The sea journey itself has been mapped out by the paper published by the Society for Nautical Research: *The Pevensey Expedition: Brilliantly executed plan or near disaster.*

Beachy Head's giant white cliffs would have been a glowing beacon in the night. Then, knowing where King Harold's manors were located at Wilting and Whatlington, it was time to swing along the coast across the wide mouth of what is now Pevensey Marshes (see map below) and then to beach in the area of Hooe and Cooden giving an immediate route to dry high ground with tracks to villages that could be raided for victuals and more horses, with having to circumnavigate the extensive marshes.

Below is the current research I have completed on the likely shoreline of first contact and the subsequent history of the site. Of course I am happy to receive polite criticism or academic argument about my thoughts.

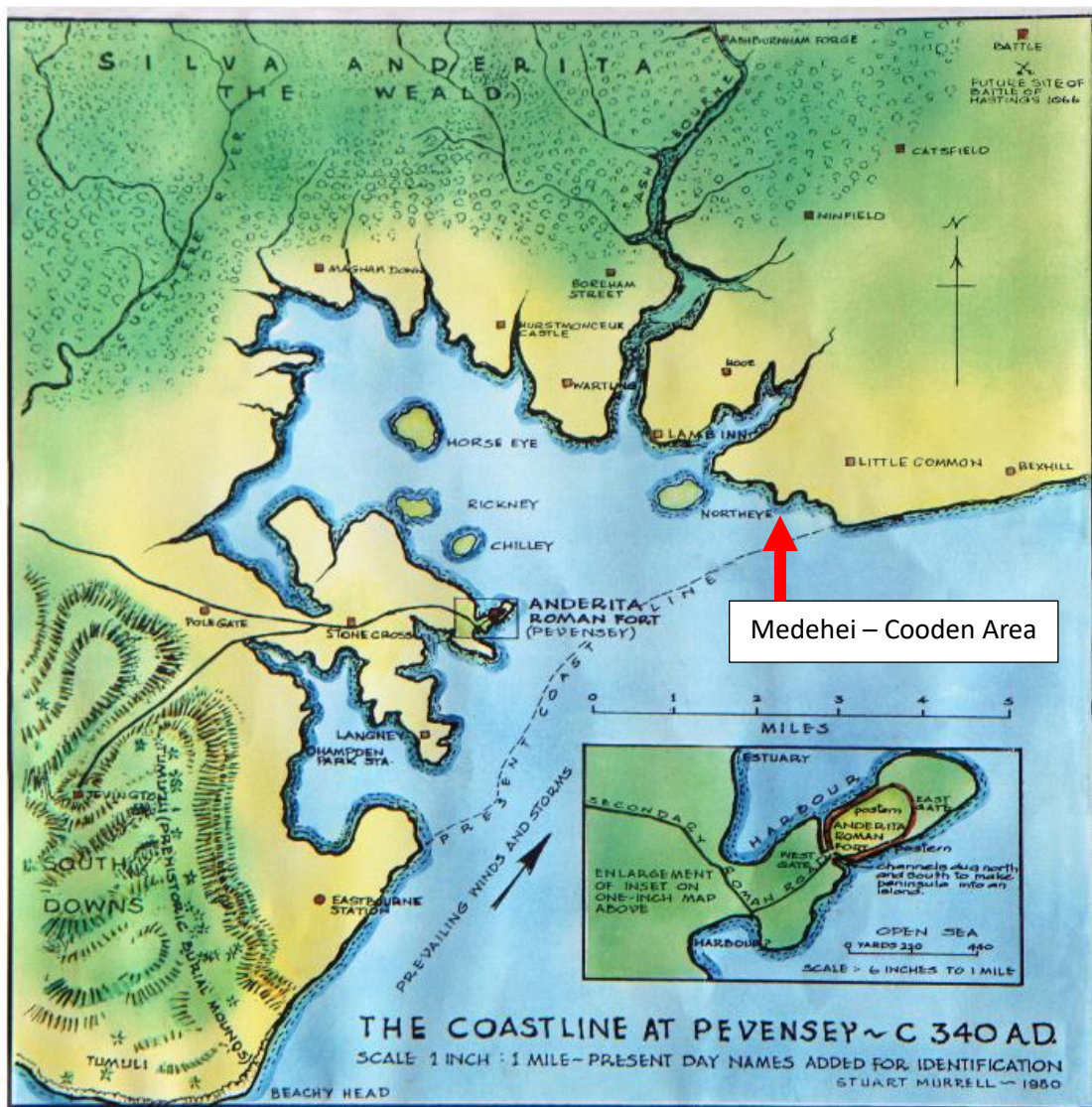David EP Dennis

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29th March 2025

THE HISTORY OF COODEN MOAT

Cooden Moat lies in East Sussex at the edge of the town of Bexhill-on-Sea where it meets Pevensey Marshes. The area has the remains of many ancient settlements, some of which had salt pans.

