info@wessexarch.co.uk
www.wessexarch.co.uk

Out of the Saltpan, into the Firth

Project design

322600.01



Figure 1: Coastal erosion at the St Monans saltpans (courtesy of Louise Roger)

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Project summary

The project is a collaborative project between Wessex Archaeology's experienced team in Edinburgh, the 1722 Waggonway Heritage Group (1722 WHG), Archaeology Scotland, Fife Field Archaeology Network (FFAN) and YouthSpace Fife, seeking to build on the successful community engagement and skills project completed at Chesterhill cist cemetery in Fife in October 2025 (HES funded project HEGP2024-1666). The project will utilise heritage as a tool for mental health recovery, skills development and social cohesion whilst also recording a site which is being rapidly destroyed by coastal erosion: the St Monans saltpans (https://www.trove.scot/place/34266#activities). The site is a Scheduled Monument (SM5529) and therefore would require Scheduled Monument Consent (SMC) for any intrusive works, and Metal & Mineral Detecting Consent (MMDC) for any geophysical survey. Potential for these have been discussed with the HES Monuments Officer for the region, and an indication that the proposed works would meet the requirements for these has been given.

While part of the St Monans saltworks has been excavated as part of a large project in the 1980 and 90s (https://www.tafac.org.uk/saltpt2.pdf) the 2nd furthest east pan house (pan house 8) was only stripped to wall top level, while the archaeology of the associated wagonway from the coal pit at Coal Farm and across the fields to Pittenweem harbour was investigated through extensive aerial reconnaissance but limited excavation (https://www.tafac.org.uk/saltpt4.pdf). This project seeks to recover as much information on these under-threat features as possible while engaging both youth groups and military veterans in archaeology to develop skills, combat isolation and build up confidence. The project will continue the positive work completed at Chesterhill by pairing with the youth group YouthSpace Fife (https://www.youthspacefife.co.uk/) to develop interest in heritage with their members as well as working with the Waid Academy in Anstruther to widen participation. Half of the site days will be for members of these youth groups/schools. The remainder will be focused on military veterans in line with our extensive experience supporting these individuals in recovery from poor mental and physical health. All days will be open to local volunteers from the wider community and we will work with the local interest group St Monans Pool and Pans Restoration Group SCIO as well as Fife Field Archaeology Network (FFAN). The project will also work with Archaeology Scotland and the 1722 WHG to provide example structures and advice to these local groups to show how a bottom-up group can be successful and where further resources can be found. The aims for the project are:

- to have developed heritage skills and interest in Fife's heritage to participants;
- to have supported the recovery and ongoing resilience of participants with poor mental health;
- to have developed the organisation and resilience of a local community heritage group; and
- to have recorded the archaeology of an at-risk monument before it is lost forever.

Heritage Focus

The 18th century saltworks at St Monans is one of the most complete complexes of this industry in Scotland, with a total of 9 pan houses set out in a shallow arc along the coastline along with other infrastructure and workers' housing immediately inland from them. A wind pump brought the salt water through wooden pipes from two tidal holding ponds to a header tank, while the coal fuel for the furnace was mined at the nearby Coal Farm pit and brought down by a wagonway to the

complex. The whole complex formed part of the Newark Salt & Coal Company, founded in 1771 and seeing salt and coal exported from Pittenweem harbour for 20 years. It was excavated in the 1980 and 90s, which greatly contributed to the understanding of this important and inter-connected industry, however only three of the salt pan houses (4, 7 and 9) were fully excavated to floor level, with the remainder only cleared to surviving wall top for planning. Excavations identified a tantalising glimpse of the structure of the wagonway but were not able to recover much information beyond confirming its presence due to very poor weather and time pressures. Its route was plotted through comparison of estate plans with cropmarks during the droughts of 1985 and 1989, but information on construction methodologies could not be answered in detail. In the intervening years there have been further studies into saltworks at Brora in the Highlands and Cockenzie in East Lothian, with the latter also recovering significant information on the development of wagonways and the changes in construction/technology over time. An updated investigation of the wagonway at St Monans has the potential to provide additional information on the technological development of these routeways given its short operation (1770s-1790s), while the excavation to floor level of the easternmost unexcavated pan house 8 will preserve the archaeological dataset by record of a structure at risk of being lost to coastal erosion. The whole project will also work with local interested parties to develop archaeological skills and potentially also additional information on development and group structure for both St Monans Pool and Pans Restoration Group (SMPPRG) and FFAN. There is clear potential for SMPPRG to work with Archaeology Scotland's Adopt-A-Monument team to develop their plans for the area, although as this programme is funded by HES it does not form part of the grant-applicable in-kind support from Archaeology Scotland.

