

## VILLAGES ON THE WANTSUM CHANNEL.

BY GEORGE P. WALKER.

IN Vols. XXXVIII-IX of *Arch. Cant.* there appeared articles by the present writer on the subject of the Wantsum Channel and its roads, giving details and maps of how it looked in bygone days and tracing its career down to the time of its extinction ; but owing to the limitation of space little could be said of the villages, some of them more than a thousand years old, that nestled on its shore.<sup>1</sup>

Those villages are there to-day though now far from the sea, and, to the casual observer, never having had any connection with it (see Map 1). They are as follows :

<i>Thanet side.</i>	<i>Kent side.</i>
Ebbsfleet.	Reculver.
Minster.	Stourmouth.
Monkton.	Each End.
Sarre.	Worth.
St. Nicholas.	Sandwich.
Stonar.	

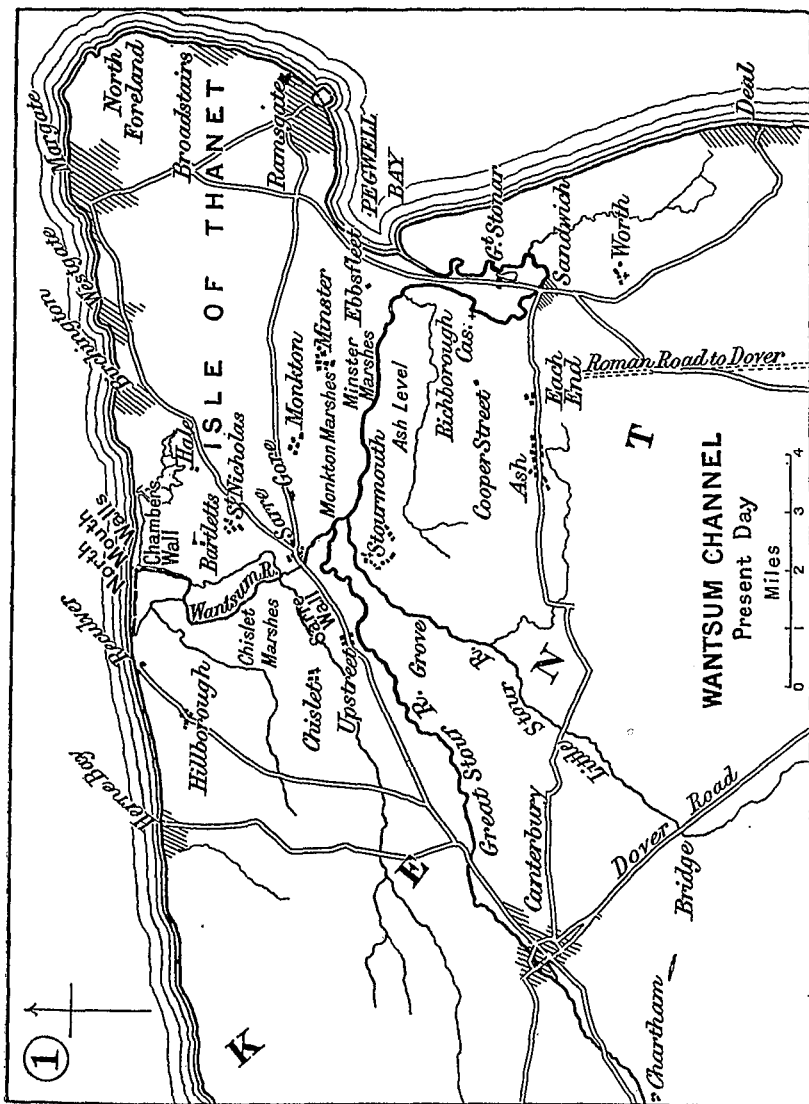
Richborough, being on an island, stands alone.

