Introduction

The history of any place is affected, often dictated, by its geographical location, and there is no better example of this than the town of Seaford. Had it grown up a few miles further north, it would never have been more than a village and would probably have remained less important than neighbouring Alfriston which is sited next to a once navigable river. But men settled in Seaford because it was on the coast and on a river estuary and it is this which has shaped its history at every period since.

Flint implements have been found in and around the town, indicating Stone Age occupation of the area, and part of a large Iron Age hill fort is still discernible on Seaford Head in spite of considerable cliff erosion. There was a substantial Roman villa at Eastbourne and a Roman burial ground on the present Seaford Head golf course. Roman funerary vessels and Roman coins have been found locally so it would seem that Seaford was inhabited periodically, if not constantly, by Ancient Britons right through to the Romano-British period.

The first written evidence of Seaford comes from the Saxon occupation in the fifth century when Sefordt was mentioned in early chronicles inferring a ford near the sea or perhaps a fiord of the sea. An eighth-century transaction mentions a town as being Super fluvium Saforda or 'on the river Saforda', presumably the river Ouse which then flowed into the sea at Seaford.

Although the town's earliest history must remain vague, the sea and the river Ouse are very real and we do know how nature used these two geographical features to set Seaford literally on the map. In fact, to understand Seaford's eminence in the Middle Ages and its political significance in the 18th century we simply have to look at the winds and tides in Seaford Bay.

Although Seaford is on the south coast, it actually faces south-west so is at the mercy of the gales coming in directly from the Atlantic. Many centuries ago the tides and prevailing winds gradually built up a great shingle bank right across Seaford Bay from the cliffs at Meeching (Newhaven) to the cliffs at Seaford Head. As this barrier grew, the river Ouse was diverted eastwards until it drove its way out into the sea at Splash Point under Seaford Head and the very low-lying area behind the bank was flooded and formed a natural harbour.

It is difficult to picture this in the Seaford of today until one remembers that in Saxon times the cliff ends at Meeching and Seaford projected much further out into the sea, so that the shingle barrier was considerably further seaward than the present shoreline. A look at the conjectural map of the bay in that period superimposed over Seaford of the 1980s shows how the old river Ouse flowed inland, rounding the spurs and lapping into the ancient Ice Age valleys of Bishopstone, Hawth and Blatchington.

Certainly this happened long before the Norman Conquest and we know that by the early 13th century Seaford was a Cinque Port and senior limb of the head port of Hastings, the other head ports at that time being Sandwich, Dover, Romney and Hythe. During its most prosperous period the port of Seaford gave employment in fishing, ship building, provisioning of ships and a two-way trade with the continent, importing wines and exporting wool from the large flocks of Downland sheep.

A busy port also needed defence so there was a fort to protect its entrance and presumably some form of local militia to man it. The entire maritime defence of the realm was in the hands of the Cinque Ports whose duty it was to provide a tally of ships and 'marines' proportionate to their respective status. It is known that in 1342 Seaford sent three ships to the French wars and in 1347 its official tally was five ships and 80 marines, so it is not difficult to picture a bustling port and a thriving populous town in the 14th century. In 1298, because it was a Cinque Port, Seaford was granted the right to send two members to parliament. This had a great influence on its political and social history over the next 500 years.

Although Seaford shares with London, Bristol and Liverpool the rare distinction of not being mentioned in Domesday Book, we know that in the 12th and early 13th centuries the town was in the lordship of the Earls de Warenne and then passed to Michael Lord Poynings, but the separate Manor of Chington (now Chyngton, and variously spelt Chingting, Chyngting, Chyntinge etc.) was owned by the de Aquila family. This helps to explain the Seaford coat of arms which shows, dexter, the two half lions/half ships from the arms of Hastings; sinister, the eagle from the Aquila arms and base, the ship from the arms of the Cinque Ports. The motto, E Ventis Vires, 'strength from the winds', has proved very significant in Seaford's chequered history

As a Cinque Port Seaford was granted a charter by Henry VIII which confirms and embodies all the duties and privileges it enjoyed since its inception as a town, parish and borough. These privileges excused its members from various national duties and allowed the borough to be more or less self-governing locally, with its own corporation. The corporation consisted of freemen, jurats and a bailiff. The bailiff was elected annually on Michaelmas Day by the freemen. The freemen and jurats were nominated and elected by the corporation. The bailiff could only serve for one year at a time so we find the same local families succeeding each other in and out of office in a continuous merry-go-round over the centuries!