Heritage at Risk

It was noted that the Fife coast is one of the most active in terms of coastal erosion in Scotland, and potentially nationally significant archaeological material is being lost due to this. One such site is the post-medieval salt pans at St Monans, which were partially excavated in the 1990s and contributed a great deal to the understanding of the salt industry in Scotland and its significance in connection with the industrial development of Scotland. The project investigations will look to mitigate the direct and complete loss of archaeological information within the easternmost two saltpans, as well as adding to information about the wagonway that supplied coal to the pans complex from the coal pits at Coal Farm. The wagonway remains are largely beneath agricultural fields and may be truncated due to plough activity but are not at particular further risk unless ploughing technology/depth changes. The easternmost salt pan houses 8 and 9 and three salt pans in the centre of the site (3, 4 and 5) however are directly at risk of total loss due to coastal erosion, with the most exposed sections having already been damaged in recent years, as noted by SCAPE recently (https://scapetrust.org/sites-at-risk/site/1310/). This has further been confirmed by the HES Monuments Officer for the area and there is significant concern within the local community that the heritage is being lost without any mitigation.

Need for Project

The main focus of the project is to utilise heritage as a vehicle for mental health wellbeing improvement, an increased sense of belonging and a knowledge exchange for the participants in terms of skills development. Previous work has demonstrated the power of archaeology to give people a focus and new confidence through the development of skills within a safe, social environment.

It will provide participants with inspiration to get out and look at the coastal landscape and think about it in new ways, as well as fostering improved self-confidence in putting these skills into practice.

The project will also recover archaeological information about an at-risk part of a Scheduled Monument prior to it being removed by coastal erosion and has the potential to contribute to our understanding of 18th century wagonways and their development as part of a rural industrialised landscape. As many of these features have been partially or entirely destroyed by later development, there are limited opportunities for such research.

Overall, the project will meet the aims of Scotland's Archaeological strategy through HES Grants aims 1, 2 4 and 5.

We believe it also meets Object E of the SLCF scheme, as well as providing skills development for participants. The bringing together of multiple project partners including those within the local community demonstrates partnership working and community engagement.

Project Breakdown

The project will have six parts:

- A project set-up phase which will see kick-off meetings with project partners and possible participant groups; the development of a Written Scheme of Investigations agreed with Fife Council and HES; and Risk Assessments and Method Statements as required;
- Participant recruitment and support: youth recruitment and support through YouthSpace Fife; military veteran recruitment and support through Breaking Ground Heritage; and local participant recruitment and support through Wessex Archaeology and Archaeology Scotland;
- Workshops covering the history of wagonways and saltmaking in Scotland from 1722 WHG; setting up a community heritage group from the bottom-up from 1722 WHG; and resources available to community heritage groups from Archaeology Scotland;
- The fieldwork element incorporating: 2 days of terrestrial geophysics within the survey areas set out below; and the archaeological excavation/recording works covering pan house 8 and exposed sections of pan house 9 for 6 days; and backfilling of the excavated material afterwards;
- Reporting, archiving and evaluation of project completed by Wessex Archaeology's in-house specialists with input from 1722 WHG specialists.
- Dissemination of results through conference papers, blogs and social media activities by all project partners.

The workshops will be held at a suitable location in St Monans, and where possible will be recorded to allow for further dissemination to those unable to attend. Project partners will retain the material for their own use in future.

The survey and excavation works will be planned to take place consecutively, with the geophysical survey providing information to target the excavation of a section of wagonway outside the SM, as well as hopefully providing confirmation of its route from Coal Farm to the salt pans and/or part of the route running towards Pittenweem harbour. Excavation will be completed by hand, although stripping of the upper non-archaeological layers may be completed by mechanical excavator under

supervision of a suitably qualified archaeologist. Excavation within the salt pan structure will only be by hand. Reinstatement will consist of backfilling of excavated material in the approximate order of removal. Where possible we will work with Fife Council's Estates team to ensure that the site is left in an acceptable condition.

Excavation will comply with CIfA standards and guidance through Wessex Archaeology's excavation handbook as a CIfA Registered Organisation. The geophysical survey will complete with industry standards for archaeological prospection.



