



S.O. to Martello Towers, Sunday 26th July at 2:00pm

Welcome to the Stepping Out walk looking at the lost line of Martello Towers that once guarded Bexhill's shoreline. I'm Alex, one of the museum's volunteers and today I'll be assisted by Paul.

Today we'll explore how these costal forts faced down the threat of Napoleon's invasion and later became key outposts for the Coastal Blockade in its fight against smuggling. The walk is just over a mile and half distance, looking to finish at Shelter No.3.

We're keeping mostly to the promenades but as usual please be careful when crossing roads and be aware of giving room to pedestrians and cyclists when we make our stops.

Bexhill Museum **[A]** – *Polegrove* **[B]**

Introduction [\[MAP A & B\]](#) [\[PHOTO D\]](#)

Before Bexhill's transformation into a fashionable resort, the land at the bottom of the hill from the Old Town was a desolate, low-lying expanse of marshland, cornfields and rough grazing meadows, with only a few scattered buildings existing between the hill and the shore.

Much of the lower land was uncultivated marsh, particularly around Egerton Park and the Polegrove. This was described as a "boggy swamp" or "unhealthy lagoon" where tall reeds grew and wildfowl was abundant. The land was frequently inundated by the sea during rough weather and high tides. Sea water often swept as far inland as the Sackville Arch and up to where St. Barnabas' Church now stands.

Emperor of France, Napoléon Bonaparte declared war in 1793 and soon turned his full attention to crossing the English Channel with an army of over 200,000 troops. It is interesting to note that France financed these preparations selling her North American territories to the United States in return for 50 million French francs. Ironically, the US had partly funded the purchase with a loan from a British bank based in the City of London.

Britain was put on high alert and building sites were selected along the south coast for Martello fortification towers to counter the threat. Dover Castle had underground tunnels added, the Dover Western Heights were constructed and the Royal Military Canal cut should Napoléon land on Romney Marsh.

140 Martellos were built around Britain, 74 being found in the South East of England, lining the Kent and East Sussex coast between Seaford and Folkestone. Included in the scheme were 3 much larger circular forts called redoubts that were constructed at Harwich, Dymchurch and Eastbourne; they acted to supply the smaller towers as well as being powerful fortifications in their own right.

Bexhill's twelve towers were built by John 'Yorky' Smith from Leeds under supervision from the Royal Engineers between 1805 and 1808. These were numbered 44 to 55.

Route

Polegrove [B] – Beach Garden [C]

Martello Tower #55 [PHOTO 1] 1929

The only existing tower in Bexhill today, known as Billy's Tower to the local fishermen.

It was used for semaphore communication from the 1820s and then for experiments in wireless telegraphy in 1910. The tower then became a summer residence until the Second World War when it was converted to a Battery Observation Post. Some anti-tank cubes can still be found around the site today.

In 2004 it went up for sale with a reserve price of £150,000 - it sold for £285,000, by 2008 it was converted into a two bedroom home with a glass extension on the roof and now a Grade II Listed building.

Martello Tower #54 [PHOTO 2] 1865

At 8:00am on Monday 13th November 1865 William Richards, a coastguardsman at Pevensey Sluice (now known as Normans Bay), found a massive finback whale washed up on the shingle next to this tower, it was said to weigh more than 50 tons.

An estimated 40,000 people travelled to the bay that winter to see the 70 foot whale with photos showing as many as 30 men standing on the carcass at once. The demand was so great that the railway company ran special excursion trains from London. Because there was no station here at the site, a temporary platform made of old sleepers and timber was hastily erected to allow passengers to alight. This temporary structure eventually became the permanent Normans Bay Halt. The local pub, the Star Inn, was overwhelmed by the influx of Londoners, the pub ran dry and the landlord and his family reportedly had to barricade themselves in the upstairs bedroom to avoid disappointed tourists!

Because whales were valuable for their blubber (used for lamp oil, margarine and soap), a legal battle for ownership ensued. The Mayor of Hastings claimed the carcass under the Cinque Ports Charter (as Northey was a limb of Hastings), while the local Customs House claimed it on behalf of the Board of Trade. It was eventually decided to auction the whale. Bidding started at £15 and a group of ten local fishermen, led by Mark Breach, purchased the animal for £38 (about £4,000 today). The fishermen recouped their investment within two days by erecting a canvas screen around the whale and charging sixpence for a guided tour.

