

Archæologia Cantiana.

THE ROMAN CASTRUM AT RECVLVER.

BY GEORGE DOWKER, F.G.S.

REGULBIUM, the Roman name for Reculver, has been traced to British origin by Battely, who supposes it to be derived from *Rhag* and *Gwylfa*, which signify “former or first watch tower.” The sea has made great advances here, and the hill on which the *castrum* stands must have formed the north-east promontory of Kent, at a time when the waters of the Wantsum, at its northern mouth called the Genlade, flowed between it and the Isle of Thanet. The cliffs between Reculver and Herne Bay have yielded a great number of flint weapons, many of which are preserved in the cabinets of Mr. Brent of Canterbury, and Mr. Slater of Chislet, and most of them have been referred to a very early period, the Palæolithic, though others of a more recent type have been found. It is therefore extremely probable that this place may have been occupied, as a port or watch place, before the advent of the Romans, when the county of Kent, or at least the eastern portion of it, was peopled by a race from Belgic Gaul, described by Cæsar and Dion Cassius. In Cæsar’s campaign against the Veneti, a description of their coast fortresses is thus given:—“Most of

these petty fortresses on the coast of the Veneti were situated at the extremities of tongues of land, or promontories; at high tide they could not easily be reached by land, while at low tide the approach was inaccessible to ships: a double obstacle to a siege." Reculver would present all the features here described, and we know also that from Kent a commerce existed with the Continent: indeed Cæsar himself informs us that in his Belgic campaign his enemies received succour from Britain. It is not then at all unreasonable to suppose Reculver to have been a port and a coast defence before the Roman occupation.

There is no certain record that the walls of Regulbium were built at an early period of the Roman rule in Britain, though this commanding station at the north mouth of the estuary of the Wantsum was probably very early occupied by them. Its omission by Ptolemy and by the geographer of Ravenna, and its mention only in the Itinerary of Richard of Cirencester and in the Notitia, has led many to infer that it was built at a late period, and that these walls (as well as those of the *castra* on the east of Kent) were erected to repel the invasions of the Saxons. It is, however, not my purpose to enter into a disquisition on this difficult subject, which has been ably treated by Mr. Roach Smith, who says:—"In the total absence of inscriptions, as well as of historical evidence, that can possibly be brought to bear directly upon the question, the precise period when the *castrum* of Regulbium was erected, as well as others on the Saxon shore, must remain a matter of conjecture." I incline to the belief that Richborough was erected earlier than Reculver. Within the walls of the former are found many more remains, attesting a prolonged

Roman occupation, than in the latter. A large excavation within the walls of Reculver, lately made in digging the foundations of coastguardmen's cottages, brought very little to light.

An attentive examination of the estuary of the Wantsum, which flowed from here to Richborough, leads me to believe that it was much shallower and narrower in Roman times than is generally supposed, and that it opened out widely northwards; nearly surrounding the *castrum* with water. The cliff at Bishopstone gradually dips as it approaches Reculver, the hill on which the *castrum* was built rising abruptly; but still it is so far above the level of the marsh that there is no reason to suppose the waters ever came up to the *castrum* walls, as some have suggested. Towards the south, an inlet in the marsh marks what had probably been water, at least at high tide. In a dike recently cut, just at the south of the *castrum*, I observed indications of a large accumulation of earth, covering Roman tiles and other remains to a considerable depth; such an inlet as I suppose probably formed a fleet or harbour. This inlet has at some distant period been walled off from the Genlade, shutting out the sea from this strip of marsh.

It is averred that the bounds of the port of Sandwich were Pepperness, a small sand in the eastern end of the Sandwich estuary, and *Meres fleet* by the north mouth, or Genlade.* It seems certain that some

* *A Short Dissertation on the Antiquities of the two ports of Richborough and Sandwich*, by John Lewis.

A.D. 949. In a charter of Eadred granting the monastery of Reculver to Christchurch, Canterbury, written by the Abbot Dunstan, in a description of the boundaries of the said lands mention is made of Eanflæde mouth to the north and from Eanflæde mouth to *Meareflætes mouth*.

fleet existed near here, and I am inclined to place it on this strip of marsh. The word *fleet* is of Saxon origin; it was used to designate a stream flowing into a river, and appears constantly to have been used for harbours and landing places in early times. In my account of Richborough, in Volume VIII of *Archæologia Cantiana*, I noticed an artificial excavation in the hill of Richborough, opposite a farm now called Fleet. The existence of these fleets in connection with the Roman *castra* in the south-east is instructive. Richborough, Lympne, and Pevensey, appear to have been situated close to the marsh and land overflowed by the tide.

