THE RIVER OF LONDON by HILAIRE BELLOC

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THE RIVER OF LONDON

ST. PAUL'S FROM BLACKFRIARS

THE RIVER OF LONDON

BY HILAIRE BELLOC

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LONDON & EDINBURGH

Published
December 1912

Printed by Morrison & Gibb Limited, *Edinburgh*

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JOHN MUIRHEAD, R.B.A., R.S.W.

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INTRODUCTION

THE RIVER OF LONDON

INTRODUCTION

THROUGH THE FLATS THAT BOUND the North Sea and shelve into it imperceptibly, merging at last with the shallow flood, and re-emerging in distant sandbanks and less conspicuous shoals, run facing each other two waterways far inland, which are funnels and entries, as it were, scoured by the tide.

Each has at the end of the tideway a narrow, placid, inland stream, from whence the broader, noisier sea part also takes its name. Each has been and will always be famous in the arms and in the commerce of Europe. Each forms a sort of long great street of ships crowded in a traffic to and fro. For each has its great port. The one Antwerp, the other London. The Scheldt is the name of the first, which leads to Antwerp, and makes the opportunity for that great market of the world. But the second is the River of London, much older in its destinies, and probably more destined to endure in its functions of commerce.

I know not how to convey that picture in

the mind, which the eyes do not see, and yet by which a man is haunted if he has read enough of books and seen the maps, when he comes up through the Narrows of Dover Straits from the wide, empty seas three days behind and knows that there lies before his owner a choice between the eastern and the western gate. That choice is in the case of every ship determined long before. She has the dull duty to do of turning to the right or to the left, and her orders bind her to the river of the Netherlands or of England as it may be. But if you will consider many centuries and the changing adventures of business you will still—as you pass northward between the two shores of Flanders and of Britain, and as you see their recession upon either side of the northern way which opens before you—understand that doubt upon the future and the rivalry of the two rivers which is soon to be so deeply impressed upon the politics of our time.

I could think of the Scheldt and of the Thames as two antagonists facing each

other before conflict across a marked arena, which is that of the shallow, tumbling, and yellow water of the North Sea; or as two forces pitted one against the other, streams each of which would force the other back if it could find the strength; or as two Courts in a perpetual jealousy one of the other, intriguing and making and losing point after point in a game of polity.

When the statisticians have done their talk—and very brainless it is—of resources and of metals, two opposing *lives* are left standing behind either of the great towns, and either of the great sea rivers. The one is the experiment of the modern Germanies; the other is the founded tradition of England; and the more closely a man considers each of these the greater contrast does he discover between the causes of either's energy of come and go.

A third great tidal river is also concerned with these seas, also helps to determine their commerce, also supports its great inland town. That river is the Seine, and I shall, in

the pages which follow, use the Seine also for the example it affords in the analogies and contrasts and parallels which I propose to draw. But it is the Scheldt and the Thames which still remain the greater opponents. The united political life of Gaul, which was inherited and transformed by the French Monarchy, forbade the growth of a great commerce to the north. Paris became not only the political centre of France but its main market as well, and to-day the water carriage of Paris—that is, the traffic of its port—is greater than that of any maritime town in the country. Only if Normandy had developed as an independent state would Rouen have become what Antwerp and London have become. Rouen would then have been, without doubt, the point of transhipment between the inland and the maritime waterways, and the distance of the town from coal would hardly have affected it more than does the distance of London. Its situation as a political junction would have determined its greatness. As it is the Lower Seine may be

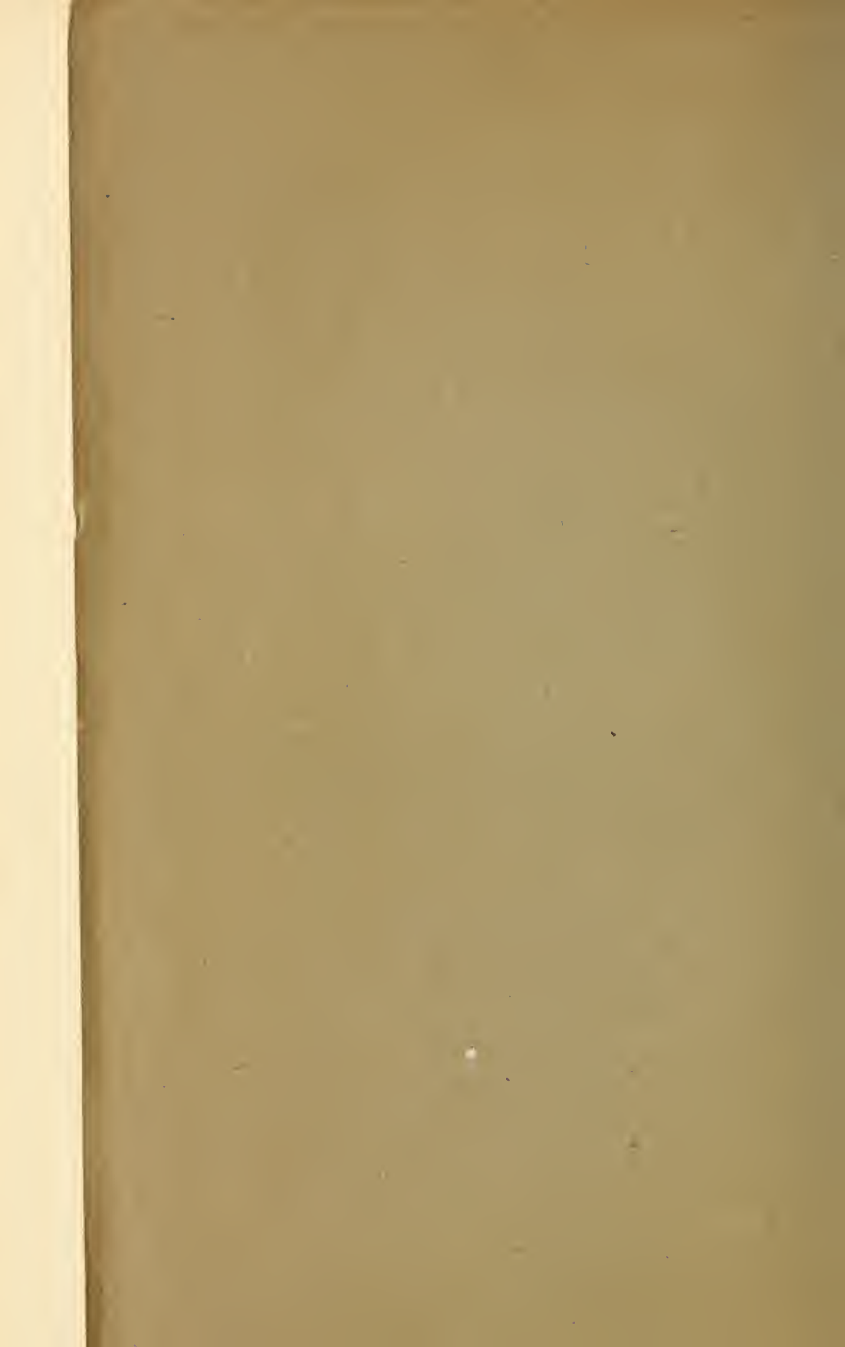
set beside the Scheldt and the Thames for an illustration in their topography and in the origins of their human settlements, but it does not afford a true commercial parallel to-day, and Rouen is no third rival to the two great ports which are before our eyes and in this generation struggling for primacy.

