

NORFOLK'S COASTAL HERITAGE PROJECT

by Richard Hoggett

Between January 2010 and June 2011 the Norfolk Historic Environment Service delivered the Norfolk's Coastal Heritage Project. This was an integral part of North Norfolk District Council's Coastal Change Pathfinder Programme, a Defra-funded initiative to help coastal communities cope with the effects of coastal change. During the course of the Project a series of heritage-related training events were offered in Happisburgh which ultimately resulted in the foundation of a new heritage group. Elsewhere along the coast, other initiatives saw the implementation of formal and informal coastal monitoring strategies, partnership working with bodies such as the RSPB and National Trust, as well as the establishment of an 'Equipment Library' from which members of the public can borrow surveying equipment.

INTRODUCTION

Norfolk's coast has a very rich and varied natural environment which has proved attractive to residents and visitors alike for many centuries. This has resulted in an historic environment which can truly be said to encompass the full range of human history, from the earliest human occupation in Britain, to prehistoric earthworks, Roman forts, medieval churches and an array of First and Second World War coastal defences (Albone *et al.* 2007). At the same time, much of the county's coast is being affected by coastal change – erosion, in particular – and these natural processes are having a significant detrimental effect on the region's heritage. Historic buildings and archaeological sites have been and continue to be destroyed by erosion (Plate 1), while further archaeological sites and artefacts are being exposed, and subsequently lost (Fig. 1).

The question of how best to ensure that vital historical and archaeological information is not lost to the elements is one of great concern to those charged with managing the county's historic environment. The issue is not without its difficulties, as was clearly demonstrated by the controversy surrounding the decision to excavate the eroding 'Seahenge' in the late 1990s (HER 33771; Brennand and Taylor 2003). Ultimately, it has come to be recognised that the only realistic way to achieve this goal is to work closely with coastal communities to promote the study and recording of historical and archaeological sites which are at risk, while at the same time encouraging the systematic archaeological monitoring of eroding cliffs and beaches.

In 2009, the opportunity was presented to trial just such a community-focussed approach to coastal heritage management when the Department for



Plate 1 The ruins of Happisburgh's Low Lighthouse, built in 1791 and demolished in 1886 due to the encroachment of the sea. The foundations have since eroded from the cliffs and are now only visible on the beach at the lowest tides.

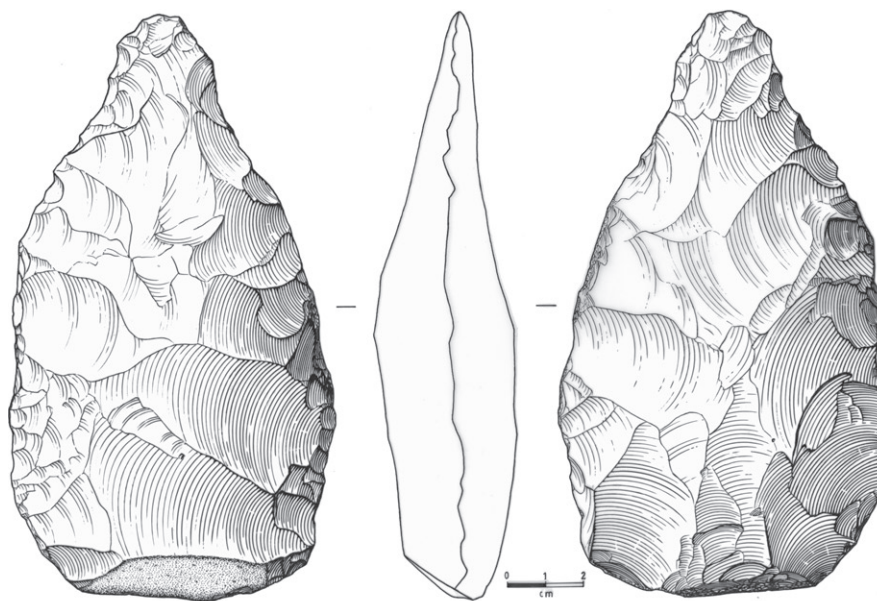


Fig. 1 A Palaeolithic handaxe with an unusually pointed 'nose' discovered on Happisburgh beach during the 1990s and reported to the Historic Environment Service as a result of the Coastal Heritage Project.
Scale 1:2.
NHER 55741; drawn by Jason Gibbons

