

WALBERSWICK

LOCAL HISTORY GROUP

NEWSLETTER NO: 80

February 2026

Newsletter Editor's report

Forthcoming Talks/Speakers

- Saturday 14th March - AGM at 18:30 followed by a talk by Harry Edwards on growing up in Walberswick.
- Saturday 13th June at 19:00 - a talk by Dr Tom Johnson about the book he is writing on medieval Walberswick.
- Autumn and Christmas 2026 – to be announced

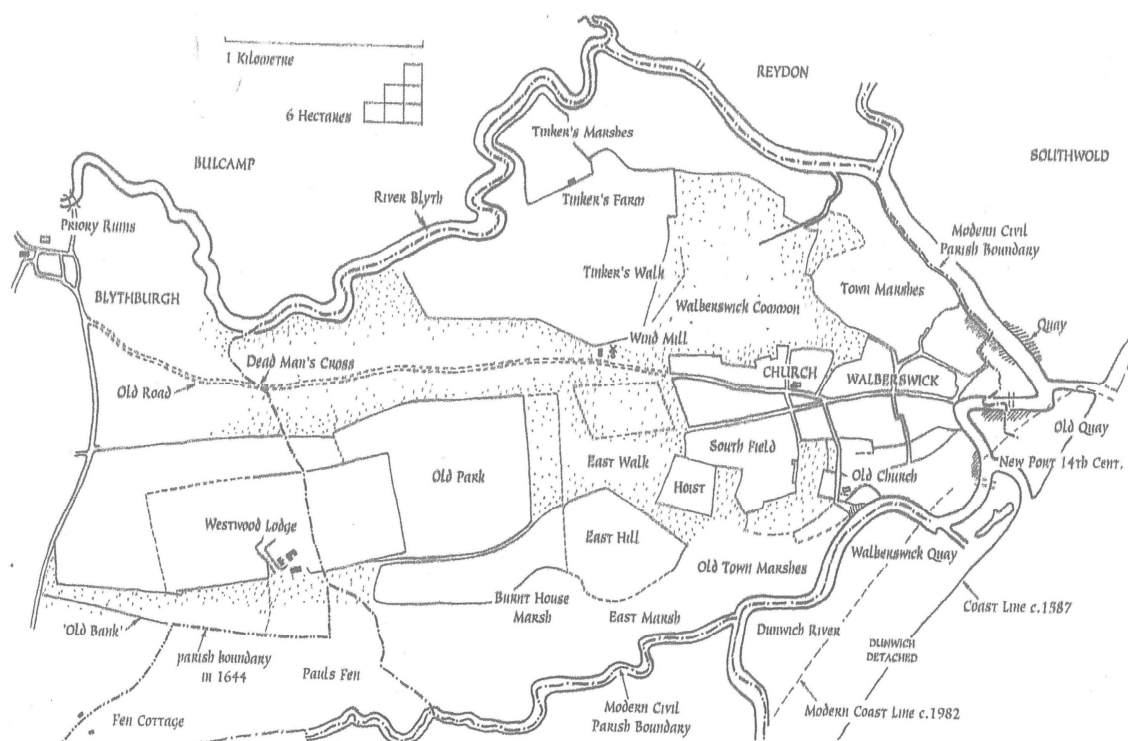
All talks are in the Village Hall. These talks are free to members and £5 for guests of members and can be booked through Edward Wright at ewright123@btinternet.com.

Exhibition

Saturday and Sunday 18th and 19th April. Works by Chris and Wendy Sinclair.
To be held in the Heritage Hut

They say that every cloud has a silver lining. If, and when, the digging and tunnelling takes place it may throw up relics of a time when Walberswick contributed to other wealth-generating activities in this part of the country. The churches that were built based on this wealth remain evidence of this time. Edward Wright and Penny Fox have written a short piece on this subject. I have combined this with the last article I have yet to publish from Philip Kett. These are very different articles but the overlap in subject matter is obvious. For those who compare the articles there may be anomalies. As always, referenced work and oral history can be different. The map before the first article was originally part of Edward and Penny's piece but I have brought it to the front.

Some may find this edition a "slog" to get through as there are no colourful pictures to break it up. Maybe, just think of Philip as you read his article and possibly you may be able to hear him. I know I can. He wrote much like he spoke. Anyway, do not despair about missing pictures as following close behind this edition we have another "bonus" special edition. I will not give too much away but after receiving the first draft of this article one of our reviewers wrote to the author saying "*..... the paintings are beautiful and the centrepiece of the story. The whole article is an opportunity to spend time with one artist in one place at a particular period, a real luxury. Brilliantly illustrated*".



