

HEAP's Mapping Day 7 November 2014
TRACKS AND FOOTPATHS
The last of the HEAPS/Branscombe Project mapping workshops

Eighteen participants plus Emma Rouse and Phil Planel gathered in the village hall to examine maps and look at how the ways round the parish, other than roads, has changed over time. We were also going to number the paths and tracks we observed and indicate who might use them – smugglers, cliff farmers, farm labourers etc.

Everyone present had been to at least one of the previous sessions and such was the level of confidence in the process that we didn't need a lot of explanation.

Emma had produced printouts of the OS map for 1888 and we were to compare these with the modern day OS map. We were looking for paths/tracks from the Victorian era that have now disappeared, or indeed still exist. The older map has many footpaths marked with FP so they weren't hard to spot, but care was needed not to confuse them with contour lines that are also dashed lines but not marked FP.

An immediate problem was that field outlines have often changed, through amalgamation or splitting of fields. It was found helpful to colour the older field boundaries onto the modern map in green before colouring in the route of a path.

We were also looking at tracks – something capable of taking a horse and cart – and marked as a double dashed line on the older map. Sometimes these were a little difficult to spot as they often resembled footpaths on the sheet.

We were also considering if certain places in the parish might be hubs where paths and tracks converged. These might be farms, quarries, pubs or the beach. As expected such places did, and still do, exist in Branscombe.

Our second brief of discerning who might use the paths was easier in some places than others. A track leading to a quarry or lime kiln could be used by farm workers or local masons or off-comers to make purchases. Where these paths and tracks were near others it is likely they were multipurpose, with someone, for example, setting off along a lane leading to limekilns but then turning off to go to the cliffs.

After completing our allotted section of map we fed back to everyone what we had discovered. In many instances people had chosen to work on 'their patch' of Branscombe and so knew their area very well. There was variation in the feedback on changes observed. Some people felt the paths and tracks they examined had changed very little, whilst others saw many changes. The coastal area has seen the most changes. The cliff face and fields above were threaded with paths in the past. There are very few left today.

Whilst footpaths are now generally regarded as being for leisure purposes, this was not the case in Victorian Branscombe, and it was clear that in many cases, people setting out for work took the most direct route to their destination which might not be along a prescribed path. The decline in the number of footpaths is partly due to the decline in the number of activities, it's also about changing notions of privacy with landowners unwilling to allow people to 'trespass' on their land. The question of land ownership may also have been important earlier on – it seems that paths did not follow the easiest route.