Environment, Food and Rural affairs (Defra) invited local authorities to become part of the £11-million Coastal Change Pathfinder Programme, an 18-month 'road test' to explore the ways in which local authorities might help coastal communities to plan for and adapt to the effects of coastal change. North Norfolk District Council (NNDC) was successful in securing £3 million of the Pathfinder budget to trial its projects and, thanks to a strong partnership between NNDC and Norfolk County Council's Historic Environment Service, the Norfolk's Coastal Heritage Project was established as an integral part of the North Norfolk Pathfinder Programme.¹

The Norfolk's Coastal Heritage Project was developed with the intention of informing, engaging and empowering the county's coastal communities, allowing them to take an active part in preparing for the impact coastal change will have on their heritage. Starting from the premise that *in situ* preservation of heritage assets might not be a viable option, this was to be achieved in a number of ways: by encouraging and supporting communities to study and record their heritage; by hosting a range of free public events to highlight the significance of the historic environment; and by providing equipment and training for individual volunteers and groups along the county's coast.

In its initial stages the Project worked with the north-east Norfolk community of Happisburgh, where coastal erosion continues to have a particularly significant impact and where a number of the other strands of the North Norfolk Pathfinder Programme were also focussed. The first part of this article describes this work and summarises its results. Work continued in Happisburgh throughout the Project, but, as the Project developed, its scope was broadened to take in other coastal communities and interested parties, as well as undertaking the more general promotion of the historic environment to a much wider audience. A summary of these activities is presented in the second half of this article.

HAPPISBURGH

The village of Happisburgh is famous – perhaps infamous – for the severe coastal erosion which has affected the cliffs on which it stands, yet there is much more to Happisburgh than eroding cliffs, and the parish has enjoyed a rich and varied past (Trett and Hoggett 2011). The beaches in this stretch of the county have frequently produced Palaeolithic handaxes, including the famous 'Happisburgh Handaxe' (HER 35385),

dating from c. 600,000 years ago (Robins *et al.* 2008). On the clifftops above stand the medieval church (HER 7091), the iconic lighthouse (HER 7092) and the Arts-and-Crafts St Mary's/Happisburgh Manor (HER 14148). The fields surrounding the settlement have revealed traces of prehistoric burial mounds (HER 55788), two Roman farmsteads (HER 38730 and 38744), and also contain the remains of a significant Second World War radar station (HER 14147) and gun battery (HER 18472). All of these important sites are predicted to be affected, or even destroyed, by erosion by 2105.

Community Training Days

The first major event which the Project hosted in Happisburgh was a Coastal Heritage open day, comprising a series of displays and interactive exhibits, the aims of which were to inform people about the Coastal Heritage Project and encourage local residents to



Plate 2 Members of the local community engaged in recording the remains of Happisburgh's Second World War radar station (HER 14147).