Map showing Walberswick Quay, Old Church and coastline C.1587
Taken from Bloody Marsh, Dr Peter Warner, 2000

Walberswick Old Harbour Edward Wright and Penny Fox

LionLink's proposed tunnel and trench pass through an area of Walberswick associated with various openings to the sea, shipbuilding, wharves and related activity. There is little sign of this on the surface now but in the medieval and early modern periods this area was of national significance.

The importance of Dunwich is well known and one of its assets was its harbour. Vessels from Walberswick and Southwold had to travel down the river and head offshore from Dunwich because there was no other direct route to the sea.

Dunwich reached its zenith in the 13th Century and then declined because of coastal erosion destroying its buildings and the blocking of its direct access to the sea. A shingle spit, 'Kings Holme' had been extending itself southwards from Easton Bavents and Southwold towards Dunwich and by the 13th Century it was restricting Dunwich's harbour entrance. In 1250 and 1286 there were particularly severe storms that accelerated this process. The scouring effect of the River Blyth forced an opening at Walberswick.

On more than one occasion, Dunwich people blocked up the Walberswick entrance; this was intended to have the secondary effect of increasing the flow of water down the river to enlarge the reduced entrance at Dunwich. Then, in 1328 a storm pushed the shingle across Dunwich harbour mouth which became impassable for shipping. Walberswick, with its new opening to the sea, increased in importance as a fishing harbour and trading centre.

This new opening seems to have been in use until about 1435. A replacement was then cut further to the north and then in 1590 a mouth was cut nearer to Southwold, roughly where it is now.

Therefore, from around 1328 to 1590 this entrance and the harbour on the landward side of it, served not just Walberswick but also Southwold and Dunwich. This activity must have left archaeological evidence, some of it now under the sea. The Agas map of 1589, as copied by

Kirby in 1750 shows some of the features associated with the harbour, such as Walberswick Key, Old Key and New Piers. Marine traffic would have been substantial, not just the fishing fleets but ships carrying exports and imports. In 1451 Walberswick had a fleet of ships trading as far as Iceland as well as several smaller fishing boats. In addition, there would have been vessels from elsewhere visiting Walberswick for coastal and international trade in goods.

In 1451 it is reported that work was undertaken on the Walberswick Conde. This was a tower that was high enough to enable a lookout to spot the shoals of herring. It may also have been a navigation mark for those heading to the harbour. Around the same time there were also 'torches', presumably beacons, used as sea-marks or to send signals. At an earlier date, there was also a Britask which was a fortified strong point guarding the harbour entrance. The Britask was staffed by armed men whose role was to force ships to unload at Walberswick rather than travel down the river to Dunwich. In the C15th there was also a weighbridge, presumably associated with the handling of cargoes and perhaps with Walberswick market.

Dr Tom Johnson of the University of Oxford is writing a book about medieval Walberswick, and his research confirms the importance of Walberswick and its harbour. In the C15th there were 87 households in Walberswick, which he equates to 500 or more people, and in 1513 there were 16 ships of between 30 and 70 tons recorded here. Dr Johnson has found records of cranes in use at the harbour, and he emphasises the range of activities being carried out, for example: shipbuilding and repairs, rope and sail-making, buying and selling of fishing equipment, trading in fish and other goods, warehousing of traded products, weighing and measuring of cargoes, administration of legal requirements, and maintaining the security of the harbour. In the late 1460s, the first ever English 'carvel' (a frame-built ship of the kind that was used in the first Atlantic crossings) was built in the harbour for the Duke of Norfolk.

Dunwich's attempts to block up the harbour entrance may have resulted in the remnants of timber piles and the timbers of the derelict ships that are thought to have been used as part of the blockage.

No-one has identified a precise location for the opening to the sea and the harbour it served but various people have attempted it; this is A T Rees's summary: "...it is said to be two leagues or two miles north of Dunwich ... and not far from Walberswick Quay." Walberswick Quay is at the bottom of Stocks Lane, close to the old chapel. It is here that a substantial ship called Basing was built in 1654. There is a reference to "Old Walls" noted on the Tithe Map of 1841 held in Walberswick Archive.

