

Chapter Six

ROMAN PORTCHESTER

VANISHED LANDING PLACES

The actual landing sites of the early invaders no longer exist. They are submerged, some of them hundreds of yards off the present shoreline. It was on the promontory of Portchester that the massive earthen fosse and vallum of *Caer Peris* were built, and it is within the periphery of these that we find the Roman citadel of *Portus Adurni*.

A glance at the six-inch survey map of the district shows the curvatures of the embankments of the British camp extending eastwards into Horsea channel, and assuming the former existence of the marshland in that direction, it is possible that the vallum enclosed a more or less circular site. But such speculations are futile, since all traces of the earthworks on the eastern front have been washed away by the tide. It would be interesting, were it not beyond the scope of our present purpose, to trace other evidences of fluctuations of level around the harbour. The three raised beaches on the Portsdown between the hundred-foot contour and present high-water mark, point to a period not so very remote, when Portsdown Hill was an island, and the whole coastal plain was beneath the sea. The submerged forests round the Harbour tell of a period when the harbour was a well-wooded river valley. These facts, which have been referred to in previous chapters make obvious the truth of the geological axiom that "The earth is never at rest."

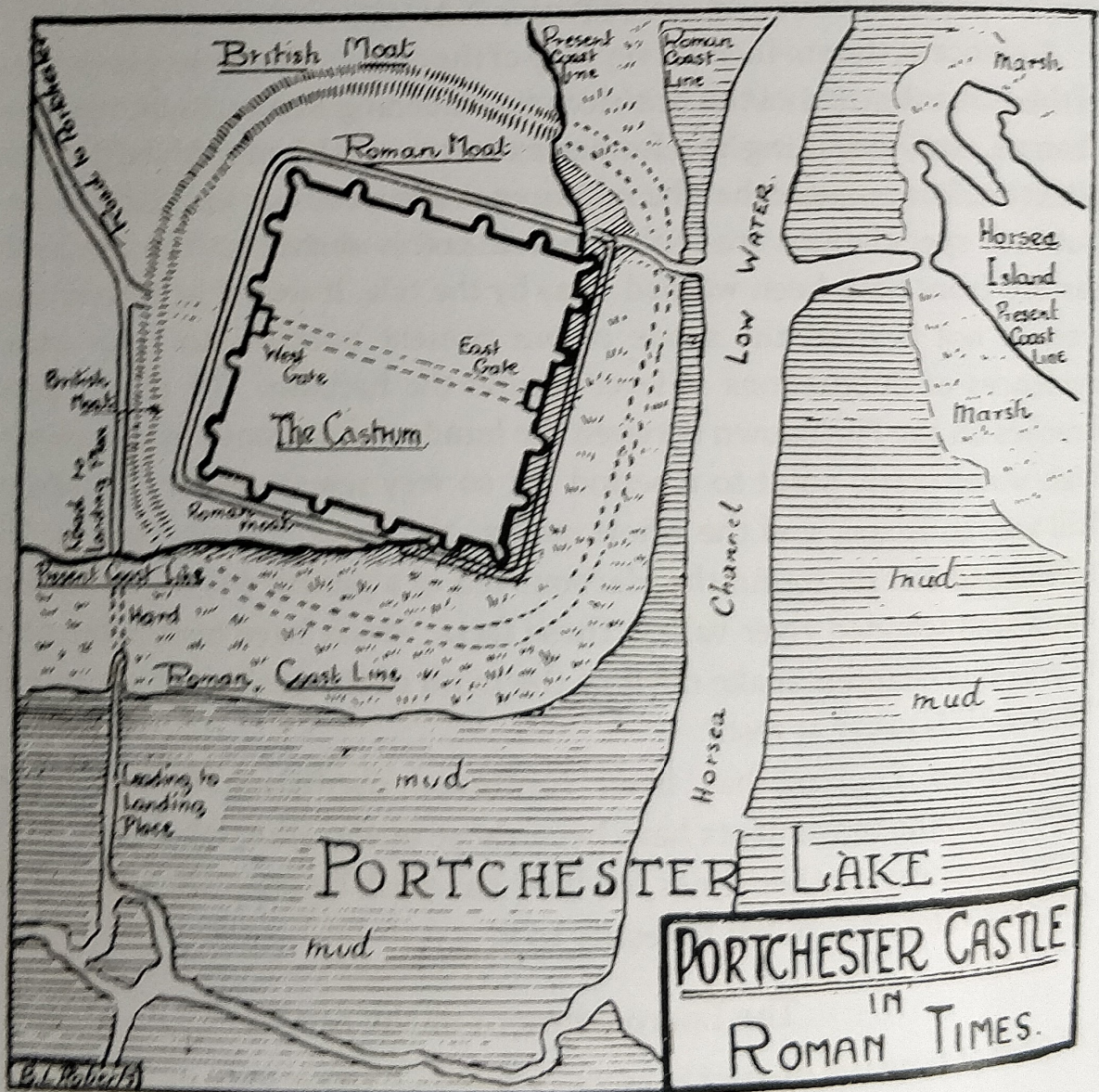
Southern England has been continued oscillation for ages past. Sometimes the movements have been those of elevation, as shown by the raised beaches; at other times the land has sunk beneath the sea, and the submerged forests are left to testify to it.