Eventually the carcass was stripped of its oil and the flesh removed, the skeleton was preserved under the guidance of William Flower from the Royal College of Surgeons. Before its final move, the skeleton was exhibited at the Central Cricket Ground in Hastings during Easter 1866, with admission fees set at sixpence for adults and half-price for children. The Museum of Zoology in Cambridge acquired the skeleton later that year. It remains a popular attraction there today, hanging above the main entrance in a purpose-built glass cabinet.

As for the fate of the tower No.54, went up for auction in August 1908 and was subsequently withdrawn when it didn't make its bidding price of £500, it was demolished three years later.

Martello Tower #53 (war department boundary stone) [PHOTO 3] 2020 (credit Derek Smith)

East of Normans Bay, built to protect the sluice together with No.54. All that remains are the War Department boundary markers (pictured).

After the threat of Napoleon had vanished, the Coastal Blockade and married pensioners from the Royal Artillery were used as peacekeepers in the towers from 1817. Midshipman Charles Brand, who served in several local towers including Tower 50 (Cooden Beach) and Tower 55 (Normans Bay), described them as damp and mildewed dungeons. The towers were considered unsanitary for long-term family living; for example, Tower 59 in Pevensey once housed 16 people from three different families in cramped conditions. Not to mention the threat of smugglers, where one night in 1830 they attacked four blockademen living here leaving them seriously injured.

Damaged by erosion in the 1870s and dismantled by 1875.

Martello Tower #52 (pivoting stone) [PHOTO 4] 2020 (credit Derek Smith)

Located south-west of Herbrand Walk railway crossing. The landowner still has the central pivoting stones for the gun platform, this would have mounted a 2.5 ton cannon at the top of the tower which enabled it to fire in any direction up to a mile out to sea.

On the early hours of Saturday 28th February 1822, a large gang of smugglers tried to capture the Coastal Blockade guards at this tower as a boat arrived on the shore. The Blockade men shot one of the smugglers in response, killing him. Alarms were raised and one arrest was made.

Collapsed due to erosion and dismantled by 1875.

Martello Tower #51 [PHOTO 5] 1869

Located south of Herbrand Walk.

Coastal Blockade men were considered fair game for bribery and in 1819 two smugglers offered £100 (over £7,500 today) to bypass the guards at this tower as a loaded boat pulled to the shore, they were unsuccessful and the boat quickly turned and left.

Used as a blockade hospital from 1827. Collapsed due to erosion by 1869.

Martello Tower #50 (used to build coastguard station) [\[PHOTO 6\]](#) 1896

Located south-west of the Cooden Beach Hotel.

In September 1824, a landing near this tower was intercepted by Lieutenant William Brand and five guards. A violent struggle ensued on the beach, resulting in the seizure of over 100 tubs of spirits, one blockademan was captured by the smugglers and his body later washed ashore.

Tuesday, 30th October 1860. Preparations were being made for artillery experiments against this tower. Two 68lb and two 32lb smooth-bore guns were being moved along the railway line from Bexhill to directly opposite the tower. During the unloading, Lieutenant Marshall lost his hand when it was accidentally crushed under a gun. He was quickly moved to Powell's Hotel (The Bell, Old Town).

Saturday, 10th November 1860. The experiments commenced with both shot and shell being fired from 1,030yd over four days. The Duke of Cambridge was in attendance with a huge crowd of spectators, at one point guns were fired over the public's heads to stop them scavenging the spent shells! In the end the bombardment had little effect on the tower, with only four shots penetrating the interior. The tower finally succumbed when the distance was reduced to 400yds.

Some of the bricks were used to make Kewhurst Coastguard Station (demolished 1920, now Westbourne Court).

Martello Tower #49 [\[NO PHOTO\]](#)

Located south of Harfield Road near the splash deck.

Saturday, 22nd October 1864. The Sussex Advertiser reported on a three day long bombardment of artillery shelling aimed at No.49, similar to that at No.50 in 1860. This time Government authorities tested their 70lb Armstrong and Whitworth Guns commanded by Lieutenant Robinson and 50 men of the Coastal Blockade. On the first day solid shot and blind shells were fired, which considerably damaged the wall, but seemed to have been pierced through in one place only - each shot only brought down a portion of brick at a time, slowly chipping away at the tower. On the second day live shells were fired knocking down the near side of the eight foot thick wall together with the centre pillar. Only the outer sea side of the tower remained and this was promptly destroyed on the third day.

Martello Tower #48 [\[PHOTO 7\]](#) 1856

Located between Pages Gap and Beach Garden.

Confusion over the numbering of the towers prior to 1867 meant No.48 was accidentally omitted and therefore making this tower's history relatively unknown. We do know it was twinned with No.49 in 1830 to make a single blockade post and abandoned by 1865. Some of the material from this tower and No.42 at Bulverhythe was used to build St. Mark's Church and its chancel in Little Common. The building materials were brought by sea to Cooden and taken by cart to the site.