The bailiff and jurats administered the law and the old town hall in South Street had its own jail under the court house. Minutes of corporation meetings and fines and punishments awarded were kept from 1562 right up until 1886 and can still be viewed, page by page and year by year, in the County Record Office. These records show sentences ranging from fines and periods in the stocks or pillory, to duckings, whippings, branding and transportation, all administered in the little town, with only more heinous cases being sent to the county assizes.

In spite of its early prosperity, the town was in decline by the second half of the 14th century. By 1380, as a result of the plague and of raids by parties of Frenchmen burning and looting, the people of Seaford were petitioning Richard II for relief from their taxes. By 1400, they could no longer pay the expenses of their two members of parliament and their electoral rights elapsed for 241 years.

During this time the sea had continued to shift the shingle eastward, gradually restricting the mouth of the harbour. Gales were threatening to drive the sea across the shingle bank and flood the town, so in 1421 Robert Lord Poynings and Sir John Pelham were commissioned to investigate repairs to the whole bank across Seaford Bay. Their efforts must have been in vain for by 1439 the town was unable to pay its usual church tithes because of floods, inundations and conflagrations. About this time, in a remarkable example of early town planning, Lord Poynings attempted to replace the ravaged old town on Seaford Bay by a new settlement on the eastern slopes of Seaford Head overlooking the more tranquil Cuckmere estuary. This was shown near Chyngton Farm on the old Ordnance Survey maps of 1873 as Toynings Town' and 'Walls Brow'. Traces of foundations and walls were still visible in the mid-19th century

to the Victorian historian Mark Anthony Lower who observed consistent traces of burning, suggesting that the embryo township was probably destroyed by fire. Aerial photographs taken in 1967 over Poynings Town and Walls Brow show clear signs of the presence of earlier buildings, now mostly invisible at ground level, and would seem to substantiate what for about four centuries was little more than a legend.

Perhaps because of the sorry state of the old town of Seaford, in 1450 Richard Carpenter, then bailiff, and seven yeomen, one butcher and one barber of the town, together with Robert Poynings of Sutton, all took an active part in Jack Cade's rebellion. This was an uprising of the yeoman class against the taxes of the Lancastrian King Henry VI and in support of the exiled Duke of York, a foretaste of the Wars of the Roses a few years later. All the Seaford men are individually named in the pardons later granted on condition that they returned peaceably to their homes.

The relentless pressures of the sea continued to shift the shingle bank until in the mid-16th century the harbour mouth was almost unnavigable and the whole of the wide Ouse valley up towards Lewes was so wet or flooded as to be almost worthless. Although it was said that a great storm caused a dramatic change, it is more logical to accept that the people (possibly assisted by nature) cut a new outlet for the river at the village of Meeching, thus forming the New Haven. This gradually ruined Seaford as a harbour although fishing rights were still being granted for the land-locked 'old haven' as late as 1728 and a map of c.1736 clearly shows large areas of waterways inside the shingle bank.

In 1545 a small French fleet attempting to land in Seaford Bay was repulsed by the men of the town and local landowners under the leadership of Sir Nicholas Pelham whose family has had an influence over much of Seaford's history and whose coat of arms, a 'buckle', gives its name to the area where this 16th-century action took place.

With the harbour and its consequent trade gone, the fortunes of the town declined even further and in 1596 there were said to be only 38 householders, including seven fishermen with only one boat. In 1592 the harbour was so decayed that Queen Elizabeth I made a gift of the low-lying land around the old haven, now known as the Beame Lands, to the people of Seaford in perpetuity.

As Newhaven developed as a harbour and small ships could navigate to and trade in Lewes, the harbour mouth was progressively extended with protective moles built out into the sea but this so upset the tidal forces that the constant drift of shingle was disturbed. The great barrier which had formed Seaford harbour and later silted up its exit now began to be scoured away and left the town at even greater risk of flooding from high tides and storms.

Although remaining nominally a Cinque Port and retaining its corporation, there was little employment and no incentive towards growth of population until in 1641, just before the Civil War, Seaford surprisingly regained its right to send two members to parliament. It is probable that the town was known to be parliamentarian at that time and that its votes would be an asset. Certainly its two members were 'secluded' from parliament at the restoration of the monarchy. However, once its franchise was re-established new jobs appeared in Seaford in the form of service on the lands and in the houses of the wealthy landowners who found 'jobs for the boys' in return for votes. As a coastal town, most of the jobs or 'places' (other than domestic posts) were related to customs and excise, some involving actual work but some just sinecures requiring little or no duties beyond voting as required at elections.

