

Dunwich Dig 2015

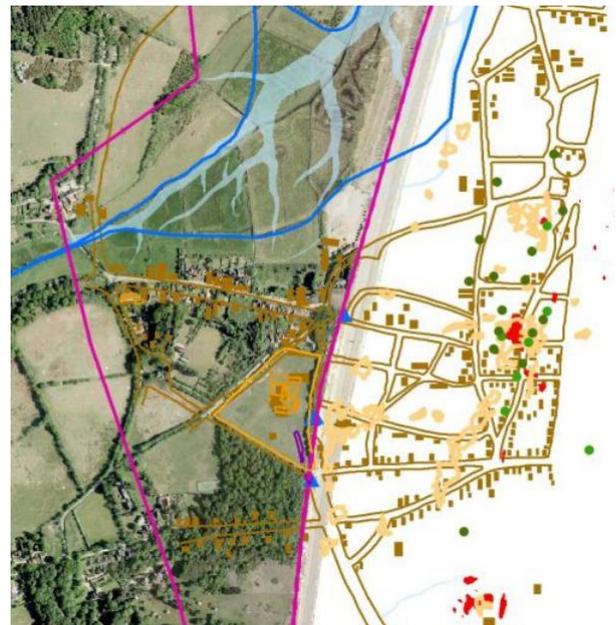
Dunwich, now a tiny village, was once a large and prosperous medieval port that grew wealthy from international trade and thriving fishing and ship-building industries. Over centuries, the coastline has drastically eroded and most of the town is now covered by the sea. In 2015, Touching the Tide, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, will enable local volunteers under the direction of Access Cambridge Archaeology (ACA) to excavate four trenches along the present Dunwich coastline, in order to explore some of the last remains of the medieval town before they too are one day lost to the sea.

The first mention of '*Duneuic*' is in the Domesday survey of 1086, which suggests it was one of the ten largest towns in England during the 11th century. In 1334 Dunwich was one of only three places in Suffolk listed as a borough and the fourth wealthiest place in the county; partly due to substantial investment by its eight churches and three religious houses (Greyfriars, Blackfriars and the Knights Templar). To the north, in the area currently overlooked by the car park, lay the harbour – Dunwich's importance can be seen reflected in its status as a royal harbour.

However, as early as Domesday rapid coastal erosion is recorded at Dunwich, with one of the town's two carucates of land (a carucate was roughly 100-120 acres) recorded as being carried off by the sea between 1066 and 1086. Following storms in 1287, 1328 and 1347 that are recorded as causing major losses of land, property and infrastructure, the town went into decline; the situation was further compounded by national problems of economic crisis and the Black Death in 1348-9. Gradual silting of Dunwich's harbour also caused its status as a royal harbour for building the king's ships to be transferred to Southwold around 1489, causing drastic economic and population decline.

Despite a small resurgence due to a long-range Icelandic fishing fleet in the late 15th to early 16th centuries, Dunwich continued to dwindle in size and wealth - by 1602 the town is recorded as being a quarter of its original size. Today, only the extreme north-western edge of the medieval town remains, primarily around the east end of St. James' Street. Most notably the site of Greyfriars (a Franciscan Friary founded on the east side of Dunwich before 1277 and moved to its present site around 1289) and a few standing remains of its buildings survive. The present village is arranged along St. James' Street and lies outside the medieval town, although it may overlie outlying suburbs.

Archaeological investigations over the last few decades have showed that sections of the bank and ditch which formed the defensive western town boundary, known as Pales Dyke, still survive underneath the cliff-ward edge of Greyfriars precinct boundary. Evidence of medieval occupation has also been found along St. James' Street, which was one of the main entrances to the medieval town. At the westward end of St. James' Street and lying outside the town boundary was the Hospital of St. James, of which only the remains of the Leper Chapel still stand. Another hospital, known as Maison Dieu or the Hospital of the Holy Trinity, existed to the north of St. James' Street. In 2011, a Time Team excavation sought to locate Maison Dieu, which is thought to lie in the beach car park. Whilst no structures were discovered, the finds indicate that a high status, probably



Source: Sear *et al.* (2013) Dunwich Project 5883 Final Report: Mapping and assessing the inundated medieval town.

Present village of Dunwich overlain with map of north-western section of medieval town, using historical maps and archaeology data.