Beach Garden [C] – Clock Tower [D]

Martello Tower #47 (ruins of) [PHOTO 8] 2014 (credit Paul Wright)

Evidence of bricks and stone pieces from this tower can still be seen today, usually at low tide after storms when the sand has shifted. February 2014 was a particularly good time to see what was left.

Collapsed and washed away by the sea by 1859.

Design and construction [PHOTO 9]

Each tower was typically as wide as it was tall, standing between 30 and 40 feet (9 to 12 metres). The walls were significantly thicker on the seaward side than on the landward side to withstand naval bombardment. Bexhill's towers typically featured sea-facing walls of 11 feet 6 inches and land-facing walls of 9 feet 6 inches.

Construction required roughly half a million bricks per tower, many of which were produced in local brickworks established specifically for the project including one on the Duke of Dorset's estate at Cooden Farm. These clay bricks were often clamp-burnt (unbaked and stacked outside in layers with combustible fuel such as cow dung and grass).

For protection against landward attack, the only entrance was a narrow door positioned 10 feet from the base via a removable ladder. Each tower had three levels. The ground floor/basement was used for ammunition and gunpowder accessed through a trap door, the first floor was the living quarters where up to 24 men and an officer shared three rooms and the top floor was the gun platform accessed by a stairway.

Clock Tower [D] – The Colonnade [E]

Martello Tower #46 [PHOTO 10] 1866

This site was called The Horn due to the high point of ground which once stuck out into the sea which surrounded the tower. High seas and heavy rainfall often flooded the surrounding low-lying areas, meaning the only way to reach the site from the north was by wading through knee-deep water.

In 1819, the blockademan at the tower was offered a £50 down payment and a further £50 if he would "look the other way" during a smuggling run. He reportedly attempted to seize the band anyway and was captured, rowed out to sea and killed. His body was washed ashore – with the £50 still on him.

By 1839 the tower was twinned with No.44 to make a single blockade post and a coastguard station was built behind. You may notice the flagstaff in the image; this was surrounded by ornamental stones indicating the points of the compass. You can still find the outline of this flag staff on land registry records today.

The sea eventually eroded the foundations of the cliff and the tower was dismantled by 1870. Traces were found in 1910 during the building of the Colonnade.

The Colonnade [E] – War Memorial [F]

Sea Lane

Before the coastal railway line was built in 1846, coal was delivered by ships and collected from the beach by farm wagons. The journey was famously difficult, putting a great strain on the horses as they struggled to pull heavy loads up the steep hill. Sea Lane (now Sea Road) was a narrow, sunken and often muddy track which ran through uncultivated marshland into open cornfields.

According to an account from the Bexhill Observer printed in 1935, a horse and cart were seen hurrying through the Old Town piled high with herrings that appeared so fresh they were still bleeding. As the men drove the cart, they shouted, "fresh herrings, fresh herrings, all alive," yet they were in such a hurry that they made no attempt to stop or sell any fish to the residents. The deception was nearly compromised when several onlookers noticed a human hand protruding from the heap of fish as the cart sped past. Although the witnesses wisely decided to mind their own business at the time, it later became known that the smugglers were using the fish to hide the body of an exciseman who had been killed during a skirmish. Fearing the consequences if the body were found at the scene, the gang used the herrings as a cover to transport the officer to a remote inland spot for a secret burial.

War Memorial [F] – Shelter No.3 [G]

Martello Tower #45 [PHOTO 11] 1811

Located directly opposite from Shelter No.3, this tower is depicted in a sketch and watercolour by Turner who visited Bexhill in 1807.

An early casualty damaged by coastal erosion and subsequently dismantled by 1822.

Battle of Sidley Green

It was here that on the 3rd of January 1828 at about 1am, smugglers gathered to unload a cargo of contraband believed to be around 600 gallons of spirits and tobacco imported from France. The blockade man stationed at Martello Tower 44 (Galley Hill) fired his pistol to signal for assistance, but the smugglers were so numerous and well-organised that the small blockade party was forced to retire to avoid a "useless sacrifice of life".

The smugglers loaded their goods onto horses, carts and the backs of men and proceeded up Sea Lane through the village of Bexhill towards Sidley Green. Local residents were awakened by the noise; some appeared at windows to shout warnings to the smugglers that the Blockade was close behind. A cart with filled with spirits and a wounded smuggler was hurried into the yard of The Bell Hotel.

