

OLD ROADS IN EAST KENT AND THANET.

BY GEO. P. WALKER.

In writing the story of the old roads in East Kent, one is not only impressed by the magnitude of the task, but also by the visions that are conjured up during the process of the survey, for, compared with those in other parts of the country, the East Kent roads, both as to age and historical associations, out-do all others in importance, for there, and there only, are we carried back to the very dawn of history; in fact, so far do they take us, that in some instances we are dependent on tradition and the spade for much of our information, which may, perhaps, explain why most of our modern writers have only touched lightly on this subject.

The East Kent roads have one distinctive characteristic over those in other parts of the country, that they consist of the oldest British (Pilgrim Ways), Roman and Saxon roads to be found in England. Other counties, of course, have this combination, but their Roman and Saxon ones are not of an age to compare with those in East Kent; for in most instances the conquest of this country began in the vicinity of the Wantsum Channel, so their road-making would begin and radiate from that district. This, most probably, applies also to the British roads (Pilgrim Ways) which are to be found scattered all over East Kent; for if these latter were, as is supposed, first laid down by the early Belgic invaders*, who, Cæsar relates, inhabited this part of the country from the sea coast long before this time, then they must be of great antiquity. In fact, the whole country comprehends that part of England which, from its proximity to the continent, first obtained distinct historical notice,

* Rev. F. T. Vine.

a circumstance which may account for its early superiority in civilization to that of the other islanders.*

In thinking backwards one is apt to assume that Watling Street, which passes through Canterbury from Dover on its way to London and the north of England, gives the starting point in road-making; but some of the Pilgrim Ways far outstrip it in seniority, for even the Watling Street is a modern innovation as compared, for instance, with a British road that joins it near Canterbury. This old road passes through a fortified encampment of the Iron Age in Bigbury Wood at Harbledown, and joins up with the great London road near St. Dunstan's Church. It is locally known as the Pilgrims' Way, and it has been assumed that it marks the last stage of the track generally followed by pilgrims from Southampton and Winchester who visited the shrine of St. Thomas at Canterbury Cathedral. In this case, as in many others in different parts of the country, the term "Pilgrim Way" seems to have been applied to an early road which was only partially superseded in later days by a broader and straighter highway running in the same direction. It is not yet eight hundred years since the first pilgrims wended their way to the shrine of St. Thomas. Eight hundred years earlier still, it seems probable that this road was falling into disuse, and that, as now, passengers and traffic coming by road entered Canterbury by the Watling Street. It may fairly be doubted, indeed, whether, strictly speaking, a single Canterbury pilgrim ever walked or rode along this so-called Pilgrims' Way,† or if by chance it was sometimes used as such, it was most certainly not made for them.

There can be little doubt that most of these roads were in existence at the time of Julius Cæsar's invasion in 54 B.C., and that, on his way to Barham Downs, he would most likely make use of the one that started from the Strand at Deal, passed through Upper Deal, Knowlton, Goodneston and Adisham on its way to Canterbury. Parts of this road can be traced to this day. As confirmation of their

* Cæsar.

† Goldney.

antiquity is the fact that most of the British camps in East Kent called "Oppidum" are found to be close to these Pilgrim Ways, as instanced by the one in Bigbury Wood, near Harbledown, also those at Coldred, Kingston and Iffin Wood, the latter called locally the "Castle," and "Old England's Hole" in Bourne Park on the Dover Road, all of which are in close proximity to one or other of these old roads.

Three very ancient roads may all be seen from Patricbourne Hill leading north-west in the direction of Canterbury, the left and central ones in particular being visible at the present day for more than a mile and a half. The road on the left hand ascends the steep hill in the direction of Hardres, and passes through Whitehill Wood. It leads to an ancient British camp in Iffin Wood, where sunburnt pottery and other remains of clearly British origin have been found.

With reference to this it is interesting to note that Cæsar in his "Commentaries" remarks that after defeating the Britons (on Barham Downs) they retreated to one of their strongholds. May not this stronghold have been the one that can be seen to-day in Iffin Wood about three miles from Barham Downs, and close to the Roman road which linked up Lympe with Canterbury, called on the maps "Stone Street," and may not the road they retreated by be the very one now under review? It is known as the Kingsbury Road. Now what was the "Kingsbury"? May not this be merely Saxon for the British and Roman entrenchments this road passed through? They were supposed by the Saxons to be the "bury" of a great king (Bury—byrig, stronghold),* the Saxons' knowledge of the country they had conquered being notoriously weak. It is said to have terminated at Rutupiæt† (Richborough) and westward as far as Salisbury Plain. It crossed the Dover Road on Bridge Hill, but, though it did not go direct to Canterbury, that city could have been reached by the Britons continuing

* Rawlings.