Figure 2: Volunteers including members of YouthSpace excavating features at Chesterhill Cist Cemetery, Fife

Project partners

- Wessex Archaeology (project lead, archaeology lead, workshops provider)
- 1722 Waggonway Heritage group (post-medieval archaeology specialists, community organisers)
- St Monans Pool and Pans Restoration Group SCIO (local interest group)
- FFAN (Local heritage group, participant provider)
- YouthSpace Fife (Youth group, participant provider)
- Archaeology Scotland (Outreach and training)
- Breaking Ground Heritage (veterans coordinator)
- Veterans organisations across Scotland (participant providers)

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Proposed project funders

- Historic Environment Scotland
- Society of Antiquaries of Scotland
- Fife Environmental Trust on behalf of the Scottish Landfill Communities Fund
- In-kind support from Wessex Archaeology and project partners

Project outputs:

- Full Data Structure Report for excavations and survey results compliant with national standards to be archived with Fife Council HER, HES and OASIS;
- Evaluation of impact of project on participants, in conjunction with project partners where appropriate;
- Blogs, conference papers and digital outputs from project as appropriate.

Project outcomes:

- Improved wellbeing for participants and increased self-confidence in skillsets gained;
- At-risk heritage recorded and results disseminated prior to complete loss;
- Improved connection with the archaeology of Fife and heritage in general;
- Increased understanding of the rural industrial landscape of Fife;
- Increased information of the development and use of waggonways in the 18th century; and
- Increased participation in archaeological survey, excavation and other heritage activities.

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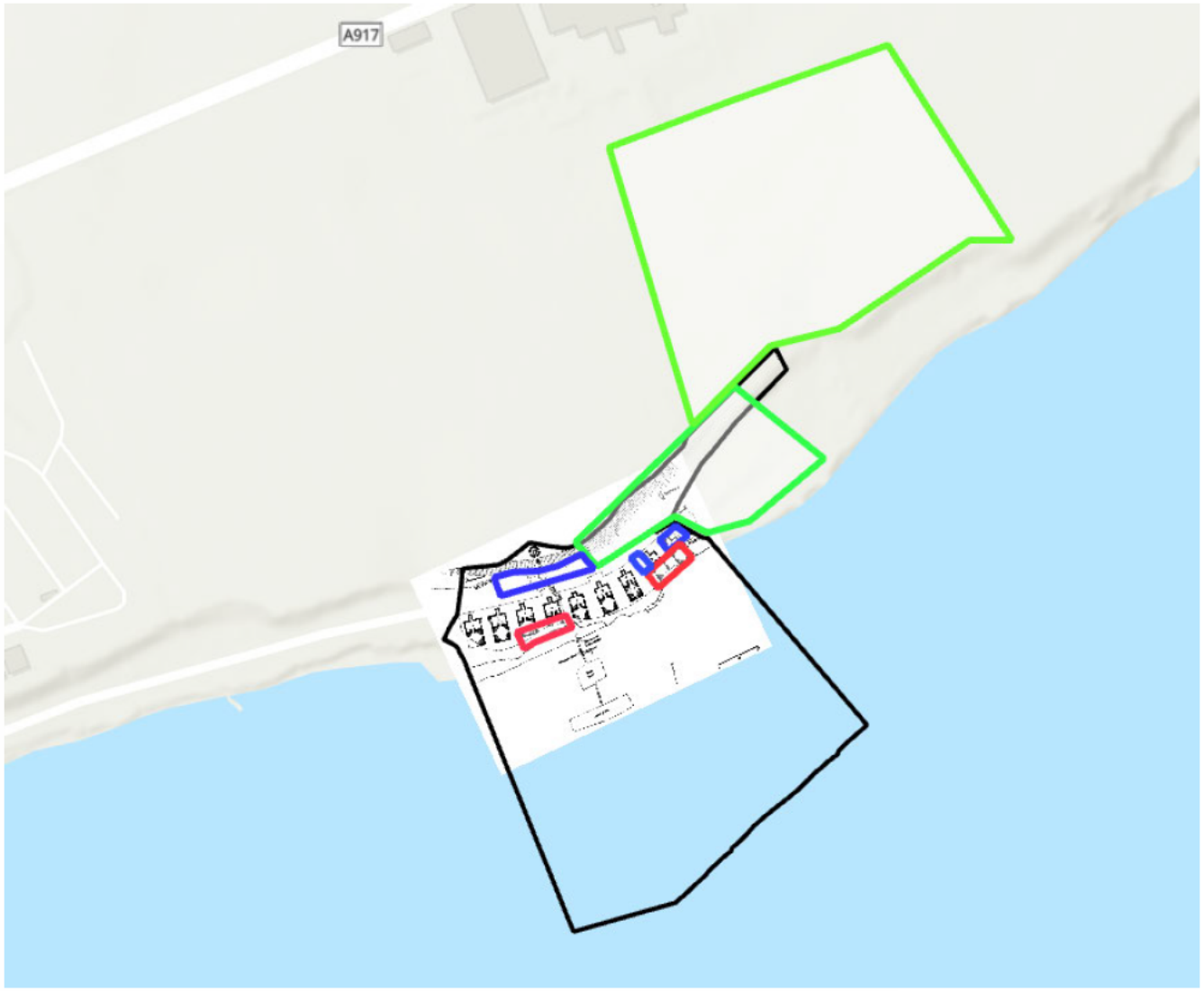
Proposed excavation areas (red), spoil areas (blue) and geophysical survey (green) for 2026 works:



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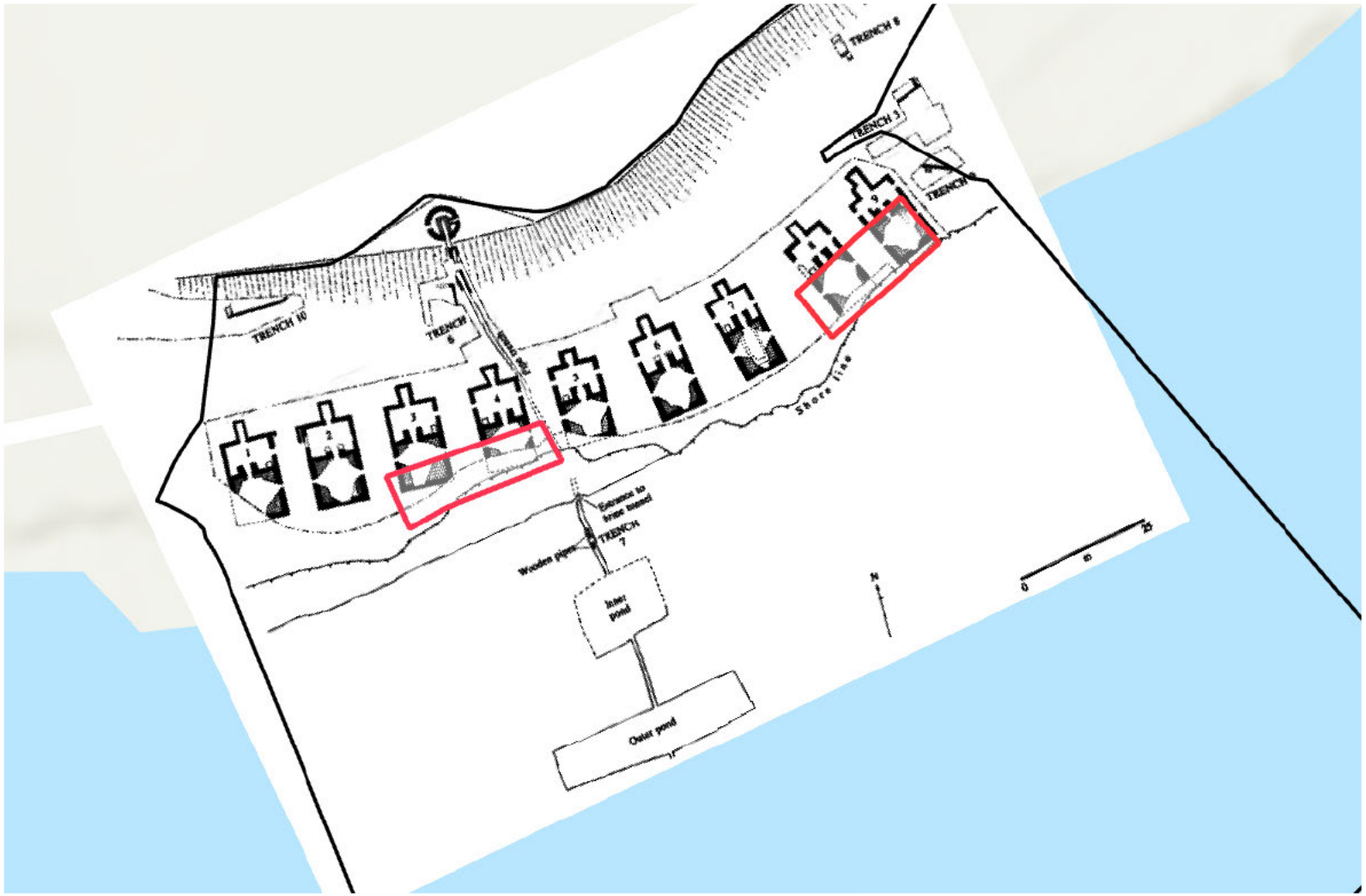

Site plan adapted from Lewis, J., Martin, C., Martin, P. and Murdoch, R. 1999. *The Salt and Coal Industries at St Monans, Fife, in the 18th and 19th Centuries.* Tayside and Fife Archaeological Committee.

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