Meanwhile, the Blockade officer at Galley Hill gathered reinforcements, raising his force to about 40 armed men and intercepted the gang at a meeting of the roads at Sidley. At Sidley Green, the smugglers' armed with six-foot-long bats formed a regular line to protect the men carrying the cargo. The Blockade leader, Quartermaster Charles Collins of HMS Hyperion, was killed after having his "brains literally beaten out" by the batsmen. An older smuggler named Timothy Smithurst was also killed; he was found the next morning with his bat still grasped in his hands, he had been "hacked to pieces" by the sailors' cutlasses.

Despite the violence, the smugglers successfully repulsed the Blockade and escaped with nearly all their goods, except for 4 or 5 tubs of spirits.

The establishment was determined to bring justice and a £500 reward was offered for information. A local girl of "loose character," Ann Easton, provided information that led to the arrest of Charles Hills. Hills subsequently turned informer to save himself from the gallows, delivering the names of over 30 accomplices to the authorities. For weeks, District Commander of the Blockade Lieutenant John Green and his men scoured the countryside, breaking into houses by force. This period was described as a state of "terror and alarm" for local residents.

In April 1828, ten men were formally accused at the Old Bailey. They pleaded guilty on the understanding their lives would be spared and they were subsequently transported to Australia. The battle and its legal fallout were devastating for the community. In Bexhill alone, 25 to 26 families were left destitute and forced to rely on parish funds after their breadwinners either absconded or were captured.

Shelter No.3 **[G]** – *Shelter No.4* **[H]**

Martello Tower #44 **[PHOTO 12]** 1895

This and No.43 were the first towers to be built in the Parish. An admiralty signal post was built beside it in 1810. Used by the Coastal Blockade 1818-1831 and as previously mentioned the men who fought in the Battle of Sidley Green were stationed at this tower on Galley Hill.

Collapsed due to cliff erosion and some of the remains were still visible up until the 1930s.

Coal Mining **[MAP C]** 1927

The year is 1804 and thin bands of what looks like coal have been discovered during the digging of water wells for the nearby Martello Towers. Arabella Diana, Dowager Duchess of Dorset, has commissioned William James, a surveyor and the steward of Bexhill Manor, to investigate the potential for mining in the area.

The Sussex Mining Company has been subsequently created and within two years a shaft will be sunk to a depth of 164 feet. This shaft will reveal a layer of what looks like coal about 3 feet 6 inches thick. An engine house will be constructed and two steam engines installed to pump water out of the workings. A man-made canal will also be constructed to carry water from the mine shaft to the sea and to allow fuel for the engines to be brought in from the beach. Marine Cottages (located on Galley Hill) will be used to house the foreman of these coal explorations.

To keep investors encouraged, specimens of coal will be brought to the surface despite not being mined at this location. These samples will convince backers that a viable coal bed exists just beyond the current diggings, even as geological reality may prove otherwise.

Alas, the charade can only go on for so long. It was not coal, just lignite – fossilised driftwood. The project will result in a staggering loss of £80,000 – over 6 million pounds in today's money. By 1810, the project will be officially abandoned and for many years to come, rusty machinery will remain visible in the centre of the old Bexhill Golf Links as a reminder of this failed venture.

Outro

In the end, the Royal Navy's blockades and Admiral Lord Nelson's relentless pursuit of the French fleet crippled Napoleon's invasion plans, leaving the towers unused for their intended purpose. Instead, as we have learnt, they later served as coastal-blockade lookouts against smugglers, homes for retired soldiers, signalling stations, sites for wireless-technology experiments, military testing, sources of masonry and observation and artillery platforms during the Second World War.

John 'Yorky' Smith became very wealthy from the building of the Martello Towers. Original estimates put the cost of each tower at £2,000 and by completion this had reached over £3,000 (about £240,000 today). Yorky continued working in Hastings even after the Napoleonic war. He built the first house, 57 Marina, in the new town of St. Leonards and was first to be buried at Hastings Cemetery in 1856.

It was during the 1850s that excessive duties on tea, spirits and tobacco were removed by the government. Thus, smuggling gangs disbanded as it was no longer unprofitable and not worth the risk. While this brought peace to the coast, it also led to economic hardship for local agricultural labourers who had relied on smuggling to supplement their meagre wages, often leaving them below the poverty line.

Finish

The next walk will be Stepping Out to the Amsterdam on the 29th August at Galley Hill Coastguard Station.