When the Romans left Britain, this coast was harried for many years by Saxon pirates. Saxon settlements on the coast grew until they covered a large part of southern England we now know as Wessex. The Mercians under King Offa came to the area, signing charters in the 770s. Then came the Vikings with raids into Sussex in the 800s.

The area of Wessex around Bexhill was populated by many named settlements: Some examples are; Pevensey, Hooe, Northeye, Southeye, Medehei, Bulverhythe, Bullington, Barnhorn, Worsham, Pebsham and Filsham.

Medehei – Cooden Area

THE COASTLINE AT PEVENSEY ~ C 340 A.D.
SCALE 1 INCH : 1 MILE – PRESENT DAY NAMES ADDED FOR IDENTIFICATION
STUART MURRELL ~ 1980

In 1066 the coastline was further out to sea with a large shingle bank for landing, and there were extensive marshes at Pevensey which is below sea level. There were also marshes at Bulverhythe, between Bexhill and Hastings in what is now called Combe Valley.
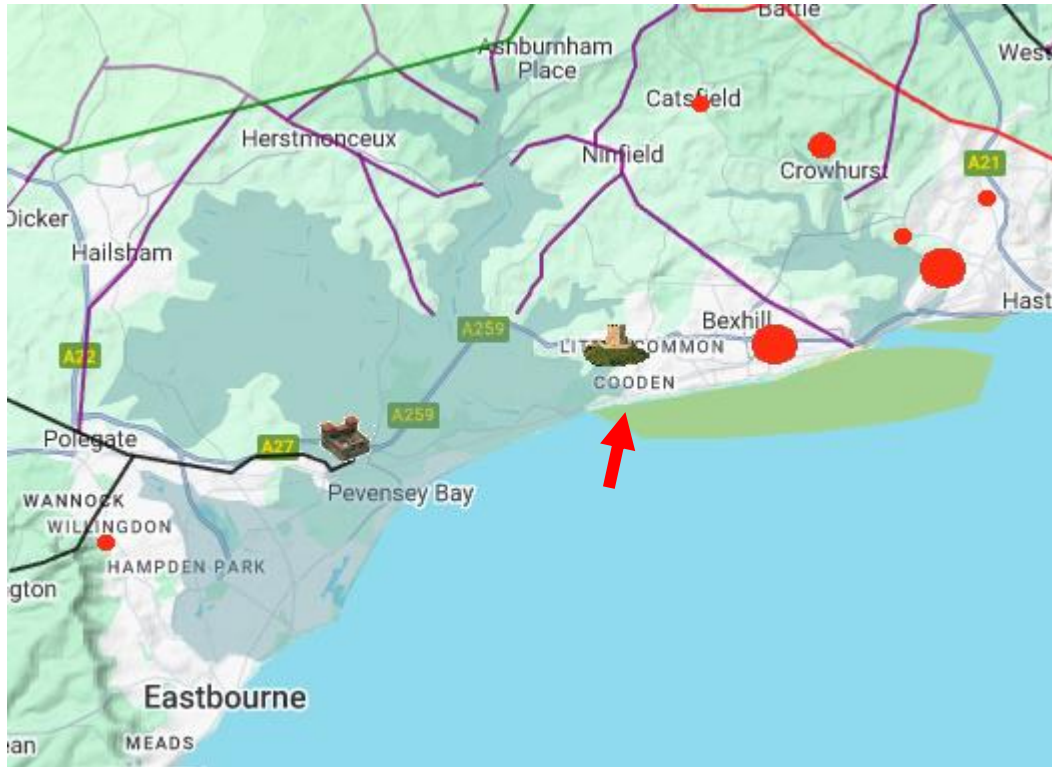
Cooden Landing 1066. Red dots are villages laid to waste by the Normans

Medehei

Medehei was a settlement in Domesday Book, in the hundred of Ninfield. The Domesday book of 1086 recorded a population of 4 households in 1086, putting it in the smallest 20% of settlements recorded in Domesday. Its overlord was Robert, Count of Eu. It had 4 ploughlands. 1 lord's plough teams. 4 men's plough teams, a meadow 2.5 acres, woodland sufficient for 3 swine render and significantly: 5 salthouses.