It is the custom of sailors to speak of that water by which they approach a great town under the name of the town. Men coming up from Yarmouth Roads inland do not speak of the Yare, but of Norwich River. For, to the sailor the river is but a continuation of, or an access to, his port, and the Lower Thames is thus universally known from the sea as London River. The term is an accidental one, but it contains the true history of the connection between the stream and the town. The Thames made London. London is a function of the Thames, and it is in such a connection that I propose to regard it in this essay : London as the great crossing place of the Thames, and as the cus-

todian and fruit of what early may have been the chief ferry, but has for nearly two thousand years been the chief bridge; London as the market of which the Thames is the approach and the port; London as a habitation of which the great street is the Thames, a street for centuries the main highway of its people, lost for a time and now recovering its ancient use; London as the civil and religious head of revenues which were drawn from the Thames Valley; and London as the determinant, through its position upon the Thames, of English military history.

This intimate connection between the city and the river we all instinctively feel, and the two are connected together as no other waterway with its capital can be connected throughout Europe. For the Thames is all that every other river is to every other capital, wherever some great stream is connected with a chief city. But whereas in every other case it is but one or another of the functions of such a stream that history can remark, in the case of London it can remark them all.

ERITH



Little sea-borne traffic reaches Paris by the Seine; the Tiber could never be a street for Rome; Vienna neglects the Danube; Antwerp protects no great crossing, nor has ever been the nucleus of a State; Rouen—the nearest parallel—was not the strategical pivot of Normandy, nor ever formed, as London forms, a chief fraction in the economic power of its province. The two rivers which are sacred to Lyons never fed that town; the Rhone watered but did not lead to Arles. The towns of Lombardy depend upon the fertility of the Po Valley, but the stream is nothing to their commerce or to their political eminence, and Milan, and Venice, and Turin are independent of it. Saragossa was the mistress of Arragon, but the Ebro did not make Saragossa, and as for Madrid, the trickle which runs below Madrid is best described in the story of the Spanish patriot who was dying of thirst after battle, but upon being offered a cup of water, said, "Give it to the poor Manzanares." Lisbon and Cadiz are maritime, not fluvial, and look where you will throughout the civilisation of

Europe you will not find, save in the case of London, this complete interdependence between a great town and its river.

In tracing or establishing this intimate bond between London and the Thames one must guard against an error which the modern reader rightly suspects and is justly ready to criticise or to deny when it appears in any piece of historical writing. That error is the error of materialism.

A generation ago it was universal, and there was no phenomenon in the story of England or of Europe from the emplacement of a city to the growth of the Church which was not traced to inanimate causes superior to, and independent of, any action of the Will. This philosophy narrowed, distorted, and dried up every department of knowledge, and while the area of learning increased with a rapidity hitherto unknown, the spirit inhabiting that conquest was starved. It was as though the time could not contain at once

the energy to discover and the energy to know, and as though the covering of so vast a field in so short a period was achieved inevitably at a cost of profundity. That a bias towards the mechanical and the necessary should be present in the physical sciences—in chemistry for instance—is to be expected, that it should have invaded biology was less excusable, but that it should have been permitted to affect (as it did) the business native to man—his building, his institutions, his very dreams—was an excessive blunder, and the spirit of all the younger men to-day is running if anything too strongly in reaction against that ebb-tide of the soul. They reject the dogmas of their fathers which would bend everything man has done to material circumstance, which would talk of man as the slave rather than the master of his instruments, and which, in an argument absurdly circular, "interpreted history in the terms of Economics":—and they are right.

Even in the sphere of topography, where

the physical limitations of human action are the main subject of the writer, they expect a full admission of the soul of man and even —which is very wise—some recognition of that mysterious genius which inhabits every place and is perhaps its vital part.

They are right. No one can see the marriage between London and its river without wondering in what degree things other than ponderable and measurable things may enter into the habitation of man. There is nothing man does, of course, which has not in it the soul. But it may be also true that there is nothing done to man wherein some soul is not also. Now the homes of man and the air and the water and the wind and the earth, against which in part and with which in part those homes arise, are so woven in with his fate—which is a spiritual fate—that we must properly lend to these insensate things some controlling motive; and we may rightly say, though only by the use of metaphor, that all these things have a spirit within them. I cannot get away

from it that the Thames may be alive, and London most certainly is.

But all these things, though one may put them in the form of statements, are really questions ; and questions to which no sort of answer has yet been discovered.

II

THE APPROACH UP RIVER

THE APPROACH UP RIVER

THERE IS PERHAPS NO JOURNEY in the world in which the past and what now is and the links between them stand out more clearly stratified than a journey up the Thames upon the tide from the Sea-reach to the Pool.

I will describe it; for it is upon a physical experience of this kind (I mean the seeing of history through the eye to the north and to the south of the narrowing river and the feel of the stream under one) that any historical essay upon the River of London must be built.

I have heard it said that the experience is a common one, seeing that so many thousand men of the articulate, travelled, and experienced class (who can relate their experience to some purpose) have entered London by river. Any one (I am told) who comes in from the East or from Holland to the docks will know what I mean. But I do not think this is so. I do not think that the thing seen rapidly from the decks of a liner, perhaps cut short at Tilbury, perhaps missed

because the voyage is at night, is quite what I intend to emphasise. Nor am I certain that the proportion of those fifty miles is accurately seized when they are experienced from the height of some great steamer whence the strength and nature of the stream, its ebb and flow, its local life, are missed.

It is so with all other great ports. The myriads that come in nowadays to England by the Mersey have no opportunity for judging the estuary, the meaning of the opposing shores, nor that character of south Lancashire which lies before their eyes in the mist and is so singular a factor in the make-up of England.

I think that to know the River of London the journey must be made from the sea upwards, in something not larger than a barge, in a motor boat, or in a fishing vessel, or little half-rater, and taken upon one tide with an easterly wind, as all the men of the past took it, making the great port upstream under the weather they had chosen. In this way, with little freeboard between one's feet

and the changing level of the broad water, and with not too rapid a passage of the stations upon either bank, and with some true measure wherewith to gauge in detail what one sees, one can understand the river. It was in a progress such as this that the painters came to understand the Lower Thames, and nothing has nourished a more national art than this valley, though its interpreters have been rare.

You see five successive stages clearly marked in such a voyage.

