

THE SHORNE, HIGHAM, AND CLIFFE
MARSHES.

BY C. ROACH SMITH.

I WAS on the point of visiting the marshes between Higham and the Thames, in order to ascertain the correctness of Hasted, who describes a Roman causeway there, when the reception of a publication, by Mr. Thomas Kerlake* of Bristol, (in which this causeway is referred to, as evidence of the early state of these marshes,) gave me an additional motive to proceed in my object, without further delay. I have now paid five visits to the marshes; chiefly in company with Mr. Humphry Wickham, and Mr. John Harris. Once we were joined by Mr. Flaxman Spurrell, who, it appears, has been for some time examining the marshes in relation to their ancient embankments, and the condition of the Thames anterior to, and during, the Roman domination.

Hasted's statement is as follows:—

“Plautius, the Roman General under the Emperor Claudius, in the year of Christ 43, is said to have passed the River Thames from Essex into Kent, near the mouth of it, with his army, in pursuit of the flying Britons, who, being acquainted with the firm and fordable places of it, passed it easily (*Dion Cassius*, lib. lx.) The place of this passage is, by many, supposed to have been from

* *Vestiges of the Supremacy of Mercia in the South of England, during the Eighth Century*, by Thomas Kerlake. (Reprinted from the Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archæological Society.) Bristol, 1879.

East Tilbury, in Essex, across the river to Higham (by Dr. Thorpe, Dr. Plott, and others). Between these places there was a ferry on the river; for many ages after, the usual method of intercourse between the two counties of Kent and Essex, from these parts; and it continued so till the dissolution of the Abbey here; before which time Higham was likewise the place for shipping and unshipping corn and goods, in great quantities, from this part of the country, to and from London and elsewhere. The probability of this having been a frequented ford or passage, in the time of the Romans, is strengthened by the visible remains of a raised causeway or road, near thirty feet wide, leading from the Thames side through the marshes by Higham southward to this Ridgway above-mentioned (Shorne Ridgway), and thence, across the London highroad on Gad's Hill, to Shorne Ridgway, about half-a-mile beyond, which adjoins the Roman Watling-street road near the entrance into Cobham Park. In the Pleas of the Crown in the 21st year of King Edward I, the Prioress of the nunnery of Higham was found liable to maintain a bridge and causeway, that led from Higham down to the river Thames, in order to give the better and easier passage to such as would ferry from thence into Essex."

Dion Cassius, mentioned by Hasted, is more diffuse on the exploits of Aulus Plautius than would be expected from this reference. The notes of Ward, printed by Horsley in his *Britannia Romana*, pp. 23 to 25, should be compared with the account given by Dion Cassius. This is highly important, as shewing the extent of marshy, unembanked land on the banks of the Thames, which, known to the Britons, caused the Romans great difficulties and loss of men. It may be safely inferred that both the embankment and the causeway, the object of our visits, were constructed soon after the perfect subjugation of Britain, which followed the invasion under Aulus Plautius and the Emperor Claudius in person.

Following a straight line from the high road, which leads from Shorne Ridgway to the church at Lower Higham, we crossed a farm yard and a meadow; we

then came upon an embankment, which we, at first, supposed to be the causeway mentioned by Hasted ; but subsequent visits shewed that the two works were perfectly distinct. This embankment is a work of great engineering skill, and must have cost much time and labour. It belongs to, and is portion of, the extensive embankment of the Thames ; but, to within a short distance from the river, it forms a grand combination of embankment and causeway, running generally in a straight line where it is possible to do so. Often, however, it deviates ; evidently with a view to make available, on the western side, an ancient creek, which throughout has regulated its course. This creek causes turnings which were unavoidable to the constructors, who had decided on making use of it. They probably widened and deepened the creek. On the eastern side runs another creek, also accompanying the embankment throughout its course. This appears to have been cut to help form the raised ground ; while it also forms a land boundary, as does its wider companion on the western side. The base, of this great work, may be computed at about twenty-five feet, at the level of the marsh land ; and it rises to the height of twelve to fifteen feet. On the side of the Thames, towards Gravesend, it is fully twenty feet high. Here it diminishes in width, at the top, to about three feet, from about six feet.

