

In the Beginning

AN IDIOSYNCRATIC VIEW

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EVERYTHING HAS A BEGINNING and it can be said that the seed that grew into the town and cross-Channel port of Dover was sown eight or nine thousand years ago with the realisation that communication across the narrow sea that not long before had made Britain an island, now needed, using modern terms, the services of ships and mariners.

Though the island of Britain, separated from the continental mass as we know it today, is relatively young, not older than eight and a half thousand years - an almost immeasurably small fraction of the earth's time span - the familiar present day surface features of our land were, to a great extent, formed during the last Ice Ages.

Twenty or more millions of years earlier huge forests were growing on the land on which we now live and were sub-sequently deeply submerged beneath the sea. At the same time the chalk, now everywhere so evident, formed by the deposition of the shells of myriads of dead sea animals compressed by the sheer weight of the water into a form of rock.

150,000 years ago sub-human species, i.e. Swanscombe Man, were living here and they were followed about 40,000 BC - the time-gap is enormous - by true men. By 25,000 BC Paleolithic hunters were existing precariously in a snow and ice-bound environment that was, albeit uncomfortable, slowly improving.

When hunting and gathering man became an agriculturalist in the land of the fertile crescent (the modern Middle East), this land of ours, a promontory on the north-west of the Eurasian continent, was very sparsely inhabited (the population was probably less than $\cdot 5$ per km²) by early man, possibly cannibals, who by then had

fire and understood the working and use of flint. All this time there was a gradual movement of man into "Britain" from the continental land mass to the east and southeast. There was no population pressure behind the movement, probably little more than a simple curiosity to see what lay in the lands of the gradually warming north-west and these nomads, still hunters and gatherers, liked what they found and stayed there.

The slow retreat of the northern ice mantle after the last glacial period, say after 10,000BC, brought about a great improvement in climatic conditions and slowly the south-east of Britain became covered with forests of birch and pine and supported a varied and considerable animal population. Britain was still part of the European land mass and the retreat of the ice led to a corresponding advance northward and westward on the part of the central and eastern European tribes of hunters and fishermen in their constant search for food and good living conditions. Some of these peoples crossed the half-submerged land bridge before its final collapse and, later, tribes from northern France and Flanders, and perhaps others from northern Africa who were escaping from the dessication of the area later to become the Sahara, crossed the very new English Channel and settled in central and southern England.¹

It is certain that the greater part of what is now the English Channel, a proprietorial name if ever there was one, but by the French called La Manche, was, in the millenia preceding and during the last Ice Age, a deep indentation in the western coastline of the European land mass; an indentation which, over vast periods of

time, was gradually enlarged by erosion, by wind, by waves, by rain, by the action of rivers and by enormous variations in the sea level. The present-day 30 fathom - 55m - line on the Channel chart, lying quite close to the shore both at Land's End and on the French side, narrows in a distorted funnel shape in an easterly direction until the two lines meet, more or less in mid-Channel, just south of Beachy Head. This line, it is believed, marks the deepest penetration of the ocean, sometimes referred to as the Atlantic Gulf, and was probably stable for hundreds of thousand years.

East and north-east of the head of the gulf was a vast stretch of undulating country forming a wide land bridge between England and the Continent and extending from Newhaven and Dieppe to The Wash and Denmark. The Baltic was then the Ancyclus Lake and was separated from the North Sea by a land bridge between Denmark and Sweden.

Archæologists, pre-historians, geologists and geographers are not entirely agreed on the course of the River Thames in those far-off days. All appear to agree that the Thames entered the area of the modern North Sea through the site of present-day Clacton, and there is evidence to substantiate this theory in the "benches" on that earlier course, but at that point their disagreement shows. An accepted view is that the river first ran on easterly and then slightly northerly and finally joined a much lengthened Rhine which ran into the Northern Ocean near the present-day Dogger Bank. There is a contrary assertion, less well supported, that from Clacton the course of the Thames curved south-east, then south-west to enter the sea at the head of the Atlantic Gulf. There is support for both points of view but at the time of writing, 1986, (*sic*) the first appears to be more generally accepted. It has also been suggested that the then un-named rivers flowing through Sandwich, Dover and Folkestone probably ran on separately for many winding miles, at first south-easterly then south-westerly and possibly

converging before reaching the sea at a point near the head of the gulf. However the minority assumption, that the Thames did run into the Atlantic Gulf, offers the interesting possibility that it was joined on its course by these three small rivers.²