You see, in the first place, that everything up to the very gates of London must have been, at the beginning of our history, as desolate as any province in Europe. The rare places at which high and firm land comes down to the modern stream are, as it were, isolated, and live a life upon the defensive. Nowhere (as we shall see when we come to examine London as a crossing place) does some good habitable site stretch down to either opposing bank. There is no natural gateway upon the Lower Thames; no twin

villages defending a gap; nor the projection from the north as from the south of tongues of high land or even good arable land, the proximity of which, one to the other upon either shore, would give humanity to the river. All the miles of it are desolate marshes, either to the one side or to the other, most commonly upon both, and the few spots where an exceptional formation has given firm building ground and fertile fields as well close to the river have something about them exceptional and, as it were, beleaguered. It is a gross and an unhistorical exaggeration to say (as many of our academic people are saying) that all that valley was a flooded lagoon until historic times. It was not that. But it was a long succession of very wide, watery marshes, with knolls of slightly higher land standing up therein. Consider, for instance, the view to the northward, from the height just above and east of Dartford. There you have two good miles of what was marsh and still is largely marsh to the main stream, and be-

yond, upon the farther shore, another three or four miles of the same flats, with odd, exceptional rises at Rainham, at Aveney, or upon the edge of the flat of Upminster. It is the same from the Abbey Wood, east of Woolwich. Plumstead Marshes and Barking Level made one morass, four miles wide at least, or nearer five, drowned twice a day into a great level sheet of water, until some civilisation came to dyke up the tidal stream and confine it to the central bed, which it had scoured in its windings through such a desolation. Now of all that primitive effect of waste, abandoned places very much remains in such a journey as I have suggested. It is true that a wall of earth everywhere controls the flood to-day, and that the traveller in his boat does not see, as he would have seen two thousand years ago, the glint of water to the north and south at high tide over tufted grass and drowned banks of mud for miles upon either side of his going. But he still sees in so many places as to make them the chief note of the lower reaches, at least,

great Flats without a soul upon them, unbroken by tree or house or hedge, and plainly saved by artifice alone from flooding. This run up the Lower Thames is, save for the exceptional approach of high land in one place or another (as at Gravesend or Erith) like a sail through the Fenland, and this character of desertion, silence, and morass, the oldest foundation of all, is still quite plainly the background of what one sees and remembers when one comes up the River of London to London from the sea.

So much, then, for the first layer.

The second should by right be Roman: but nothing Roman remains; no, nor anything of the Dark Ages. Unless we believe what is probable enough, but not proved in any way, that the great containing walls of earth (notably that round the Isle of Dogs) were Roman work, we can distinguish nothing in such a journey to mark the first thousand years of Christendom. Far out beyond the Sea-reach, Reculvers was a Roman station in the estuary, but the ways

have eaten it away. No great monastic nucleus of the Dark Ages could be founded in that inhospitable land. There was no palace of the kings standing near the central stream until the neighbourhood of London was approached. There was not even a fortress. Indeed it is odd to think how empty all that approach from the sea to the greatest of the western Roman towns was and remained. It was not until the Middle Ages began to flower that the Lower Thames put forth any human signs—at least of such a sort as have come down to us. The remains of them are very few, but they are distinctive.

Of all that life of the Middle Ages which the English countrysides preserve in so many visible relics—and especially in a host of parish churches surpassing all of the kind in Europe—the Lower Thames has but one clear instance remaining to the eye; and that is the little isolated church of St. Clement's. Rainham is too far from the water, the legends and associations surrounding

the well of St. Chad are also too distant to count in the picture. The endowed foundations of religion either stood remote from the river-bank or have disappeared. London, but for the Great Fire, would have supplied in this the emptiness of the lower river.

But for that capital accident in the history of the city, which renders London so different in outward aspect from all other great European towns, the Middle Ages would still break upon one in a sheaf of spires showing over the flats from Woolwich Reach, at least, and perhaps from farther down the stream. But that accident—the Great Fire of the seventeenth century—has left London stripped of the Gothic and, alone of the great capitals of Europe, no impress of our four hundred years of Gothic remains with the traveller as he comes upstream. When we consider the two parallels to London upon the Continent—the parallels I have chosen as ports upon the two great tidal rivers of the north-west—Antwerp and Rouen, the loss will be apparent.

For miles and miles over the flats of the Scheldt the sailor making for Antwerp sees the high steeple upon his horizon fixed against the sky, and, late as was its building, this watch-tower of Antwerp is of the true Middle Ages ; Europe was still Europe and one when its last stone was laid.

Still more does the sailor making for Rouen have the Middle Ages before him as he rounds the Ferry Reach and comes up northward into the sweep of the river before the town. In spite of the extraordinary and meaningless gate which the new travelling bridge makes for the city, its cathedral still dominates the whole view ; surrounding it, the high pitch of St. Vincent, the belfry of St. Maclou, the rebuilt towers of St. Ouen, give their character to all the smoky basin of houses between the Seine and the hills.

A far more splendid sight was the Gothic group of London as one came upon it up river before the Great Fire. A score of spires stood in varying height and perspective before the master spire of the cathedral.

Old St. Paul's upon its hill carried the loftiest cross in Christendom—far higher in the air than Strasburg; and old St. Paul's had been built, as had nearly every great monument of the Middle Ages, with a special eye to the landscape whence it should be seen and which, in a sense, it should control. The huge and somewhat ill-proportioned pyramid of St. Dunstan's by the very excess of its bulk made a landmark which is the first thing to strike us when we look at a sketch of the river made at any time before 1665. We are fortunate, moreover, in our retention of such memorials. No other northern town, I think, possesses a complete panorama of its appearance in the first half of the sixteenth century such as London possesses in the great work of Wyngaerde in the Bodleian. And though the seventeenth century, with its triumph of engraving, produced a great number of such documents throughout Europe, Visscher's drawing is unique in its importance, while we have at the end of the series Hollar's care-

ful delineation of the square mile of ruins after the Great Fire.

This is perhaps the most remarkable piece of pictorial evidence open to English history, and any one who will look at that long string of churches burnt out to shells, and of private houses reduced to a few feet of black and crumbling wall, will see what a revolution in the outward aspect of the river and of its port, and what a breach in the outward continuity of London the Great Fire means. The Conservative temper into which the English fell (with regard to their externals, at least), after the sixteenth century, would have preserved the architectural past of London (and that to our own day) much more perfectly than the past of any great city of the Continent has been preserved. It seems due to the national spirit that a view more ancient even than that of Rouen should greet the traveller coming in by Thames; but the accident of the Great Fire has forbidden it.

On the contrary, the note of the approach

to London nowadays from the Lower Thames is a note peculiarly and strongly modern. It is as though the abnormal expansion of our perilous Industrialism in the last hundred and fifty years had not only conquered but obliterated the eighteen centuries from which it suddenly arose. Here and there an odd survival left remaining of deliberate purpose serves but to emphasise the capture of the Lower Thames by that crazy mechanical giant so recently born and already so blind and old. You have the noble front of Greenwich, you have the charming little "mail" opposite, you have, most distinctive, perhaps, of all the survivals upon the river, the Fort of Tilbury. Save for these a huge and hardly national commerce, plainly suffering the domination of a few, has eaten up the scene of Thames-side and marks it more and more as one comes in through the outlying miles until one is relieved by older, dingier, and more gracious things near the heart of the whole business in the Pool.

It seems unjust to pass, with no more than a mention, that lovely little isolated relic at Tilbury. Here was for centuries the natural gate, the military defence of the port. When the range of ordnance was not much more than hailing distance, no defences could be thought of upon the broadening water of the Hope, still less in the funnel of the Sea-reach. But Tilbury, standing over against Gravesend, defended the first point at which the river had narrowed sufficiently to be commanded by batteries from the shore.