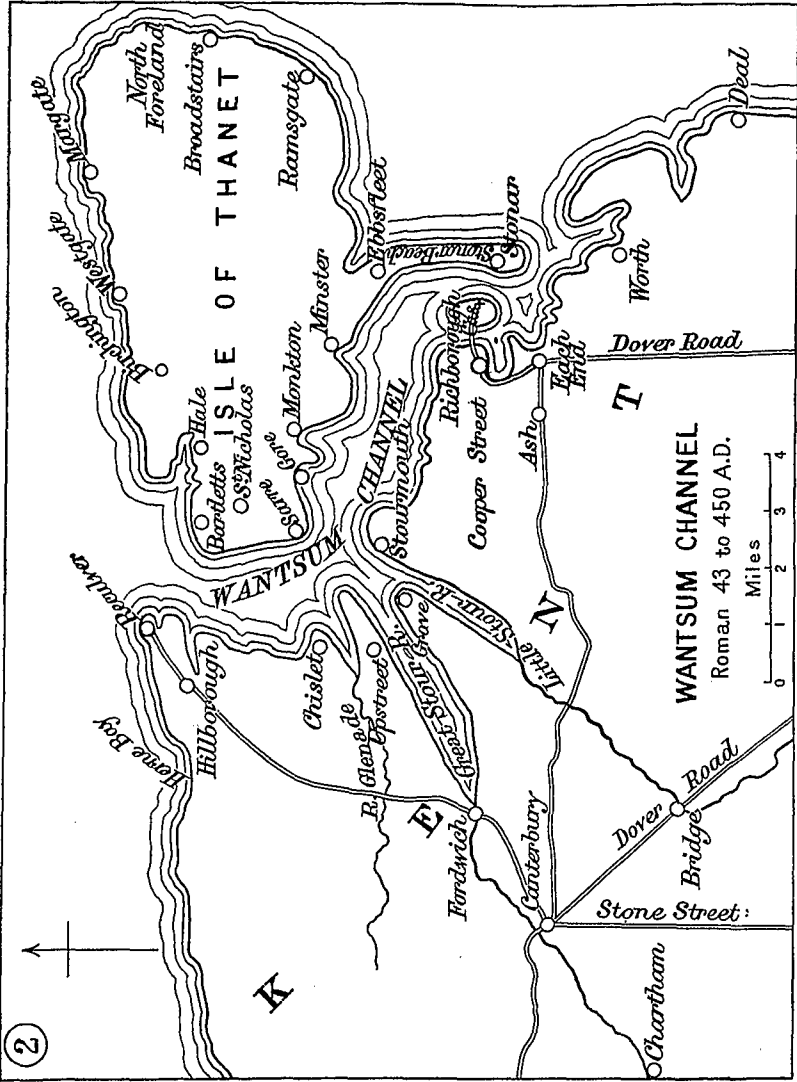
It will be noticed by Map 2 that most of those villages on the Thanet shore were situated on creeks ; now these creeks were called " Fleets," and Mr. George Dowker tells us that the word means a port or dock, which was made by a spring of water finding its way through the chalk and causing a deep channel to be formed at its place of exit, so that each village was constituted a little sea port and could carry on its trade with ease.

### EBBSFLEET (Thanet).

Ebbsfleet is the most intriguing place of all on the Wantsum Channel ; it stands at the northern end of the Stonar Beach and from its geographical position was most

<sup>1</sup> Some were members of the Cinque Ports, while others were " Limbs " affiliated to those which were.





(Reprinted from Arch. Cant. XXXIX, p. 101.)

important, but search where one may no evidence is forthcoming that it ever was a village. Bede gives it as the site of a battle in A.D. 465, shortly before the final departure of the Romans from this country. Again we hear of it in connection with the arrival of St. Augustine, the landing of the Abbess of Minster Monastery and that of the Saxons under Hengest and Horsa, but never as a village. Archbishop Parker had a census taken of Thanet in Queen Elizabeth's reign but Ebbsfleet is not mentioned. In Green's *History of the English People* we read: "Here (Ebbsfleet) an Englishman first placed his foot on British soil, and here English history begins." In Bede's time it appears under the name of Whippedsfleet and later as Ippedsfleet.<sup>1</sup> Whatever opinions historians may have about it, the fact remains that tradition has always held Ebbsfleet sacred to memory of St. Augustine; the tradition has been handed down to us through fourteen hundred years and is not to be lightly put aside.

Ebbsfleet had an inner and outer "fleet," divided from each other by a small ridge that gradually rose in a northeasterly direction towards the centre of the island; following over this rising ground is Ebbsfleet Lane, which can be traced to-day as far as Manston Aerodrome, where it appears to end on the site of an old British camp.