This important work branches off, at about half a mile from the Thames, to Cliffe ; and, nearly a quarter of a mile onwards, to Gravesend. The Cliffe branch is very winding ; and it shews, throughout, how its construction was regulated by local circumstances. It was built to secure from inundation all the better land, leaving to its fate, as not worth reclaiming, the portion

nearer the Thames. The same was the case with the land on the western side. From the spot where is the divarication from the straight line from Higham, for a very considerable distance, a wide space of ground on the margin of the Thames is unenclosed. It was thought worthless; and over it the high tides have ever flowed and still flow. But the vast tract, of marsh and meadow land, protected by the embankment, has apparently been ever secured from the highest tides. Sheep and cattle graze upon it, in perfect security; it grows no marine plants, such as flourish on the river side; its creeks are full of fresh water plants, and fresh water fish.

Following the embankment to Gravesend, we noticed a very marked causeway, in the marsh, which seemed to point from Higham to a spot not very far from Gravesend. It was in our endeavour, on a subsequent day, to trace this raised road, nearly thirty feet wide at its base, that we came upon Hasted's causeway. That, which was the immediate object of our search, was so intersected by water courses, cut since its discontinuance as a road, that, in endeavouring to recover it, by a long circuit towards the high ground at Beckly, we approached Higham in a new direction, and came upon the causeway at the upper part, near the village of Higham. It answers Hasted's description; is fully thirty feet wide; and in a pretty straight line, goes direct to the Thames, at a point opposite East Tilbury in Essex. Its elevation is sufficiently high to make it, at all seasons, fit for traffic of all kinds; and, though it be now somewhat out of repair, it bears, in numerous cart and waggon ruts, the marks of use as a high road at a very recent period. If, instead of passing Higham church, towards the

marshes, the road on the left be taken, and followed, in front of the houses and past them, the causeway will be found at a short distance. The last of these houses, the "Sun" beershop, bears also the significant name of the "*Old Ferry House.*"

The magnitude, extent, and efficiency of these works, which I have attempted thus briefly to describe, point, I submit, to Roman origin. The absence of all evidence of the period of their construction, in historical or documentary works, tends to testimony in favour of remote antiquity. The notion that the land up to, and beyond, Lower Higham, was subject to submergence in historic times, is refuted by the discovery of Roman burials, in the low ground, opposite the old ferry house. I refer to *Archæologia Cantiana*, Vol. XI., p. 113. The newly-made graves, in Higham churchyard, continually disclose fragments of Roman pottery and tiles, contributing to shew that the district was well populated in the Roman epoch. I have, from evidences such as these, ever felt that there has been by no means such changes, in the low sea-marginal lands, during the historic period, as has been imagined by many.

Mr. Kerslake, in the paper I have referred to in the commencement of my remarks, has brought together many important evidences of the intercourse of Essex with Kent, by the *Trajectus* between East Tilbury and Higham, from the seventh to the tenth century; and these could, no doubt, be easily added to. He has also collected a large mass of valuable materials respecting the state of the entire district from Higham to Hoo, including the long disputed position of Cloveshoe, where, from the eighth century, so many royal and pontifical Councils were held.

This he, with some of our best modern authorities, shews to be Cliffe-at-Hoo. He adduces, also, auxiliary evidence in the records of these convocations, to prove that the places designated "Cealchythe" and "Acle," are now represented by "Chalk," and "Oakley," near Higham.

The importance of these meetings, which were witenagemóts, or parliaments, as well as ecclesiastical synods, is shewn in the late J. M. Kemble's *Saxons in England*, vol. ii., p. 241, *et seq.* He cites numerous instances, extending, as regards these localities, from the seventh to the tenth century; but this accomplished scholar did not perceive, like Mr. Kerslake, their claims to a Kentish site.

Under the guidance of the Rev. H. R. Lloyd,* we examined the church of Cliffe and its environs, but failed to find any ruins of buildings assignable to the times of the great Councils. The foundation of the long wall, on the north of the church, appears to be of the same date as that edifice, and both contain broken gravestones used as building materials; but they are not, perhaps, above a century or two anterior.

* To Mr. Lloyd we are also indebted for introduction to his interesting Rectory, a well-preserved building of the thirteenth century, and for a hospitable entertainment there.