The Wantsum connected the waters of the Greater and Lesser Stour, which were carried by it to Richborough, and thence to sea southward, and also by a branch which emptied out northward near St. Nicholas, Thanet. Another river rising in the Blean flowed out at Chislet, uniting its waters with those of the Wantsum by one channel, and by another it flowed out near Reculver, at the north mouth, called the Genlade. There are at present two streams emptying out northward, one called the North Mouth, and the other the Cold Harbour; between these streams the intervening marsh land is tolerably level, but several hills seem to mark the former division of the stream.

I must not, in connection with this subject, omit to mention the coast changes which have taken place. The waste of coast from Herne Bay to Reculver has been extremely rapid during some periods, and if the land had stood at any elevation above the sea level north of Reculver, we must conclude that the *castrum* was considerably removed from the sea; but we must bear in mind the gradual dip of the cliff as we near

Reculver from Herne Bay; if a slight elevation in the cliff did not occur just at Reculver, we should find it about the marsh level. It evidently stands on an isolated hill, overlooking the marsh; in this respect bearing a very close resemblance to the hill of Richborough. The marsh, east of the *Castrum*, probably opened out or widened seawards, hence Regulbium might still have been near the sea. The earliest notice of its distance from the sea is given by Leland, who states "it standith within a quarter of a mile or little more of the se syde." This was probably between 1530 and 1537. According to vulgar tradition, the town and monastery stood between the *castrum* and the "black rock," which is now far out at sea. This "black rock" is probably the seaward continuation of the sandstone, which occurs naturally in these cliffs, and which, following the strike of the beds, would crop out there. A peculiar ridge of rock runs out diagonally to sea near the Bishopstone station, and probably gives the name *stone* to that place, and is of like geological character. I should not place much reliance on the popular notion that this "black rock" has any connection with the ancient Reculver, as similar popular statements often rest on mere supposition: nor have we any reason to conclude that there was ever an extensive town here. The earliest reliable map of this neighbourhood represents the northern walls of the *castrum* as thirty-two rods from the sea. This map was made, I believe, about A.D. 1600. In 1780 Mr. Boys made the distance of the cliff, from the north-west angle of the Roman wall, three rods.

The Roman Castrum.—We have several accounts of this building, as it has appeared of late years, the most accurate and reliable of which is that given by

Mr. Boys,* who made a careful survey of the walls. He says, "The castle when entire occupied eight acres one rood and one perch of ground, and the area within the walls seven acres two roods twenty-six perches." He also gives a plan of them, from which it appears they formed nearly a square parallelogram, having apparently but one opening, and that in the centre of the west wall, opposite the west entrance to the church. The south-east angle of the wall is represented as rounded, and concealed by the soil. A break in the wall is shewn at the north-east corner, probably a cart-way cut in the wall; the corners are all represented as rounded. At the time Mr. Boys made his survey the foundations of the walls were entire, except a portion cut off by the cliff at the north-west corner. He represents likewise the ground-plan of the buildings within the area of the walls. These plans appear to have been made about A.D. 1798. He notices that the walls skirt a hill, of pit sand, which is higher in every part than the ground without the walls; that the walls are nowhere more than ten feet high, and never rise above the level of the ground within the *castrum*. He speculates on the walls having been thrown down, and the fragments carried away by the sea, which he supposed washed its southern as well as northern sides; and he noticed the absence of bonding tiles in the walls, which form such a conspicuous feature in the Roman walls at Richborough. A description has also been given of the *castrum* by Mr. Freeman, in a book entitled *Regulbium*, a poem. He says:—

"In the year 1780, when a survey of Reculver was published in the *Bibliotheca Topographica*, by the late Mr. Boys, of Sandwich,

* *Bibliotheca Topographica Britannica*, No. xviii, p. 84, pl. iv.

the north wall of the *castrum*, which was distant about eighty yards from the church, had lately been overthrown by a fall of the cliff, and the angle of the tower towards the north, as appears by the annexed plan, was distant about fifty yards from the border of the precipice. In the year 1805, when the writer first examined it, the churchyard was entire, surrounded by its walls: and between the wall and the cliff was a highway broad enough to admit carriages; since that time some remarkable high tides and violent gales of wind have happened, by which means so much cliff has been overthrown that at the present moment, June, 1809, the distance from the north angle of the tower to the edge of the cliff is reduced to five yards only.”*

Mr. Freeman likewise notices the walls of the *castrum* pretty much as described by Mr. Boys; but he adds that the foundations were at places exposed by the removal of earth. He measured the fragments of the wall lying on the beach, and found them to be nine feet thick, from which he conjectured the walls with their original facings could not have been less than eleven or twelve feet thick, as at Richborough. He further notes, “From the present state of the wall none of the original gates or entrances are distinguishable.”