Author: Alexis Markwick, 2026

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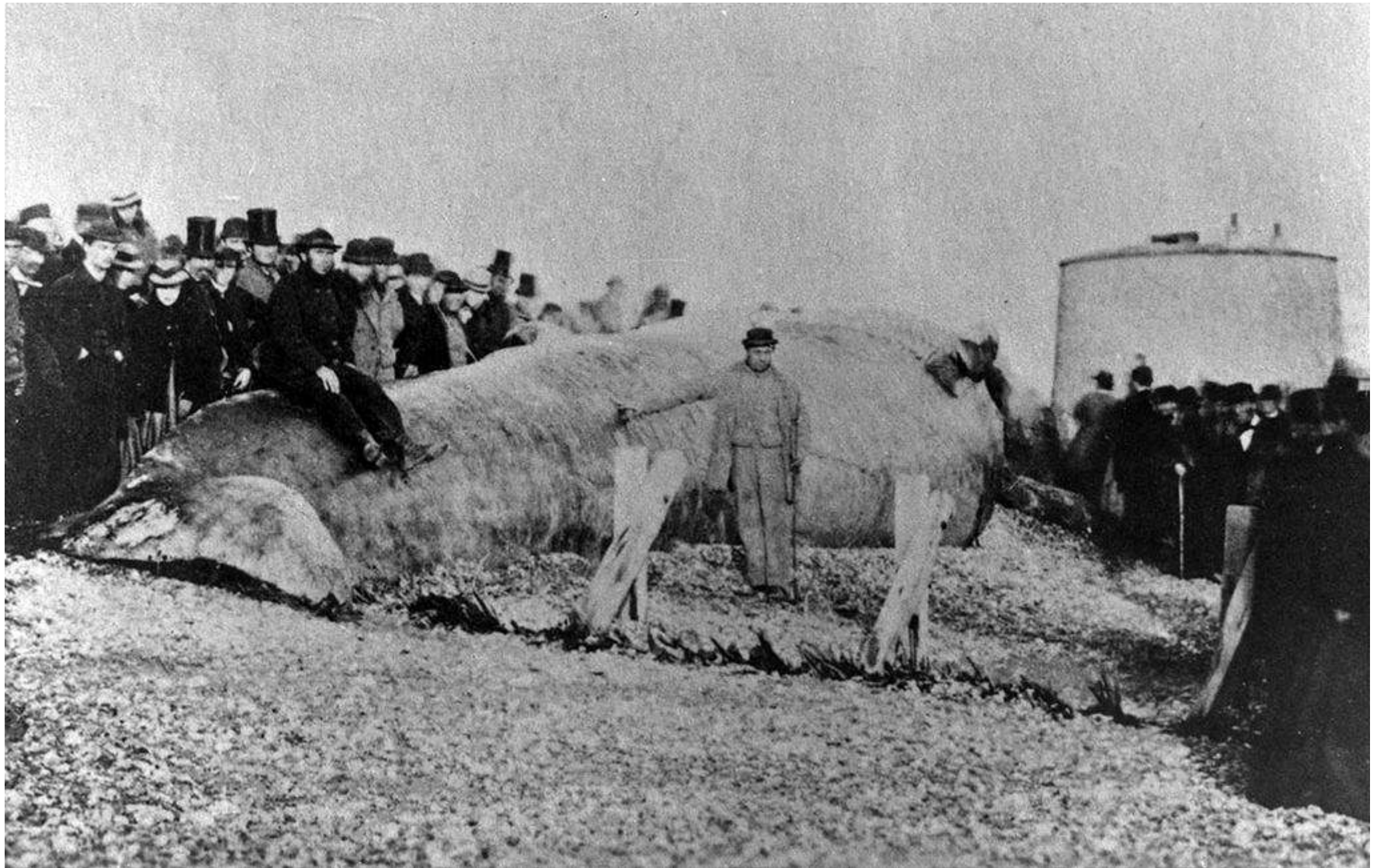
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Note: The tour was put together to raise funds for Bexhill Museum, so if you enjoyed it please consider sending them donation at <https://bexhillmuseum.org.uk>