About 6,500BC the melting of the ice caps, with the global 100 metre rise in sea level, major subsidences, upheavals and the folding of the earth's surface partly caused by the sheer weight of the extra water, all slowly combined to produce a "subsidence of the land" and "the sea flooded into the lowlands between eastern Britain, Scandinavia and the Low Countries" and brought about the separation of Britain from Europe. A small tilt in the angle of the earth's axis, with the resultant rise of a degree or two celsius in the mean temperature of the northern hemisphere, had brought all this about and "sudden as the thawing of a frozen pond" Britain had become an off-shore island.³

The sea had made the Channel and the seed of Dover's later importance had been sown. With the speed-up in the improvement of the climate, making Britain an attractive goal and spurred on by man's native inquisitiveness, Mesolithic canoes, the ships of the time, began making the Channel crossing. Though the "ships" could, perhaps, have been dug-out canoes it is more probable they were similar to the very much later Celtic currach, constructed with a light wicker framework covered with skins and still to be seen in modified form in Ireland today. It is known that the currach could be, and was, built large enough to be capable of making the western Channel passage in fine weather and it is likely that similar craft were in use all along the British shores of the Atlantic Gulf and by the Veneti on the continental littoral. As by this time there was in Britain the knowledge and ability to navigate the prehistoric sea routes to and from Brittany and Ireland it needs little stretch of the imagination to visualise the British "mariners", swarthy bearded men, paddling their way across the new channel. Probably

34 the passage could only be made in conditions of relative calm, but the need was there and the seed had been sown and now, almost eight thousand years later, Dover has become the busiest passenger port in the world.

It is not possible to define the shoreline resulting from the destruction of the land bridge with pin-point accuracy but there is evidence of a sea level much higher than that of today in an eroded cliff face near Brighton, ten metres or so above the present high-water mark. Little imagination is needed to conjure up the scene when in its final stages the great mass of water surged across the already attenuated land-bridge in a two-pronged unbalanced attack from the Northern Ocean and the Atlantic. The Northern Ocean, with a greater depth of water fed by the melting ice at the fringes of the Arctic Sea, was the dominant partner with a high water mark several metres above that in the Atlantic Gulf. This greater depth, combined with a difference in the time of high-water on each side of the great land bridge, contributed greatly to the ferocity of the final attack. Carbon dating, pollen analysis and other more sophisticated scientific methods have been used to ascertain the date of the inundation and trawlers in the North Sea and the Channel have picked up in their nets stumps and fragments of trees that have been identified as oaks that were growing on land now submerged to 100 metres. These theories are discussed, summarised and brought together by Dr. J. A. Williamson in his book, *The English Channel*, in which, *inter alia*, he says "We may take it as an average of findings reached by different lines of approach that the pronounced main subsidence occurred chiefly in a period at least eight thousand years ago, possibly much more" - but 8,000 years is hardly measureable in the context of geological time.

Although the separation of "Britain" from the Continent was now a physical fact, assigned to a date definite within a tolerance of + or - 500 years. archaeological

investigations have confirmed the presence of Palaeolithic man at a much earlier date (and also of his Neolithic successors) who moved unhindered throughout the whole of the Euro-Asian land mass, and who, in "Britain", lived in small widely spaced nomadic groups strewn over the greater part of the land. One can only assume that the equable climate and the extremely low population density, produced an adequate food supply, that drew those prehistoric nomads to an area that, some thousands of years later, was to be immortalized as "England's green and pleasant land". Contact was maintained with Europe across the relatively new channel and gradually the questionable benefits of a civilisation, born 5000 or more years ago in the Middle East, filtered across to this country, *cf* the European migrations.

