

THE SAXON HISTORY OF THE WANTSUM.

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THE Wantsum is the channel which formerly divided the Isle of Thanet from the mainland. Its northern end is now represented by a very small stream and its lower or eastern branch by the course of the River Stour from Stourmouth to Sandwich. Much has been written about this channel in *Archæologia Cantiana*, and there is still great lack of agreement as to its width and other features at different times of its history. This essay aims at nothing more ambitious than collecting together the charter and chronicle references of the Anglo-Saxon period with a view to discovering the nature and usefulness of this channel during the four hundred years ending 1066.

Our earliest description of the channel is in the *Ecclesiastical History of the Venerable Bede*, Book I, Chapter XXV. It is as follows: "Fluvius Uantsumu qui est latitudinis circiter trium stadiorum, et duobustantum in locis est transmeabilis; utrumque enim caput protendit in mare." This is a little difficult to translate, but what Bede meant to convey was apparently that the Wantsum River was about three furlongs wide, and because it emptied into the sea at each end had to be forded, which was only possible in two places. The stadium measured rather less than the furlong, but there can be little doubt that the latter measurement was intended. The Wantsum was therefore about 660 yards across. Although Bede lived far away and had never set eyes on the Wantsum, we know that his information about Kentish affairs came direct from Canterbury and we can accept his description as accurate.

Although his description is the first available, there are certain other early references which support it and tell us a little more about the channel. A charter of 686 (B.67) records the conveyance of some land now represented by the parish of West Bere. This is said to be bounded on the north by a road called the Ford Street ("vadum quod appellatur Fordstreta"), and this can only be what is now known as the Island road, the old Roman road leading over Sarre ford into the Isle of Thanet. This charter therefore tells us that one of the fords mentioned by Bede was at Sarre. It by no means follows that the ford was at the site of the present bridge. It is perhaps more likely that the original ford, in Roman times, was somewhere south of Sarre Court. The exact position of the ford in Bede's time remains uncertain.

We know from another charter, of about 761 (B.189) that the channel could be used by the small cargo ships of those days. By this charter the Nunnery at Minster was given a remission of the tax upon two such ships. It is not quite clear whether they were merely ferry

boats or whether they came with supplies down the river from Fordwich, where also Minster had a remission of dues. In any case, their usefulness was perhaps confined to high tide.

Bede has a second incidental reference to the Wantsum, in Book V, Chapter VIII, of his history, and this is rather surprising since it introduces a new name for the channel. He is speaking of Berctuald becoming Archbishop of Canterbury and says that he had been Abbot of the Monastery called Reculver which is situated at the north mouth of the river Genlade ("erat abbas in monasterio quod juxta ostium aquilone fluminis Genladae positum Raculfe nuncupatur"). This word Genlade occurs elsewhere in the Saxon Charters in reference to wide estuaries such as that of the River Limen in the neighbourhood of Appledore (B.396) and certain creeks amongst the marshes north of Cooling (B.228, 257). The word survives to-day in the name of Yantlet Creek which separates the Isle of Grain from the mainland of the Hundred of Hoo, just as the Wantsum made Thanet an island in the Saxon period. The use of Genlade in reference to the northern part of the Wantsum suggests that this was wider and perhaps shallower than the other end. Nor is this improbable. The ford at Sarre must always have formed a sort of bar which would tend to direct the Stour waters towards Sandwich. This bar may originally have been a natural feature, because the high ground at Sarre comes nearest to the relatively high ground at Walls End in line with the ford, but it would tend to be reinforced by the meeting of the tides and possibly by actual repairs to the bed of the ford.