The land before the Conquest was owned directly by King Edward the Confessor who had appointed Osward of Norton to be its local lord. At the point of the Conquest, it was said to be worth very little - an annual value to lord: 5 pounds 10 shillings in 1086; 1 pound when acquired by the 1086 owner; 4 pounds in 1066.

The lord taking charge by 1086 was Wibert, the man who owned the Herst, later to become Herstmonceux. His name is sometimes written 'Wilbert', and he is said by some to have been a close companion of Duke William and by others to have been Sheriff of Kent before the Conquest, so the picture of Wilbert is unclear.

The location of Medehei is not known for sure. I am putting it forward as being the precursor salt pan settlement renamed Cooden when the de Codyng family took over the land.

Ninfield Hundred was first recorded in the thirteenth century c.1248 and by 1279 the settlement of Medehei had disappeared and instead Cooden was first mentioned. As you will see below, the existence of the manor house was shown in 12th century records before the existence of Cooden as a separate settlement and this is understandable as the name of Cooden is taken from the

Codyng family. By 1296 the taxation system of the day paired Catsfield and Cooden but by 1327 each of the four remaining settlements are taxed separately.

After the Norman Conquest, Sussex was divided up into Rapes and Hundreds. Some of these settlements became known as Manors in the Rape of Hastings. Cooden Manor has been moved legally from its original Hundred of Ninfield to the Hundred of Bexhill.

Local records show a likelihood that Ninfield Hundred originally held Catsfield, Hooe and Ninfield itself but this was not recorded in the Great Domesday Book of 1086.

Cooden Moat

When the Normans arrived, it is thought that a motte and bailey defence structure was sited – a mound and pre-packed wooden keep defence structure surrounded by a moat. The timber was brought over by barge or longship. The word 'motte' comes from 'a clump of turf' and is not connected to 'moat'. It has been suggested that this work to make a raised mound happened in September 1066 as part of the Norman invasion of England as shown in the Bayeux Tapestry.

1200-1299

Later, on the original Norman mound, a manor house was built. This manor was known Codingele in the 12th Century and by 1242 Willam de Coding held the manor with the overlord being the Countess of Eu.