† Rev. F. T. Vine.

their retreat in a westerly direction over Chartham Downs (Stone Street, of course, was not then in existence). Then, by crossing the river Stour at Shalmsford they would reach the Pilgrims' Way, which would lead them to their great stronghold in Bigbury Wood, already referred to, close to Canterbury.

That the British camp in Iffins Wood was afterwards held by the Romans appears probable, since we find in close proximity to it the distinct remains of a Roman one, in a long straight line of outer entrenchments in the shape of a Roman "agger" or mound, and ditch. The further retreat by the Britons by this road is indicated by the tradition which assigns to Chilham (near Shalmsford) the tomb of Cæsar's commander, Quintus Laberius Durrus, who was killed in battle on that day, and near by are the very fine remains of a large Roman camp in the Chilham Castle estate.

The central road is now the main road between Dover and Canterbury. It passes through the village of Bridge, near by being the site of a British camp known by the name of "Old England's Hole," at which place tradition places the last fight the Britons made in opposing Julius Cæsar's advance in B.C. 54. It is, for a considerable distance, identical with the old Roman Watling Street, formerly a British road. The third or right-hand road (seen more clearly perhaps from the heights of Garrington, north-east of Bekesbourne, than from Patricbourne) ascends Bekesbourne Hill, and enters Canterbury at the Longport. This is most likely the road which had its starting point at Deal, passing through Knowlton and Goodneston, and is probably the one by which the right wing of Cæsar's army entered Canterbury.* His centre would make use of the existing Watling Street, at that time a British road, his left wing following the Britons along the Kingsbury Road, as already explained; while there is yet another road passing through Patricbourne and Hode, known as the Pilgrims' Way, which meets the last mentioned at St. Martin's Hill. Its direction, however, towards the south-east gets lost in Pitt Wood,

* *History of Julius Cæsar*, by Napoleon III.

though it would appear to be making for Womenswold and Coldred, at which latter place are the remains of a British camp. There can be no doubt as to the antiquity of these roads, since they all led to British strongholds.*

Of the Roman roads perhaps the most interesting are those that converged on Canterbury. By the Church of St. Dunstan's one is standing on the site of the north-west corner of a military quadrilateral, which in those early ages must have been of primary importance to those that were masters of this part of the country. The eastern angle was at the great port of Rutupiæ on the Wantsum Channel. The south-eastern angle was at Dover and the south-western at Stutfall Castle, near Lympne. Straight roads from Richborough, Dover and Lympne converged at this spot. It will thus be seen that, from the time of the Roman occupation at least, Canterbury was, by means of these roads, the focus of a system of extended coast defence, which must have been of great service to the conquerors. Another interesting series of Roman roads converged on Richborough Castle. One of them came from Canterbury and another from Dover. There has always been considerable difference of opinion among writers as to the exact point of convergence, but that they did meet near the Castle all seem to be agreed upon. This is unfortunate, as these roads are most interesting, if only by reason of the fact that they must have been about the first the Romans built after their occupation of this country in A.D. 43. The Government ordnance maps show them converging on Sandwich, though entering that town by different gates, the road from Dover coming down from Woodnesborough Hill into Sandwich, and the one from Canterbury crossing the marshes from Each End Inn into Sandwich. But this section of these two roads must have been an extension of a much later period, as the Romans would not have finished off these important highways at what was virtually, at that time, a blind alley; for, if the site of Sandwich was above the