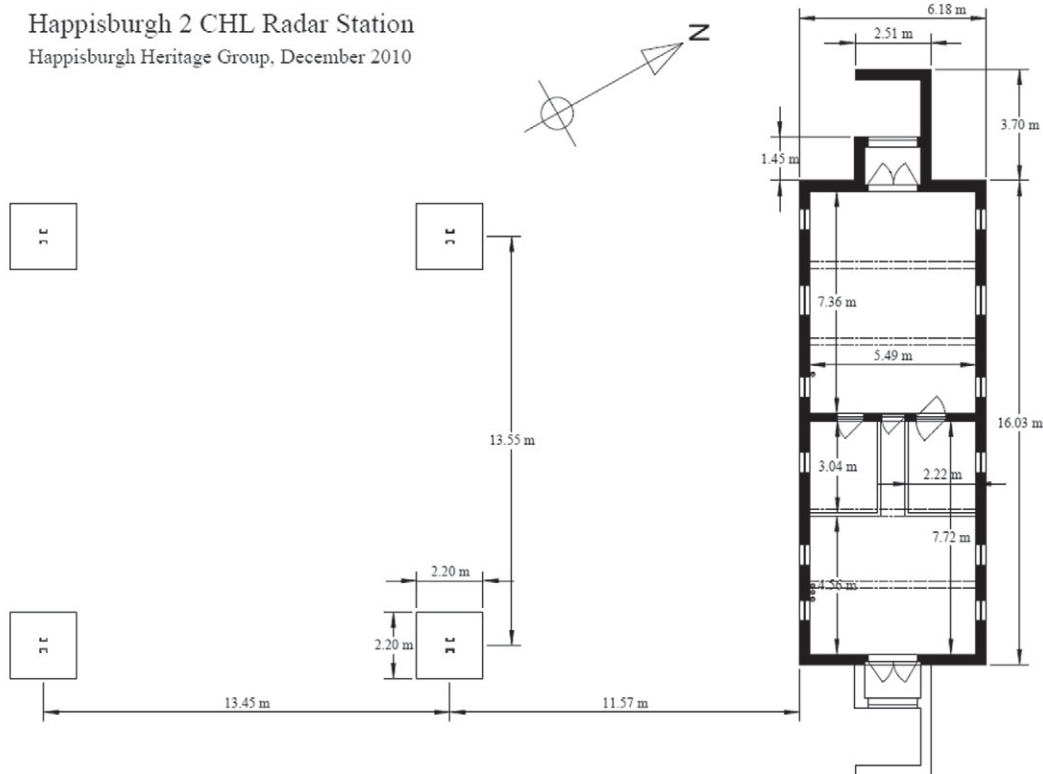


Fig. 1 Measured plan of Happisburgh's Second World War radar station (NHER 14147) drawn by Jim Whiteside

take an interest in studying the heritage of their parish. Capitalising upon on expressions of interest gathered at the open day, a free archaeological and historical research skills training day was subsequently offered in the village, attracting fifteen people. This day provided an overview of and basic training in subjects such as the use of historic maps, the use of aerial photographs, historic building recording and archaeological fieldwalking surveys. A workshop on oral history given by the staff from the Norfolk Record Office was arranged separately for those who were interested.

These classroom-based sessions were complemented by a series of field-based training days, the first of which saw members of the community recording one of the surviving World War Two buildings which formed a part of the Happisburgh radar station (Plate 2). The relatively simple shape and size of this building made it a particularly suitable structure on which to practise, and the measured surveys were complemented by a photographic survey undertaken at a later date. The measurements taken and sketches made on the day were subsequently drawn up and turned into a short report of exceptionally high quality which has now been added to the Historic Environment Record (Fig. 2; HER 14147). Other practical training days concerned the recording of churchyard memorials and church

architecture, undertaking fieldwalking surveys and artefact identification skills.

The Happisburgh Heritage Group

Through these community training sessions, the Project brought together a group of individuals who subsequently met several times during autumn 2010 to discuss founding a formal group to carry out research into the parish's heritage. As a result of these discussions, a constitution was ratified, officers elected, a bank account opened and the Happisburgh Heritage Group began operating in January 2011. It had always been the intention that the Project would provide equipment for use in the furtherance of research, and a small grant was made to the new group to help set them up with the equipment necessary to undertake research of their own, including a laptop computer, scanner and printer, digital camera, voice recorder, and an array of surveying equipment.

The Happisburgh Heritage Group continues to hold monthly meetings and is currently engaged in a number of local research projects, including recording the monumental inscriptions in Happisburgh churchyard, researching parish records and historic maps,



Plate 3 Members of the public visiting excavations being undertaken on Happisburgh beach by the Ancient Human Occupation of Britain project, June 2010.

conducting oral history interviews with long-standing local residents and undertaking further research into the Second World War remains in the parish.²

The Ancient Human Occupation of Britain Project

It was particularly fortunate that the Coastal Heritage Project coincided with archaeological excavations being undertaken on Happisburgh beach by the Ancient Human Occupation of Britain (AHOB) project. In response to popular demand it was possible to arrange for public tours of the excavations which were attended by some 80 people (Plate 3). The tours took the form of a series of short presentations from the leaders of the excavation team and the handing round of artefacts from the excavations, including flint tools and fossilised flora and fauna.

Shortly afterwards, the results of the first five years of the excavations were published in the journal *Nature* and quickly made headlines around the world (Parfitt *et al.* 2010). The excavated evidence suggests that human ancestors were occupying the area between 780,000 and 950,000 years ago – at least 80,000 years earlier than previously thought – making the artefacts from Happisburgh the earliest evidence for human occupation so far discovered in northern Europe. Following the publication of these results, the Coastal Heritage Project hosted a public lecture in Happisburgh given by the leader of the excavations, Dr Nick Ashton. This lecture was very well attended and a video of the lecture was made available via the Happisburgh village website.³