For many years, the harbour served not just Walberswick but also Dunwich and Southwold and it involved a range of maritime facilities and activities. It developed into a significant maritime haven from the C14 onwards and the church of St Andrew was built on the wealth generated at this time.

In seeking the harbour, the bottom of Stocks Lane is clearly the best starting point. However, it may have extended for a considerable distance from Stocks Lane, particularly to the east in the direction of the caravan site and beyond. This area has never been given the archaeological attention afforded to Dunwich; the remains of Walberswick's harbour still lie undiscovered but may yet be uncovered by today's surveys for the proposed tunnel and trench passing through some five centuries later.

Sources

Men of Dunwich. Rowland Parker 1978.

P146 - the Walberswick Conde.

P157 - the creation of the harbour entrance at Walberswick.

P 197- the use of sunken ships to block the harbour entrance.

P217 - attempts to keep Walberswick entrance open.

P221 - Dunwich entrance blocked.

P 227- Dunwich market could only be reached by seaborne cargoes entering via Southwold and Walberswick.

P229- the Walberswick Britask.

P254 - the weighbridge at Walberswick.

J Browton's diary, held in Walberswick archive Details of several Walberswick ships mentioned in wills.

AT Rees, University of Cambridge academic paper 1955, held in Walberswick Archive Includes at page 6 et seq a description of Walberswick harbour mouth and the changes that took place between 1328 and the 17th Century.

John Kirby map c.1750 held by Dunwich Museum

This map was copied from the Agas map of 1587. It includes notes translated by Val Dudley and Professor Mark Bailey.

White's Trade Directory 1891

A note by Hans Lange in the Walberswick Archive mentions 13 Walberswick barks and 22 fishing boats in 1451. White's Directory is given as the source.

The Churchwardens' Accounts researched by Dr Johnson show 12 herring boats and 21 sprat boats registered at Walberswick in that year.

I could have taken some pictures to go with Philip's text, but, as he says, why not take a walk with him?

THE BOUNDARY POST: A COLLECTION OF STORIES THAT WILL BE LOST IF NOT WRITTEN DOWN Collated in 2023 by Philip Kett

So where is this boundary post you may ask? The truth is that it has long since gone and most likely so will be the stories that happened around it. So come with me on a short walk from the Ferry Road Car Park.

Ferry Road car park: This car park is on land once known as the "Flatts", an area of land that was once used by the village fishermen to dry their nets, especially their herring nets, which could each be 50 yards long. Several were linked together forming a fleet. The top of the net was hung on a line of corks and with small lead weights attached to the bottom of the nets, thus forming a curtain of net in the water into which the herring swam and got entangled by their gills as they tried to get through the mesh of the net. These nets had to be dried after use as left wet in the bottom of a boat would soon rot. Regular treatment in the tanning copper meant more hard work for the fishermen. The tanning copper was also situated on the Flatts, on a more slightly raised area. Around the copper was an area of bricks, just laid tightly on the ground to form a hard and even surface to work on. The nets got carried from the boats to the drying racks on a barrow. This barrow had a flat deck, no wheel but four legs, with handles running under the barrow so that two people could carry it. The net was piled on the barrow starting at one end and neatly laid out and folded to fill the flat bed of the barrow. On reaching the drying racks, the last end of the net to be loaded onto the barrow was the first piece to come off and was draped along the drying racks in loose folds that would let the wind blow through. This operation was repeated for each net that had been used until all of the nets were hung out to dry.

When dry, the nets could be reloaded onto a barrow. They then could be tanned in the copper and would have to be dried again before storing or being repaired and kept dry ready for reuse when required.

The Old Dunwich River and The Boundary Post: We have now moved on to "Wally's" Bridge (more on that later). Crossing the bridge, we follow the concrete path towards the beach, angling slightly to the left. At about 75 yards from the bridge, stop and look around, take in what you are looking at. Over to the right the vegetation is somewhat different. The coarse grasses and reeds that are behind the sea wall give way to lush marshy vegetation and back again to coarse grasses. This lush marshy part is slightly lower than the area of the coarse grasses. It was the bed of the Old Dunwich River and you are standing right beside the site of the Boundary Post or very close to it. Let me explain, we are facing South looking at the bed of the Old Dunwich River. All the land to the left of centre of the river bed belonged to Dunwich. Even up to 1927, the maps record the area between the sea and the centre of the river bed as Dunwich Detached No 1 (when I was a youngster there was a line of posts marking the centre of the river bed, on the sea side was cut a D and on the landside was cut a W).