The inside harbour was near where the farmhouse now stands, and a spring of water still flows out of the chalk cliff which the farmer has converted into a duck pond. Dean Stanley in his work *The Coming of St. Augustine* says: "Tradition that some celebrated landing took place there is still preserved at the farm and a field of clover near by is pointed out as the spot." (Map 3.)

The evidence that a ferry existed at Ebbsfleet is pretty conclusive for, independent of tradition, the Venerable Bede particularly mentions it in his history.

Ebbsfleet's outer harbour (Map 3) lay between the present Ramsgate-Sandwich road and Cottington Lane, the intervening space being used by the St. Augustine Golf Club

<sup>1</sup> Another name given to it is Whipped (a Saxon Chief).



may stand repeating here owing to its archæological interest. While St. Augustine was waiting at Ebbsfleet he was invited by King Ethelbert to visit him at his Palace at Richborough. On reaching the castle and stepping ashore the boatman noticed that the stone on which he trod had the imprint of his foot left upon it. Afterwards a chapel was built commemorating his landing and the stone was installed within its walls as a holy relic, and pilgrims came miles to kiss it and get healed. Centuries passed and the position of the chapel got lost to sight and memory until, through the generosity of the Society of Antiquaries and the able assistance of Major Bushe-Fox, it was once more exposed to view and was found near the NE. corner of the castle walls. When the writer last visited Richborough he was shown an oblong slab that had been disturbed during the course of excavation, and on it was the clear imprint of a human foot, which measured  $7\frac{3}{4}$ " from toe to heel.

#### MINSTER (Thanet).

The history of Minster is mostly associated with the Monastery but it takes us at least as far back as the Saxon period. It not only had its Monastery and "fleet" but also a shipbuilding yard (The Durlocks). The present church was originally a chapel, part of the Monastery buildings, the whole of the rest of which were destroyed by the Danes in A.D. 958. Their foundations are in the grounds of Minster Court. It was, no doubt, badly damaged but evidently not beyond repair, for it was later made serviceable again and in its enlarged condition we can see it there to-day. A considerable number of Roman bricks are constantly being found and fragments of such bricks are to be seen in various parts of its walls, and it has been conjectured, with much probability, that they originally formed part of a Roman Temple that stood on this spot.

Like most of the other villages on the Thanet side of the Channel, Minster had its "fleet," and Dr. Farmers in his *History of Minster* says it actually had a river running

through it which most likely came from a spring in the chalk. Where this particular "fleet" was situated is difficult to determine but as it appears to have been near the church it may be the one called "Durlocks." Altogether there is distinct evidence to-day of at least three of these in existence, known locally as "Bugles," "Watchester," and "Durlocks." By far the finest is "Bugles"; it has a deep channel about 200 feet long by 30 broad going down to the marshes, the water still running through it from a spring. At high tide it must have held boats of considerable tonnage; but the fact that it is situated about three-quarters of a mile west of the church renders it rather unlikely to be the one referred to by Dr. Farmers. The other two are nearer the village, but their remains are much more indistinct, one of which, Watchester, is rather unusual as the spring of water rises out of the ground and does not flow into it as is generally the case. As its name indicates, here, most likely, stood one of those watch towers the inhabitants of Minster considered so necessary as a precaution against raids by the Danish pirates. The position would certainly be most suitable as it gave a clear view both up and down the Channel.

Minster Junction railway station is built over the bed of the old channel and many pieces of wooden piling came to light during the course of its erection, indicating, most probably, the end of a pier or wharf. According to Hasted the water came up as far as the church wall.

During some period of its existence the Wantsum Channel appears to have been visited by a severe storm—or storms, for it is not made clear whether the meagre details that have come down to us refer to one or more. It may have been the same storm that changed the course of the river Rother and did other damage along the SE. coast. Not far from Minster, and standing on the bed of the old Channel, are two conspicuous mounds known as "Boxlege Hill" and "Weatherluse Hill"—tradition accounts for them as the result of a great storm. Hasted in his history of Kent suggests that "they seem to have been made by the sea when it overflowed." Minster also seems to have felt the fury of

the storm and, as a consequence, had one of its "fleets" destroyed for we are told that "the Abbott of Minster Church having land on either side of the 'fleet' and owing to the great storm the sea overflowing it and inundating his fields, took upon himself to fill in the 'fleet' altogether thereby depriving Minster of its principal dock." This must have been the one called "Durlocks" as Dr. Farmers says the principal "fleet" was near the church.