The next named person we can discover is Hugh de Coding who had expanded his holdings in 1264 to own parts of the Lowey of Battle and the high point above the marshes known now as Cooden Down (Codingdune). Hugh died before 1275 leaving a child called John who must have had a guardian until he was old enough to rule his own land.
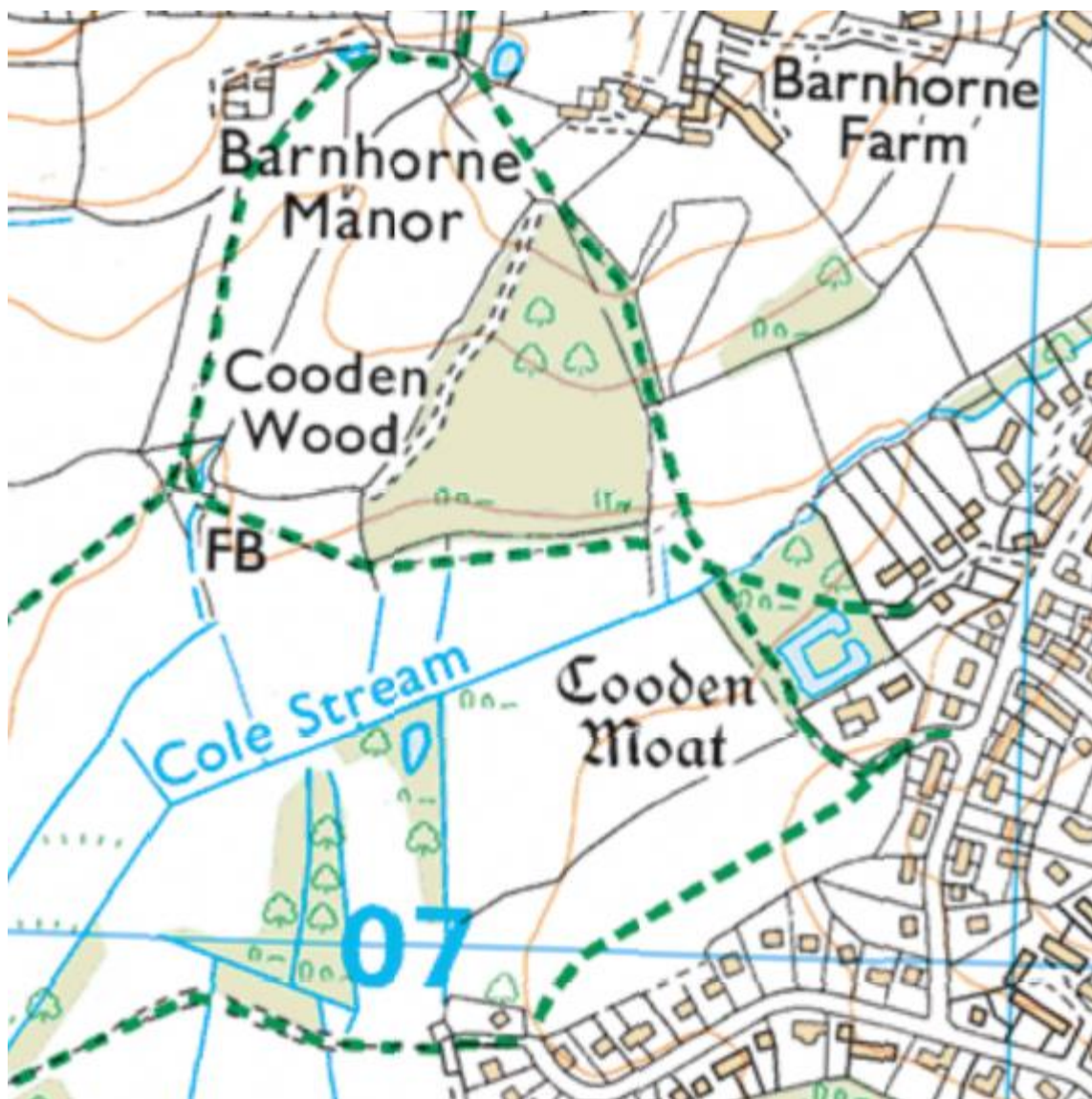
1300-1399

This child's majority came by 1304 when John and the Abbot of Battle Abbey were in dispute about who had the right to graze livestock on Cooden Down. A compromise was reached where grazing rights were shared with other landowners in the Bexhill area.

In 1315 there was a land assessment and John de Coding's lands were worth 8 marks (a mark being 66% of a pound). John was still alive in 1327 but died before 1332 when John's son Richard de Coding began to provide one 'man at arms' as a defence service for Cooden manor. Richard had a son named John and by 1346 he had married Sarah and had four young sons. Inevitably, this John also had one of his sons named John and this man died c.1397 leaving his manor and lands to a kinsman called John Coumbe. This man was a clerk, and he arranged for the manor and lands to be passed to a William Brenchley (Brenchesle).

This John in 1346 had a wife Sarah and four sons, of whom the eldest, John, seems to have died about 1397, when John Coumbe, clerk, kinsman and heir of the last John, released his right in the manor to William Brenchesle or Brenchley?

John Coumbe's legal work and that of his own son called John, who was also a notary public appears in documents connected to land dealings with a minor canon of St Paul's Cathedral in London. These documents were signed in 1397.

1400-1499

In 1411, Lady Brenchley held the Cooden lands and manor separately from the land ownership of her husband Sir William Brenchley.

By 1428 we enter into a small mystery when the Cooden lands and manor were once more owned by the descendants of John de Codyng (reversion name change) and Joan, Lady de Brenchley even though her husband was still alive.