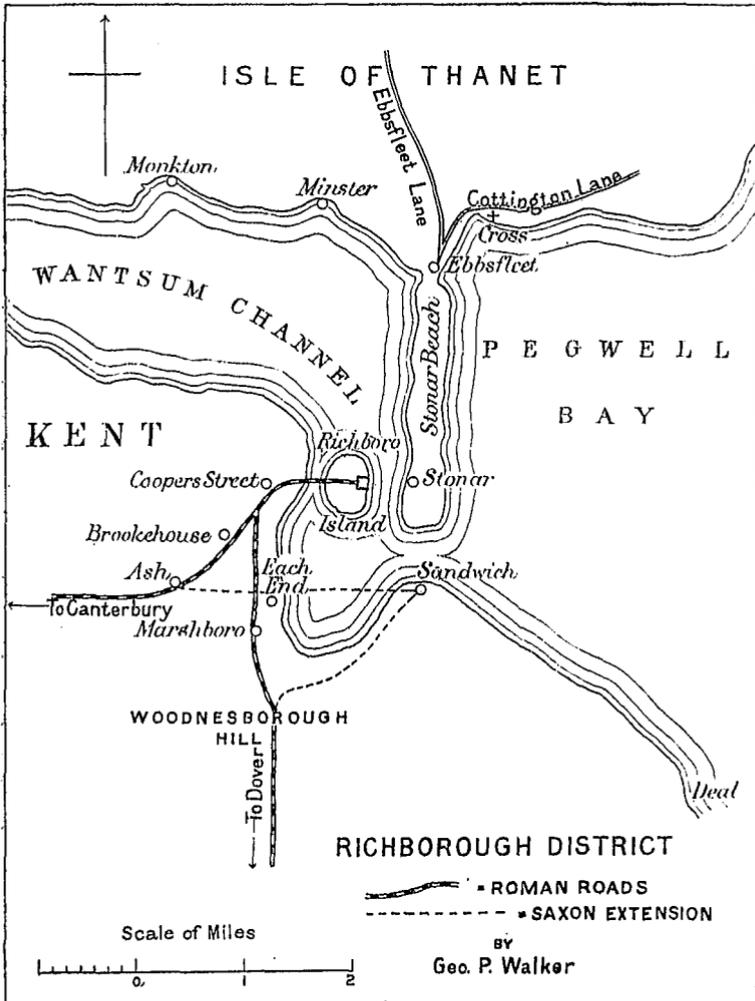
* Rev. F. T. Vine.

sea at low water, it is about as far as it has risen. For even as late as the landing of St. Augustine, if it was not entirely covered by the sea, it must have been a mere island,* and it is an ascertained fact that at no time have any Roman coins or pottery ever been found there.† All this, together with the knowledge that even to-day, after centuries of deposition of mud, part of these roads at this section are still practically on sea-level, argues the lateness of their construction. In the Itinerary of Antoninus the length of the roads is calculated from Richborough and not from Sandwich. Mr. H. Sharp places the junction at Each End, where he says the Romans had a landing place and ferry. Mr. Holmes and the Rev. J. Douglas say the Dover portion extended further north than this. If the two latter writers are correct, and the distance north was sufficient to take it to where Cooper Street is to-day, then that, together with the assertion of the late Lord Northbourne that the Canterbury portion started out from the Castle in a south-westerly direction (that is, towards Ash), would bring the junction somewhere between Brooke House and Cooper Street. There is also another authority who has information to offer on this subject. Mr. Codrington, in *Roman Roads in Great Britain*, asserts that the roads converged, and that one causeway across the tidal land between Richborough and the mainland served for both roads. If this writer is correct it may reasonably be presumed that, in constructing the causeway, the Romans would certainly select the nearest passage across the tidal land to carry it. On looking from the western wall of the Castle it is at once made noticeable that the position of Cooper Street entirely agrees with this, for it is closer than any other point on the mainland to the island, and lies almost due west from the Decuman Gate. Moreover, it corresponds with the present cart-track which leads out from there, and which has been identified as of Roman origin. Reference to a geological map shows that the waters of the Wantsum Channel at one time came

* Hasted.

† Boys, *History of Sandwich*.

almost up to where the Inn at Each End on the Canterbury Road now stands, and followed a fairly northerly course till Cooper Street was reached. Examination of the topography of the ground is quite in accordance with this.