#1: Martello Tower #55, 1929



#2: Martello Tower #54, 1865



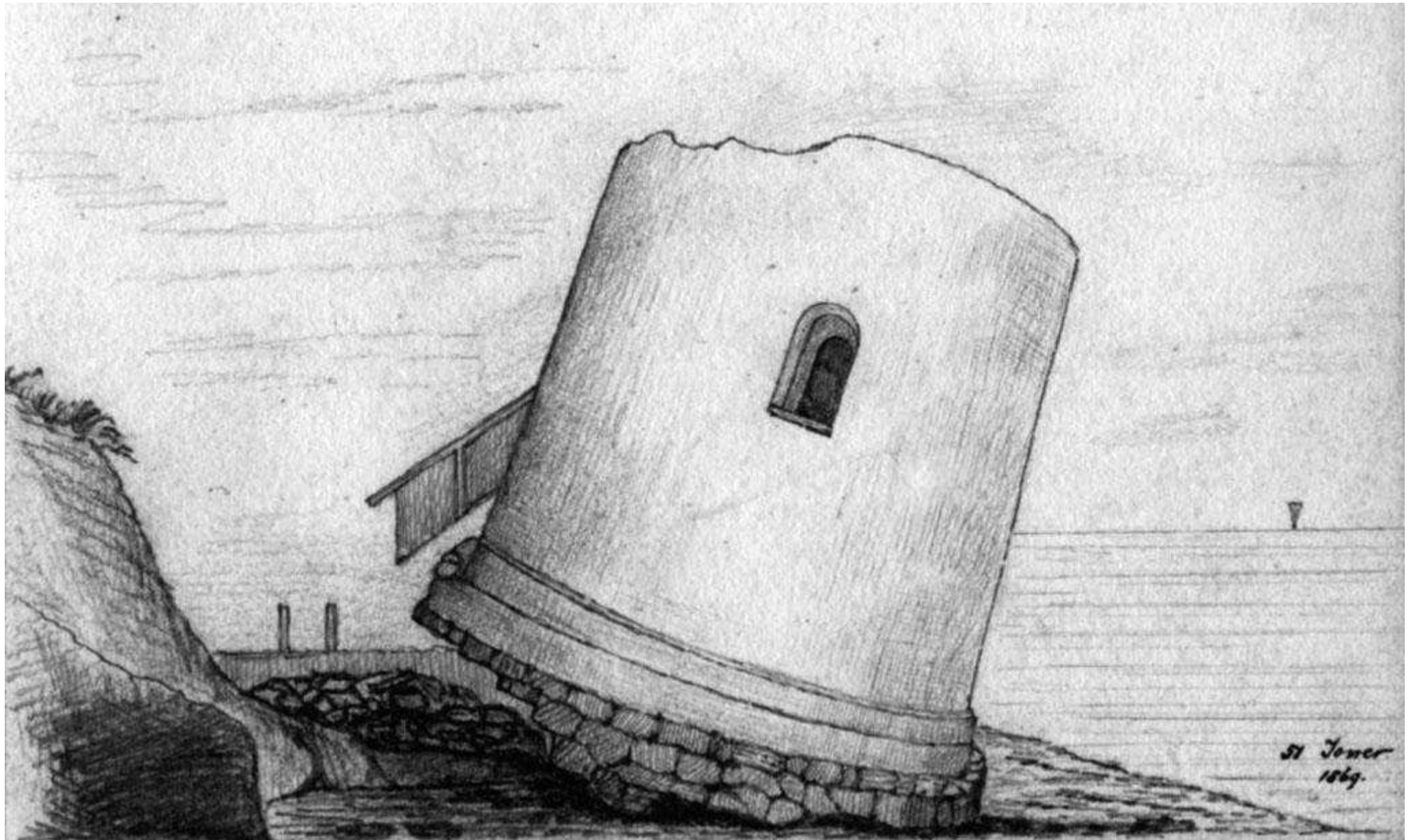
#3: Martello Tower #53 (war department boundary stone), 2020