The Encroachment of the Sea

At present time the district is more or less in a static state of equilibrium,

with a tendency to repeat the downward movement. The rate of depression is so slow that it is not perceptible to a generation, but when regarded over a long term of years, such as that which has intervened between the Roman or Norman invasions and the present time, the effects are so considerable that they must be taken into account in appreciations dealing with the historical events of the period. There are prints and etchings, published about two hundred years ago, showing the eastern base of the Roman citadel protected by a wide bank of earth, where now we find a depth of from two to three feet of water at high tide. The whole of this bank has now been washed away.

The Roman walled citadel stands on slightly rising ground on the verge of the promontory. Following the usual Roman practice, a limited area of the old British camp was selected, and engirdled with a fosse and vallum. For the rest, probably a strong wooden palisade along the crest of the fosse



behind the only moat may have been deemed sufficient protection for the troops and stores within the camp during the earlier stages of the Roman occupation. This is a natural assumption, since the walled embattled citadel was not built for several centuries after the invasion by Aulus Plautius in 43 A.D., and some works would have been necessary for the protection of the outpost troops.

Gildas, monk and chronicler, writing between the years 540 and 547, says that the forts of the Saxon shore were built in the final stages of the Roman occupation, that is, as he suggests, about 440. But he may have meant that they were repaired about this period, as it is obvious that they were in existence long before the Romans departed from Britain.

Who Walled the Citadel?

Everybody is agreed that Portchester is a genuine relic of Roman Britain. There is not a great deal to be said of its history because there are few contemporary records, but, such as they are, they are of great interest.

It is possible that the walling of the citadel may have been commenced by the usurper Carausius to protect the port from the persistent attacks of the Frisian pirates. Many of his coins have been found in the neighbourhood. It is more probable that the walled camp was one of the links in the chain of the coastal defences forged by Constantius, the father of Constantine the Great, who organized in A.D. 296 a system of defence forts from Brancaster, in Norfolk, to Portchester, in Hampshire, and that it was subsequently strengthened in the latter part of the 4th century, when Theodosius came to the aid of London in resisting the attacks of the Saxons, English and Franks.

There were nine of these *castellae*, or fortresses, namely Brancaster and Burgh, in Norfolk; Bradwell, in Essex; Reculver, Richborough, and Dover, in Kent; Lympe and Pevensey, in Sussex, and Portchester in Hampshire. It is supposed that some of them were old forts refurbished and strengthened; and that others were new constructions. The Kentish forts probably had their origin about the time of the earlier Roman invasions. Burgh Castle, Pevensey, and Portchester were probably the new additions. All had much in common. Each fort occupied an area of from seven and a half to ten acres; the style of planning varied little; and the situation at or near the head of an estuary or bay shows that it served as a strategical base for denying to an enemy access to the hinterland. Primarily these coastal

forts were intended for the defence of those parts of England which were open to attack from the Continent, and particularly by the Saxons; and for that reason they were known to the Romans as "The Forts of the Saxon Shore."

The purpose of building the forts was to give protection to a country which was one of the richest of the Roman colonies. Euminius, writing in 296, alludes with obvious admiration to "the wealth and prosperity, its teaming cornlands, its immense livestock, its busy seaports, rich mines and large revenues." The Constantian period was the Golden Age of Roman Britain; and particularly of the south and south-east, where the Romano-British towns and villas predominated. The forts formed a unique coastguard system, which protected an area having a seaboard of 380 miles. The system served the purpose of Constantius well enough, for Britain enjoyed unexampled peace and prosperity during his reign, and formed no mean part of the Empire of Imperial Rome.

Garrisoning of the Forts

We would like to know more about these forts, but, unfortunately, contemporary records do not give much information. Many of them were probably garrisoned with legionaries from Gaul, Germany, Spain, Italy and Dalmatia; but Portchester seems to have been the head-quarters of a *Prepositus numerii exploratum* (a commander of a detachment of scouts), and may therefore have had some connexion with the organization of the British Fleet. We learn this much from the *Notitia Imperii* of Pencriollus, a Roman official publication of A.D. 428. But it is tantalizingly brief about its references, and gives no information about the positions of any of the forts. It refers to the ninth and most westerly fort on the Saxon Shore at Portus Adurni, and for this reason some historians suggest that Portus Adurni was situated not in Hampshire, but somewhere in the vicinity of River Adur, in Sussex. If there were Roman remains at Bramber or elsewhere in the neighbourhood, the suggestion might be worth considering. Moreover, the name Adur is quite a modern invention for the river. Another site which finds favour for the ninth fort is Southampton Water; but here too there is little to support the contention, excepting the walled town of Clausentum (Bitterne), where coins have been found dating from the time of Claudius to that of Honorius, and representing nearly the whole period of the Roman occupation of Britain. Clausentum covered an area