In the earliest map of this point (which is preserved in the Admiralty) one may trace the way in which the river was closed. There ran out from the northern bank, pointing somewhat downstream, a sort of barrier. We have no indication of its structure. A few piles would have been sufficient to prevent a passage and to canalise traffic into the open space that was left in the midst of the stream; for this space was not left free, as we might have supposed, just under the guns of the fort, but at a range which seems

upon the drawing to be about 250 yards. Whether a corresponding permanent work existed upon the Gravesend shore I am ignorant, but it was obviously easy to emplace guns there when they might be needed. Meanwhile Tilbury, with its continual preparation for arms and as continual innocence of them, with its one chief historic memory of the Armada, remains the most perfect relic of the past upon all the stretch of the river. The swamped land round about has defended it and isolated it, and that great regard for the old things of the nation which is a virtue to be proud of has saved it from decay.

For the rest, as I say, and with the exception of those rare survivals of which Tilbury is the most striking, modern industrialism, down to its last manifestations, has captured the Lower Thames and stands in a bleak contrast against the windy emptiness of the flats. Nowhere is one more oddly struck by this than opposite the great tanks which have been put up for the stor-

age of petrol—the last of our necessities. From Tilbury upwards, wherever there is available space or good ground, it is the haste, the necessity, and the carelessness of modern exchange directed for the immediate profit of men who perpetually change their methods of acquirement (and even their homes) that marks the river. It is a new sort of desolation, the obverse (and not a pleasant one) of that more natural desolation which Nature made by stretching out her marshes and lagoons upon either side of the tideway.

And I say "exchange," not production. Thames-side used to do many things, but in particular to tan leather and to build ships. The tanneries have nearly gone; the shipyards are in process of death. In the last journey which I made up the tide some months ago to see London once more from the river I passed what may be the last of the men-of-war built upon Thames-side. It lay completing upon the northern shore. It was the ship round which had turned the

discussion whether or no the Thames could still successfully build against the north, and if the official answer is to be that it cannot, then this decision will mark the end of the oldest trade of the river and that most native to its life. But we live in a time when most things are dying.

For all this lamentable cloak of purposeless industrialism, chaotic and already murmuring with the sounds of its own dissolution, the gradual envelopment of a man who comes up river, his reception by the hugeness of modern London is a thing which no one who has experienced it can forget.

Indeed, the utter ruin of order and of plan, which is but the outward manifestation of the ruin of religion, has destroyed the sense of approach everywhere around that great helpless, apathetic nation which we call London, save where it could not be wholly destroyed, and that is along the water which was its most ancient highway.

Come in from what direction you will, save by the Thames, and the approach to

RICHMOND BRIDGE

London is a waste of eyesight. No one has imagined for two hundred years such a thing as a gate or a limit. There is no kind of salutation offered or of barrier presented or of definition laid down. Draggle-tail financial experiments of no interest or purpose to those responsible for them, save abstract wealth, stand isolated in fields as often as not given up to weeds and rubbish, and new roads half made end everywhere in dust-heaps or in mud. Then for one mile after another you pass the thousands of little houses all shamelessly similar, for in none does a man intend to make his being, to possess his soul, or to live and die there. There is not even a city wall remaining from the past, nor so much as a broad outer street, delimiting what may still be noble and permanent from these hopeless suburbs. Little scraps of what were once happy and united villages still stand like islands in this flood of mean brick. For the most part they are to be distinguished no longer save by the narrowness and crookedness of their streets,

and when at last one comes to the inner part, where there is something of history and of meaning and of an inherited culture, one comes upon it without introduction and without grace. Of all cities that ever were, modern London least deserves a wall, gates, and a senate.

But the entry by the river cannot be wholly destroyed. The river is too strong. And therefore a man does here receive a physical impression almost worthy of the magnitude of the things he seeks. He does get some idea of London and some introduction to it. The houses and the places of change, and the great stores and the abrupt street-ends with their water steps, cluster in groups with narrower and narrower gaps between them, until at last they come up all together in rank and enclose one avenue of flood, banked everywhere by brick and crowded with the interlacing of vessels. It is a thing which, if a man could draw it properly, would make the best record of our time for the curiosity of those who are to

come after us. Accustomed as we are to an eternal noise drowning thought and human life wherever the haphazard and violent activity of our time is at work, there is an odd broken silence in this waterway of sails and chains and alarms, guarded and hemmed in by the leagues of houses. The mainspring of the moving road is silent, the power of that one thing in the view which is not made by man, the rushing upward of the water ; between all these new and artificial things the strength of the Thames survives with no more sound in its going than when it went through other silences before men found it.

III

LONDON THE FIRST CROSSING OF THE THAMES

THE FIRST CROSSING OF THE THAMES

IT IS A COMMONPLACE WHICH MUST be repeated whenever the connection of the Thames with London is referred to, that the capital matter in that connection is London's position as *the lowest crossing point upon the Thames.* That affirmation, standing alone, is of no use to history unless one also explains why it was so important to find a crossing place as low as possible down the river, and the many causes which combine to make that lowest crossing place the neighbourhood of London Bridge. These last especially require a full explanation because, of the many converging reasons for selecting that site, the chief were, until quite recently, imperfectly studied.

Why was it of such great importance for man, from the beginnings of a settled occupation in this island, to discover a convenient crossing place as low down as possible upon the course of the Thames ? And why, when once this crossing place had been established, would it become the principal meeting-place in the country ?

The answer to these questions is to be found, not only in the shape of the island, but in the position of its best soil and in its relation to the Continent.

It is obvious that the main connection between Great Britain and the Continent must be by the Straits of Dover. It is not only the shortness of the trajectory from the mainland to the island which makes the Straits of Dover the necessary and permanent entry into this country, it is a number of other things as well: as, that communication is very easy from the opposing shore inland; that that opposing shore was provided for ages with a harbour peculiarly suitable to early traffic—the Portus Itius (now the silted-up plain between the hills behind Boulogne); the conformation of the high land upon either side at Grinez and at Dover Cliffs which, in the centuries when the thing was important, gave an uninterrupted sight of land during the crossing; and the choice of entry which the various inlets (now filled up) afford from the Portus Le-

HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT FROM VAUXHALL

manis behind Folkstone, the old inlet at Dover, and the old Mouth of the Stour to what was once the sheltered channel between Thanet and the mainland behind the island of Richborough. So powerful has been the topographical effect of the Straits that no revolution in travel has dispossessed them of their original importance. The great expansion in our means of communication has only emphasised the bond which is established by the Straits between this island and the Continent of Europe, and so throughout the whole of the old world. When, a few years hence, a man sets out to travel by land to India or to China, he will cross from Dover and will take his train at Calais. Were communication inland as uninterrupted throughout this island as it is throughout the opposing portion of the Continent, a system of roads would naturally have established itself, radiating from some depôt common to the various ports of Kent, just as a system of roads grew up upon the Continent, radiating from Calais and from Boulogne,

and forming a network inland with such central points as Bavai, Amiens, Cassel, etc., to form pivots for the whole.