The Canterbury-Sandwich road descends rapidly as it passes the Inn till it reaches the level of the marshes on its way to Sandwich. Also all the ground from the Dover-

Richborough road at the top of Woodnesborough Hill in the direction of Cooper Street is above sea-level, though bordering on the marshes. That portion of the Dover road which turns off to the right at the top of Woodnesborough Hill to go to Sandwich is most probably of Saxon origin, as some of their kings had a palace at Eastry, which is situated on this road about a mile to the south. The Saxons probably made the branch from Woodnesborough Hill into Sandwich for their own convenience, as the latter place had, by that time, been joined up with the mainland. (*Vide Map.*)

With the assistance of the authorities mentioned above it may now be possible to give a pen picture of the probable direction and convergence of these two roads on leaving Richborough Castle. The start would be made through the Decuman Gate by a single road in a direction slightly north of west (the Castle walls are not quite true to the cardinal points) until the causeway was reached. The latter would carry it over the tidal land to the mainland, where, still as a single road, it would swing round to the left in the direction of Brooke House, until it met the forks of the main roads. Of these two roads the one that came from Dover is, with the exception of one or two breaks, in a fairly complete condition to this day. It creeps up a coombe by the cemetery on to the chalk down as a narrow sunken road, and thence on nearly to Whitfield. On gaining the high ground a straight road begins pointing to Woodnesborough, and, after winding slightly, continues for six miles. Woodnesborough is on the nearest high ground to Richborough,* where the road at present turns off to the right to Sandwich, but in Roman times most likely it continued straight through the village of Marshborough and Each End on its way to the Castle. The other road, which runs from Canterbury to Richborough, and which to-day is sometimes known as the Ash Road, leaves Canterbury by the Longport, passing St. Martin's Church on the way, but it is questionable whether it covers exactly the same course as it did

* Codrington.

during Roman times. Its very irregularity seems to prove that it does not, as instanced by the *détour* to Wingham; but its general course is practically the same, for the original intention is still there, viz., that of connecting up Richborough Castle with Canterbury. Mr. H. Sharp says that it terminated at Each End, where the Romans had a landing-place and ferry, the latter running to Stonar and Ebbsfleet.

There is one other old road in East Kent that ought to be referred to, viz., the Reculver-Canterbury road. It was impossible in Roman times to connect up the former fortress and Richborough with a road direct, as was done with Dover and Lympne, owing to the valleys of the Great and Little Stour intervening. It therefore became essential, as the only alternative, to connect it up with Canterbury, and this was done by means of a road, represented at the present day by the one which, crossing the Sarre road about three-quarters of a mile east of Sturry Station, passes, on its way, through Ford and Hillborough. Starting from Canterbury it appears to have crossed the Stour at Fordwich. A parish boundary follows the present road from the river at Fordwich through Sturry and for two miles on through Westbere. At about three-quarters of a mile from Sturry the road to Reculver branched off, as represented by the present road through Upstreet.* It is impossible to find out now what its exact direction was from Fordwich to Canterbury. That a convenient road did exist seems certain, not only as forming a connecting link with Reculver, but owing to the importance of Fordwich as a port to Canterbury. There is at present a footpath which runs along the slope of the hill, passing at the back of the Barracks, and enters Canterbury close to St. Martin's Church. Whether that is the remains of the Roman way, or whether it climbed to the top of Scotland Hills, joining the Ash road about a mile from Canterbury, seems impossible now to decide, but for directness and convenience the footpath would appear to be the most likely way.

* Codrington.

The Saxons were not very capable at road-making, and seem to have remained content with repairing or perhaps extending the British and Roman roads. A probable instance of extending is the branch road from the church on Woodnesborough Hill down into Sandwich. It entered the latter town by the Woodnesborough Gate. Another instance is what is now known as the Canterbury-Sarre road. This, no doubt, the Saxons carried as far as Upstreet Hill to connect with the Sarre Ferry. There is also another road which may be Saxon, viz., that which runs from Reculver through Hillborough and Chislet, joining up with the Canterbury-Sarre road at Upstreet.

Some apology may be needed for including the old roads of Thanet in an historical survey with those in East Kent, because at the period under review Thanet was a real island, not merely a postal address, and was quite distinct from the mainland of Kent. The estuary, in which was included the harbour of Richborough, known to the Romans as the *Portus Rutupiaë*, extended from the cliffs of Ramsgate southward to Walmer, and comprised the whole of the low-lying ground between Sandwich and Deal, washing the shore of the island on which stands Richborough Castle.* To appreciate the extent of the Wantsum Channel as it was, it is necessary to study a geological map, comparing it with a modern one, when a reason will at once be found for the position of many of the villages and roads in this district. Places such as Minster, Sarre, Worth, Ebbsfleet, Sandwich, and Monkton, which, to the casual observer, appear never to have had any connection with the sea, will be seen to have been built on what was then the shore of the Wantsum Channel.