Happisburgh's Heritage Conference

It had always been the intention that an event would be held to celebrate the successful completion of the Coastal Heritage Project, and this took the form of a one-day 'Happisburgh's Heritage Conference' which was held in March 2011 and attended by over 100 people. The day was offered free of charge and took the form of a series of presentations, photographic displays and exhibition stands provided by invited speakers and members of the Happisburgh Heritage Group. The panel of speakers was drawn from a range of backgrounds and they spoke on a number of different themes, including the AHOB project, Arts-and-Crafts houses and the National Mapping Programme's analysis of aerial photographs of the coast, among other things. The final presentation of the day was given by chairman of the newly formed Happisburgh Heritage Group,

highlighting the work which the group had undertaken to date and outlining its plans for the future. The conference was a very fitting way to end the public engagement element of the Project and provided the perfect opportunity to publicise the work of the Project, promote the newly formed Happisburgh Heritage Group and encourage people to subscribe to one of the Project's most lasting legacies, *The Book of Happisburgh*.

The Book of Happisburgh

Happisburgh's resident local historian and churchwarden, Mary Trett, has produced displays and booklets on various aspects of the history of Happisburgh for many decades, during which time she has also built up a sizable collection of historic photographs and postcards. From the very earliest stages of the Project discussions had been held about the possibility of helping to bring this work to publication. The Project Officer approached Halsgrove, who have published a number of similar parish histories, and secured a publication contract. The most appealing aspect of Halsgrove's local history series was the fact that they are paid for by pre-publication subscription, meaning that local residents and other interested parties have the opportunity to have their names included in the back of the book. This was felt to be particularly in keeping with the community-focused ethos of the Project.

An A4 hardback with 160 pages and over 200 images, *The Book of Happisburgh* was published in November 2011, having sold over 400 subscriber copies prior to its publication, and it continues to sell well. The book presents Happisburgh's rich archaeological and historical heritage, using archaeological drawings, aerial photographs, historical documents, old postcards and personal recollections to tell the story of the community (Trett and Hoggett 2011).

PUBLIC EVENTS

In addition to the work undertaken with the community of Happisburgh, a number of opportunities were taken to promote the work of Norfolk County Council's Historic Environment Service among all of the county's coastal communities. To this end a static exhibition was produced, which toured the coastal libraries throughout the duration of the Project; where possible this exhibition was coupled with coastal heritage talks and workshops. Public libraries act as important local hubs for community engagement in their own right and their use as venues for lectures and

exhibitions such as this was particularly appropriate. The library events proved to be very successful and attracted a large number of people, many of whom subsequently became involved with the Project and/or made use of the resources offered by the Historic Environment Service.

The Project was also represented at a number of other events throughout its duration, including the Royal Norfolk Show, the Poppyland Partnership's annual exhibition and 'Stone Age Day' at Cromer museum. The Project Officer also gave lectures to numerous interested local groups and societies, including the East Norfolk Metal Detector Society, the University of the Third Age, the Southrepps Society, the Great Yarmouth Local History and Archaeology Society and the Norfolk Archaeological and Historical Research Group.

To mark the end of the main phase of the Pathfinder Programme, North Norfolk District Council convened a two-day conference in Cromer in March 2011, delegates for which included representatives of other Pathfinder projects from across the country, national and local agencies, North Norfolk District Council staff and local councillors. The work of the Coastal Heritage Project was particularly well represented throughout the two days: the first day of the conference included a walking tour around Happisburgh, and the Project Officer gave a presentation on the work of the Coastal Heritage Project after the conference dinner.

COASTAL MONITORING

The successful management of the county's coastal heritage requires people who are frequently on the cliffs and beaches to act as our eyes and ears, remaining vigilant for the exposure of new archaeological sites and artefacts which may not remain visible beyond the next tide. The Coastal Heritage Project gave us the opportunity to trial a number of different ways of implementing this monitoring along the coast.