We have little information about the other end of the Wantsum Channel. About 666 St. Wilfred was shipwrecked in Sussex, but the boat floated off with the tide and "with a south-west wind they prosperously reached a port of safety at Sandwich" (Eddius Stephanus, *Life of Wilfred*, Colgrave, 1927). In 774 King Offa gave to the monks at Christchurch "Hlyden juxta Sandwicum" (Somner, 211), and this is Lydd Court of which the manor house in modern times was the club house of the Royal St. George Golf Links. These two records tell us that Sandwich was already a port and that the accumulation of sand and shingle to the east of it was fairly under way although perhaps not yet established in its present form. It is sometimes said that the spit of land which ends in Pepperness was wholly absent in the Saxon era and that Sandwich was an almost open port facing east. The fact that Roman remains have been found practically on the sea line of this promontory, although as far south of its tip as the Cinque Ports Golf Club, tells strongly against this view, and it is more than likely that St. Wilfred had to sail up a rather narrow channel along the east side of Stonar before he came to his port of safety at Sandwich.

After the eighth century there is a long break in the Saxon references to the Wantsum, relieved only by a chance reference to the

“old ford” in a charter of 826 (B.851, 1337). This was evidently the ford at Sarre.

The tenth century references are more numerous. In 994 (B.791) certain lands in Thanet were given to a thane named Aelfstan. I cannot identify them with certainty, but the boundaries included “andlang merce on tha ea wantsume andlang wantsume oth raculfinga mearce”—along the boundary to the Wantsume water; along the Wantsume as far as the Reculver boundary. This tells us little more than that the name Wantsume was ordinarily current. A charter of 949 (B.880) is more informative. It recites the boundaries of the land belonging to the monastery of Reculver, commencing: “Aerest on north healfe Aethelferthes londe; swa forth be sande oth north muthan; from north muthan to macan broc” (First, on the north side, Aethelferthe’s land; so forth along the sands to the North Mouth; from the North Mouth to Macan Brook—on which Brook Farm is situated). This brings in once more the term North Mouth and mentions by name one of the smaller channels flowing into the Wantsum—the macanbroc. There are other references to this brook or to the manor which took its name from it. According to Thomas of Elmham “Maecembrooc” was part of the land outside Thanet given to the Abbess Aebba in 676 (B.42) and the Black Book of St. Augustine also mentions it.

In 943 (B.78) land called Aet Miclan Grafe was given to a minister named Aelfstan. It lay in Thanet, and the boundaries are given, although damage to the Charter prevents them being read with absolute certainty. The estate probably included St. Nicholas at Wade and Sarre, and one of the boundaries is “west andlang ea on middel gewaed”—west along the water to the middle ford. This implies that there must have been a third ford in the tenth century. The middle ford mentioned is apparently that at Sarre. The two others should be north and south of this. The northern one may have been on the road which runs from St. Nicholas Court to Belle Isle and so along Snake Drove to the river, although it must be confessed that this is little more than a guess. But, whatever its precise position, its existence points to a further silting up of the north mouth. This is what we should expect as the land was probably subsiding, the scour of the tides therefore lessening and the deposit of silt increasing. This question of a gradual subsidence between the Roman period and our own is still something of a moot point amongst archæologists, but the geologists appear to accept it and it explains much that would otherwise be obscure, for example the presence of Roman potteries practically under water at Upchurch and the various findings of Roman and pre-Roman occupation sites below meantide level on our coasts.

The eleventh century charters and chronicles have more to tell us. Canute’s famous charter of 1023 (K.737) sets out the boundaries of the riverine jurisdiction of Sandwich which are said to run “fram Piper

naesse to Maerces fleote." Pepperness is still to be found on our maps. It is the point of land on the south of Sandwich Haven—which is called "tha haeuene on Sandwic" in this charter, which also refers to a ferry at Sandwich. The position of the Maerces fleote is thought by Robertson (*A.S. Charters*, page 407) to be unknown, but the author devotes a useful paragraph to the term. A fleote is usually an expansion of a lake-like nature on the line of a water course, which may be on the coast or some way inland. Such fleets are common in Romney Marsh and are often mentioned in the charters. A "mearc" fleet is one that happens to form a boundary and the particular mark fleet with which we are dealing was the boundary between the jurisdiction of Sandwich and that of some other place not named in the charter. We know, however, from other sources that this latter place was Fordwich, whose jurisdiction met that of Sandwich at a point now roughly indicated by the position of Plucks Gutter. No doubt the actual fleet extended over some part of the Stourmouth valley.