The Boundary Post marked the North Dunwich boundary and the South end of the Southwold boundary. It also marked the Eastern limits of the Walberswick boundary (Walberswick did

not possess any beach frontage here, but only from Cliff Field, Southwards, till reaching the Old Dunwich River some 300 yards away).

King's Holme and St John: The Men of Dunwich were always falling out with the Walberswickians along with the Southwolders over passage rights in the Haven. They controlled the entrance to the Haven. Nothing exists today of what I'm going to write here, but in 1228 the Haven was protected by a large sandbank known as King's Holme, which was connected to the land in front of Southwold and was covered in grass as it had been there for a very long time. The sandbank was progressing Southwards and in doing so was slowly but surely cutting off the channel into the Haven. The entrance to the Haven was in front of the old town of Dunwich, which stood half a mile to the North of present-day Dunwich out in the sea. The Men of Dunwich had a right to collect a fee for Anchorage in the Haven but only halfway up the Haven, towards Walberswick and Southwold. There had been an Agreement drawn up on a piece of Parchment which was conveniently lost for 150 years so that no one could dispute it. The Men of Dunwich thought that they had got it all their own way and so they decided to impose more levies.

Dunwich also decided to get out a cannon and see if they could stop the traffic in the Haven. As the channel got tighter so the cannon got more accurate and the Walberswickians and Southwolders had to pay.

Sometime after 1228 the men of Dunwich decided that enough was enough and that they would try to settle the score, so 12 of them sallied forth to Walberswick by walking along the beach and on arriving, burnt down a few houses and then came to the Manor house, the home of Margery de Cressy, Lady of the Manor. The house and its Chapel stood at the top of the hill and overlooked the village towards the river. On reaching the Chapel, they promptly raised it to the ground, burning all of its religious icons, stealing a Statue of St John and dragged it back home to Dunwich in triumph. The affair went to trial and Dunwich lost the day. The statue was returned some 7 years later.

Hummerstones Cut: By the 1500s the Haven had silted up and The Men of Dunwich could not keep the channel open, so a decision was taken by the 3 towns to dig another entrance through King's Holme further to the North of the town of Dunwich and still inside the Dunwich boundary, which became known as Hummerstones Cut. At the time it was cut, they also erected Bulwarks to defend the entrance and a Condor to signal to the ships passing by.

The New Cut: By about 1700 [*Editor's note: other sources suggest the new cut was made in 1590*] the Walberswickians, the Southwolders and the Blythburgers who had had enough of Dunwich and its tolls, met to discuss the situation. Where, you may ask - at the Boundary Post. You will note that the Men of Dunwich were not invited.

They met as all good men do as a group, most probably on a cold winter's day with the wind blowing from the North east, with their collars turned up to keep the biting wind off their ears and their hands thrust deep into their pockets, stomped about the Boundary Post and made a decision. They decided to dig out a new course for the river to the sea. The big decision was where to start. It looked good to come off the river, just before the bend that turned the river Southwards and when they turned themselves around, they found themselves well inside the Southwold boundary which was better still. They could stop this madness once and for all and say good bye to Dunwich and its tolls.

Today that may seem a nigh impossible task with only spades, but they knew that nature was on their side. The seaward side of King's Holme was being eroded by the sea and the sand bank had moved itself inshore over the years. Their task was not impossible. You have to remember that these men were sons of the sea, they had lived and worked alongside it all their lives and their fathers before them. If they dug a cut out of the centre of the bank, as deep as they could without moving vast amounts of sand and with a Nor'easterly gale due sometime soon, it could be possible to wash out the undug sections at the ends of the trench. You have to remember that most of the walls that protect the marshes today did not exist, so there would be extra water in the estuary which would have flooded over the sand bank on its way in, on its way out, break down the walls at the ends of the cut and let the water

flow to the sea. With all this extra water in the river and six hours to run the river will get things moving and subsequent tides will keep it clear,

So, the course of the river was changed and better still it was well within the Southwold boundary. Two piers were built in 1752 complete with lookout huts and also a Quay on the Walberswick side was added to be able to load and unload vessels of up to 100 tons. The Walberswick fishermen also had modified boats with a large tank built into the boat containing sea water, into which they put freshly caught fish. Inside the harbour, on the Walberswick side, they also dug out fish ponds to keep some of their catch alive and fresh until required.