But communication within the island of Britain was not thus uninterrupted in all directions. One great obstacle lay across it from east to west, and that obstacle was the Thames. How complete an interruption the Thames formed, especially in its lower course, I will describe in a moment; it must suffice to notice here that for one who would reach all the fertile land of East Anglia and of what is now Hertfordshire, for one who would reach from the landing-place in Kent the wheat lands of what is now Essex, and the centres of population in what is now Norfolk (both of them originally capital sites of population before the growth of modern industry), the profound wedge driven into the land by the estuary of the Thames and its continuation in the tidal river formed an almost insurmountable obstacle. There was no straight line from say Canterbury to the Midlands and to the central east of the is-

land with its great mass of arable soil. More than this: if one looks at a map of England on which moorland and waste country is distinguished from the arable soil, it will be apparent that north of the Wash the latter takes the form of a long and somewhat narrow strip corresponding at first to the lower valley of the Trent and farther north again to the Vale of York. A direct line to this arable northern strip from any principal Kentish centre (and Canterbury was such) would take one across the Thames estuary and was therefore impossible. The farther up river a practicable crossing was found the longer the detour it involved. The only considerable population in Britain that was early accessible to a road-system proceeding directly from Kent was the population of what later came to be called Wessex, that is, the central southern districts of which Winchester was the capital. As a matter of fact we find a road of immemorial antiquity proceeding directly east and west from Canterbury to Winchester along the ridge of the Chalk, but a similar

road northward was blocked by the obstacle of the Thames. We shall see in a moment that the discovery of a good crossing place fairly low down in the course of the river not only saved a long detour by the upper valley for travel proceeding from the Straits of Dover to the eastern Midlands, and ultimately to the plain of York, but also afforded a fairly direct line in another direction which was essential to travel, namely, the direction of the north-west and the main ports which establish communication with Ireland.

We may take it, then, as established, that there existed from the earliest times a necessity, or a necessary tendency, to found and keep up a permanent crossing place at the lowest practicable point in the Thames valley.

Once that crossing was founded and continuously maintained it was equally necessary that it should grow into the chief meeting place of the island; that is, the chief market and therefore the chief town. Indeed the various advantages such a crossing

would have form so rare a combination that we should be perfectly justified, even if we had not the evidence we have, in making certain of the existence of a great and important London early in history.

All the causes which we have seen to feed the commercial growth of the site from the sea were reinforced by the inland communications which met at this crossing place. The bridge (as I have shown elsewhere) made a terminal not only to sea-borne traffic, but to all the inland traffic from down the upper valley. It became the place of transhipment. It was further the terminal, and the necessary terminal, of the three great roads from north-west, from the north, and from the east, which combined at this point to seek the Straits of Dover to the south; and once this nexus was woven, once the market and place of meeting was fixed, it must further become the goal of other roads against which the Thames did not originally provide an obstacle. Thus it was that a road would necessarily be established from this cross-

ing place to the west and to the south-west. Though the main traffic from the fertile Lower Severn valley would more naturally make for the Straits by way of the Chalk ridges, yet, when once London with its market supplies and depôts was established, a main road would necessarily aim at the Straits *through* London rather than south of the Thames. And though the secondary entries into the island from the Continent by Southampton Water, and by the ports to the west of it, would naturally send out arteries of communication northward and westward, yet their communication north-eastward through London would soon acquire the chief place. That London would have become what it did through no more than these domestic causes may well be denied. The main factor in its growth was throughout the centuries what it remains to-day—the commerce of the tidal Thames. But standing at the head of that commerce London also gathered to itself, as the main crossing point of the Thames, the communications of the whole island.

The peculiar and determining effect this had upon the military history of England I have mentioned in another study,* and shall expand in this. Parallel effects could be found in every other department of activity, not only in commerce but in the political machinery of England, of English feudalism, and of the English monarchy, and later of English aristocratic government. London once so formed upon its river was the centre or support of each in turn supreme in the island.

Having established this, let us consider why the crossing place came just here upon the line of the river, and to solve that problem we must recollect what it is that acts as a barrier to communication, especially in early times. This barrier is certainly not to be found in hills of such a gentle sort as diversify south England. The breadth of a stream, up to half a mile or so, and apart from broken water, though of considerable importance in the problem, is again not the

* *Warfare in England*, Williams & Norgate.

chief difficulty, for man has always been able to cross water if his approach to it was unimpeded. The true obstacle was marsh—bad going. It is still the chief impediment to modern engineering, and the difficulty which men found during earlier centuries in negotiating any considerable breadth of marsh translates itself to-day into the expense which a similar undertaking now involves. Belts of marsh impeding or actually forbidding travel across them have been formed upon one, the other, or both banks in so unbroken a chain down the Lower Thames valley as to make that valley the obstacle it was and is to transverse travel. The first factor in the formation of such marsh is the tide. If you have a considerable difference between high and low water, and if that difference is further complicated by great variations between the neap and the spring tides, the difficulty of the barrier of marsh affected by such a tide will be correspondingly increased.

This consideration is often missed, and it will therefore be worth while to explain it.

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A fairly regular height of tide covering daily the same expanse lends itself to the establishment of a regular crossing place, and though that crossing place may not be in continuous use from the difficulty of using it at low tide, it can be regularly counted upon to serve twice in the twenty-four hours. But if there is any very considerable difference in the state of the tides throughout each fortnight, then the opportunities for using the crossing are very much reduced, unless, indeed, one has a steep shore to deal with. Under such conditions one might find a spot where crossing was easy enough at the springs, and yet impossible at the neaps; and instead of a ferry regularly in use twice in the twenty-four hours, you would have one which could only be depended upon a few times in a month.

Now the Thames is a river in which this difference is considerable, and it has greatly strengthened the power of the waterway to act as an obstacle to travel from north to south.

This, then, is the first of the factors which have combined to make the Lower Thames the obstacle it was and is to travel. If we compare the Thames in this respect with the other great rivers which we have seen to be its parallels upon the Continent, we shall be struck by the greater effect of the tide in its waters.

The second factor in the establishment of such an obstacle is the type of soil over which the water works. It is evident that a tidal river and estuary in which sand and gravel or even chalk form the riparian soils will less produce marsh than clays will. A river which washes the silt of clays up and down with its tides will be defended by worse belts of bad land than one which runs through the other types of rock. Now in this respect also the Thames has a bad pre-eminence over its rivals. Chalk only comes near the stream once or twice, and for a very short distance, in its lower course, and though gravel and sand, as we shall see, approach

the banks in more than one place (and ultimately determine the site of London), this kind of soil is nowhere that which the mass of the stream churns up or carries down in its course. The Thamesdeals for many miles of its upper tidal waters with clays, bringing them down towards the mouth, and has settled them for centuries upon either side of its channel in the shape of deep alluvial marshes.

But there is more than this.

The third factor in the problem depends upon the contours of the land upon either side of the river. A river with steep banks, fairly narrow, bounded by hills, even though it be a highly varying tidal stream, and even though it scour through a great part of its tidal course a soil of clays, cannot form wide belts of marsh upon either bank.