For Cooden Manor and other parcels of lands in the period 1400 to 1470, a mortgage change appear in the records and most importantly the Manor and lands were taken over by a Thomas Baret and his son John in the period 1469-70 and then promptly sold to St Stephen's College, Westminster. By then the manor was called 'Codyngton'.


1500-1599

King Henry VII then took over Cooden Moat Manor. In 1535 the college still listed the lands as the full owner, but by 1549 it had been granted by King Edward VI to Richard Cowper who gave it to Thomas Gravesend and Thomas Sayle.

Cowper, or Sir Richard Cowper as we should call him, built a large house in Capel, Surrey, not far from Dorking right on the edge of Sussex. Thomas Gravesend was a Shoreham merchant who, early on in his career, served Sir John Gage and later began to trade via Shoreham Harbour with France and the Netherlands. It may be that he was involved in the construction of the defence structure know as Gravesend Blockhouse in King Henry VIII's Device Plan of 1539. Thomas Sayle seems not to have been prominent in that age.

These men gave Cooden Manor and land to Sir Richard Sackville and his wife Winifrid who, in time, passed the manor to their grandson Henry. While Henry Sackville owned it, it was taken into the overarching manor of Bexhill.

During the Second World War anti-tank blocks were placed along the beaches at Cooden. At the end of the war, a farmer lifted them and cast them into Cooden Moat.
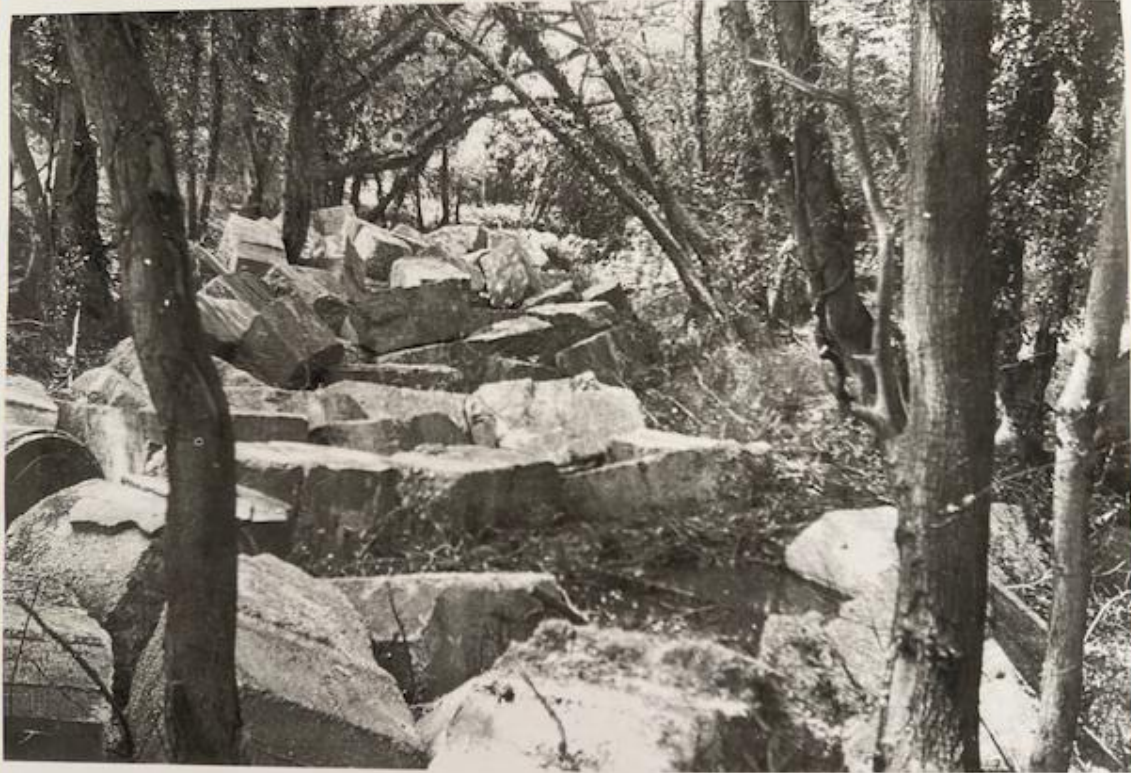
Cooden Moat in 1946