In the early Stone Age the realisation dawned that the flint abounding so profusely throughout the chalky soil would make a much better weapon than the fist or the wooden club and with a little more refined chipping could be made into tools for many varied purposes. The abundance of flint in the chalk of the downs of some parts of southern England was one of the attractions that brought about more permanent Neolithic settlement on what is now the Channel coast of east and south-east Kent. Later it was discovered that flints could be developed into vastly more effective and efficient tools and weapons by polishing or honing to form cutting edges, and, amongst other things, Neolithic man's latent ingenuity led to the fixing of small triangular honed flakes into curved bones or sticks to form rudimentary sickles.

Chalk in southern England is in three layers, the LOWER CHALK being the mixture of clay and granular chalk through which the Channel Tunnel is bored, the MIDDLE CHALK with flint sparsely distributed and the UPPER CHALK with flint in abundance. The North Downs are the UPPER CHALK, 120 to 150 metres thick. The South Downs, surfacing in East Sussex and continuing for many miles westward, are

MIDDLE CHALK. Underlying the mass of the Upper Chalk Western Heights in Dover, the Middle Chalk is evident in the cliff face for a metre or so above the modern sea level in an arc from Snargate Street to Lydden Spout.

A further probable reason for the attraction the North and South Downs - more particularly the latter - held for later Neo-lithic man was that the soil was tractable and friable and, compared with the soil in the valleys, could be much more easily worked. The land they settled on was, in fact, a light chalky soil and though being very primitive agriculturalists using very basic and unsophisticated tools, they were competent to work a soil that could be managed with their limited equipment. In fact they did very little more than scratch the surface, but they sowed and harvested the seeds of edible grasses, the ancestors of our wheat, rye and barley, and they were content. On the North Downs, and in the Weald settlement was along, or parallel with, the river gaps, the Darent, the Medway, the Stour and, at Dover, the Dour, as has been very recently proven. In what is now East Kent the regions of greatest population were on the slopes of the sheltered valley of the Dour, a strip of land close under the Downs at Folkestone, and on the Isle of Thanet. In all these places flint could readily be found - in some it was mined, using antlers as picks - and it formed the basis of a country-wide trade along the trackways. Though mainly with the West Country, the interchange was with any area where flint was not naturally abundant. Thus a friable soil, high on the hills, where a settlement could easily be defended, water in the valleys and flint in the base chalk, anchored the Neolithic nomads and brought about a fundamental change in their pattern of life.

The discovery of tin and copper was made whilst Britain was still joined to the Continent; separately, one was too soft and the other too brittle for really useful purposes, but when a way was found to fuse them together the Bronze Age dawned,

with its considerably improved tools and equipment, and, as a corollary, a greatly enhanced standard of living.

Over the millenia the wind and waves widened the Channel and the coastline of East and South-East Kent took on a form not substantially different from that of the present day. The estuarine harbours at Rye, New Romney and Hythe, on a coastline much further inland than that of the present day are, however, exceptions to this generalisation. Until about 1000 years ago the estuaries were far larger than now; Rye has been reduced to its present comparative insignificance and New Romney and Hythe to redundancy by the eastward drift of sand and shingle along the shore, a drift that with a little help from the Romans, who constructed the Rhee Wall, and the detritus deposited by the River Rother in its original course, succeeded in creating a new extended coastline for South-East Kent and East Sussex and possibly assisted in the seaward growth of Romney Marsh. At Dover the bastion of the chalk cliffs protected the coastline and the original harbour in the valley. Much later that harbour, as a result of man's intervention, did silt up and all areas seaward of the cliff face and southwestward of Boundary Groyne have been formed as a result of man's intervention and not by the natural forces that were concerned with the changes at most other places.

¹ It is convenient to use the names "England", "France", "Flanders" etc. to define areas that otherwise would be difficult to describe.

² The Pent Stream at Folkestone is piped under Tontine Street to the sea.

³ Quotations in this paragraph are from Graham Clarke and Stuart Piggot, *Prehistoric Societies*, London, 1965

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