In most country districts politics were controlled by the local landed gentry. Although Seaford, Blatchington and Sutton had families which might have formed a squirearchy, they were totally overshadowed in the 18th century by the powerful Pelham family which had vast estates in various counties including property at Laughton, a few miles north of Seaford. As Seaford was one of what came to be known as the 'rotten boroughs', where a handful of electors voted for two members of parliament, it was a tempting political prize and the Pelhams kept Bishopstone Place

as a base from which to direct and control the voters of Seaford, using the local gentry and placemen (sinecure holders) as their agents.

We have an interesting insight into property in Seaford from the window tax record of 1713/14 - one of only two known records of this old tax in the whole of Sussex. Before the days of income tax this was a simple toll levied on each house according to its number of windows. Capt. Harison, John Goldham and Robert Palmer, all bailiffs at various times, each had over 20 windows; 11 houses had between 10 and 20 windows, 17 houses had between six and ten windows; and humble cottages of less than six windows were untaxed, so apart from a very small upper crust, the people of the town in 1714 were moderate in their means and modest in their aspirations.

In 1712 Thomas Pelham-Holles succeeded his father as 2nd Baron Pelham and later became Duke of Newcastle with numerous other titles and distinctions. He came of age in 1714 and, after an enormous banquet in celebration, he took his seat in the House of Lords to influence and later dominate the nation's politics almost to his death in 1768. It is hardly surprising that he used his 'pocket borough' of Seaford to good advantage.

The duke had a major-domo at Bishopstone Place - Thomas Swaine, whose family ran the Old Tree Inn at Seaford (an excellent sounding-board for local gossip). His private secretary was Thomas Hurdis D.D., nominally vicar of Seaford for 35 years, whose son was for some time curate in charge of the parish. With his other 'placemen' it is not difficult to see how the duke kept a very firm grip on the political pulse of the town.

In those days there was no secret ballot and on election day, having been liberally wined and dined (if minor gentry), or given plenty of ale and a good tip, the voters had to assemble in the old town hall and stand up under the stern eye of the duke and voice their vote. They naturally put their vote where their jobs and their financial interests lay, thus ensuring continued employment around Seaford for years to come!

As a result of this system the duke's younger brother, Henry Pelham, was elected together with other useful friends and members of the family until in 1750 George II said of the duke, his brother Henry, then Prime Minister, and the Lord Chancellor (originally elected for Seaford): 'They are the only Ministers, the others are for show'. William Pitt and George Canning also became Prime Ministers after representing Seaford in parliament.

Occasionally there were contesting candidates, including the Gage family of Firle, which led to rival feasting and suitable inducements on the eve of elections and then to petitions to parliament and debates in the House of Commons on the conduct of elections in Seaford, but the Pelham faction invariably won.

The debate always turned on precisely which of the town's inhabitants were entitled to vote. This depended on who paid 'Scot and Lot', or the forerunner of local rates. In the 18th century there was a noticeable tendency in Seaford to apply to be rated just before a general election with its potential handouts, and then a rush to be de-rated when the spoils were won and elections over for a few years!

The matter of voting entitlement also sparked off occasional trouble in the election of the bailiff. Two cases were taken to the high court in 1763 and 1764 involving the elections of Robert Stone and Thomas Washer, when the populace claimed that they had not been properly represented. In 1775 in an attempt to displace the bailiff, Lancelot Harison, the court house was invaded, a shoemaker took away the town chest with its records and there was almost a reading of the Riot Act before order was restored. In 1789 there was another riot at the town hall inspired by T. H. B. Oldfield, a political reformer, no doubt with an eye to the main chance.

Politics were not the only reason for conflict locally and some of the people of Seaford gained the sobriquet of 'Shags' or 'Cormorants', not only for their propensity for smuggling and looting of the many ships wrecked in or near the bay, but also for the more dastardly crime of using lights to entice ships onto the foreshore or cliffs and then to help themselves to any cargo they could salvage.

Wrecks from natural causes were common enough in the days of sail and the early days of steam. No sailor likes to be too close to a lee shore and coming up channel with southerly gales or easterly headwinds made the rounding of Beachy Head most hazardous. So it was not uncommon to find great numbers of ships anchored in the comparative safety of Seaford Bay, sometimes for days, awaiting more favourable conditions. This bay was not always a safe haven - in 1809 an 18-gun naval sloop, along with the six merchant ships it was escorting, stood into the bay at night thinking they had already rounded Beachy Head and all seven ships foundered on the shore.