Formal and Informal Monitoring

The establishment of a formal agreement with the agents for the Crown Estate for coastal monitoring to be undertaken by volunteers at Weybourne beach, where Roman artefacts had been discovered previously (HER 41541), is an example of the kind of initiative which the HES has been keen to develop for a number of years. By linking up volunteers who are frequently on the beaches with the relevant landowners, and

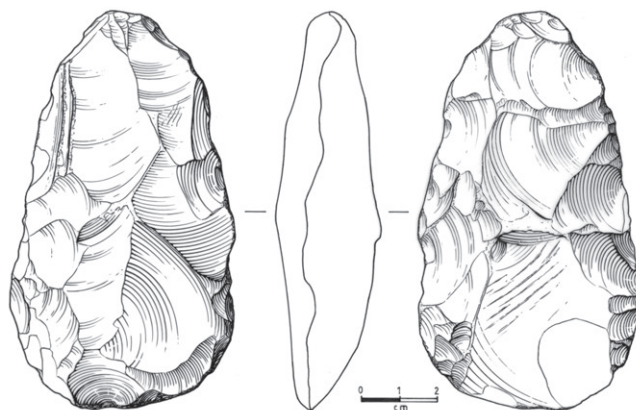


Fig. 3 A flaked Neolithic axe discovered on Happisburgh beach by members of the Happisburgh Heritage Group in 2011. Scale 1:2 (NHER 55391).
drawn by Jason Gibbons



Plate 4 A possible post-medieval brick-kiln seen in cross section eroding from the cliff at Sidestrand. Since this photograph was taken in July 2010, subsequent cliff falls have completely destroyed this feature.
Russell Yeomans

providing them with equipment and information about the historic environment of the beaches and cliffs in question it has been shown to be possible to implement a programme of frequent monitoring. Unfortunately, despite several visits, no further archaeological remains were discovered on the beach, but now that the formal monitoring agreement is in place it can continue to be acted under into the future. This is a methodology

which the Historic Environment Service would like to see continue to be developed into the future, gradually building up a network of volunteers along the entire length of the coast.

More informal approaches to coastal monitoring have also been trialled, in the sense that the Project has provided local residents with identification guides and provided artefact handling sessions with a view to increasing the recognition of artefacts which may have appeared on the beaches or eroded from the cliffs. Under this arrangement any monitoring which takes place is undertaken by individuals acting under their own volition, and not as enrolled volunteers. This approach has proved to be very successful and has already resulted in the recovery of a number of flint artefacts from Happisburgh beach and elsewhere (Fig. 3), as well as a number of photographs of features eroding from the cliffs being reported to the Historic Environment Service (Plate 4).

RSPB Titchwell

As well as working with volunteers to monitor the coast, the Project also worked with the managers of the RSPB reserve at Titchwell to ensure that archaeological features exposed on the reserve were recorded. When the archaeology of the Norfolk coast was mapped by English Heritage's National Mapping Programme the presence of a number of linear features and blockhouses pertaining to a Second World War tank range were noted within the area of what is now the flooded area of the RSPB reserve (HER 26780; Albone *et al.* 2007, 204–6).

Substantial groundwork undertaken at the reserve during 2010 necessitated the draining of the brackish marsh, which in turn presented the opportunity to study and record the nature and extent of these usually submerged and inaccessible remains. In September 2010, the Project Officer, assisted by an RSPB volunteer, conducted a walkover examination and photographic survey of the site and discovered that many of the Second World War remains had survived very well. The results of this survey have been integrated into the Historic Environment Record and shared with the staff of the RSPB reserve.

Sheringham Park

Following a lecture in October 2010, the Project Officer was contacted by volunteers at the National Trust's Sheringham Park seeking advice about how they should

go about conducting a survey of the archaeological remains within the Park. The Sheringham estate extends beyond the area of Sheringham Park proper (HER 22881) and encompasses the land which lies between the northern edge of the park and the cliffs; the entire area contains extensive remains of Second World War defensive features, as well as features relating to the emparked and pre-emparkment landscapes. Site meetings were held with the volunteers to discuss the nature and extent of the remains which are to be found within and surrounding the park. Advice and surveying equipment were provided to the volunteers, who have since set about creating a photographic inventory of the archaeological features within the park with the aim of enhancing both the Historic Environment Record and visitors' enjoyment of the site.

SURVEYING EQUIPMENT LOAN SCHEME

Using some of the Project budget, a quantity of surveying equipment was purchased in order to facilitate the training sessions discussed above, but also to equip volunteers who were interested in undertaking monitoring and recording projects in a variety of coastal settings. During the lifetime of the Project this equipment was borrowed and used to conduct coastal monitoring, earthwork surveys and photographic surveys of sea defences, as well as other projects. The results of all of this work has been integrated into the Historic Environment Record.