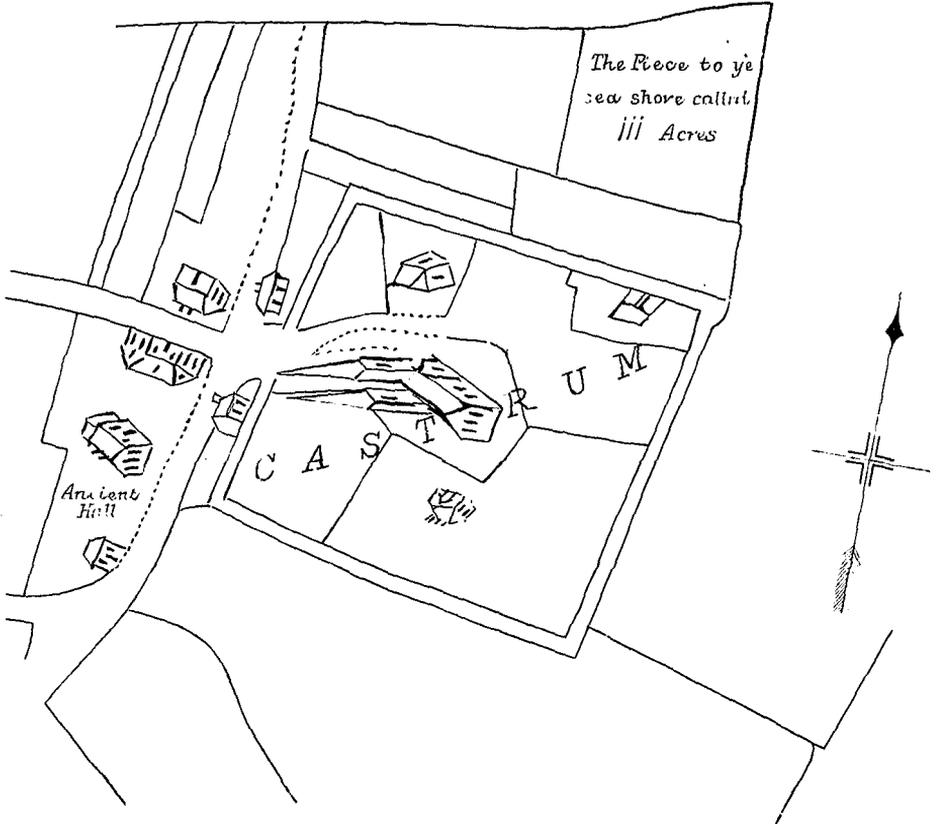
Mr. Roach Smith, in his history of Richborough, Reculver, and Lymne, notices the previous accounts given of these walls, but his description is chiefly taken up with historical data, though he had minutely examined the walls, and commented on the absence of bonding tiles.

It appeared to me desirable to make a minute examination of the *castrum* walls, in order that I might, if possible, throw some light on their plan and original structure. For this purpose, I first made a minute examination of the outer walls, to determine if

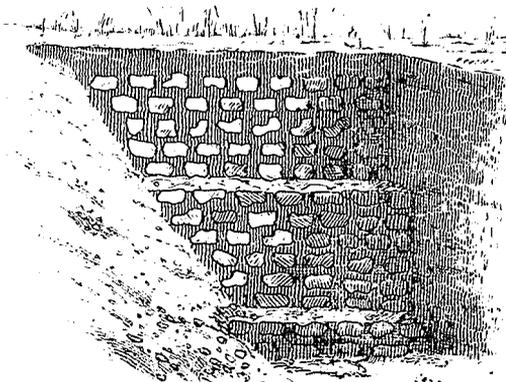
* *Regulbium*, a Poem by R. Freeman. 1810.

