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# ROMNEY MARSH.

AN INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS

DELIVERED AT THE

ANNUAL MEETING OF THE KENT ARCHÆOLOGICAL SOCIETY,  
ON JULY THE 30TH, 1879,

BY

THE RIGHT REV. THE BISHOP OF DOVER.

OUR Kent Archæological Society now, for the first time, sets foot in Romney Marsh. Few and far between, as the visits of angels, are the footprints of professed antiquaries within the limits of this "fifth quarter of the globe." We all know who are apt to "rush in where angels fear to tread," and I must perhaps risk the imputation of foolhardiness in sounding the first note of welcome to a region which some have feared you will not find very full of interest. I do not agree with them. The child's parable of "eyes and no eyes" was never penned for archæologists. You all bring your eyes with you, well sharpened for use, and I doubt not that you will light on some things well worth seeing, which you might fail to find in some richer and more fully stocked hunting grounds of antiquarian research.

Strictly speaking, *i.e.*, from a physico-geographical point of view, "Romney Marsh" embraces much more than these Eastern Kentish parishes with which we have to do. The whole of this "*altum pelagus et mare velivolum*,"\* over part of which you are to sail on wheels, lying stretched out beneath this far reaching arc of hills from Hythe to Fairlight, is owned

\* Quis quæso hodie credat magnam partem illius prati sive Planiciei nobis nunc Rumnensis Marshii, id est Romani Maris, nomine dictæ fuisse quondam altum pelagus et mare velivolum? Johannis Twini *Liber de Rebus Albionis*, ed. 1590, p. 31.

as much by Sussex as by Kent, in joint partnership. I have, however, no intention of eking out our supplies with any stolen scraps from Rye or Winchelsea, however great the temptation. The vast forest of Anderida, which hereabouts barred the way to kings and men of Kent along this highland ridge, has bequeathed to us the division, here artificial enough, between the two counties, and we must honestly keep to our own side of the border.

Romney Marsh—what does it mean? “Rumen-*ea*,” “large or watery place,” says Hasted, following in the track of Somner and Lambarde. Isaac Taylor, no mean authority, bids us hang the explanation on a Gaelic word for marsh, viz., *Ruimne*. More on this subject is reserved for your discussion this evening. For my part I still venture to hold, *medio tutissimus*, to a part of Kentish history, between the Kelt and the Saxon, to the “*Insula Romanorum*” of Holinshed.\* To me it is always the Roman ‘Ey’ or ‘Island,’ as part of the district is to this day still Oxn-ey, the ‘ey’ or Isle of the fat beeves which still pasture in its fields, and were once graven on its pagan altars.

The Ey or Isle of the Romans! How have these ubiquitous and diligent writers of history writ their name so large on this broad expanse of grass and dyke landscape?

I need not waste words in proving that, as Camden says, “the Marsh Country . . . hath been laied unto the lande by the benefit of the sea.” Unless indeed we credit the sea with less generosity, and picture it as yielding grudgingly to the persistent advance of alluvium, and sullenly falling back, inch by inch, farther away from the old steep coast line. But whatever the ethical explanation, the geological result is obvious even to an unpractised eye. None can doubt that the old “*mare velivolium*” reached up the Weald valley beyond Newenden. So far back as A.D. 893, just 1000 years ago, we learn from the Saxon Chronicle that the “Danish pyrats” (as Lambarde calls them) towed up from Limen Mouth a fleet of no less than 250 ships. In the still earlier Roman days Limen Mouth was doubtless a broad estuary

\* Quoted by Mr. Holloway, *History of Romney Marsh*, pp. 40, 44.

under Lympne heights, guarded by the Roman Castrum of Studfall.