It so happens that the Lower Thames—until the site of London is reached—nowhere enjoys even a short stretch of steep-on shore upon both banks at once. The few spots

where higher land comes down to the water's edge upon the southern or right bank are faced in every case by great level stretches opposite which, until modern works were undertaken, were regularly flooded with every return of the tide and were impassable; while the lower and smaller patches of land on the north bank (as at Purfleet or Grays) have marsh opposite them also to the south.

In this respect the Scheldt appears under primitive conditions even worse off than the Thames; but the Seine continually enjoys steep banks after the first twenty miles or so up from its estuary, and in at least half a dozen places from Caudebec (which roughly corresponds to Gravesend) and Rouen, the first bridge (which we have seen to correspond to London), there are opportunities for crossing the tidal Seine, even under primitive conditions, with no considerable obstacle of marsh upon either bank.

Now if we combine all this and consider the total effect of all three factors in the Lo-

wer Thames valley we shall understand why no great road ever attempted to cross it, and why no line of travel runs transverse to it to-day. A mere examination of the contours would be almost sufficient, presenting, as they do, great flats in most places, stretching for miles from the main stream of the river. But beyond this you have the great variation of the tide and the type of *surface* soil with which the stream deals.

Civilisation has so considerably changed the aspect of all our streams, it has so embanked them and drained their neighbourhood, that in order to appreciate the original conditions which made it impossible to find a crossing place below London one must consult the new sheets of the Ordnance Geological Survey. They give us the drift or top-soil—which alone of course concerns travel. In this new survey the area covered by alluvium and the line where that alluvium impinges upon the older and harder soils to the north and the south are very clearly marked. That area with its boundary line gives one

the original area and the original boundary line of the Thames' marshes, and it is very instructive.

The problem is one of approach from the south. From the north there is no firm soil at all within the neighbourhood of the river-bed from the sea upwards until one reaches the slight eminence of the City, unless one counts the isolated patches at Purfleet and Grays, the approach to which from the north was not only originally difficult but connected with no reasonable line of travel. One has but to look at the map to see that Purfleet could have been approached from the north by no considerable road. It might have formed some sort of terminal for an eastern road but only that at the expense of a long detour such as is made by the main road today through Ockendon or by the railway, for immediately behind lies a belt of what was originally marsh. Moreover, even if primitive travel had drifted by this somewhat circuitous route to the hard patch at Purfleet, it

would have found no crossing there; immediately opposite lay the very wide belt of marshy land which flanks either side of the Darent. That river comes in almost exactly opposite the small belt of natural hard on which Purfleet stands.

Primitive travel, then (and for that matter modern travel too, unless it is at a great expense of engineering), could not approach the northern bank of the Thames between the sea reaches and the City of London save, and that with difficulty, by the very small exceptional patches of Purfleet and Grays, and at Purfleet would have discovered no opportunities for a crossing: the bank opposite being a particularly wide and impossible stretch of marsh at this point.

Now as to Grays: That very pleasant place does give some approach both in soil and contour to the water from the north. It is just on the edge of the chalk, just above the old limit of high water, and its original nucleus, though not actually on the stream, would require but a short causeway to reach it.

But Grays is in the same bad topographical case as Purfleet, only rather worse. It is still less of a terminal for any road from the north. It connects with the east only through Stanford and the Horndon roads. To the north of it lay, completely cutting it off from any communication, the belt of marsh of which Mordyke is now the drainage line, and of which Orsett Fenn is the principal survival.

We have, then, on the north, only Purfleet and Grays; and both must be rejected. On the south, however, there is a series of isolated natural wharves which approach the main tidal stream, and not only stand fairly steep-on to its rise and fall, but are further of a soil upon their surface which permitted travel and an easy approach to the river in early times. These are, counting from the sea-reaches upward: Gravesend, where the chalk comes right down to the Thames; Greenhithe, where a tongue of the chalk juts out and touches the water; Erith, the point where the gravels, which some

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mighty stream laid down when the rivers of Northern Europe were discharging ten, twenty, or a hundred times the flood they have to-day, first approach the existing stream. At Woolwich sand and gravel closely approach the river and line it for so considerable a distance as to afford the platform for a fairly large town. Next up-river the same formation of gravels gives at Greenwich a hard along the stream, and immediately above another spit of the same actually touches the river at the point where used to stand the isolated village of Deptford.

Now any one of these natural hards along the south bank of the Thames between London and the sea would have afforded an excellent platform for the crossing of the river. It is true that the Thames is somewhat wider in its lower reaches than at the pool, but the difference was not so considerable as to balk those who first instituted the ferry and later the bridge of London. If one could cross the half-mile of water which lay before one at extreme high tides under the earliest con-

ditions at Southwark, or bridge (as was done so long ago) the four hundred yards of the main stream, there would have been no difficulty in dealing with the quarter of a mile at Deptford or at Greenhithe, nor even with the rather broader stream opposite Woolwich.

Save perhaps by a bridge of boats, a permanent crossing could not have been attempted at Erith or at Greenhithe, though the narrowing of the stream at Gravesend might well have allowed a more stable structure to be established. At any rate, a crossing even so broad as that opposite Erith has nowhere in Europe interfered with the passage of commerce, or of arms where both sides of a great stream lent themselves to such a passage. But it is here that each one of the points I have mentioned is at fault. Opposite Gravesend as opposite Greenhithe, opposite Erith as opposite Woolwich, Greenwich, and Deptford, there lies upon the northern bank a belt of marsh which forbids traffic. Tilbury Fort, opposite Gravesend, stands upon a tiny circle of harder land, but

all around it are the Chadwell and the Tilbury marshes. Greenhithe has right against it the projecting expanse of West Thurrock Marsh, Erith the whole breadth of Wellington and Rainham marshes; and, as one approaches London, and the river narrows, matters seem only to get worse. Woolwich faces the expanse of originally flooded soil between the Lea and the Roding, with the most of which even the economic forces making for the expansion of London have been able to do nothing, and of which so unpleasant a relic of its original condition is left in Plaistow Marshes to-day; while opposite Greenwich and Deptford lay that perfectly impossible morass, which, though turned into water meadows by a river wall many centuries ago, is still perhaps the worst building ground within the London area. We call it the Isle of Dogs.

The reader must not imagine this lack of any two opposing hards upon London River below the City to be due to some coincidence. It has a fairly obvious geographical

cause. Those points where the gravels and the chalk were touched by the scouring of the stream were naturally the outer cusp of its curves. The river having first determined a bend to the south or to the north, would eat away more and more on the outer edge of those bends (which the stream always follows both in flood and in ebb), and scour away the bank until it struck harder soils and was there checked. Deptford and Greenwich lie on the outer edge of the first great southern bend; Woolwich on that of the second; Erith on that of the third; Greenhithe the fourth; Gravesend the fifth; while both Grays and Purfleet represent similar checks to the bends towards the north.

Now it is evident that the same process which makes a river extend its curves outward more and more by the scouring the stream along the exterior edge leaves on the inside of the curve an increasing tongue or wedge of alluvial deposit. What we have, therefore, on the Lower Thames, the continual opposition of marsh to the rare hards,

is only what we should expect from the geological history of the river, and the crossing place which was at last found is much more of a coincidence and accident than the absence of a crossing place below.