Now that the capital investment has been made in this equipment – which includes GPS units, digital cameras, ranging poles, and suchlike – it is the intention that the Historic Environment Service will use it as the basis of an 'Equipment Library' from which individual researchers and local groups will be able borrow equipment as and when necessary. This will be a lasting legacy for the Project and one which will greatly enhance the ability of community groups to undertake historic environment-related fieldwork. Details of this scheme will be made available on the Norfolk County Council and Norfolk Heritage Explorer websites in due course.⁴

CONCLUSION

There can be no doubt that the Coastal Heritage Project element of the North Norfolk Coastal Change Pathfinder has been a great success and leaves a number of significant legacies for the county. The Project mounted a number of very successful public events

at venues along the length of the coast, bringing important messages about coastal heritage to a diverse range of audiences. In addition, the Project has also worked in a more targeted fashion with the residents of Happisburgh, and it is here that the Project's best results have been achieved.

Through the work of the Project, Happisburgh's residents have obtained a much greater understanding of their rich historic environment and its importance to the character and fabric of their community. As a consequence, local residents are taking a much greater and more focussed interest in the preservation, study and recording of their heritage. The lifespan of the Project has seen the establishment, equipping and training of the Happisburgh Heritage Group, as well as publishing *The Book of Happisburgh*, which brings together decades of research undertaken by local historian Mary Trett.

A number of significant volunteer recording projects and episodes of coastal monitoring have also been facilitated, resulting in the collection of much new historic environment data. Many of these new discoveries are made as a result of the erosion of the cliffs, during which known sites are destroyed and newer sites are exposed, emphasising the need for regular coastal monitoring. The Project has also facilitated the establishment of an 'Equipment Library' to be managed by the Historic Environment Service from which individual researchers and local groups can borrow surveying and recording equipment. This is a new initiative in the county and one which has already been demonstrated to be very successful.

On the national stage, the work conducted during the 18 months of the Project has resulted in the development of several approaches and initiatives which could be easily adapted and applied to any other community, coastal or otherwise. Indeed, such has been the success of the Coastal Heritage Project that the Norfolk Historic Environment Service has decided to extend to work of the Project until March 2012. This will allow us to capitalise on the momentum which has been built up thus far and broaden the scope of the Project to encompass other coastal communities.

November 2011

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A great many people have contributed to the successful completion of the Coastal Heritage Project during the last 18 months. Particular thanks are due to the Pathfinder team at North Norfolk District Council: Rob Goodliffe, Rob Young, Peter Frew, Brian Farrow, Jose Socao, Marti Tipper and Steve Blatch. The Coastal Heritage Project was managed for Norfolk Historic Environment Service by David Robertson and delivered by the Project Officer, Richard Hoggett, with significant input from David Gurney, Alice Cattermole and Ken Hamilton.

This Project would not have succeeded without the enthusiasm and commitment demonstrated by the many residents of Happisburgh, especially Jim Whiteside, Mary Trett, Clive and Sue Stockton, Glenn Berry, Diana Wrightson, Carol Palfrey, Gilbert and Joan Larter, Chris and Christine Dye, John Marshall, Nikki Piggott, Colin Young and Helena Ancell.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Albone, J., Massey, S. and Tremlett, S. 2007. *The Archaeology of Norfolk's Coastal Zone: Results of the National Mapping Programme*. Unpublished project report for English Heritage.
- Brennand, M. and Taylor, M. 2003. 'The Survey and Excavation of a Bronze Age Timber Circle at Holme-next-the-Sea, Norfolk, 1998-9', *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 69, 1-85.
- Parfitt, S.A., Ashton, N.M., Lewis, S.G., et al. 2010. 'Early Pleistocene human occupation at the edge of the boreal zone in northwest Europe', *Nature* 466, 229-33.
- Robins, P., Wymer, J.J. and Parfitt, S.A. 2008. 'Handaxe finds on the Norfolk Beaches', *Norfolk Archaeology* 45, 412-15.
- Trett, M. and Hoggett, R. 2011. *The Book of Happisburgh*. Wellington
- 1 For further details about the North Norfolk Coastal Change Pathfinder Programme visit: <http://www.north-norfolk.org/pathfinder/>
 - 2 Further details of the Happisburgh Heritage Group can be found at: <http://www.happisburgh.org/heritage>
 - 3 <http://www.happisburgh.org/history/archaeology>
 - 4 <http://www.norfolk.gov.uk/historicenvironment/> and <http://www.heritage.norfolk.gov.uk/>