possible how they had been built; what was the material used; what openings or gates existed; whether the hill within, faced by the walls, was natural or artificial; and whether the walls were surrounded by a fosse, or other protection. I caused an excavation to be made near the centre of the existing east wall, on its inner side. I found the earth was almost entirely maiden soil, of a clayey sand, except about a foot from the top, and that immediately in contact with the wall. The inner face of the wall was quite perfect. Its upper portion consisted of alternate layers of flint and rough blocks of sandstone, the top layer being flint, and this was quite level; at three feet below the surface there was a set-off one foot wide; the wall, thence formed mainly of flints, continued perpendicularly four feet, with only one layer of sandstone; at that depth there is another set-off, about one foot wide, resting on a surface of black pebbles, on which as a foundation all the wall appears to be built. These pebbles are beach pebbles, and the same have been used beneath the walls of Richborough. The total depth of the wall was 8 feet. I determined the width of the original wall, by measuring from the inner face to a plummet line which cut the outer face of the wall, in a line with the perfect facing stones, some of which we meet with on the east side; this measured 8 feet in width. Thus we get the dimensions of the walls, viz., 8 feet deep, 8 feet wide at the top, then 3 feet lower down 9 feet wide, lastly with an extra foot projecting inwards at the bottom. As before stated, the walls on the outside are bare to the very foundations, having been used as a quarry; almost all the squared ashlar facing stones, and some portion of the core of the walls, have been carried away for

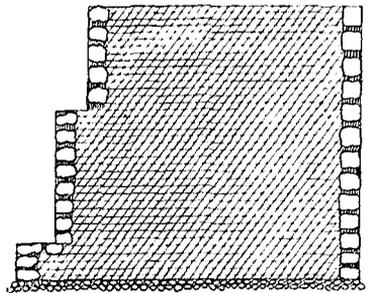
The North Sea



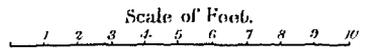
RECVLER CASTRUM AND CHURCH, AS SHEWN ON A PLAN OF BROOK FARM, AND OTHER LANDS OF MR E. MASTER OF OSPRINGE, — DRAWN BY JAMES CASTELL ABOUT A.D. 1600.



INNER (WESTERN) FACE OF EAST WALL.



SECTION OF WALL.



EAST WALL OF ROMAN CASTRUM AT RECVLER 1877.

use elsewhere. It is probable that the Romans chose a hill for their camp, scarped it, and then built a wall against it, to keep up the crumbling sand of which it was composed. The foundation pebbles appear to go quite through the wall and into the soil within. I conclude therefore that the walls were laid in foundations dug into the soil, on the verge of the hill, but that the earth so dug out had all been cast up to remain within the wall. We must not conclude, however, that the camp quite coincided with the dimensions of any natural hill; it is square, and the hill falls more towards the east than towards the west. Mr. Boys states, in explanation of his plan, that "parts shaded lightly, are either wholly destroyed or concealed from view by the soil." The south-east angle is thus represented, so that there must here have been soil resting against the outside of the wall, or some tower or other defence occupied the angle. We cannot imagine that a wall, 8 feet only in height, could have been any sufficient protection to such a camp as the Romans possessed here: yet so regular and uniform is this height throughout the entire circuit of walls, that we can hardly accept it as accidental. The uniform absence, also, of any overthrown material points to the conclusion that some other defence existed. It appears then very probable that a fosse once existed entirely surrounding the walls, and that the mound cast up against the walls, in forming it, has long since been removed by accident or design. In confirmation of this view, I would point out that the earliest map we have of this neighbourhood (I refer to that in Mr. Collard's possession) shews, on two sides of the *castrum*, a narrow slip of land which had different owners from the adjoining land. Such an old

fosse and embankment as I imagine would probably long continue to be waste land, and would be recovered from the waste, as such slips often are, by small proprietors. Mr. Collard informs me that his father did once remove some of the soil, adjacent to the walls, to place in his garden, it being rich, good soil, better than most of that about.

On examining the masonry of the walls, I found it was largely composed of material from the neighbourhood; the sandstone being identical with that occurring in the cliffs about here. I also found travertine, frequently termed *tufa*, sparingly used as a facing material for the wall.

On carefully noticing the wall on the south side of the *castrum* I observed that it was absent, for some space, at a point much overgrown with trees, and on pacing the distance from the south-east corner, I found it corresponded with the centre of this side of the *castrum*, according to the measurements on Mr. Boys' plan. On comparing the last Ordnance Survey, on the large scale, with my plan of the *castrum*, I found that the southern wall is not straight; from both extremities it converges inward towards this central point, thus indicating the probable position of a postern gate. This convergence in the south wall resembles that of the north wall at Richborough, which, towards the Decuman gate, also tends inward. The sentinels on duty could thus more readily perceive the approach of an enemy from either side of the gateway. Further excavations at the spot I thus indicate might perhaps shew us a gateway.