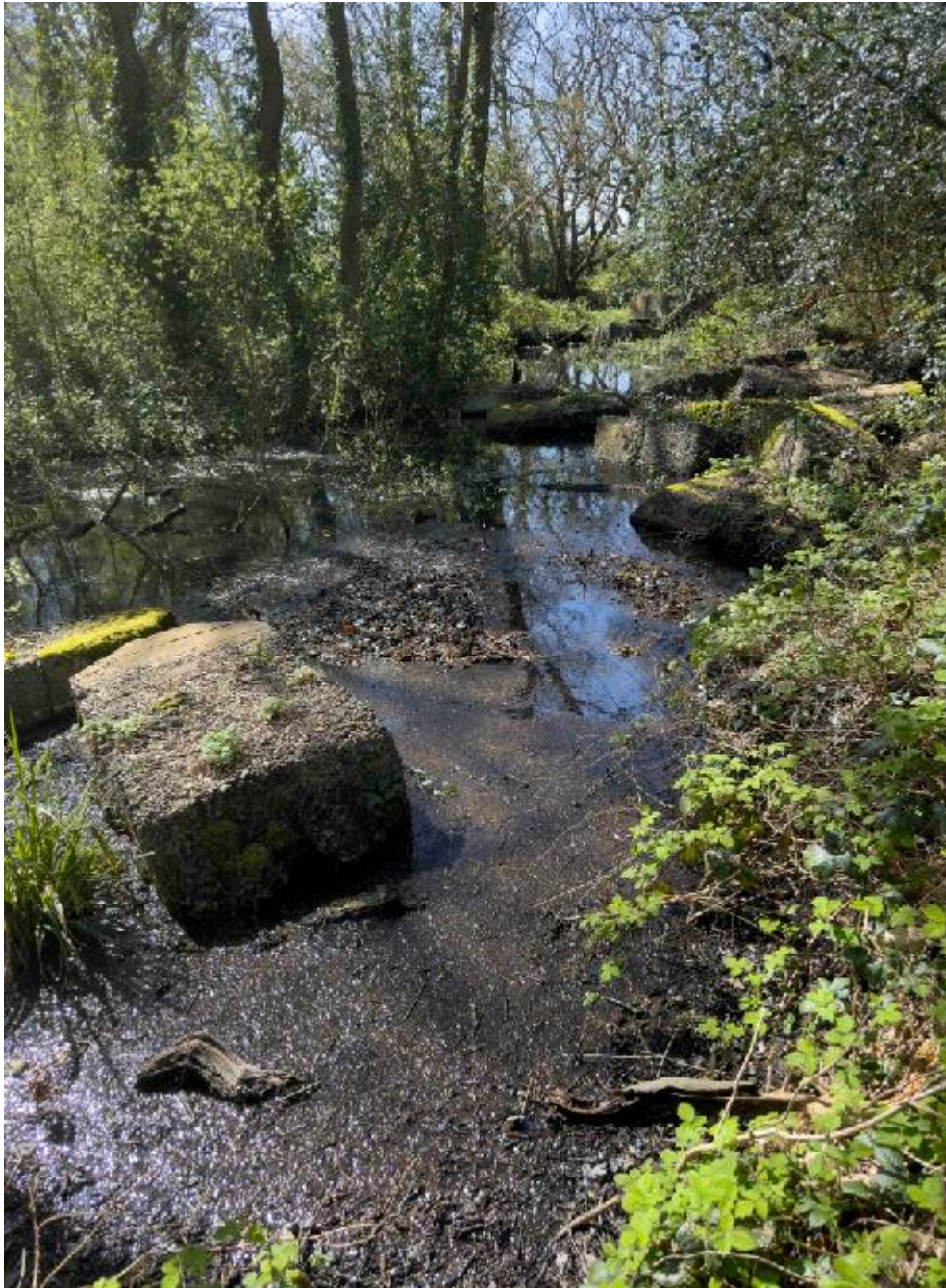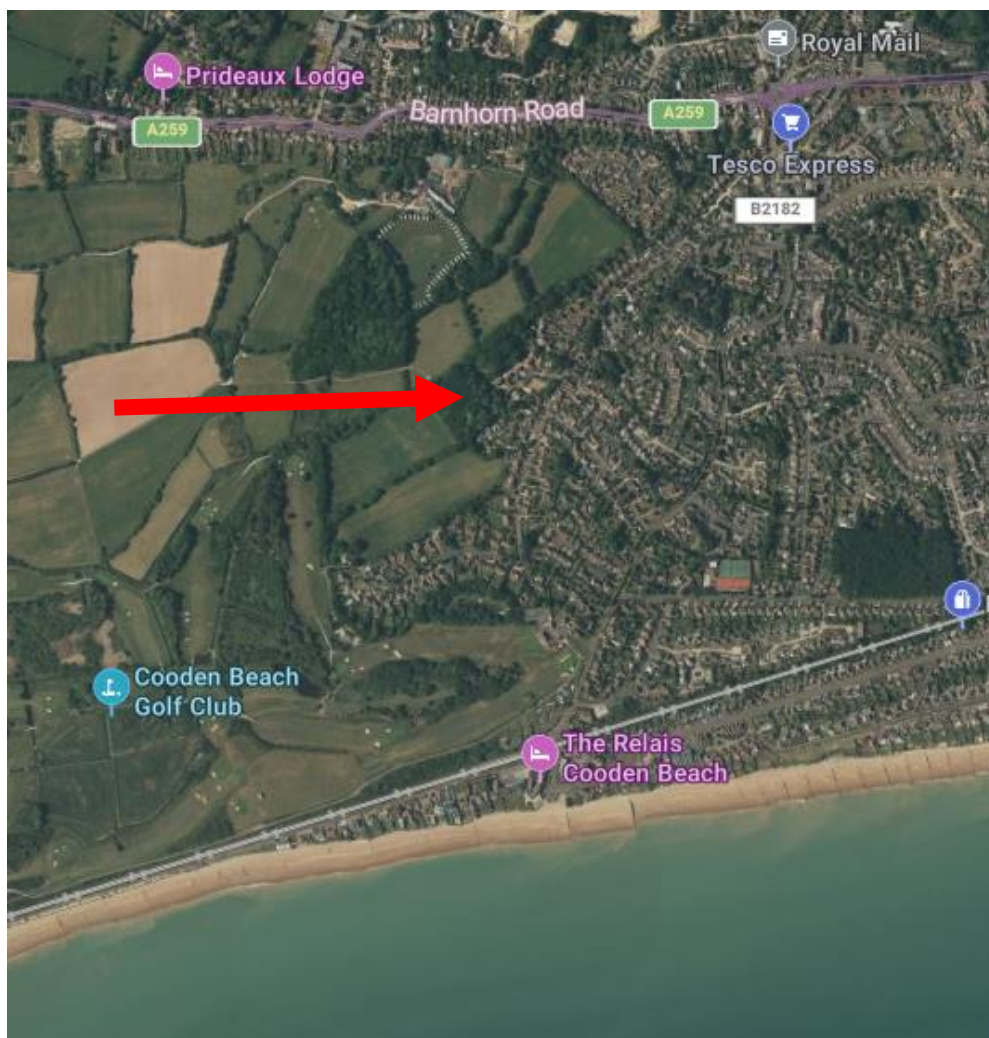