Rye Harbour
A history of changing coastline and threats of invasion.

8,500 years ago – chalk landbridge breaks down with rising sea level creating the English Channel and enormous amounts of shingle that will be pushed by waves to create the shingle coastline of Rye Bay and Dungeness.

1287 – great storms washed away a shingle bar with Old Winchelsea on it (near today’s river mouth) and the river Rother was diverted from New Romney to enter the sea at Rye Harbour.

1542 – a reforming shingle spit was the location for Henry VIII to complete Camber Castle to protect the prosperous hilltop towns of Rye and (New) Winchelsea.

1637 – Camber Castle abandoned because land had built up in front of it.

1806 – during the Napoleonic War the Royal Military Canal and several Martello Towers were built. Tower no. 28 at Rye Harbour was built near the shore.

1854 – railway opened from Rye to Rye Harbour.

1865 – lifeboat house built on shore at the closest accessible point to Rye Harbour.

1860s – tar distillery set up on Rye Harbour road.

1865 – lifeboat house built on shore at the closest accessible point to Rye Harbour.

1928 – the Mary Stanford Lifeboat was launched from the boathouse on the shore and all 17 crew were lost on 15th November – a memorial is in the village churchyard.

1932 – serious flooding by sea at Winchelsea Beach. The breach was not repaired until June 1933.

1930s – shingle extracted from Flat Beach for the production of blocks to create Dover Harbour.

1940s – another threat of invasion required the shore to be fenced and mined while several machine gun blockhouses were built overlooking the sea. Anti-aircraft guns were placed on the Martello Tower and Camber Castle and a “starfish decoy” town was created near the castle with a Stanton Shelter to operate it. The sea was let in at Pett Level.

1946 – the concrete road to the shore was built and shingle recycling started with lorries moving thousands of tonnes of flint stones westward each year against longshore drift. This road stopped the sea from flooding land near the river.

1956 – first designation as a Site of Special Scientific Interest.

1970 – Rye Harbour Nature Reserve was established by a group of local partners.

1972 – the first birdwatching hide was built, overlooking Ternery Pool.

1973 – the Friends of Rye Harbour Nature Reserve was established for individuals to provide funding and volunteers for the Nature Reserve.

1978 – larger islands created at Ternery Pool, first electric fencing used to protect Little Terns and Information Kiosk in car park opened.

1986 – Friends bought Watch Cottage as a base for the warden.

1992 – Sussex Wildlife Trust (SWT) purchased Castle Water with support from the Friends.

1999 – designation of the Dungeness to Pett Level Special Protection Area.

1999 – Friends leased Lime Kiln Cottage and opened it with volunteers as an Information Centre.

2003-6 – SWT created a 20ha reedbed at Castle Water.


2006 – Environment Agency completed the secondary sea defence bank which created several new saline lagoons and wet grassland with many new ponds.

2011 – management of the Nature Reserve transferred to SWT from East Sussex County Council and the Environment Agency leased the southern part of the reserve to SWT. Environment Agency completed works to allow sea back in to two fields near the river, recreating 20 ha of saltmarsh and also a new footpath to view it.