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EARLY COAST RECESSION AROUND RECULVER, KENT¹

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INTRODUCTION

ENCROACHMENT of the sea at Reculver, Kent, has been a subject for some discussion. It poses a searching problem in view of the associated loss of valuable land and property. Moreover, locally at Bishopstone and Beltinge, numerous landslips have imparted to the coast (Fig. 1) a relatively high degree of susceptibility to recession. Whether this is justified must be viewed against coast changes taking place in an earlier epoch. These changes will further throw light on the manner in which the present-day coastal processes² operate.

Comparatively recent coast changes are readily picked out by Ordnance Survey maps of various editions and by remnants of sea-defence works. Those in an earlier period of less precise cartographic records, however, have to be inferred largely from personal accounts and from historical or archaeological remains. Such data, being more often than not fragmentary and localized, demand interpretation with care. Reculver, because of its Roman fort and St. Mary's Church, has been the focus of attention of many interested workers, especially historians and archaeologists. Thus progressive destruction of the fort area recorded by them has often been held to demonstrate differential marine erosion at various times.

FORMER COASTLINES

Green³ suggested comparable positions of the Reculver coast at Roman times and in the early fifteenth century. His contention was that erosion of the fort area had been confined to the last few hundred years after long-continued renewed submergence rendered it vulnerable. Locally, however, coast recession is rather unlikely to rely on sheer wave action in view of the prevalence of landslips. That Reculver was once 7 miles from the sea probably arises from undue attention to punctuation in Kilburne's description⁴ of Reculver as 'neere the Isle of

¹ The author expresses his grateful thanks to Miss A. Coleman, of King's College, University of London, for first drawing his attention to the stretch of coast studied.

² C. L. So, 'Some coastal changes between Whitstable and Reculver, Kent', *Proc. Geol. Ass.*, lxxvii (1966), 475-90.

³ C. Green, 'East Anglian Coastline Level since Roman Times', *Antiquity*, xxxv (1961), 21-8.

⁴ R. Kilburne, *Topographie*, London, 1659.