#4: Martello Tower #52 (pivoting stone), 2020



#5: Martello Tower #51, 1869



#6: Martello Tower #50 (used to build coastguard station), 1896



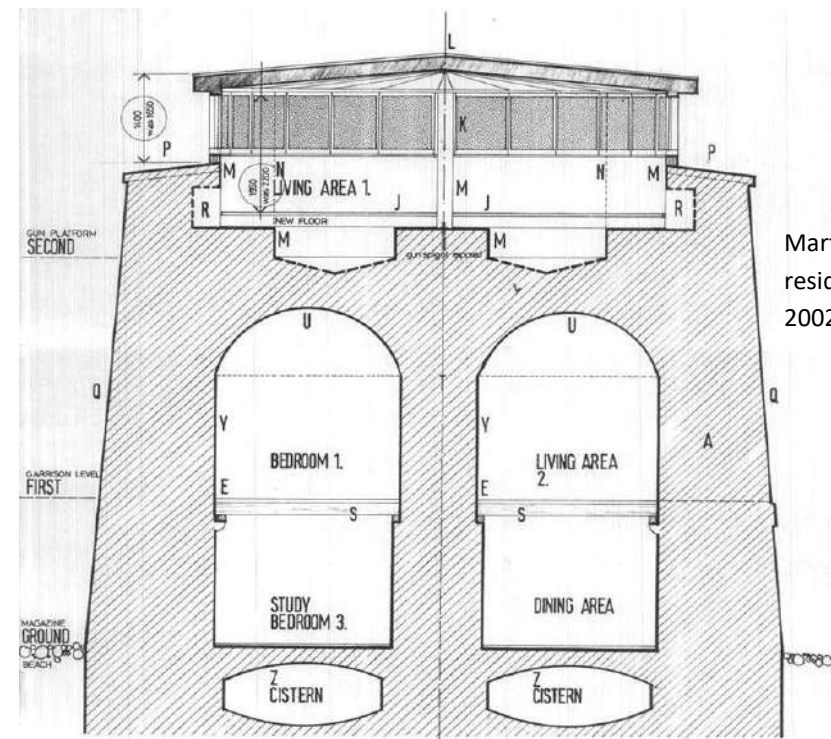
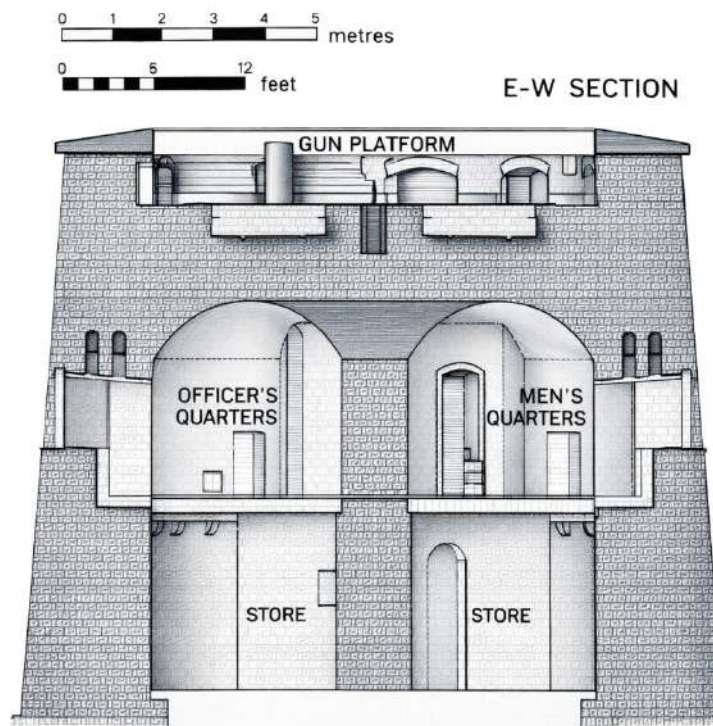
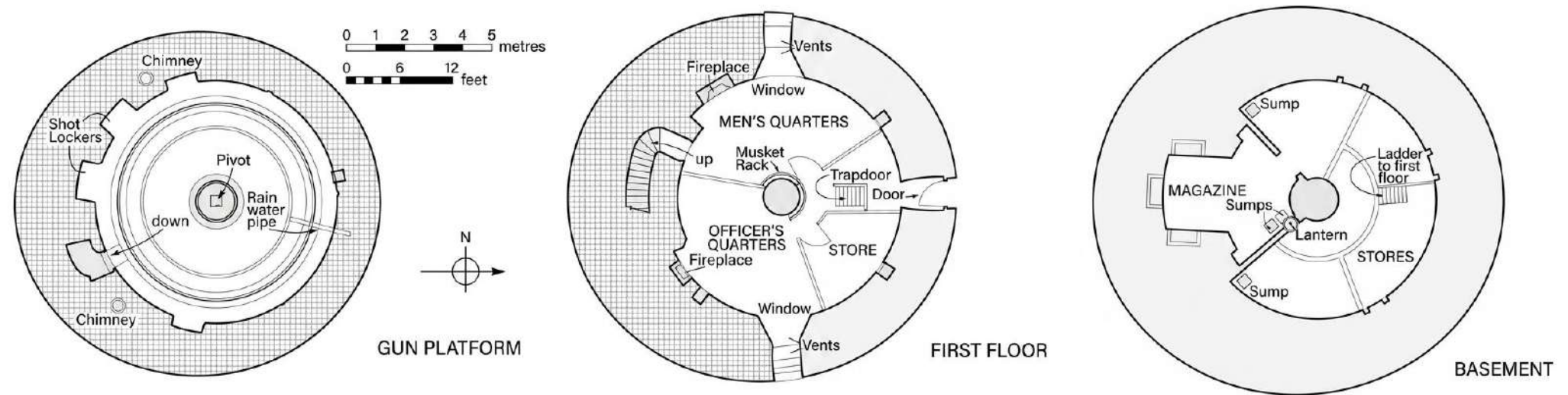
#7: Martello Tower #48, 1856



