



F·S·A·R·G
The Faversham Society
Archaeological Research Group



Community
Archaeology

**Report for Keyhole Excavation KP92
Front Brents, Faversham.**

Grid Reference: TR 01622 61782



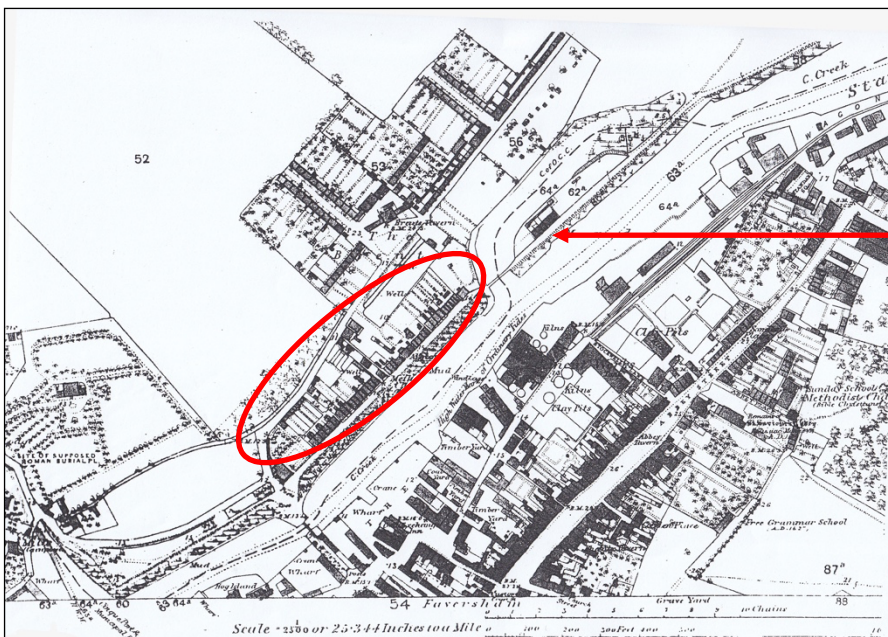
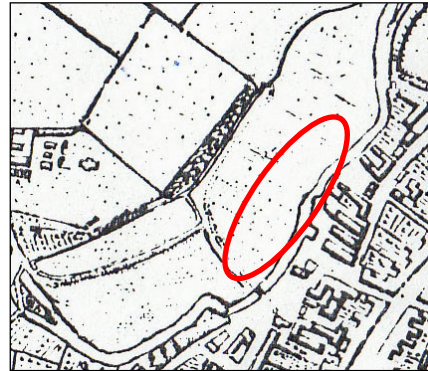
Faversham Nautical Festival 2012, Front Brents in the background.

1. Introduction

The flourishing town of Faversham was established on the east bank of Faversham Creek from Anglo-Saxon times. Even at such an early period easy access to Watling Street, the main trading route to and from London and Canterbury, influenced development.

The small community on the west bank of Faversham Creek known as The Brents was not established until the early nineteenth century. This settlement was outside of the parish of St Mary's, Faversham in the parish of North Preston. To complicate matters further, when the creek was 'straightened' in 1840-44 a portion of Faversham parish was detached and became in essence part of The Brents known as Crab Island (see **Fig 3**). The derivation of 'Brents' may come from the Middle English word 'brent' meaning steep – a perfect description of the land to the west ascending to the Davington plateau.¹

Fig 1a: The Front Brents area in 1795.²



**Black
Cottages**

Fig 1b: The same area in 1865.³

The change in 67 years as shown in the two maps is extreme - from nothing to a dense packing in of houses. Even the line of the Creek has changed, as discussed above, with the Black Cottages now standing on the newly created Crab Island (see later for a very vivid account of life in the Black Cottages). Originally consisting of Front Brents, running beside to the creek, Brent Road running north towards Brent Hill and Church Road, almost parallel to Front Brents but higher up the slope. Three cul de sacs – Court's Opening, Shop Opening and Top Opening - led off to the west from Church Road.

The community of about 120 dwellings housing mariners, oystermen and brick workers had three places

¹ Stevens P 2003 *A look at the Brents* Faversham Papers: No 85 Faversham Society p2

² 1795 draft for the first survey of the OS.