The New Quay: By 1900 Southwold had increased in population and the idea was mooted that Southwold should have a quay, (their fishing fleet used to use the beach fronting the town to dock and unload their catches) that is accessible at all states of the tide.

E. R. Cooper was Town Clerk to Southwold Borough Council and thought that there was a lot of income going to waste. The Herring Fishery was going great guns in Lowestoft and they had more boats there than they could handle. He thought that Southwold could benefit greatly from a hard quay, to unload the herring drifters against, with room to lay out all the necessary cleaning and packing spaces along with a sale room and a connection to the Southwold Railway, so the idea of The Free Fishery was adopted.

By 1906 work had started on the Harbour, two new piers were built, and on the Southwold side a trench was dug some thirty feet deep several yards back from the river's edge. By machine, the trench was dug wider at the bottom than it was at the top, so the new wall had a firm base to sit on. As the trench was being dug the finished sections were back filled with concrete, mixed and tipped into a hopper which was mounted on rails above the trench and could follow the job along tipping the mixed contents exactly where it was required,

When the quay wall was finished the river bed was dug out and the spoil that came out of the river was spread on the landward side of the wall, on what had been just marsh land, raising the level to that of the new quay wall. At the end of what is now known as Ferry Road, was built the Sale room, an octagonal building standing tall. Inside the building the floor was arranged around a central ring, being raised up in the form of steps to the outer edge and used to sit on.

Cran baskets of fish (containing about 200) were brought to the Sale room (locally known as the Kipperdrome) as a sample of the vessel's catch, which was then tipped out onto a raised table, where quality of the fish was assessed, bid for and sold, although some of the catch may have still have been in the vessel's hold, some being cleaned (gutted)(by Scotch Fisher Girls) and placed in Barrels with salt and ice, or Boxes with salt and ice to go on the Fish train and sent off to London and beyond, some bought by local Fishmongers to smoke and sell locally.

There is evidence that some of Scottish Fisher Girls lodged in Walberswick during the fishing season, which may have lasted about 3 months here, having worked their way around the coast following the run of herring. Their husbands worked the boats which were family-owned boats and also did some of the shore work, like packing the barrels and boxes. The girls gutted herring at 2 a second in all weathers outside in the open with bare hands and arms. When they worked here they were employed by a manager who paid them, they came from the small fishing ports around the Scottish mainland and also the Outer Islands. The Free Fishery shut down at the outbreak of WW1 never to work again. The herring declined until there was but a few left, but lately there has been resurgence in the species.

Wild Sea Swimming: Moving on to the early 1920s when salt water bathing was popular and wild swimming in the sea was the thing to do, one of the Walberswick Fishermen thought that he would get in on the act so he placed a couple of huts at the back of the Beach. Homemade of course from driftwood, these he let out to holidaymakers staying in the village for a fee. Word got out that Mr Cross in Walberswick was making money out of Dunwich Town Trust land, so he was asked by the Chairman of Dunwich Town Trust to pay rent for having his huts on Dunwich land and letting them out. He refused several times, anyway

Dunwich Town Trust got fed up with this and sent to Walberswick half a dozen men to sort the job out. They walked down the beach on a bright and sunny day, carrying hammers and crowbars, arriving at the huts, they must have decided to take on the nearest hut, as you do, so they gathered round this hut and at the word started on it but they seemed to have had a bit of a shock. After quickly getting off a couple of boards they found cowering up a corner a lady in a state of undress, so they quickly stopped and returned from whence they came not knowing what to do. Dunwich Town Trust took Mr Cross to Court at Halesworth Magistrates Court and they could not give a verdict on the case, so Dunwich Town Trust went to the High Court in London where it was promptly thrown out and told to go back to Halesworth, who eventually decided in favour of Mr Cross. This was now going to cost Dunwich Town Trust a lot of money and they were broke so they wondered if Southwold could help them out, which they did, in exchange for the piece of Dunwich Detached No 1.

In 1951/2 I used to go swimming with two boys of my age on the beach. We used to change in one of two huts on the back of the beach. Looking back now, I see that the placement of these huts was as close to the centre line of the Old Dunwich River as you could get, but still on Walberswick land. They got swept away in the 1953 flood never to return.