Although 18th-century Seaford was closely bound up with politics and its financial advantages, the main occupation outside the town was still agricultural. The river Ouse no longer flowed through Seaford, but in 1761 the Duke of Newcastle enabled the building of corn grinding mills on a still tidal creek of the old river on the coast opposite Bishopstone. These tide mills were driven by water wheels powered by the tide rising into a mill pond and again by the ebb tide flowing out from the pond. They gave considerable employment and an almost autonomous village was built on the site to house the workers. Later there were windmills at Blatchington and Sutton but the tide mills survived until steam power made this little local industry redundant.

During the Napoleonic Wars Seaford Bay was potentially an excellent landing place for a French invasion and again it had to be defended. There was a small battery at Splash Point and another to the west of the town. As bailiff in 1794 Thomas Harben, who in 1783 had transported the original 'Corsica Hall' by barge from Wellingham to Seaford, raised a local volunteer defence force. In the same year a tented camp of the Wiltshire Militia at Seaford was almost completely blown away one night in a sudden rain storm and barracks were built at Blatchington, where later there was a mutiny caused by wretched conditions and worse food.

Martello Tower No.74, the last of a chain of similar forts stretching round the coast from the Thames estuary, was completed in 1808, but with Nelson's victory at Trafalgar in 1805 the serious risk of invasion was removed and Seaford's defences were never put to the test.

After the death of the Duke of Newcastle in 1768 local politics were sometimes contentious but the large-scale distribution of sinecures ceased. Later, as a result of the 1832 Reform Bill, Seaford finally lost its franchise and so became of little value to political landowners and the town again faced the prospect of decline for want of employment.

In 1799, on the eve of the 19th century, a sad indication of the state of the little town is found in the records with a note that 'the Jury found a True Bill of Nuisance against the Hog Pounds in the West Lanes, the dung heaps between the Post Office and the Ship Inn and also from the Dark Lane to the piece of land called the Crouch'. In 1814 the town had 153 houses occupied by 181 families consisting of 464 males and 537 females. Two houses were being built and, surprisingly, seven houses were uninhabited!

Along the coast the little town of Brighthelmstone had blossomed due to the interest of the future George IV, into the beginnings of the fashionable seaside resort of Brighton. Could Seaford exploit its seaboard to bring prosperity in a similar way?

Unfortunately the sea which had created the town was still its frequent enemy and in 1824 a great storm broke through the shingle bank between Splash Point and the Martello Tower, and also near the western battery. This not only flooded the lower part of the town but washed inland along the old valleys almost to Blatchington pond and carried a barge right up past Bishopstone church almost to the next hamlet of Norton, temporarily reproducing the waterways shown in illustration No.2.

In 1835 Lord Palmerston was petitioned for a new harbour to be made in Seaford Bay at government expense but the estimated costs proved prohibitive. In 1850, in an attempt to prevent further erosion of the protective shingle bank, sappers were

employed to mine into the chalk cliffs of Seaford Head and explode 11 tons of gunpowder. This dislodged 380,000 tons of chalk onto the foreshore intended as a barrier to restrain the tidal drift. Unfortunately, although great crowds flocked to watch this exciting spectacle - including Charles Dickens - the great expectations were mocked by the sea which washed away the chalk almost more quickly than the shingle.

In spite of this, in 1857 Dr. Tyler-Smith (who later became bailiff) set up The Seaford Improvement Committee. From small beginnings this inspired the concept of a seaside resort, encouraged the extension of the railway which came to Seaford in 1864, and built up Pelham Road with its rather dour urban Victorian terraces in a still largely rural 18th-century and earlier township.

A proper sea wall was started in 1865 but it was destroyed in another disastrous storm in 1875 when the town was again badly flooded, though the railway embankment this time prevented the floods making inroads as far as they had in 1824. In 1880 a petition signed by 44 inhabitants was given to William Webb Turner, bailiff, calling for measures to render the town presentable and attractive to visitors.

In 1885 the last bailiff of Seaford was elected and the ancient corporation, which had existed for 600 years and whose detailed records are extant for its last 300 years, sadly and abruptly came to an end to be replaced by a Local Board and then in 1894 by the totally unromantic Seaford Urban District Council.

Various companies were set up to try to develop the town as a resort. A better, but far from impregnable, sea wall was built, the elevated roadways from the Steyne to the sea front were constructed, and the promenade and the first terraced houses were built facing the sea including in 1891 the Esplanade Hotel, the flagship of the enterprise. In 1905 Edward VII honoured Seaford by staying in the Esplanade Hotel. The town was aiming to imitate Brighton, but the entrepreneurial Seaford Bay Estate Company had overlooked the rigours of Seaford's winter gales and their few seaside homes and lodgings were never to prove commercially viable.