³ OS 1865 (1904 reprint) Sheet XXXIV Scale 1:2500

of worship - a Primitive Methodist Chapel (1857 - 1898), a Mormon church (1866) and St John's, an Anglican church (1881-2003) founded by Mrs Hall, wife of the Gunpowder Works owner, John Hall. There were also three shops and three pubs, The Albion (1847 -to date), The Willow Tap (c.1840- 2000) and The Brents Tavern (1831-to date).⁴

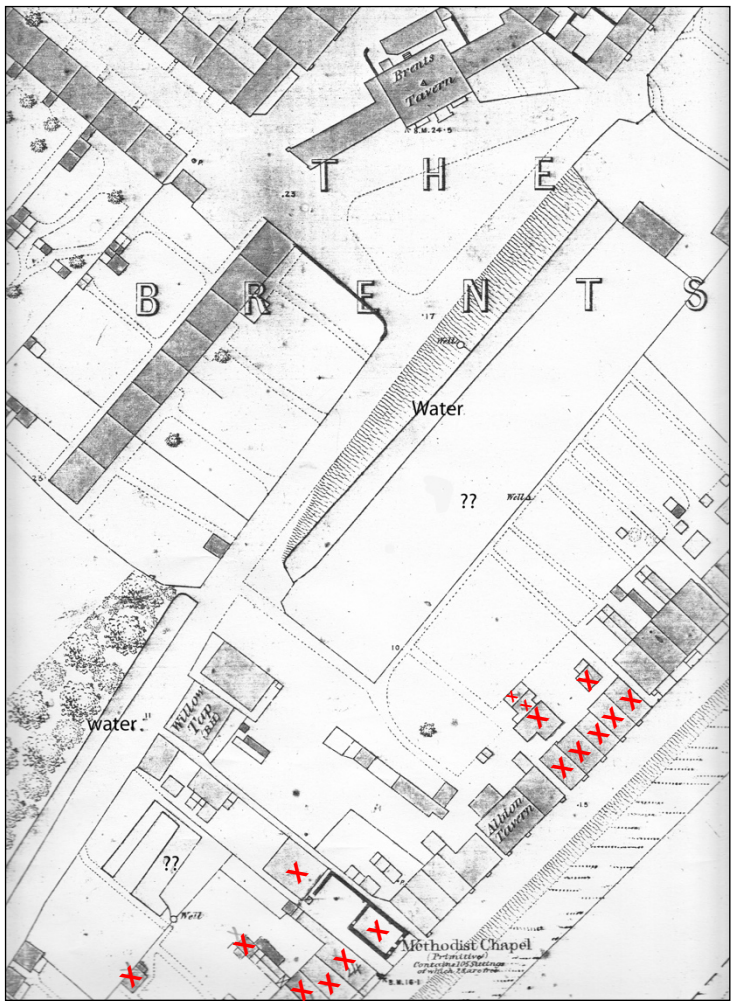


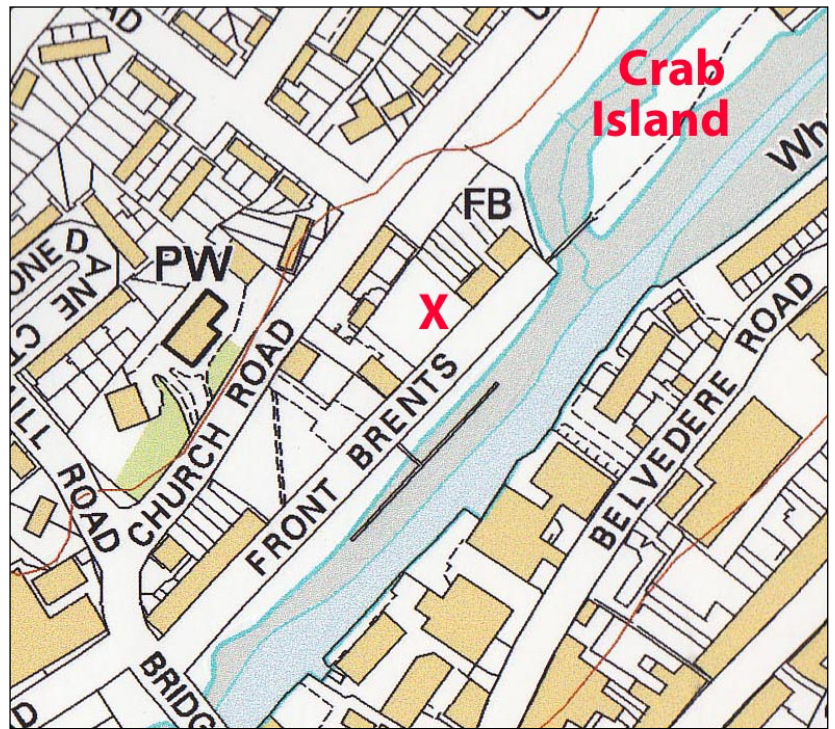
Fig 2: A close up map from 1965 showing the central part of the Front Brents with the three pubs and (appropriately!) the Methodist Chapel.⁵ The properties with crosses no longer exist.

