

## A WALK ACROSS THE THAMES - SCRIPT

### PICTURE 1 – INTRODUCTION “A WALK ACROSS THE THAMES”



A walk across the Thames is something hard to imagine until one starts to look back two millennia.

Looking at the river today, some would find it difficult to imagine a crossing but nevertheless between East Tilbury or Linford to Cliffe in Kent is a well-documented route.

Cliffe is believed to be one of the oldest settlements on the Hoo Peninsula, with evidence of habitation from the Mesolithic period (20,000 to 5,000BC).

Archaeological evidence verifies the importance of the area especially during both the Romano-British and the better documented Anglo-Saxon periods.

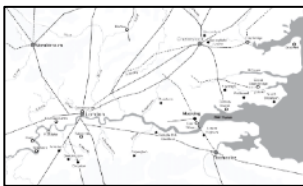
### Picture 02– The Chalk cliffs which gave its name to modern day Cliffe.



It was downstream from the chalk cliff that the River Thames dramatically widens, so the location of the crossing point can be easily established.

Even today it is easy to visualise the ‘lake’ reported by Cassius and by referring to the geology, historical and archaeological evidence, where the crossing may have been.

### Picture 03 – Mucking in Essex



This sketch Map of the Lower Thames basin shows relief, rivers, Roman roads and selected Early Saxon sites.

When the overlying soil had been removed on the Mucking escarpment, the surface of the gravel revealed marks attributable to features of human settlement ranging in time from Neolithic (6500BC – 4500BC) to Anglo-Saxon.

Mucking was an extensive Anglo-Saxon settlement for well over a millennium, commanding an important strategic position. It functioned as a meeting place and market for surrounding areas on both sides of the Thames".

The original age of the crossing is uncertain but extends beyond the Bronze Age, that is approximately from 3300BC to 1200BC and evidenced by the number of artifacts found on either side showing trading between Essex and Kentish tribes.

Also, on the Essex side, the approach to the crossing is even more obvious. From the top of the escarpment at Linford, in the parish of Mucking, where a southbound traveller would get his first view of the Thames.

A single road runs straight down and along a slight ridge to East Tilbury, where a small medieval church perches on a narrow outcrop of the Chalk. Here no marshes separate it from the waterway, which sweeps around Coalhouse Point and into the Lower Hope.

#### **Picture 04 – Aulus Plautius.**



One of the first written records of a crossing point is by the Roman, Dion Cassius, describing the progress of Plautius, the Roman General under Emperor Claudius, in the year AD43.

*“From there the Britons withdrew to the Thames at a point where it flows into the sea and at high tide forms a lake. This they crossed with ease since they knew precisely where the ground was firm and passable. The Romans, however, in pursuing them got into difficulties.”*

These crossing points or fords were exploited by the Romans who, in turn, established a causeway and ships could not navigate beyond this point towards London.

During this period, the River Thames was about fifteen feet lower than today, and what we call the marshes were well and truly dry land and continued to be so until the tide surges of the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries and after sea levels rose, a ferry system replaced the ford.

#### **Picture 05 – Cliffe Fort built in the 1860's.**



Cliffe Fort was built was carefully chosen as it stands where the Thames Estuary suddenly narrows and on a bend in the river making the site ideal to hamper and deny enemy shipping access to London.

Together, with other river defences at Shornmead Fort and Coalhouse Fort, formed an outer line of defence with Gravesend and Tilbury Forts, a little further upstream, forming an inner defence line.

#### **Picture 06 – An Ordnance Survey map of 1897.**



The crossing points and Port also gave Cliffe importance during the Saxon period as it stood at the centre of four great Kingdoms: Kent, Mercia, Anglia and Wessex and it was at Cliffe that the great Saxon

councils were held between 700AD to 800AD.

This Ferry was, during the twelfth century, recorded and maintained and fees collected by the Priory at Higham and in 1293AD, the Prioress was found liable for maintenance of a bridge and causeway leading to the ferry.

### **Picture 07 – The Jetties at Cliffe Causeway.**



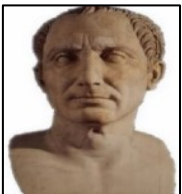
This map indicates Jetties were also installed but details as to the extent and dates are not known.

The probability of a ford or passage in the time of the romans, is strengthened by the visible remains of a raised causeway or road nearly thirty feet wide leading from the Thames, through the marshes by Lower Higham to Shorne Ridgeway which adjoins the Roman Watling Street Road.