#### SARRE (Thanet).

Had the Wantsum Channel remained to-day in the same serviceable condition it was in during the Roman period, Sarre would be the North Foreland of the Channel and would most certainly have had its lighthouse.

By referring to Map 2 it will be seen that it was situated at a point in the Channel where its course was changed from due south to that of almost east. In Boys' *History of Sandwich* we read: "Sarre seems anciently to have been much larger and more populous than at present on account of its being the most frequented passage into the island of Thanet, and a place where shipping often anchored in their passage to and from the North mouth there being a most convenient haven for them there." On a change of wind the ships would be able to alter their position if necessary for that of a more sheltered anchorage.

The present village stands a little more to the west than the original. About 100 yards east of the Crown Hotel would be its centre. The Church of St. Giles stood a little further on, on the top of the high ground at the back of a chalk pit, and between this and the old windmill was found the famous Anglo-Saxon cemetery, the finds of which included gold coins, valuable jewellery and many other objects of interest now in the British Museum. As the Channel continued gradually to dry up, Sarre became of less importance; so long as the sea flowed past it and the ships resorted to its "fleet," it was considered a pleasant and healthy place, but later when the waters began to recede, the fogs and vapours



from the marshes soon made it very unhealthy and unpleasant to live in; from that date the population began to decline, for which reason it was deprived of its church, nothing of which remains above ground, and the parish was united to that of St. Nicholas. In Leland's *Itinerary* there is the following: "At the Northmouth the salt water sweeteth yet up to a creek a mile or more toward a place called Sarre, which was the common ferry when Thanet was a full island." It was to stop this flow of sea water which only came past Sarre at high tide that the "Sarre Wall" was built; this wall being made broad enough was serviceable as a road and did away with the use of a ferry. It was here the two tides met, one coming from the Northmouth and the other from Sandwich, and caused such a commotion in the water that many of the older writers refer to it. Sarre was a "limb" of Sandwich in the Cinque Ports and was affiliated to it in the year 1229.

Now what is the evidence to-day of a "Fleet" in this once important sea port? Considerable research has been necessary before any certainty could be established, as the historians who wrote about Sarre did not give any clue as to its exact position and local information was difficult to obtain. On passing the "Half Way House" Inn, going towards the "Sarre Wall," a road will be observed turning sharp to the right; a few paces down this road is a gate leading into a meadow. Here is the site of Sarre's "fleet," at the back of which rises the Thanet chalk cliffs where they climb up behind the present village. The level of the meadow is still below that of high water; the grass is of poor quality and only very little spade work is necessary before arriving at sea sand, pebbles and shells including those of the oyster. One looks at once for a spring of water percolating through the chalk cliff as at Ebbsfleet, but like that at the Watchester "fleet" at Minster it bubbles up from below ground. To-day there are at least two of these springs that vary in quantity of water discharged according to the season of the year. A garage has lately been erected in front of the largest spring.

## ST. NICHOLAS-AT-WADE (Thanet).

As the waters of the Wantsum Channel continued to recede and the vapours from the marshes became more and more unhealthy, the inhabitants of Sarre began to leave and many appear to have found a home at St. Nicholas, which stood about a mile and a half away to the NE. on the chalk uplands and looked down on the Wantsum Channel in the direction of Reculver. The church was a chapel to that of Reculver and absorbed the congregation of St. Giles at Sarre when that church was abandoned. It has a very imposing appearance and owing to its having been built on the edge of the cliff its massive tower can be seen, even from the Kent side, and for miles around.

