Background information on the Man-made Features of the Park

Although this is essentially a natural area, relatively untouched by man, some of the features on the park are influence by man’s presence. He has ‘left his footprint’ on the area.

An early settlement at Exceat on the hills above the Cuckmere valley was discovered in 1913. Records show that in 1330 there was a community of about 80 people living on top of the hills. It is believed they were wiped out by the plague, poor harvests and French raids by 1538. The last known resident was Henrius Chesman in 1428.

A walk across the top of the downs reveals lynchets at Coombe Bottom. These are field boundaries formed by ploughing. At the top negative lynchets are formed where the soil is removed and carried down by the plough to form a bank or positive lynchet at the bottom where it turns.

On the floor of the valley are a number of dewponds. These have enriched the landscape of the downs for over two hundred years. They were constructed to provide water for livestock. Traditionally the ponds on the park were lined with powered chalk or clay, a process called puddling, which dried out to form a waterproof layer allowing the ponds to fill with rainwater.

The flint buildings on the park date back over two hundred years. The pump barn is approximately two hundred and fifty years old and the camping barn dates back to 1730. The oldest of the cottages at Foxhole was built in 1828. The modern farm buildings were erected in 1967.

There is a long tradition of smuggling associated with the Cuckmere Valley. It started in 1304 when Edward I imposed export duties on wool being shipped to France to be woven. This sparked the ‘Owling Trade’ when wool was smuggled out of England. This developed into two way traffic across the Channel and the smuggling in of brandy, tea, gin and luxury items from France. One of the area’s notorious smugglers, Stanton Collins, lived in Alfriston in the late 1700’s and used Cuckmere Haven to bring in his contraband. At its height during the war with Napoleon, gangs of 150 to 200 men were carrying contraband smuggled in along this stretch of the coastline up to London.

In an attempt to contain the smuggling soldiers returning home at the end of the Napoleonic War were employed as customs men and cottages were built on top of Seaford Head at the mouth of the river in 1809 to house them. The Coastal Blockade was set up with groups of navy seaman under the command of a group lieutenant based in Martello Towers or Watch houses every 2-3 miles along the coast to defeat the smuggling. The Coastal Blockade also rescued those in danger at sea.

1821 the National Coast was established to patrol those areas not covered by the Coastal Blockade and in 1831 it replaced the latter.
As smuggling declined with the reduction in duties in the 1840’s the national coast took on the role of coastguards, rescuing those in trouble at sea.

During the Napoleonic wars, from 1804 – 1814, there was an embarkation camp for those waiting to be sent to France on the eastern slope of the hill overlooking the present lagoon and a well which can be seen today was built to provide water for horses and men. There would have been timber barracks for officers and tents for the men. These were auctioned off in Sept 1814. The soldiers ran a ferry across the river. Its demolition was listed as part of the auction details of the camp in Sept 1814.

The Second World War has left its mark on the river valley. The main concrete path running down to the sea was a tank road laid down in 1940. The Pill box at the beginning of the park was a 1940’s type FW3/25. There are other ‘Block-house defences’ nearer the coast.

The Ministry of Defence used decoy lights in the 1940’s in the valley to confuse German bomber pilots flying over the coast to blitz London. There was a target range near Cliff End and the eastern valley slopes were farmed by the war Agricultural Committee.

The Valley was heavily mined during the war and there were anti-invasion plans that involved flooding the valley by releasing the sluice gates.

There have been various attempts to establish a crossing over the river. A ferry across the estuary was run by the Coastguards which continued after the Coastguard station was closed. After a short break in 1914, the ferry continued until 1955.

There is believed to have been a wooden bridge (1917) over the river put up by the Canadian Army camped on the hillside in the 1914-18 war. It was still there in 1917 and was aligned with the old causeway across the Chyngton Marshes and causeway from end of the meanders to Foxhole corner.

There have been attempts to develop the valley. There was a car park and caravan site on the side hill near the lagoon between the wars and in the 1920’s visitors could enjoy a cup of tea at the tea hut near the beach. Fears that this would expand led to the setting up of the Park in 1971. The park’s designation as part of an AONB and a Site of Special Scientific Interest has protected against further development.

The beach has been exploited for its gravel. In the 1930’s licences were granted for the removal of sand and ballast from the shingle spit. In 1933 A two foot narrow gauge railway was built which carried sand, pebbles and shingle to a goods yards where the car park is now.

Removal of shingle stopped during the war and started again in 1950. It finished in 1964 but the remains of the railway over a ditch near the first pillbox can still be seen.

The saline lagoon at the back of the beach is man-made and was dug out in 1976 to provide a nesting area for water birds.