Other points I investigated were the presumed openings in the walls. Of these, the opening now used as a pathway to the coastguard station from the

east appears to be but a way cut down through the wall. On the opposite side, towards the south-west, the wall, in a fragmentary state, may still be seen under the cow-houses belonging to the "Ethelbert Arms Inn," but it cannot be traced further.

I find that the church is situated half way between the east and west walls of the *castrum*. It thus stands where we might presume the *prætorium* to be situated. The east wall faces 35° N.W. of N. and S.

With regard to the historical part of the subject, Mr. Roach Smith has brought all the facts to a focus in his able work on Reculver.* We learn from the *Notitia*, or at least from that part of it relating to Britain, that *Regulbium* was garrisoned by the first cohort of the *Vetasii* under the command of a tribune. These *Vetasii* or *Betasii* (for their name is variously spelt) were a people of Belgic Gaul, now called Brabant. They are mentioned in two rescripts of Trajan and Hadrian, by which it appears that in the reigns of these emperors, among numerous auxiliary soldiers these were serving in Britain. Mr. Roach Smith has favoured me with the following letter, which I give in its entirety, although he mentions my researches in too flattering terms:—

"My dear Sir,—To what I published respecting Reculver many years ago, I have not much to add, beyond congratulating the Society on possessing a member so active and so competent in the field of practical research.

"By means of excavations you have shewn the internal construction of the east wall of the *castrum*; and revealed more clearly the character of the site, and the natural elevation within the walls." "As you suggest, a further excavation on the southern side would probably expose a postern entrance, somewhat similar to that at

* *Antiquities of Richborough, Reculver and Lymne*, sm. 4to. London, 1850.

Richborough. You have also demonstrated, I think beyond doubt, the Roman origin of the church, which from Gandy's drawings seemed obvious; but which was not heretofore to be so clearly decided by visible remains.

"Unfortunately here, as in all of the *castra* on the *Littus Saxonicum*, we are not assisted by lapidary inscriptions; the source of so much valuable historical information in the fortresses of the north of Britain. With the exception of the inscribed tiles, found at Dover and Lymne, recording the British *Classarii* stationed at those ports; and an altar, erected at the latter place by a prefect of the British fleet, our only historical evidence on the defences of the Saxon shore is confined to the *Notitia Imperii*, compiled in the state in which we have it at a very late period, not earlier than the days of Arcadius and Honorius. This fact is to a certain extent evidence of the comparatively late date of these military defences.

"I need not trouble you with what I have published on the *Betasii* (*Vetasii*, as written in the *Notitia*) quartered at Regulbium. In addition to the inscription found at Ellenborough, or Maryport, three others have recently been discovered. The first gives the *prænomena* T. Attius to Tutor the Prefect in a dedication to Victory. The second is also to Victory by the first cohort of the *Betasii*, styled as in the former, 'C. R.,' *Cives Romani*, under the prefect, Ulpius Titianus; and the third is dedicated by the same cohort and prefect to Mars Militaris, the deity to whom the altar long since discovered was erected. These three altars were discovered with fourteen others buried with their faces downwards, on the outside of the station in a series of pits, indicating the abandonment of the *castrum* possibly when the garrison was called to the south.

"Strood, July 29, 1877."

Though we cannot with any certainty decide who were the builders of this *castrum*, the balance of testimony seems to favour its being of late date in the Roman occupation of Britain, though we need not hence infer that Regulbium had not previously been a Roman port, which may have been mentioned with Richborough under the name of *Rutupiæ*.

Battely explored this *castrum*, and described

many of the relics of Roman manufacture found here. It would appear that most of his specimens were derived from pits, ten to twelve feet square, and the same in depth; formed by posts driven deep into the ground, their sides being closed with oaken planks two inches thick, and the bottom of each being formed of the stiffest clay, well trodden down to prevent percolation of water. These, Battely supposed, were reservoirs for rain water, which the brackish nature of the spring water in the neighbourhood rendered necessary. These pits were found when the sea undermined the cliff, and as in 1780 the *castrum* was nearly entire, they must have been without the walls. I think it probable they were dirt pits like those found at Richborough.