Besides the traditional maritime occupations – bargemen, fishermen and oyster dredgers – at various times there have been a number of small boat builders and repairers on the creek and, north of The Brents, a barge builder Whites and the shipbuilders Pollocks (1916-1970) all giving employment to Brents residents. Further employment was provided by an iron foundry, sawmill and brickworks. To the south the creek ended in the Creek Basin created by the draw bridge with sluice gates. Three coal yards, the gasworks and boatyards bordered the basin. As the tide ebbed water was retained within the sluice gates and released at low water to scour the mud from the creek.

⁴ Stevens P 2003 op.cit.

⁵ OS 1865 (1904 reprint) Sheet XXXIV Scale 1: 500

Fig 3: The Front Brents in 2007 - after extensive demolition.



2. The Lower Brents community project

In 2012, the Faversham Society Archaeological Research Group was carrying out research into various aspects of the history of the land running downhill at Brent Hill, on the western side. This is reported on in a separate document.⁶ It was decided to carry out some investigation along the Front Brents in the same season and to time it so that the work coincided with the first Faversham Nautical Festival taking place on the forecourt of TS Hasarde, on the opposite side of the Creek (see cover picture). This was very much a community project that aimed at maximum contact with members of the public.

It was decided to carry out a small excavation on the open land to the north of the Albion public house (see later for details). This was securely fenced off so that visitors could see the activity and ask questions without being at any risk of falling in.

At the same time a display was set up nearby in a small marquee, showing all sorts of information about the area - maps, prints, newspaper articles etc. Chairs would be set out and folk with memories of the Front Brents encouraged to tell us about them. This did indeed prove most successful.



Fig 4: Interviewing on the Creekside.

The project was confined to two days as the work took place on open land, and it was not thought advisable to leave it open for more than one night. The aerial photo **Fig 5** shows the location of the excavation KP92 as **X**.

The large cleared areas along the Front Brents either side of the Albion are very obvious in the photograph⁷ and in **Fig 3**.

⁶ Reid P 2012 *Report on excavations at Brent Hill* on www.community-archaeology.org.uk , under project DVN12

⁷ Google Earth 20133.