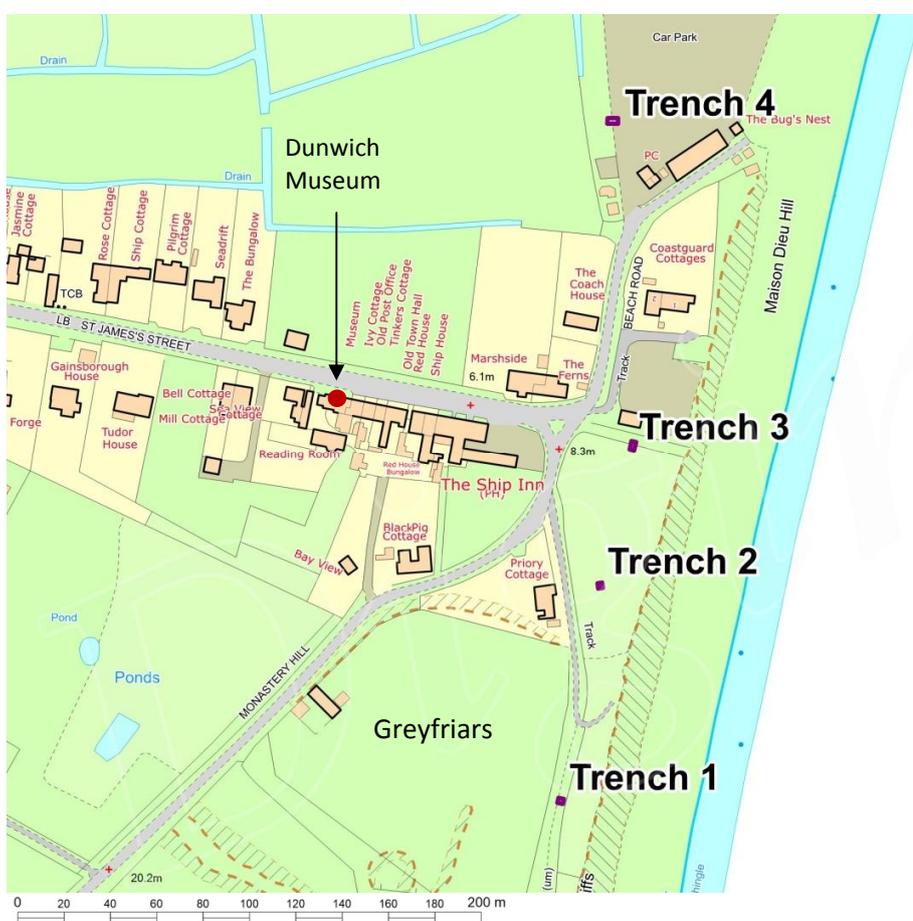
ecclesiastical building existed nearby; together with prior investigations, evidence suggests that Maison Dieu lies partially under the current beach café.

Historical documents and maps record the loss of Dunwich, particularly the dates when all its churches and two of the three religious houses (Blackfriars and the Knights Templar) were lost to the sea. Using the available historical information in combination with sonar surveys of the underwater archaeology, a recent project led by the University of Southampton has improved our understanding of the town's layout. Modelling of land lost shows that in 1250 the Dunwich coastline was approximately 0.6-1km further east than it is today; consequently, there is unlikely to be any archaeological evidence surviving on land to investigate claims that Dunwich began as a Roman fort and was later a coastal Saxon settlement.

An understanding of historical coastal erosion has also allowed the Southampton project to anticipate where the coastline will be in the future, highlighting the importance of exploring the last remainder of medieval Dunwich, especially archaeology inside the town boundary, before it too is lost to the sea.

Please feel free to visit our trenches and see what we have found so far:

I have visited trench:



4

3

2

1

Trench 1 located just outside Greyfriars precinct wall and within the town boundary, this trench aims to explore the nature and date of archaeological remains on the edge of the town.

Trench 2 seeks to investigate the extent of archaeological remains and nature of medieval activity in this previously unexplored area between Greyfriars and St. James' Street, particularly whether it relates to the friary or town.

Trench 3 is placed along the medieval continuation of St. James' Street, which was one of the main entrances to the town – this trench will investigate the road's date and construction.

Trench 4 lies near the Hospital of the Holy Trinity and old harbour edge – past excavations suggest this area is likely to be rich in pottery.

Daily summaries start in the beach car park at 3pm

Open Day: Saturday 1st August, 10am-4pm

For more info, please visit: www.access.arch.cam.ac.uk/reports/suffolk/dunwich-excavations