That crossing place was, of course, finally discovered opposite the steep gravel bank upon which the oldest part of the City of London is built.

The land has been so often turned and returned in at least twenty centuries of building that it is not easy to-day to reconstruct the original conditions of that crossing; and, unless we look at all the evidence, slight as it is, it is easy to fall into errors upon it. Thus several writers upon this subject have often spoken as though the gravel-topped knoll upon which the original London stood was the sole factor in establishing the crossing, and I have myself fallen into the error of believing that the approach from the south could only be made over a long artificial causeway.

A further consideration of the evidence,

and especially of that concerning surface soils to the south of the crossing, has convinced me (subject to yet further evidence which may appear) that the opportunity for a crossing near the site of London Bridge was almost as tempting from the south side as it was from the north. It is true that no considerable rise of land is to be discovered on the Southwark side until we have gone some distance from the river, and the contour lines do not, therefore, suggest an easy crossing at this spot. But much more important than the lie of the land was the nature of the surface over which travel must proceed. The rocks across which a road is driven are not of the first importance in primitive times, though they become important, of course, when the road is expected to bear very great loads, or when it is so thoroughly metalled that the presence of good stone in its neighbourhood has to be considered. What is important to a primitive track is the immediate soil under foot, and if that be fairly hard and dry it can be quite

shallow and yet sufficient for the purposes of travel.

Thus, one can point out to many a path across the clay of the weald which picks its way from one shallow patch of sand, gravel, or stone to another, over country the main base of which is clay, and there is a similar example (with which I have dealt in another volume)* in the upper valley of the river Wey. There, once the primitive track has left the chalk and come to the marshy alluvials of the lower levels, it picks its way in this fashion from one long strip of gravel to another; and though these strips of gravel are shallow—mere casual drifts in many cases—they are sufficient for the purposes of the road. Now in the case of the crossing of the Thames at London, the new Geological Ordnance Survey, as it gives the drift as well as the rocks, shows us that a spit of sandy gravel projected into the alluvial mud of the Thames valley just opposite the "bluff" upon which the oldest part of London stands, and indeed

* *The Old Road*, Constable & Co.

projected so far towards the stream that the last traces of it are not lost until beyond Guy's Hospital—that is, until within little more than a furlong of the present high-water mark. The causeway which might therefore be necessary to approach the stream from the south in all states of the tide need only have been such a hardening of the track over the mud as is necessary between the high- and low-water mark of any tidal river where a ferry is to be established, and we must believe that the river at high water washed the gravel spit.

Upon the farther or northern bank traces of artificial embankment (indicating the original limit of alluvial mud upon that side) have been found upon the line of Thames Street, and the Roman wall ran just to the north of it. The total width, then, which had to be negotiated at this point was one at the very most of seven hundred yards, and perhaps much less than that, and it was one which at high water was flanked to the south, as to the north, by a hard surface across which the river could be approached.

GREENHITHE

No such conditions were to be discovered between this point and the sea, and, far inland as this point was, it was therefore the lowest practicable crossing of the Thames. Thus it was that the Thames established London.

It has also been maintained that this crossing formed not only the first practicable way to one coming up from the sea and seeking the *lowest* passage of the Thames, but also that no practicable passage could be found for some considerable way *up* the river either; in other words, that the opportunity for going over the Thames near the site of London Bridge was an isolated and all the more valuable one from the absence of similar opportunities *above* as well as *below* it.

We must be very careful before we accept such an argument. It is as certain as inference can make it that an original crossing, perhaps older than that of London, passed the Thames in the neighbourhood of Lambeth Bridge. The road which the Romans made or straightened from the south-east,

that is, the first great main road from the Straits of Dover to the north, the Watling Street, points directly to this spot, and the presence of good going on the south bank at least strengthens the conjecture, coupled as it is with the antiquity of Westminster as an inhabited site, and the long-established ferry which plied for centuries from the neighbourhood of Lambeth Palace to the opposing "Horseferry" Road.

The formation of the surface-soil in this neighbourhood is well worthy of study.

Immediately in the bounds of Lambeth Church and Palace the superficial hard gravels (which have been approaching the river for two miles and leaving a belt of marsh to their right or north) touch the stream. Not quite opposite, but nearly so —quite nearly enough for the establishment of a ferry—the large isolated patch of gravel which lay between the two mouths of the old brooks and which supported the nucleus of Westminster affords a good landing-place. It is true that there

is (or was) a patch of bad ground immediately to the north of this gravel, but very soon the rising ground which is now marked by Constitution Hill and Grosvenor Gardens gave good going and led the track up, nearly coincident with Park Lane, to "Tyburn," whence the Watling Street makes straight for the north and west along the line of the modern Edgware Road.

For a mile or two farther up, until the gravel in Chelsea was reached, opposite the steep land of Battersea crossing may have been difficult, but between Battersea and Chelsea it was certainly as easy in early times, or easier than at London Bridge, and after that, of course, as one goes westward the passage of the river becomes easier and easier until on the present western limits of London, at Brentford, you have what is almost certainly an original ford across the river, at low tide at least, and one which some authorities have regarded as the crossing place of Julius Cæsar.

It is not, therefore, because the crossing

at London is unique—it is, on the contrary, but the last of a long series of crossings—it is because it is the *lowest* crossing of the Thames that it came to be of such capital importance in the history of this island. Upon it converge the great military road from Chichester and the Great Port, the still more important road from the Kentish ports, and in particular from the Straits of Dover, the road from Shoreham going directly northward, of which such slight but such conclusive evidence has been discovered. These from the south—while from the north the great eastern road from Colchester and the corn-lands of Essex, the northern road with its branches to the ports and to the corn-lands of East Anglia, the north-western road from the garrison at Chester with its branch to the arable lands of Lancashire, past the fortress of Manchester, and even the western road from Bath and from the mines of the Mendip and from the garrison of Caerleon, all converge.

Once this scheme of ways had been estab-

lished (and they were certainly all complete before the end of the fourth century), once London had thus become the hub of a wheel of such spokes and the centre of such a web, the Thames which had made it, making also its commerce from the sea and its value as a point of transhipment between inland and sea-borne traffic, assured its eminence over all the other towns of the island.

I will not here repeat the arguments which I have dealt with in other studies, and which are advanced in defence of various hypothetical dates for the first building of the bridge. Its establishment across the river marked, of course, the completion of the process whereby London was produced. For once the bridge was there it was a necessary terminal to sea-borne traffic, and a convenient one to inland traffic; it was the military communication between north and south, and the commercial one as well. I will close by distinguishing between the very few pieces of actual evidence and the presumption built upon them.

We have a line of Roman remains pointing to a place upon the northern bank, somewhat to the east of London Bridge and almost coincident with the opening of the subway. Opposite it we have the old landing place near "Stoney Lane" which is supposed to indicate a southern causeway meeting this identical causeway from the north. Between the two there may have been in early Roman times a ferry. On the other hand, we have the Stane Street pointing directly at the southern terminal of old London Bridge (a trifle to the east of the modern bridge) and we have the undoubted presence of that bridge through the Dark Ages, which did not, as a rule, possess any considerable monument which they had not inherited from Rome. We have, further, the fact that the earliest line traceable for the Roman town puts London Bridge nearly at its centre; and again the fact that on the line of the bridge certain Roman relics have been unearthed or fished up.

