

A Personal Field Trip to Cliff End, East Sussex – 30th January 2007

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This was already my second trip to the area in ten days, the first had been to do some photography, this was to collect some more rock samples, but as is usual for me these days, I also took my camera for any further opportunities.

The reason for these forays was to collect as much information as possible for a rock and photographic collection of the various strata, of the cliffs between Cliff End, at Pett Level and Haddock's Reverse Fault at Fairlight Cove, about 800 metres to the west.



Figure 1: Evidence of an earlier fall

There was a light wind blowing, the tide was on the way out and the weather a bit overcast, I was expecting to stay about 4 hours. Sometimes when I get here I think I'll walk to the far end of the cliffs at Haddock's and take a slow walk back to Pett checking the foreshore for different rocks and trace fossils. It never happens. I always take my time from the moment I step on the shingle, at Cliff End, to the moment I return. (I've never tried, or had to get off the beach from the far end at Fairlight Cove).

Today was no exception, I sauntered along the beach looking at various rocks and forms within them, oh, and taking more photos as well. After searching around a bit, slowly getting to Haddock's, I came across a fairly recent cliff fall (Figure 1); probably that morning, from the Cliff End Sandstone (CES). At the time I didn't think too much about it, just that I would collect some rock samples on the way back for my collection.

This is a project I am attempting after working on the Wealden Rock Collection CD ROM with colleagues from the Medway Society back in 2000. We had collected some samples from here, as well as other sites, but I want to attempt a more defined collection for this site.



Figure 2: Start of the collapse with material caught in 'free-fall'

I took a photo of this initial fall on first seeing it. When I returned about an hour or so later, I started to look around for some samples, but soon moved away as a small section fell away from the ironstone band that separates the Ash-down from the Wadhurst Formations. I began to think I might see a larger fall if I stayed around long enough. I got to an angled position away

from this initial fall and waited, camera now at the ready. As I watched more pieces were falling away and at times I was able to catch this on frame, in free-fall, (Figure 2).



Figure 3: The waterfall effect as the fall gathers momentum

The cliffs here are about 25 – 28 metres high, bottom half is Ashdown, the top half is Wadhurst Clay. For the uninitiated amongst you these are nearly all sand- or silt-stones of the Lower Cretaceous Hastings Group that have a Weald wide ironstone separating them, the CES above the ironstone is a 10 metres thick sandy unit of the Wadhurst Clay.

As I watch the cliff more and more rocks are falling, the unconsolidated sand of the CES making it appear like a waterfall (Figure 3).

All of a sudden the whole section starts to drop, (Figure 4), in no time at all it's over, a cloud of dust rolls toward me, but gradually abates, looking misty, (Figure 5) smelling of earth. My heart is beating like a drum, I was OK, but you never know. I took some more photos of the cliff face and the pile of rubble on the beach. Where there had been clean washed shingle there was now a cluttered mess of roots and rock.



Figure 4: The whole section starts to drop

There was not another soul in sight! I hadn't got a hard hat, though I don't think it would have been of much use under that lot. And a mobile phone, which I did have, does not work near the cliffs - no signal!



Figure 5: The dust gradually settles to reveal a new pile of rock on the beach.

I have visited this area many times over the last 15 years and have seen the aftermath of many falls; this is the first time I've seen this erosion in action.