#8: Martello Tower #47 (ruins of), 2014



#9: Martello Tower Design



#10: Martello Tower #46, 1866



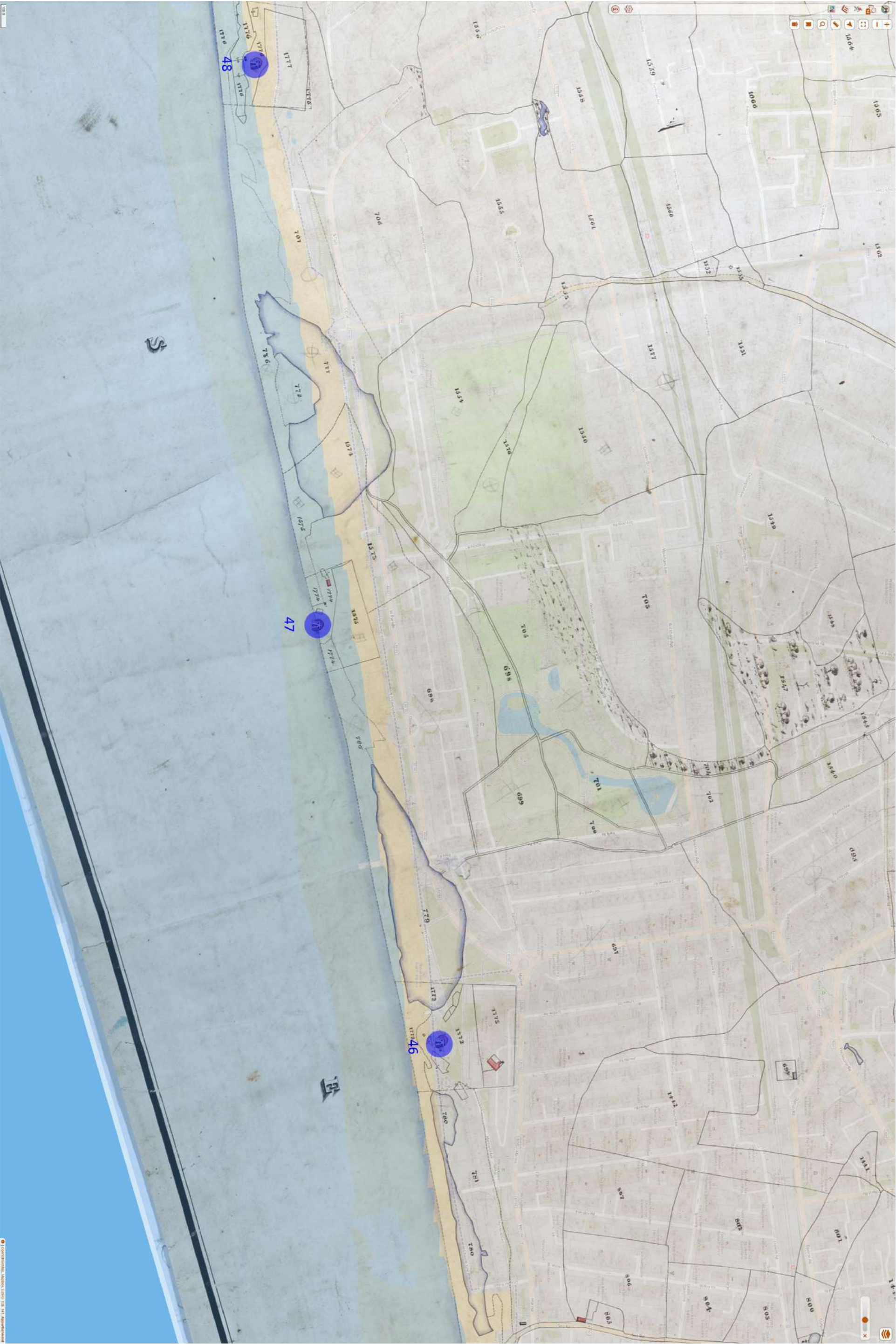
#11: Martello Tower #45, 1811



#12: Martello Tower #44 (Seacliff Cottage), 1895



A: Bexhill Tithe, 1839







D: Martello Towers from Little Common, 1805