The next reference in the eleventh century was dealt with at some length in *Arch. Cant.*, LIV, pp. 48, 49, but I do not find myself in agreement with the late Dr. F. W. Hardman. In 1038 (K.758) there was a great discussion and dispute at Sandwich between the Archbishop or his monks on the one hand and the Abbot of St. Augustine's on the other. The port of Sandwich belonged to the monks, and they seem to have burdened the Abbot with oppressive dues upon any shipping of his passing through the port. He tried in vain to get better terms but finally was forced to make some attempt to divert the Stour through a cut across the Stonar peninsular at a place called Hypples Fleote. This was presumably in the narrowest part of the peninsular, and it was actually commenced, but the Abbot did not succeed in persuading the Stour to forsake Sandwich. It is a fact that borings about the neighbourhood of the existing Stonar cut showed that this area had been considerably denuded of shingle (*Arch. Cant.*, LII, p. 74) and my old friend always maintained that this was evidence of an outlet of the Wantsum at this point. It is possible, however, that the denudation was caused by the "great delve" of Abbot Aelfstan. I do not know of any satisfactory evidence that the Wantsum ever had an outlet across the Stonar shingle and this charter of 1038 is good evidence that it certainly had no such opening at that date or, presumably, for many years before. The precise location of Hippeles fleote has not been identified. Dr. Hardman seemed to identify it with Ebbsfleet, but a cut at this place would be extravagantly long, five or six times as long as a "mycel gedelf" at the site of Stonar cut.

The final preconquest references to the Wantsum are to be found in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. In 1049 some ships of Edward the Confessor were at anchorage "be innan Northmuthan"—within the north mouth. The context makes it reasonably certain that this was

the north mouth of the Wantsum and that there was a sheltered anchorage there, at some spot which is now no doubt some way out beyond the modern coastline. There is another reference to the same north mouth in 1052. Earl Godwin had come up the channel, impressing ships and sailors from Romney, Hythe and Folkestone. His fleet assembled at Sandwich and "ge wendon heom tha to Northmuthan"—and went thence to the north mouth. It has been supposed that they necessarily passed along the Wantsum channel, but there is really no evidence at all of this. They had put in at various anchorages and were proceeding on their way to London. Since King Edward's ships had been there we know that the north mouth offered the required facilities, and Earl Godwin and Harold might well have stopped there in any case. The fact that they did so is no evidence that they passed along the Wantsum, nor do I think it likely that they would have been able to do so at that period, although the possibility cannot be absolutely excluded for lack of definite evidence.

These few references to the Saxon Wantsum suggest that it did not change very greatly during the 400 years before the conquest. It was 660 yards (which is just the distance from the present bridge on the island road to the main square of Sarre village) in the time of Bede, and even in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries when the monks' walls were presumably built it was only about twice that width in the stretch between Sarre and Sandwich. As already suggested, a fall in the level of the land probably accounted for this increase in width, and some of it may well have taken place in the Saxon era, but there is not the least likelihood that there was in Saxon days a channel of two or more miles wide with estuaries reaching up to Fordwich, Bridge, etc., such as one finds depicted in only too many maps in *Arch. Cant.* and elsewhere. We are not helped by any Saxon reference upon the question of whether Richborough was ever an island, and we have not even any record of the second of Bede's two fords. We do know that Stonar existed and had a church,¹ but we are left very much in the dark as to the configuration of the Wantsum at its eastern end. But it is hoped that the gleanings which have been possible will incite some other writer to get together and further annotate the historical records of the centuries immediately succeeding the Conquest.

¹ *Arch. Cant.*, LV. (1942), 41-2.