Afterwards, when the Saxon, or, as it is the fashion now to call him, the Englishman (taking ship as often since, and sailing westward ho! in search of what he might find), landed yonder in Thanet, and a fresh page was turned in our Island annals, the name of its old Roman masters may well have lingered among the low oozy islands, sundered possibly here and there by shallow sleepy lagoons, in which the tide lazily ebbed and flowed. And Roman Studfall (no longer manned by the military ancestors of our gallant marines, the *Classiarii Britannici*)\* still frowned down upon the slowly shallowing channels, once ploughed by Roman keels, bent on peaceful traffic in Weald ores, or on less peaceful errands, up to and beyond Appledore, where still, as I am told, exists below the Vicar's garden a veritable Campo (if not Monte) Testaccio of broken Roman tiles.

Thus onward, through the centuries, the name of the Roman ey, or island region, islands now no more, has clung to the soil, and we still speak of it as Romney Marsh.

The gradual conquest of the sea by the land is marked by a few decisive battle dates, as *e.g.*, the two disastrous tempests in the reigns of Edw. I and Edw. III, in 1287 and 1334. The first, "hideous, uncouth, violent rage and æstuation of the sea,"† destroyed old Winchelsea, while the other opened out a new bed for the river Limene or Rother so effectually, that the King made a present to my official forefathers, the monks of Canterbury, of part of the old dried up channel, as land worth the having.

Other epochs, more uncertain as to exact date, are signalized by the substitution of Hythe for West Hythe as a port, and of New Romney for Old Romney, as long ago at least (so the Church Tower will tell you to-day,) as the eleventh century. Mr. Furley, in his *History of the Weald*,‡ gives an interesting map shewing the different periods at

\* See *Antiquities of Richborough, Reculver, and Lympne*, by Mr. Roach Smith, p. 259.

† Somner's *Ports*, p. 57.

‡ ii. p. 251.

which the Marsh was "inned" or rescued for cultivation. For the most part, however, this land and sea battle went on "carens vate sacro," unchronicled, until at last Father Neptune made a bold stand and shewed such signs of taking his revenge against terra firma, that sea walls had to be built and kept in repair, lest Romney Marsh should become once more an archipelago of mud, if not a second "altum pelagus," better fitted for the pasturage of fish than of sheep and oxen.

You need not to be told that, as dry land appeared where once was sea, men came from elsewhere to dwell thereon. Which was the first Marsh village I forbear to guess. Mr. Holloway suggests that the ruined walls of Hope Church mark the earliest Church site, and even goes so far as to conjecture that its name testifies to the pious 'hope' of its founders that the newly gained land might never fall a victim to the sea. Certainly, if Church building were always, as now, a sure sign of population, there could have been no lack of Marsh men in days of yore. You must add to the Churches still in use, no less than four others at New Romney alone, as the sites of their churchyards testify. Besides these, and Hope, before-named, you must catalogue the ruins, or sites, of Midley, Blackmanstone, Orgarswick, Eastbridge, West Hythe, Bromhill. Not, I think, that this abundance of churches, nor the contrast of a large church like Ivychurch with its two hundred and eighty people of to-day, *necessarily* imply a much larger population than at present. I am disposed to think that, in what we are pleased to call the "dark ages," men were apt to build and endow churches, whether simply ad majorem Dei gloriam, or possibly by way of atonement for a mis-spent life, without reckoning so many square feet of wall area to be fitted with so many seats at twenty inches per sitting.\* We, dealing with a population which, in England and Wales, has in three-quarters of a century risen from nine to twenty-two millions, may be excused for more

\* "If it was a common practice in those ages for the feudal lord to impart to his vassals full hereditary rights to their lands in consideration of a payment, which he laid out in pious uses, such as the building of Churches, it is evident that the quality of the land and the value of the right ceded to the vassal would have more to do than the number of the inhabitants in determining the size and number of these parish churches." Laing's *Travels in Sweden and Norway*, quoted by Mr. Holloway, p. 51.

matter-of-fact calculations in providing additional church accommodation.

Some of these churches, ruined and standing, you will visit. If churches as yet unravaged by the restorer's ruthless zeal be to your mind, you will be fully gratified in more than one instance. The dedications of a few are not without interest. Little Fairfield, one of the smallest parish churches in England, bears the name (held by one other church only in Kent)\* of our great Canterbury Martyr, Thomas Becket, Archbishop. Twice, according to his biographers, he was prevented by contrary winds or calms from crossing the sea "apud Rumeneye, villam suam" to avoid the king's anger. Considering the great esteem in which this saint was held it is strange that all through this part of England, in which living and dead he filled so conspicuous a place, we so rarely find this particular trace of the popular odour of his sanctity.