The Company's proposed developments were very grandiose and the whole area from Splash Point to the present end of Dane Road was planned on the lines of Brighton with 12 parallel roads of terraced houses running back in serried rows from the Esplanade to College Road and Steine Road (sic) only relieved by a miniature 'Royal Crescent' on the centre line of the Martello Tower. Behind this, Cricket Field was to be flanked on the north and east by 22 seaside bungalows (of three storeys!), nine of which were actually built before the company went bankrupt and any further permanent development subsided under the threat and eventual demands of the Great War.

In an Edwardian guide to the town the Esplanade Hotel is extolled as being a very handsome and ornate building with over 50 rooms, and 'furnished in recherche style'. There were also the less prestigious Bay Hotel in Pelham Road and the New Inn, which became the Wellington Hotel, and several other lesser hotels and boarding houses. There were bathing machines 'of the most improved style', boats for hire, and yacht trips in the bay. Later the old Martello Tower offered 'teas and refreshments' and roller skating round its dry moat, so the town did a reasonable trade in the summer season. The grand development, however, was dead. There was not the demand for yet another resort in the 20 miles of coast between Brighton and Eastbourne, and Seaford, having lost its Duke of Newcastle, was in no position to vie with 'Prinny' or the Duke of Devonshire - the patrons of its more prosperous neighbours.

The Esplanade Hotel survived for about 80 years and the rumbustious old town took on a more genteel aspect, but it somehow became more withdrawn. The sea front remained half developed and half derelict and, without the right atmosphere, the entrepreneurial spirit also died.

Although Seaford never really developed as a holiday town its sea air was respected

and its restorative powers were exploited in the building, between 1870 and 1901, of several convalescent homes ranging in size from Talland House, on a domestic scale, in High Street to the Seaside Convalescent Home which resembled a typical Victorian Hospital.

During the Great War two vast camps, the North Camp around the present North Way, and South Camp between the present Chyngton Road and Sutton Avenue, housed hundreds of troops and a number who survived the war returned to marry and live in Seaford. The old tide mills site was a seaplane base in the First World War and was used for close quarter battle training in the Second World War when the whole of the sea front was a restricted area in anticipation of another invasion.

West House, one of the earliest Seaford houses still standing, had been a school when Mr. Bull its proprietor had to move to Broad Street after the floods of 1875. This school for young gentlemen was an early forerunner of things to come for, although the town never became a real resort, the healthy air which had encouraged the convalescent homes also inspired 'the era of the private boarding schools'.

In the 20th century, starting in 1903 with Newlands (1905 in its present site), one after another private school bought land around the old town until by the Second World War there were over 20 schools with their requisite playing fields almost dominating the environs of the town.

During the inter-war years and for some time after, these schools were quite a powerful influence on the town because their supplies, maintenance and transport created need for jobs in times of slump and unemployment when Seaford had no other 'industry'. Because of their importance and benefaction to the town, the schools were represented on the Urban District Council, and because they shaped the religious outlook of their charges they also combined to supplement the stipend of the Seaford vicars. Quite apart from these benefits, the schools' playing fields guaranteed breathing spaces of open land within a slowly developing town.

These boarding schools had comparatively small numbers of pupils and parents from a very wide catchment area whose journeys to visit their offspring ended at the coast. When motoring replaced the earlier train journeys, the very poor main roads to Seaford and heavy weekend traffic became a discouragement. As school running costs escalated so did the need to increase the fees. An alternative was to increase numbers of pupils, but this meant buying more land when the costs were rising and risking large capital outlay on a shrinking and politically unsettled market. So, one after another, all but a few of the schools closed, to be snapped up by developers who saturated those green and pleasant lands often with more houses than the number of pupils they replaced.

This brief account of Seaford's interesting history began with the influence of the winds and the sea upon the town's fortunes; from a Cinque Port to a Rotten Borough, to a would-be resort and a healthy place for convalescents and school children. Before the need for conservation was realised most of the historic town's more ancient buildings were pulled down to make way for uninspiring modern shops and houses.

Paradoxically, the cause of the transformation of this once proud borough into an insignificant sprawl was again the sea air. It was this which prompted the development of the many warden-assisted homes and hundreds of retirement houses and bungalows which now totally swamp the old town. Some of the older buildings which have survived have now been 'listed' and it is hoped will be preserved, but photographs of many of these are included in this book as a reminder of their importance to the town as a symbol of continuity.