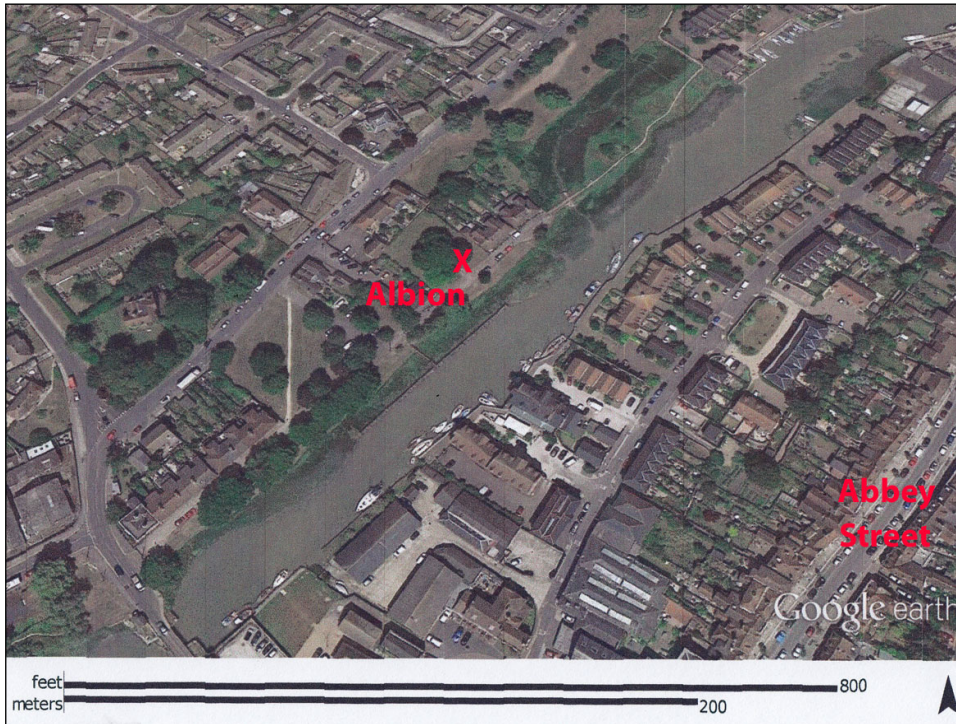


Fig 5: Aerial view of the Front Brechts in 2013.

3. The activity and findings

a) The excavation

i) Location of the pit

After considerable study of the map sequence for this area and consultation of records and books, it was decided to focus on the open ground to the north of the Albion Public House. This grassed area had been the site of five small terraced houses and then a block of four more substantial dwellings: the continuous line of housing fronting the Creek can clearly be seen in **Fig 1b & Fig 10**. Being that the excavation was intended for public view it was decided it should be located to expose the front and flank walls of the most easterly house of the block of four.

ii) The procedures

A two metre square was pegged out using the planning square and the area delineated marked with string. The position of the square was recorded by measurements to the adjacent house. The turf (context [01]) was carefully removed from the square, rolled and set aside in plastic bags. The pit was then hand excavated using single contexts, each of which was fully recorded. All excavated soil was carefully observed for finds and the spoil heap scanned with a metal detector. Finds were set aside for each context and cleaned and recorded by our finds team on site. Any features revealed were carefully recorded. Finally the spoil was put back into the excavation, tamped down and the turf replaced.

iii) The findings

The turf having been removed the next context [02] which was a dark brown soil directly beneath the turf containing small inclusions of red brick, slate, concrete, plaster, glass and nails – typical of demolition. Other small inclusions of oyster and cockle shell, pottery and bone were evidence of a domestic dwelling. Context [02] was carefully taken out by spade.



Fig 6: The front wall [03] first shows.

Creekside in background, to left.

Context [03], the front brick wall of the property, was found close to the surface of [02]. Nine inches (225mm) brickwork is usually of Flemish Bond - headers laid to bond the inside and outside skins - however in this instance the only face brickwork above ground is a single course of Stretcher Bond. It is possible that there were alternative courses incorporating headers and stretchers. The exterior brickwork was good quality red brick above the original ground level and yellow stock bricks below on a stepped three course foundation. The internal finish was probably plaster on lathes on battens fixed to the wall.

Excavation was continued by troweling out the material from the outside of the wall, towards the creek, designated context [04] being similar to [02] but with larger inclusions. Excavation revealed what appeared to be a capped off gas pipe with a brick surround, and an airbrick. Context [05], within the wall was carefully removed showing the remains of the wooden wall plate, set on mortar, which would have carried the suspended ground floor joists.

Context [05] contained lathe and plaster work - remains of the ceilings, internal partition walls and wall finish described above. Time constraints dictated that further excavation inside the building should be by slots dug to the side and rear of the dwelling, contexts [06], [07], [08] & [09]. These revealed much building material - brick, slate, tarmac, window glass, metal window and door fittings, electrical wiring - and the remains of shellfish - oyster, whelk, cockle and winkle along with sherds of domestic pottery, vessel glass and clay tobacco pipe.

Fig 7: The front wall [03] at the end of the day's excavation. Note the fencing in the background. Creekside to the right.



iv) Interpretation

This was a very straight forward excavation which could be easily understood by our public spectators (as was the intention). The wall exposed proved to be of high-quality brickwork most easily demonstrated by the three course brick foundation. Other buildings along the creek were of much lower quality which raises the query as to why this particular terrace was demolished. The most likely explanation is because of neglect and lack of repair by landlords during the late twenties and thirties and the rationing of building materials post World War II.