While at Folkestone, eastward of the Marsh, the old parish church bears the joint names of St. Mary and St. Eanswith, here the saints are sundered, St. Mary in the Marsh claiming the more honoured title, while Brenzett, at the central *quadrivium* of our Marsh highways, is fain to be content with the Saxon princess.† St. Augustine, who bore across the sea the flame which rekindled the almost extinguished light of Christ's truth eastward of the Severn, is remembered at Snave and Brookland. St. Nicholas, patron of seafaring folk, is appropriately revered at that New Romney, which stepped into the seaside dignity of the now far inland haven of Old Romney. And if any one remembers that St. Nicholas is patron also of thieves, I do not suppose that I shall seriously hurt the feelings of any modern Marsh man or woman, if I suggest that in the old smuggling days, a generation or two ago, his clients might have been found hereabouts in numbers, making use even of the parson's horses, and of the parish churches themselves, to defeat the sometimes one-eyed vigilance of the law.

\* Chapel near Tonbridge.

† St. Eanswith (A.D. 640), daughter of Eadbald, King of Kent, Abbess of Folkestone Nunnery.

While thus harping on this string ecclesiastical with reference to matters archæological, I may mention that in this "fifth quarter of the globe" we still boast two notorious specimens of the deserted dwellings of the happily almost extinct tribe of non-resident Incumbents of well-paid livings. As Archdeacon of the Marsh I am thankful to be able, on the other hand, and by way of contrast, to point to the example of others of my clerical brethren, who, often under circumstances of no small personal discouragement and difficulty, stand bravely to their post, where the Bishop of souls has placed them, faithful to the trust of souls committed to their care.

Are any of you artists as well as archæologists? If only the weather favour us, you will scarcely need Mr. Champneys' charming book\* to introduce you to the picturesque effects of pasture land and dyke scenery. Our Kentish Holland lacks, I fear, its Cuyp and Wouvermanns, but Mr. Champneys in his able word-and-pencil sketches has done something to shew us what a painter might here achieve out of very simple materials. Even such an one as I, who have no artistic tinglings in my finger tips, have more than once felt myself stirred to admire the poetry of a Marsh landscape. True, it has fallen to my lot to view it through a thick veil of mist, and in drenching rain, as well as in one of the heaviest gales of the last ten years. At such times the picturesque side of the prospect comes scarcely uppermost.

But take our Roman-ey, this Romney Marsh of ours, in one of its calmer, brighter, happier moods. The sun, let us say, is hasting to his setting over Fairlight, and the shadows are slowly lengthening out Hythe-wards. A gentle evening breeze rustles peacefully among the flags along the dyke side. The blue sky overhead was never more blue. Where are we? Is this Kent? Are we in England at all? Or have we dropped down somewhere on the Campagna, outside the walls of Rome? For lack of a ruined aqueduct your eye rests on the grey walls of Hope, or Eastbridge, or on the solitary arch of Midley. On the one side rises a tall landmark across the

† *A Quiet Corner of England*, by Basil Champneys. (Seeley, Jackson, and Halliday.)

plain, the Campanile of Lydd. On the other stretches far away the long ridge of the Alban and Sabine hills, which folk hereabout call Lymphne and Aldington. But I know better, for while my friend the Marsh Rector and I are still arguing the point, there comes creaking along the road to Ostia (New Romney he calls it), a heavy waggon drawn by the wide-horned, mild-eyed, melancholy oxen, which every Roman artist knows so well.

Thus fancy lends her ready aid in support of my honest theory as to the meaning of the name, Romney Marsh. From Rome I set out, with Rome I end. And now I leave you in the hands of the Viri Palustres (as Camden calls them)—kindly souls as I know them to be—who are waiting to receive this sudden invasion of unwonted visitors.