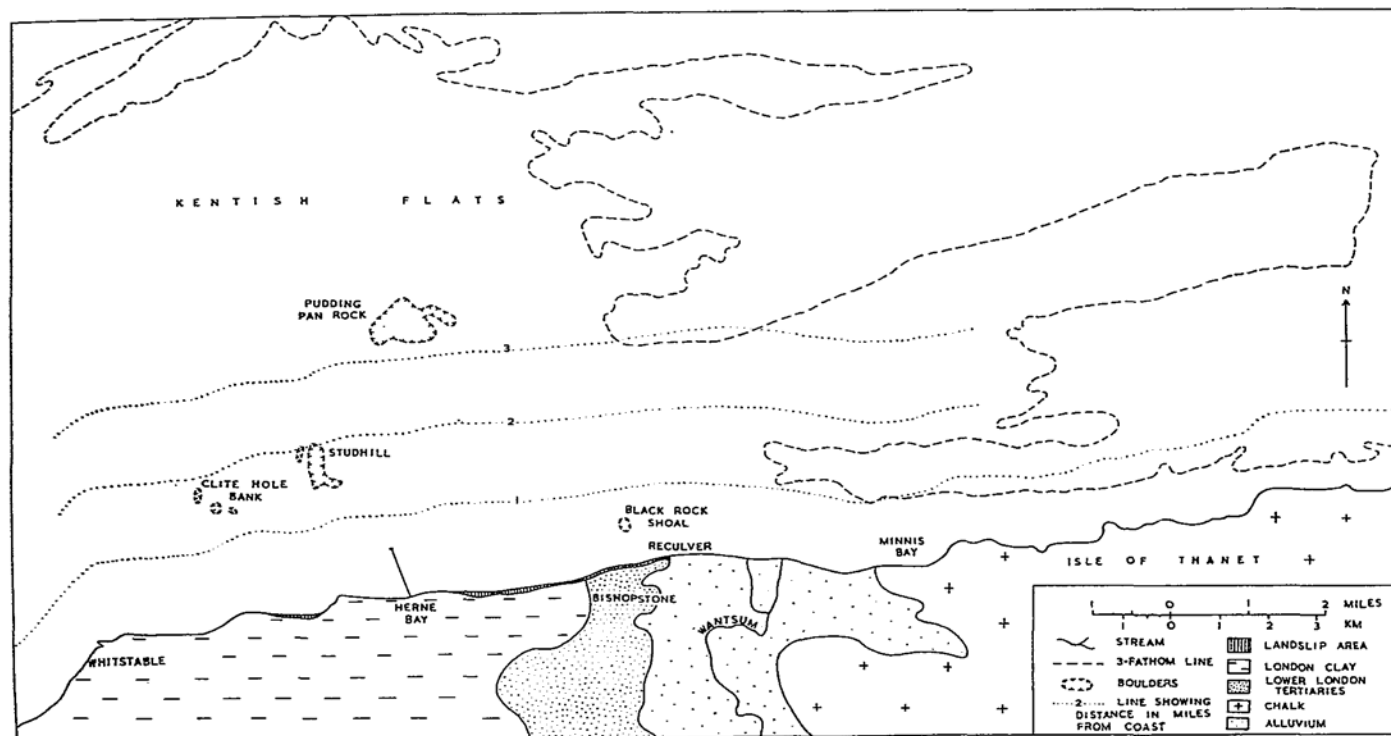


FIG. 1. The Coast around Reculver, Kent.

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Thanet, adjoining to the sea, almost seven miles to the north-east, distant from Canterbury.' Ireland's estimate of 9 miles⁵ is considered largely legendary.

An attempt was made, back in the seventeenth century, to put the town of Reculver in Roman times on the Black Rock Shoal, now $\frac{3}{4}$ mile north-west of the fort (Fig. 1). Assuming that the town, if at all existing once, was then standing on the coast, this would restrict coast recession to an amount far less than that of comparatively recent estimates. Hill's annotated map⁶ of 1685 indicated the Roman coastline about 1 mile away, and this was considered by Jessup⁷ to be near the truth.

Extension of topographical profiles offshore would put tentatively the former coastline 2-3 miles to the north. This would engulf not only stones, tree trunks and wooden stumps regarded by Collard⁸ as remains of ancient fishing weirs, but also a line of cement boulders at Clite Hole Bank and Studhill considered by Smith⁹ to be lying originally on the south bank of the river and furnished with navigation marks erected on a brick or stone foundation. The extent of the Kentish Flats, likely to have resulted from marine erosion as evidenced by their flatness and exposure of London Clay bedrock, would also point to such a former coastline. It is, however, unjustified to push the former coastline another mile or so further away to include the Pudding Pan Rock, now 4 miles north of the shore. Resort to popular notion that earthenware and pans recovered there were related to the wreck of a Roman vessel freighted with ware in the second century,¹⁰ without specifying its distance from the coast, also renders this unnecessary.

COAST EROSION

About 1535, Reculver was reported by Leland¹¹ to be within $\frac{1}{4}$ mile or slightly more from the sea. This was considered by Jessup¹² to be fairly accurate but by Smith¹³ to mean twice the amount judging from Leland's usual way of reckoning distance. In point of fact, Smith's contention would ascribe, as much as 900 yards to discrepancies of

⁵ In R. F. Jessup, 'Reculver', *Antiquity*, x (1936), 179-94.

⁶ T. Hill, *A Mapp, and Description of a Farm wth 12 Parcells of Land there belonging, lying in the Parish of Reculver, in ye County of Kent, being owned by Mr G. Despaigne (and by his Order measured and herein described): being now in ye Tenure or Occupation of Robert Wellte, Kent, 1685.*

⁷ Jessup, *op. cit.*, 179-94.

⁸ A. O. Collard, *The Oyster and Dredgers of Whitstable*, London, 1902.

⁹ R. A. Smith, 'On the Wreck on Pudding-pan Rock, Herne Bay, Kent', *PSAL*, xxi (1907), 268-91.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 268-91.

¹¹ In L. T. Smith (Ed.), *The Itinerary of John Leland*, London, 1907.

¹² Jessup, *op. cit.*, 179-94.