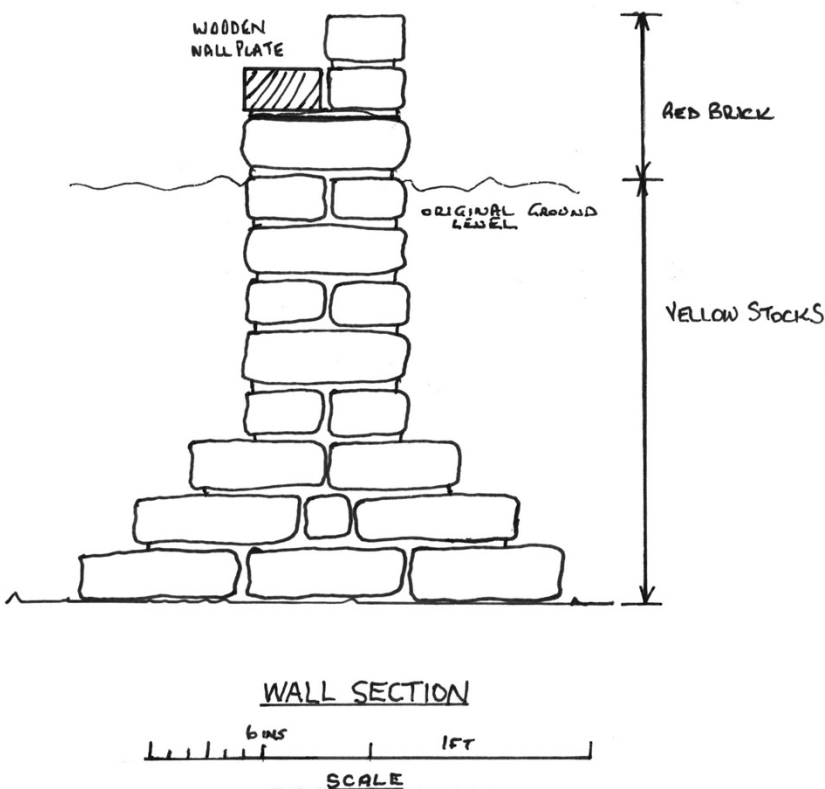


Fig 8: Scale section through the wall, east / west.

b) Oral history, taken from conversations on the Community Day.

i) John Cotton

The Faversham Harbour Master's office once sat to the left of the draw bridge on the Brents side of the creek. The Harbour Master's duties included supervision of the operation of the bridge and sluice gates, the berthing of vessels and maintaining a log of the activity within the port to ensure the collection of dues and tolls.

John Cotton started as a barge crewman in 1946, later becoming mate on the barges *Pretoria*, *Edith*, *James and Ann* and the *Esther*. John was Harbour Master in 1968-9. When a ship was loaded with a cargo for Faversham the ship's agent would inform the Harbour Master who arranged for the bridge to be opened. Some larger vessels could only enter the creek on a spring tide about every other week. After being Harbour Master, John became a River Inspector.

Turning right into Front Brents there is a large house at the end of the terrace - Bridge House - now the residence of local councillor Mike Henderson. This was once the Brents Coffee Tavern which traded in the 1880s to provide 'cheap accommodation to the public on Temperance Principles', and later the home of Herbert Richards who was an early campaigner for the preservation of historic Faversham.

Fig 9: The Front Brents in around 1940.



ii) Mrs Janet Alexander

The Wade family lived in number 10 Church Road; they were a family of ten in a two up - two down cottage. Daughter Janet, now Mrs Brian Alexander, once asked her mother why she had so many children and was told it was due to the cold and having to go to bed early to keep warm!

There was a close community spirit which was manifested once a week when a tin bath was taken into a kitchen and filled with hot water boiled on the stove. The water was continually replenished as one by one the children of the terrace were bathed. In successive weeks the bath moved down the terrace. When the bath was not one of the local lads kept his collection of frogs, toads and newts in it.