## RECVLVER (Kent).

At the north end of the Wantsum Channel, which was known as the Northmouth, stands the Roman castrum "Regulbium" on a cliff at the Kent side of the estuary. The fort when completed covered about 8 acres and was defended by the first cohort of Vetasii from Brabant. The south wall is complete in its length but not in height, and the east wall is in a similar condition as far as the seaward edge of the cliff, but the north wall has long been lost in the sea owing to the crumbling away of the cliff. The headland upon which the camp was built extended much further out to sea than it does to-day, it being now shortened by nearly a mile. One purpose of the fortress was to guard the northern entrance to the Wantsum Channel and for this it was admirably situated. At high tide the waters came up to the east and south walls and by the topography of the ground it is quite possible to-day to picture the haven and anchorage. The landing place must have been near where the Ethelbert Inn now stands, the ground from there sloping away to the south and south-east; the harbour would consequently be sheltered from the W., N. and SW. winds. At this spot it is hoped digging may some day be carried out, for it ought to be rich in finds either in the way of anchors and chains or

of articles thrown overboard from the ships while loading or unloading.

The Rev. J. Douglas in *Urbs Rutupiae* says : " The Rutupian ports with Dover and Lympne were, it seems, the only ports that led out from this island to the continent in those days, at least the ports of any consequence. Whether Dover or Lympne were the ports to which troops, military stores, or merchandise were transported I very much doubt ; indeed I do not find that history mentions them as such or of any comparative importance to Reculver or Richborough." If, as Mr. Douglas says, Reculver was used for such a variety of purposes as these, a harbour and landing place must have existed, and to have been of any use it must have been inside the estuary. Boys in his *History of Sandwich* says : " The Romans during the latter period of their empire in Britain were under the necessity of protecting their coasts opposite to the continent from the attacks of the northern pirates by the establishment of garrisons of troops in different stations ; these all present to us the ruins of Roman fortresses which were the *praesidia* of convenient harbours."

The subject of harbours has been dwelt upon at length as it is always instructive to find a reason for the positions selected by the Romans for their castles. Porchester, Pevensey, Lympne, Richborough and Reculver were all erected on sites that gave facilities for harbours and it may be assumed they were used as such. The late Mr. George Clinch, Secretary to the Society of Antiquaries, says in *English Coast Defences* : " In order to understand the functions and relative positions of Reculver and Richborough as coast fortresses during the Roman period, it is necessary to reconstruct the ancient geography of the north-eastern corner of Kent. The small stream now falling into the sea at Reculver was at the period under consideration a river sufficiently broad and deep to afford a convenient channel for shipping. It was known as the Wantsum. Boats and ships voyaging from the French coast as well as from the British coast near Dover and London usually took their

course through the channel formed by the Stour and Wantsum, thus avoiding the strong currents and tempestuous seas often raging off the North Foreland."

It is not till after the arrival of the Saxons that the story of Reculver becomes at all clear. There can be little doubt that the crumbling cliff upon which it is built was its undoing. From all accounts it must have been quite a thriving little town and was most probably a pilot station for ships navigating the Wantsum Channel. Dr. Salmon says: "The existence of a fort doubtless encouraged a settlement of inhabitants where they might be secure after the departure of the Romans." The town lay to the north of the Castrum but all of that has been washed away.

When viewing Reculver it should be remembered that the Roman Walls are of prime interest. The visitor must leave the Church level by descending some steps through the east wall and so get to the outside where the only clear view of them is obtainable.

It does not come within the writer's province to describe the church, but its final destruction is full of interest. Prints dating from the beginning of the nineteenth century show it in a very complete state of preservation; a great storm in 1809 however carried away such a large slice of the cliff that only a few yards separated it from the foundations. At this juncture the Vicar and Churchwardens took fright and, instead of calling in expert advice, decided (the Vicar giving a casting vote) to pull down the old church and with its stones build a new one at Hillborough about a mile to the southwest. This wanton destruction was carried out and the magnificent relic of bygone days was left the pitiable ruin we see it to-day. The cliff to-day is in the same condition as in 1809, but the concrete apron that has been placed round it as a preventative ought to have been carried out before the church was demolished.

When King Ethelbert became converted he handed over his palace at Canterbury to St. Augustine and had one erected at Reculver where he took up residence. That palace together with the Roman camp would lie to the north

of the church and consequently suffered destruction by the ravages of the sea on the cliff.