This raised causeway's height would enable it to be used all year round and still shows wagon ruts to this day.

The last reference to a crossing point still in use, is during the middle of the sixteenth century although in 1293AD it had been recorded that the causeway from which the Higham Ferry crossed the river to Essex, was totally destroyed in a storm.

### **Picture 08 - CASSIVELLAUNUS (Died 48BC)**



Before the Romans, he had been engaged in conflict against the other Celtic British tribes, and had defeated the king of the Trinovantes, who occupied Essex.

Being that the river is fordable, he found large enemy forces drawn up on the opposite bank. The bank was also fenced by sharp stakes fixed along the edge, and he was told by prisoners and deserters that similar ones were concealed in the riverbed.

He sent the cavalry across first and then ordered the infantry to follow. But the infantry went through with such speed and impetuosity, although they had only their heads above water, that they attacked at the same moment as the cavalry. The enemy was overpowered and fled.

After Caesar had crossed the Thames, Cassivellaunus gave up all hope of defeating him in a pitched battle and adopted what we now describe as guerrilla tactics.

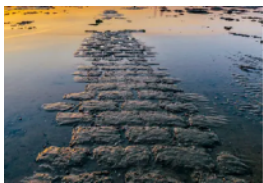
This encouraged the Trinovantes and their envoys promised to surrender and obey Caesar who demanded hostages and grain for his troops.

The Roman Road towards Tilbury attests to the importance of this area. On the Essex side, the road appears to be a north-south route which passes through the Laindon area towards Billericay and Chelmsford.

This of course makes sense to include the Wat Tyler or Peasants Revolt in 1381 when starting from Maidstone, noting peasants crossing at Blackheath, to come back to Fobbing where the Essex revolt was centered?

**No**, some Kentish peasants undoubtedly crossed this Higham/Cliffe to East Tilbury route. And it is much documented that Thomas Baker was the leader based at Fobbing with probably Walter (Wat) Tyler being from Kent.

**Picture 09 – Causeway stones between Hoo and the Isle of Grains.**



The Roman built causeway obviously built to last and an example to modern day road transport designs that do not require pot-hole repairs.

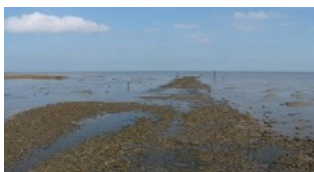
**Picture 10 – The Torpedo slipway and the Brennan Torpedo.**



To reaffirm the importance of this area, as shown on the Ordnance Survey map the Fort had a slipway for trials and potential use of the Brennan Torpedo for launch from a land-based station.

The Brennan torpedo was invented by Louis Brennan in 1877. Two propellers were rapidly spun by wires wound up inside the torpedo being released. Once launched from a land station, the weapon could potentially hit a target 1,800 metres away, travelling up to 31mph.

**Picture 11 – The causeway from the Foreshore at Wakering.**



The 'Broomway', also formerly called the "Broom Road", over the foreshore at Maplin Sands between Wakering to Foulness. When the tide is out.

Indeed, this was the only access to Foulness on foot, and the only access at low tide, until a road bridge was built over Havengore Creek in 1922



A pre-1922 picture crossing the Broomway by Wagon. Some four hundred 'Brooms' mark the route.

At over 600 years old, recorded as early as 1419, the Broomway runs for 6 miles (9.7 km) along the Maplin Sands, some 440 yards (400 m) from the present shoreline.

It was named for the "brooms", bundles of twigs attached to short poles, with which the route was once marked. A number of headways ran from the track to the shore, giving access to local farms.

**Picture 12 – Warning Beacons at the forts.**



King Richard II, in his 1st year of 1377AD, directed the sheriffs of Kent and Essex, to erect beacons on each side of the river Thames, opposite to each other, that by the firing of them, notice might be given of any

sudden attempt of the enemy to invade.

With the land around Cliffe and Tilbury subjected to the constant danger of flooding, the raising of the sea level enabled the Thames to be navigable further upstream and the consequence of Henry VIII's moves to reduce the influence of the church and other factors, the crossing and Ports became obsolete.

**PICTURE 13– The proposed Lower Thames Crossing.**



This is one of the option locations which if ever built, would make it the longest road tunnel in the UK.

**PICTURE 14 – QUESTIONS. End.**

Compiled by Norman Bambridge Basildon Borough Heritage Society August 2024