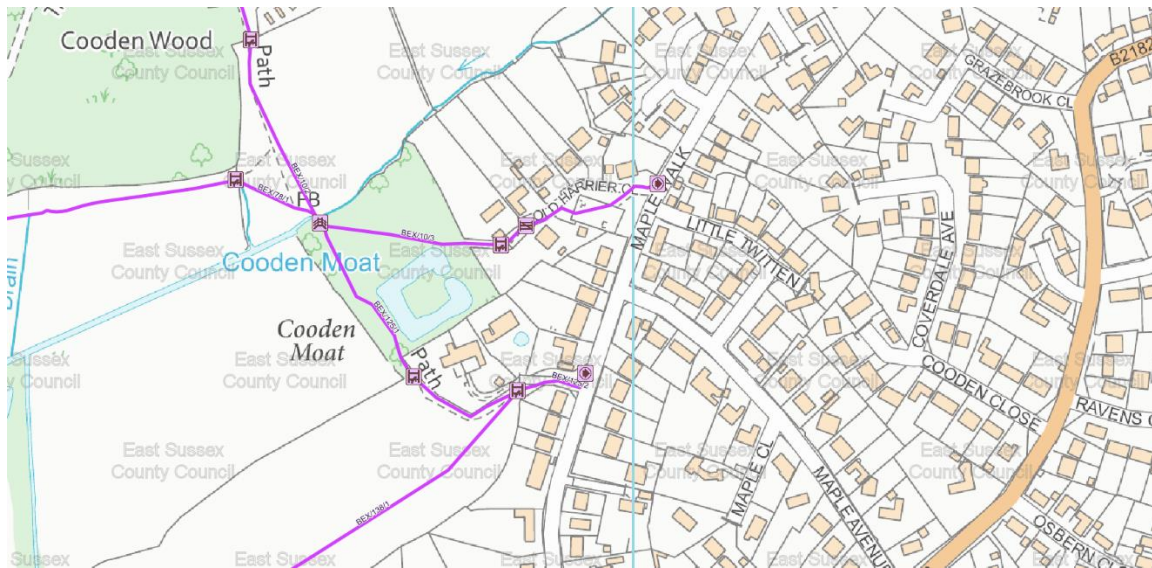Cooden Moat in 1974 – showing rapid sinking of blocks into the moat