#### STOURMOUTH (Kent).

However isolated Stourmouth may be to-day there can be little doubt it had an importance of its own during the years when the Wantsum Channel was at its best and may be included therefore with those villages which are at least 1,000 years old. Its importance in the past was certainly due to its agricultural value as its land has always been of a remarkably good quality ; and its being at the confluence of two rivers, the Great and Little Stours, must have helped its prosperity as a port. The exact site of its " fleet " or dock is not certain, but the existence of two riverside farms bearing the marine names of " Waterlock " and " Puddledock " may be an indication of its position.

Its Church of All Saints<sup>1</sup> has evidence of Saxon work in its structure and tradition has it that it was given by Bishop Gundulph to the monks of his priory who came to live at West Stourmouth, their building still being known as Old Stonehall. They at once set to work to enlarge the church by bringing material up the Channel from the ruins of the old Roman castle of Richborough.

#### EACH END (Kent).

Mr. J. Sharp in his paper on Richborough Castle says : " A ferry ran to Each End where the Romans had a landing place." Their chief port, Stonar, had the great disadvantage of being built in Thanet and consequently being cut off from the mainland of Kent by the Wantsum Channel. As a considerable trade, both import and export, was carried on between the continent and Stonar a means had to be devised for getting the goods cleared. If Each End was thus used as a transport for Stonar its situation for that purpose would be most suitable. The geological maps show that the waters of the Wantsum Channel came right up to where the Inn

<sup>1</sup> See *Arch. Cant.*, Vol. XLII, pp. 141-146.

now stands and the topography of the ground to-day confirms this. Its great advantage would be the existence of two main roads at its very door; the Watling street and the Dover-Richborough road (Map 2). The latter can be traced as far as the top of Woodnesborough Hill, but in Roman times it continued north (passing close to Each End) to Richborough Castle, where it crossed the tidal waters by means of a causeway.<sup>1</sup> Each End stands to-day on the Ash road about  $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles from Sandwich. An examination of the ground gives no indication of a "fleet," but in the grounds of Brooke House close by there is a spring of water which would have been sufficient to form a "fleet" but is now evidently diverted and carried off in pipes.

#### WORTH (Kent).

Worth well deserves the attention of archæologists. It stands on an elevated peninsula about 15 feet higher than Sandwich and was always above the marshes; it overlooked a sheltered bay at the southern end of the Wantsum Channel and must have been a tempting spot for an early human habitation. The excavations carried out by Mr. W. G. Klein in Castle Field have resulted in very interesting discoveries and have not only proved that Worth was recognised by the Romans as a suitable place for their purpose, but has also brought to light the fact that it was inhabited by an early Celtic community, perhaps as far back as 500 B.C.

Now what was there about this place that would attract the attention of the Roman authorities? If one looks round the site it will be seen by its topographical position how eminently suitable it would have been as a signal station for Richborough Castle. It is about three miles almost due south from that fortress and had no high ground intervening to obstruct its view (it is remembered that at the period under review the sandbank upon which Sandwich was later built had not even risen from the sea).<sup>2</sup> It was also less than

<sup>1</sup> Codrington and the Rev. J. Douglas.

<sup>2</sup> Hasted's *History of Kent*.

two miles from the eastern entrance to Wantsum Channel, and had a clear view north over Pegwell Bay as far as the North Foreland, and south across the Lidden marshes to Deal.

The fortresses on the "Saxon shore," of which Richborough Castle was one, were built for the purpose of repelling the Saxon pirates in their periodical raids, and a watch tower was therefore an essential. But from the castle itself the view to the north-east is intercepted by the Ramsgate Cliffs, whereas from Worth it would be quite uninterrupted. In other words the Castle was too far inland from the actual coast line to be entirely suitable for watching purposes (see Map 2). The position at Worth was exactly the reverse, as the view from a watch tower there would be clear as far as the North Foreland, and the warnings sent to Richborough of a raid would reach that place very much earlier.

According to Dr. Hardman the name Worth has no significance, there being others of the same name in the country. Under its present name it does not appear to be mentioned in Domesday.

Though Sandwich and Stonar come within the scope of this article it will be unnecessary to deal with them as they were fully described in Vol. XXXIX ("The Lost Wantsum Channel"). As for Richborough Castle it has been too often and thoroughly written about by others to necessitate any repetition here.