Another daughter, Val, well remembers the Brents VE day celebration party. She dressed in rhubarb leaves with a card around her neck showing Chad with the legend 'Wot no rhubarb'. Janet and brother Colin were the 'Bisto Kids'. Another brother Michael with Michael Coe - still babes in prams- were dressed as bride and groom. Neighbour Dave White was a black minstrel with a banjo.

iii) Colin Wade

Colin Wade was born with a crippled right leg. As a boy he had a pram adapted so he could rest his bad leg and scoot along with the good one. He collected coal from a local merchant in half hundredweight bags and delivered them along the Brents and was paid in sweets. He later made horseradish sauce which he supplied to a local shop. He minced up the roots in his mother's meat mincer wearing goggles - but his eyes still streamed with tears. After a while the shop told him that they wouldn't require his sauce any longer. He later found that the alternative supplier had undercut him by adding parsnip to the radish and watered down the vinegar. The shop came back to him later but he took some persuading to resupply them.

Though trained as a cobbler Colin only earned pennies so he went to work at Marley's factory where he earned good money and saved for a good private pension.

Though unable to walk at all with out crutches he had a motor bike and was a proud 'greaser' in the sixties. He was once stopped by the police for riding at 114mph on his bike which was a registered disabled vehicle! He became friendly with the local cops who would 'put him up' in the station when he was locked out by his parents. He later graduated to a car and then had a boat on the creek. Colin believed he was lucky to be born crippled rather than be disabled later in life. Now retired he tends his garden and goes fishing.

iv) Henry Woods and Brian Weaver, talking about the Black Cottages

Henry Woods, aged 88, had lived at No.2 from the age of four in 1928 with just a short period, aged ten, when he moved in with his grandparents. He remembered the privations but savored the well water which was cold but tasted good. Brian Weaver's family were long time residents there at No.4. Brian's grandfather had been a huffer - a pilot who guided vessels up and down the creek - and his uncle Edgar was a bargeman who had won the Coasting Class championship in 1937 as 'sail man' on the Northdown which is still in existence at Brest in France. Brian brought along a photograph of his grandmother and her daughter Ivy, aged seventeen, taken outside of No. 4.

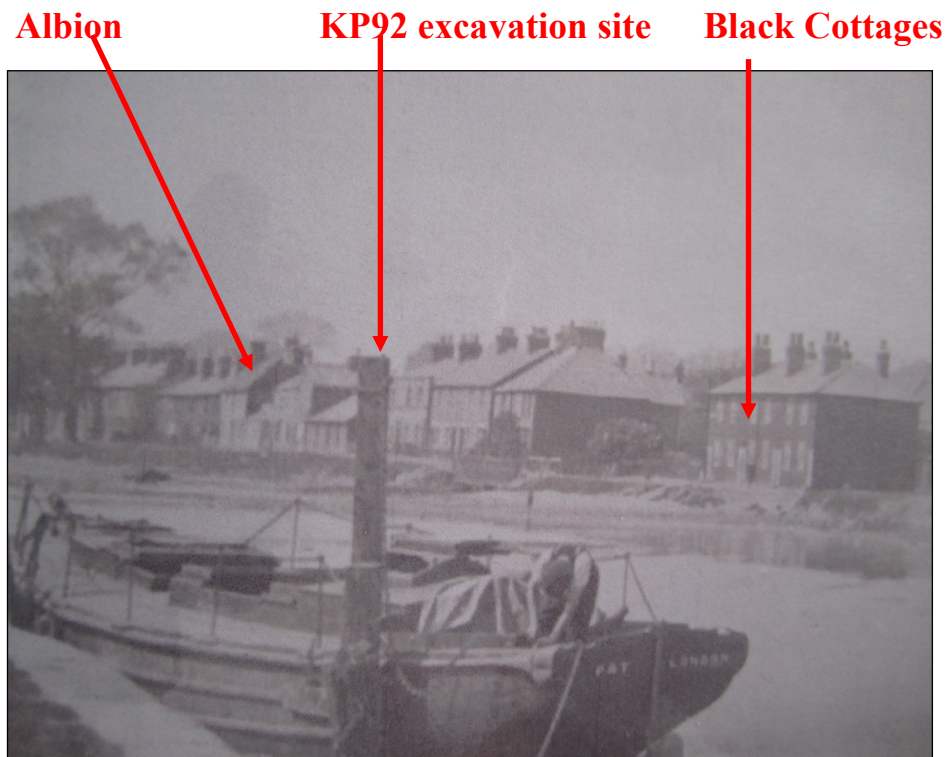


Fig 10: Faversham Creek around 1900.



Fig 11: Ivy Weaver b 1915 with her mother on the steps at 4, Black Cottages 1932.