Photo: David EP Dennis

In 2024, The area of Cooden Moat is now a wildlife area with birds such as the Wryneck and Nuthatch. The local woods are full of bluebells.

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East Sussex County Council Monument Full Report

24/04/2024   **Number of records: 9**

Cooden

SMR Number	Site Name	Record Type
MES80	Cooden Moat, Bexhill : Medieval moat	Monument

Homestead moat, possibly on site of 13th century manor house

Monument Types and Dates

MANOR HOUSE (Medieval - 1066 AD to 1539 AD)

MOAT (Medieval - 1066 AD to 1539 AD)

MOAT (Post Medieval - 1540 AD to 1900 AD)

Description and Sources

Description

(TQ 70840724) Cooden Moat (NR). (1)
 Homestead moat near Cooding Farm, Bexhill. (2)
A well preserved moat in an area thickly covered with trees. The enclosed area is comparatively small and there is a causeway 3 metres in width on the E side. The moat, some 2.0m deep and between 10 and 15m across is for the most part dry, and many large concrete tank obstacles have been thrown into it. No traces of building footings were observed on the much overgrown enclosed area. (See photo). (3)
 It is believed that Cooden Moat (sometimes spelt Couder, Coding) is the site of a 13th c homestead, the seat of the de Codynges, a family of importance in the locality in the 13th and 14th centuries. [4]
 J E Ray, the Hastings historian, has traced the pedigree of the de Codynges but there appears to have been no record of the actual manor house. From the evidence of old maps it is suggested that the manor house within the moat was demolished between 1813 and 1873. [5]
'Cooden Moat' is generally as described by F1, though waterfilled. It measures c 60.0m E-W by 50.0m N-S and the arms are c13.0m wide. The area around the moat, and the enclosed area are still thickly wooded, and no trace of a building was found. Published survey (25") revised.[6]
This well preserved site has recently been cleared of trees and undergrowth. The enclosed area is comparetively small and entered by a causeway on the east side. No trace of building footings are visible, however, from the evidence of old maps it appears that there was a house which was demolished between 1813 and 1873. The moat is water-filled, though partly obstructed by many large concrete tank obstacles which have been thrown into it. It is believed that Cooden Moat (sometimes spelt Couden, or Coding) is the site of a 13th century homestead, the seat of the de Codynges, a family of some importance in the 13th and 14th centuries. [7]
The first available map which shows the Site in any detail is Yeakell and Gardner's Map of Sussex from 1778. This shows the Site as being part of two fields, and set within a predominantly rural landscape displaying a highly dispersed settlement pattern. This map does not depict the moated site clearly, but does show a building being set within a broadly square enclosure of approximately the same proportions and in the same location relative to the Site as the scheduled moat. The labelling on this map seem to suggest that the Site lies within an area known then as Bexhill Common. By the time of the Surveyors Drawing of 1806, the scheduled Medieval moated site is clearly depicted as a broadly square enclosure to the east of the Site, but it is no longer shown as having a building within it. [8]