The South Harbour Arm: Time moves on and so do we - this is now the late 20s and Southwold wanted to tidy up the river on the other side from their quay. The river channel was held by wooden piles, now rotting with great age, but Southwold did not have enough money and they only owned about 300 yards inland from the pier heads and the remainder belonged to Walberswick. This was where the boundary ran up the centre of the river to the Southwold Railway Bridge. This posed a dilemma for Southwold and Lothingland Rural District Council, but living in Walberswick at this time was Mr Henry Cleminson a London Shipping Lawyer, who also used to do poor lawing in the East End of London. It seems that he came up with a solution to the problem, it was to move the boundary of Southwold across the river taking in some Walberswick land, but not owning it, making it possible for Lothingland RDC to raise funds to repair the Harbour. His idea was that Lothingland RDC would then own both sides of the river up to the Railway Bridge. This idea was carried out and the land duly transferred to Southwold and Lothingland. I'm afraid the Walberswickians were not a happy bunch at the outcome.

The South Harbour Arm was completed by about 1936 just a couple of years before WWII and was promptly blocked with two sunken fishing boats and to keep the flow running a hole was blown in the new side wall.

With the change of ownership, the buildings that are around the Slipway paid Rates to Lothingland RDC, lately to Waveney District Council, and now it's all changed again with the amalgamation of Suffolk Coastal District Council with Waveney District Council to become East Suffolk Council.

What a mess nobody seems to know who owns what these days.

Wally's Bridge: Moving back towards the Car Park and Wally's Bridge - this bridge is relatively new; it was built around 1964/5 to be able to transport men and materials to repair the south arm of the river wall. The repair was going to be about filling in several large holes in the wall and build a short section of wall at right angles to the river wall where the sea was eroding the beach away. After the job was done the bridge was left as a way of accessing the beach as it was built to carry concrete mixer wagons. The only other vehicle access was over the sluice bridge which cannot carry heavy vehicles. It became known as the Crabbing bridge and is well loved by young and old alike. The timbers were getting a bit rotten and the County Council wanted to take it away. The steel RSJs look like they could carry a steam train so Keith (Wally) Webb dug his heels in and with backing from the Parish Council, the County Council gave in and the bridge got repaired and named at the same time.

Crabbing in Walberswick: Walberswick's claim to fame came in 1982 in the form of the little green shore crab. Wally managed the Village Youth Club, of which there was not too many members, so it was not very viable as a group. They were asked by the Friends of Blythburgh and District Hospital if they could raise some funds for the hospital, as a benefit

to the patients. Other youth clubs in the area were also asked the same question. Walberswick decided on catching crabs to make some funds. This is how we used to pass time as youngsters. Ideas were put forward and many adults in the village joined in with the idea. Out of all of this came, a marquee, bunting, stakes, ropes, tables, chairs, scales, a trophy of a large mounted crab, and a set of rules that must be abided by (though they were somewhat elastic). Lastly no hooks or nets - bait which was supplied by some of the fishermen across the river and collected on the day, or you could use whatever you wished. There was to be a consolation prize for everyone who took part, a pot of crab paste from Shippams. Also, a well-known TV personality turned up during the afternoon, to present the winner with their prize and also the giant raffle. Lastly, the afternoon had to start with a bang, not any old bang but one that would put the Lifeboat Maroons to shame and it finished with a trumpet fanfare one and a half hours later.

So, families came to Walberswick on Crabbing Day. Those that wished to enter paid their entrance fee, and had a number inked on the back of their hand. They thought that they had arrived, and sat beside the Dunwich River, ate their lunch, listening to music played over the speaker system mixed with general chitchat. Lunchtime went and there still was not a lot of water in the creek but by 3 o'clock the creek was brim full. People just passed the time, sitting and chilling out in the sunshine, dropping their lines into the water, having a go to see what they could catch. But as soon as the mortar went off it was to catch the heaviest crab, not the most, buckets were emptied of crabs and refilled with clean cold creek water and nets confiscated just before the start, but these little shore crabs are not of the largest variety and had to be weighed on scales that weighed down to half a gramme, as most of the children wanted their crab weighed however small it was. On the first outing it was close to 500 people, some 27 years later it was around 1,500 entrants. Towards the end of its life what started out as a fun day for children got a bit out of hand and it became a victim of its own success, but what a fun day, with lots of happy smiling muddy faces.

Names of all the helpers have been omitted for fear of missing out on someone, as that would never do.

To end it all I wish to remember Wally, for all those great times that he made happen, along with his friends.



Editor: August 2007 I think. It did get busy