The one road in Thanet that may be said to deserve a position equal to those in East Kent is Ebbsfleet Lane. It leaves the Sandwich-Ramsgate road at Stoneless, about midway between the two former places, and follows a spur of high ground, which gradually rises in a northerly

* Lewes.

direction, and can still be traced as far inland as Manston. During the early life of the channel this rising ground would terminate in a small promontory above high-water level, facing the sea. On the right of the Lane is the St. Augustine's Golf Club, the whole of whose ground is, to this day, below sea-level, the Ramsgate road acting the part of a sea wall. Where these links now are might be termed Ebbsfleet's outer harbour. On the left, about half a mile up the Lane, stands Ebbsfleet Farm, at a spot which Lewes the historian calls the "Boarded Groin." There the ground at the back, sloping down to the marshes in the opposite direction to that of the Golf Links, represents the inner harbour of Ebbsfleet. This is the spot that tradition has assigned as the landing-place of Hengest and of St. Augustine. The tradition has been handed down to us through thirteen hundred years, and is not to be put aside lightly. From time immemorial this strip of rising ground, with the road running over it and water on either side, was so clear a landmark that tradition had no difficulty in passing it down from one generation to another. And it is there to-day, just as it was in Saxon times, except that the water is dried up. But its original appearance could be restored by letting in the sea, for the ground on either side of the Lane is still below high-water level.

There is every reason for assigning high antiquity to this road. The existence of a ferry at Ebbsfleet is mentioned at a very early date as connecting up Stonar* and Each End.† A road leading to it would therefore be essential, not only for passengers coming and going to the mainland, but also for defensive purposes.

Two ferries only are mentioned as having been in existence in ancient times between Thanet and Kent, one at Sarre and the other at Ebbsfleet.* The landing-place for the latter is fixed by the historian Lewes at what he calls the "Boarded Groin," which is at the west side of the farmhouse. The tradition that some celebrated landing

* Bede.

† Sharp.

took place there is still preserved at the farm, and a field of clover near by is pointed out as the spot.* Now, to show the connection between Ebbsfleet Lane and the ferry, the former ought to be in close proximity to the landing-place of the latter. The word "fleet" simply means "a port," and Mr. Geo. Dowker informs us the fleets were made by springs of water finding their way through the chalk and causing a deep channel to be formed at their place of exit. To the west of the farmhouse, that is, on the left side looking towards the marshes, a spring of this description still exists, which drains itself into the river Stour. Here the ridge has an indent in its side, which the farmer has converted into a duck pond. This, then, must have been the fleet, which the ferry made use of as a port, and here the Lane is within a stone's throw of the pond. Passengers landing could get right into the heart of the island by means of it, and in the same manner could reach the ferry on their way to the mainland.

At the Manston end of Ebbsfleet Lane is the site of an old British camp. It lies close to Cheeseman's Farm, hidden, as is usual, in a grove of trees. Its existence, as has already been explained in confirming the antiquity of the so-called Pilgrim Ways in Kent, helps to prove the great age of this road.

Another interesting road, and one which is also close to Ebbsfleet Lane, is Cottington Lane. Although perhaps not so old as the former, it has been brought into the limelight through its association with the first meeting of King Ethelbert with St. Augustine. It leaves Ebbsfleet Lane on the right, a little above the farm, in the shape of a bridle path, and follows the edge of Cottington Hill at the back and above the Golf Links until it reaches the Railway Halt, where it turns sharply off to the right, eventually joining up with the Ramsgate road at Cliff-End. The exact spot where the meeting took place was called Cotemanfield (the field of the man of God), now Cottington Lane. St. Augus-

* Stanley.

tine's first conference with the King was held under an ancient oak; and to this day there is in Cottington Lane a grove of trees among which was formerly a noble oak, representative perhaps of the identical tree which sheltered King Ethelbert and St. Augustine.* This is the position of the stone cross erected by Lord Grenville to commemorate St. Augustine's first meeting with the King, and not his landing-place, Ebbsfleet itself being situated about a mile away to the south.

* Mr. Budd and Dr. Freeman.