¹³ C. R. Smith, *The Antiquities of Richborough, Reculver and Lymne*, London, 1850, 194.

coastline positions in a period just over 300 years, that is, between Leland's time and 1850 when Smith's book was published. This would yield a mean rate of recession tying in with the figures of the more recent years. Putting the Roman coastline $2\frac{1}{2}$ –3 miles away from the shore of the mid-nineteenth century on such a basis thus also bears out results of analysis of present coastal profiles. Dowker's contention¹⁴ that in Leland's time Reculver Church was nearly a mile from the sea is less convincing, for this would put without basis the Roman coastline 5 or 6 miles away, assuming a comparable rate of encroachment.

After Leland's time, considerable coast erosion in front of the Reculver fort was reported by Lambarde.¹⁵ According to Page,¹⁶ a plan of Book Farm and other lands of Mr. E. Master of Ospringe already reduced the distance of the fort from the cliff to 180 yards by 1600. The sea was also considered to be much closer to the north-west corner of the fort than to the north-east. In the following years, coast recession accelerated periodically. A petition to the Justices of Peace by the inhabitants of Reculver, Chisleth, etc.,¹⁷ dated 14th January, 1657, stated that 'the sea has since Michaelmas last encroached on the land near six rods'. This implied a loss of about 100 feet in 15 weeks. Somner, who died in 1669, spoke of the church as even then being endangered. The cliff approached close under the wall of the fort by 1685,¹⁸ with the northern wall starting to fall 5 years later,¹⁹ and with the church within 60 yards of the sea after the gale of 8th January, 1735.²⁰ In 1780, when Boys carried out his survey,²¹ he made the distance of the cliff from the north-west corner of the Roman wall 3 rods. At that time the north wall of the *castrum* had lately been overthrown by cliff falls, and the corner of the tower towards the north was about 50 yards from the cliff edge. This, together with a revised version of his work in 1785,²² showed that the north-west corner and one-third of the west wall had gone. The church came within 30 yards of the sea by 1792,²³ the width

¹⁴ G. Dowker, 'On Coast Erosion', *Report of the British Association for the Advancement of Science*, 1899, 747–8.

¹⁵ W. Lambarde, *A Perambulation of Kent*, London, 1570.

¹⁶ W. Page, *The Victoria History of the County of Kent*, 1908.

¹⁷ Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, *Appendix to the Eighth Report of the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts*, London, 1881, 248a.

¹⁸ T. Hill, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ J. Batteley, *Antiquitates Rutupinae*, Oxford, 1711.

²⁰ S. Urban, 'Monthly Intelligence, January 1735', *Gentleman's Magazine*, v (1735), 1–35.

²¹ J. Duncombe, 'The History and Antiquities of Reculver and Herne, in the County of Kent', *Bibliographica Topographica Britannica*, i (1784), 65–81.

²² Revealed in a letter written by R. J. Pridden to J. Nichols. Duncombe, *op. cit.*, 65–81.

²³ According to Cozens. Information by kind permission of Mr. H. E. Gough, of Herne Bay Records Society.

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of a highway passable by a carriage by 1805 and 5 yards by 1809.²⁴ The next year saw waves washing the church walls and engulfing one-third of the fort area. Only protective works erected by Trinity House served to preserve the towers and to prevent further inroads of the sea.

SIGNIFICANCE OF PROCESSES

Final arrest of coast recession at Reculver perhaps bears more effects and greater significance than the mere preservation of a fort area and the towers. Cliffs in the Lower London Tertiaries at Reculver and those in Chalk at Minnis Bay, Thanet (Fig. 1), flank the north gateway of the former Wantsum Channel. At one time, their recession would have been accompanied by the progressive silting of the Wantsum depression until the cliffed coasts and the intervening lowlying coastland were more or less in line. Thereafter further recession of the flanking cliffed coasts, if any, would have led to recession of the lowland. Holding back inroads of the sea at Reculver, where recession evidently had been more pronounced than its counterpart in Chalk, must then have played a part in preserving and delimiting the intervening lowland which was subsequently dyked and embanked. It would appear, then, that in the struggle for existence at the sea-land frontier, the lowlying 'infill' of the Wantsum linked her fortunes with her neighbours.

²⁴ R. Freeman, *Regulbium, a Poem, with a historical and descriptive Account of the Roman Station at Reculver, in Kent, Canterbury, 1810.*