At the north end of the Brents, built upon the small portion of Faversham parish isolated by the straightening of the creek and known as Crab Island, were Black Cottages. Built c.1845 the six terraced dwellings were originally built to house workers from the nearby saw mill. The isolated bend of the creek was spanned by a wooden bridge at the southern end. The 'dead' water was used as a 'log pond' to season timbers. There were originally gates at the northern end to prevent the logs following the ebbing tide. When the logs had seasoned they were towed to the saw mill for conversion.

The slate roofed cottages were 'two up - two down' with an outhouse and an earth closet. They were of a timber framed construction with weather-boarded exteriors which were coated with tar every two years giving rise to their name, though many referred to them as 'The Brents'.

There was gas lighting to the ground floor rooms but candles were used to light the bedrooms. There was no mains water supply, all residents used a single well located to the rear of number six. Little more than a hole in the ground the water was contaminated by the high tide and could not be used until an hour or two after high water, this necessitated the residents filling buckets before the tide, particularly over night, so as to have water when required.

The houses were subject to flooding and tenants were allowed free coal from the council on such occasions to aid drying out. The poor condition of the cottages was brought to the attention of the council after severe flooding in March 1949 when it was noted that their position across the creek had led to them missing out on any improvements in services carried out in the rest of the town. After the 1953 floods the cottages were inspected by local MP Percy Wells who was so appalled by the conditions in which the tenants lived that he insisted that all the residents be re-housed. The council purchased the cottages from their owners and demolished them.

Though originally built to house sawmill workers the censuses show that they soon became the homes of general and brickfield labourers, bargemen and oyster dredgers and, at one time, a 'cow-keeper and dairyman' (see **Appendix 1**). It seems to have been a small tight-knit group within the wider Brents community. However, such were the poor living conditions that few wished to remain there if other local accommodation were available.

Final comments on the whole day

Listening to local people talk about their memories of the place we were actually standing in, on a beautiful summers day with the flags of the boats flying in the background and the skeletons of long-gone houses emerging from the ground beside us was a truly memorable experience. It was also a salutary reminder of Faversham's hard working, salt encrusted past and the people who gave the town its indomitable spirit.

Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to Swale Council for giving us permission to excavate on public land and the Albion for letting us use their facilities, also to Lena Reekie for welcoming us to the Nautical Festival programme. Above all, though, we are grateful to John, Janet, Val, Colin, Henry and Brian who shared their unique memories with us and now with posterity.

Keith Robinson

November 2013



Fig 12: The FSARG team for KP92.

**Appendix 1:
Census lists for the Black Cottages**

No.1

1871	John Couley	<i>Labourer</i>
1881	Frederick Cary	<i>General Labourer</i>
1891	Frederick Carey	<i>Cowkeeper</i>
1901	Edward Oliver	<i>Brickmaker</i>
1926	Thomas Boodle Percy Turner	
1939	Daniel G Payne	

No.2

1871	George Gowers	<i>Labourer at Powder Works</i>
1881	Henry Brown	<i>Brickmaker</i>
1891	John Lodge	<i>Mariner</i>
1901	Henry Arnold	<i>Oyster Dredger</i>
1926	Edward John Turner Charlie Woods	
1939	Nellie Wood	

No.3

1871	John Bunting	<i>Mariner</i>
1881	James Pack	<i>Cowman</i>
1891	Thomas Little	<i>Brickfield Labourer</i>
1901	Thomas Arnold	<i>Oyster Dredger</i>
1926	Annie M Aylward	
1939	Stanley G Brown	

No.4

1871	Unoccupied	
1881	Daniel Wise	<i>Dredger</i>
1891	Elizabeth Shrubsole	
1901	William Shrubsole	<i>Mariner</i>
1926	Margaret E Weaver Frank Hill	
1939	Annie Warner	

No.5

1871	Unoccupied	
1881	Thomas Little	<i>General Labourer</i>
1891	Eliza Arnold	
1901	Charles Skinner	<i>Brickmaker</i>
1926	Edward Ruck	
1939	Edward Ruck	

No.6

1871	Edward Cook	<i>Mariner at Sea</i>
1881	Occupier away	
1891	William Elliott	<i>Waterman / General Labourer</i>
1901	Walter Patching	<i>Barge Porter</i>
1926	Unoccupied	
1939	Jim Saunders	