In the absence of more positive evidence

we may take it as sufficient for history that in the natural course of things a ferry probably preceded the bridge, yet the bridge existed, if not when the Romans came, at any rate shortly after their occupation.*

Thus it was, then, that the River of London seems to have made London.

The Thames was so situated in the island that a crossing place of a permanent sort had to be established as far down the stream as possible. This place was found where the stream was still broad, tidal, and a port. Once bridged the same spot would mark the terminal of sea-borne traffic and the place of exchange between foreign and domestic produce, while the roads radiating north and south from such a crossing would further establish its pre-eminence.

But that pre-eminence was, from some very early period, *commercial*. The first mention of London in recorded history, the

*The arguments with regard to the age of the bridge and the earliest position of the crossing will be found set out in their most recent form and most fully by Mr. R. A. Smith, F.S.A., in the first volume of *London* in the Victoria County Histories.

phrase of Tacitus, speaks of the town particularly as a *market*. As a market London has grown, and as a market it is still chiefly eminent. But London is a market only because it is a port, and it is the port of the Thames. In that aspect I will next consider the connection between the town and its river.

STRAND ON THE GREEN

IV

LONDON

THE PORT OF THE THAMES

THE PORT OF THE THAMES

THAT A TOWN WOULD GROW UP on the lowest crossing of the Thames, once that crossing with its bridge or ferry was definitely established, is obvious enough. That this town would be important and large if there were a sufficient development of population and culture in the island is equally obvious. Both consequences would naturally follow from the topography of Britain. But that this town should become of such high importance in the European scheme and of such overwhelming importance in the national scheme; further, that this town should soon grow to be the second town in size of Western Europe, and at last by far the first, is not so immediate a conclusion from the known topographical conditions which brought it into being. That moral and material growth of London is due, of course, to the supremacy which London enjoyed and enjoys as a place of *commerce*. It is London as a market, and as a market the port of which was the Thames, which we must next con-

sider, and we must ask ourselves upon what so considerable and historical a phenomenon has been based. The matter is usually dismissed by an affirmation lacking analysis and still more lacking proof. Our text-books are too often satisfied with telling us that "the exceptionally favourable position of London as a commercial centre" was at the root of the town's greatness. The affirmation is perfectly true, but it does not provide its own explanation nor satisfy our curiosity as to *why* this position should have meant so much.

I think, indeed, that most observant people in reading this or similar phrases must, if they had any knowledge of the map, have been struck with the apparent disadvantages under which a site such as that of London suffers. It has not behind it a vast hinterland from which it should be able to gather raw material for export, nor is it a natural outlet for the various products of several different regions as is, for instance, the region surrounding the mouths of the

Rhine. It is not central to the European scheme as Lyons was for so many centuries, and Paris for so many centuries more. It lies a long way up its stream from the sea. No system of converging waterways unites in its neighbourhood. There seems at first sight, therefore, no reason why London should have obtained more than a local importance.

When we consider its advantages as a general meeting-place for varied foreign commercial interests, a first view will profit us little. London is on no general European highway but lies ex-centric to Europe far upon the north and west of the general area which European culture covers; nor does its more central position since the discovery of the New World avail the argument, for the greatness of London was planted and its future continuance assured long before Europeans had known and developed the Western Continent. London, again, does not seem to invite commerce by lying upon the frontier common to two civilisations; it does

not lie upon any economic boundary line as do the cities of the Levant and notably the cities of Palestine. It is, if we consider the economics of commerce during at any rate the first 1500 years of our era, almost at the edge of the world.

To explain the supremacy of London as a market more than one thesis is put forward for general acceptance which must, I think, be condemned. Thus we have the thesis that London occupies the position it does *because it is almost in the centre of the land hemisphere.* As a matter of fact the actual centre of that hemisphere is not far from the neighbourhood of Falmouth, and is at any rate within the limits of Britain. If we trace upon a globe a great circle or " equator " so as to include the greatest mass of land surface possible, we find our southern ports, and London amongst them, to lie near the Pole of such an Equator, and this argument has been of some weight with those who have not paused to consider what that " land hemisphere " means. If the climate of the

world were everywhere equal and most of its soil equally productive, then the fact that the great estuary of the Thames lay almost central to the greatest mass of land would have its importance—though the mouths both of the Seine and of the Scheldt, of the Rhine, and for that matter of the Elbe, would not be so far distant as to explain the peculiar supremacy of London. But in the first place the most part of that mass of land did not enter into the commercial scheme until quite modern times, and secondly, the variations of its climate and of its productivity destroy the theory. Not far to the north of our port (relatively to so great a thing as the planet) lies that vast circle of uninhabited or hardly habitable frozen land which is not only almost useless for the purposes of exchange, but which also bars any passage of commerce across it. Not so very far to the south, again, runs the belt of desert east and west across Africa and Asia, the worst part of which, the widest, is also the nearest to us and is called the Sahara. It is of

little use to have a central position between, say, Japan upon the one side and Cape Town upon the other, if the Greek Circle which connects us with Japan passes, as it does, through the Polar Ice. There are certain central positions which explain the supremacy of some particular site, but these positions are nearly always central to limited areas over which travel is uninterrupted. The great market of Nijni Novgorod in Russia is an example of this sort. Chicago in the United States of America is another. But London is no parallel to such cases as these, so far as the world or even Europe is concerned. It is fairly central (as we shall see) to what was once the chief wealth of England: it is ex-centric to all else.

Still less will the many arguments based upon fairly modern conditions solve the problem which confronts us. Thus the great export trade of modern England is mainly based upon coal. But the estuary of the Thames is not a natural place of export for coal. The political relations which necessar-

THE THAMES FROM GREENWICH PARK

ily bind this country to-day to other countries of the same speech throughout the New World have a vast effect in continuing and expanding our oversea exchanges, but all the ports natural to such ties lie upon our south or west. London does not face the New World. It looks away from it.

The truth is that the singular position of the Lower Thames as a terminal for international commerce, and of its port as an international market, must be sought in a medley of causes, the chief of which fall into two clear categories. We have first the causes which made London what it was before the transformation of commerce through the discoveries of the Renaissance and the later gigantic expansion which reposes upon modern facilities of communication. Once London is thus established as the second great city of the West, we have the later causes which permit it to continue in the enjoyment of that position, and to nourish it until the city whose port was the Thames became not the second but by far the first of

all the great markets in wealth, population, and shipping.

I will take these two sets of causes separately.

As to the first, what made the greatness of the Thames as a port for London, and of London, therefore, as a market before the modern era of geographical discovery?

A natural market exists only where two natural conditions are present: ease of approach from without, and what may be called *draining power* from within.

I mean by ease of approach from without a natural facility for the arrival of goods from areas of production foreign to those of the market. And I mean by "draining power from within" some topographical or other condition which makes domestic produce run naturally towards the one centre of this market.

To these two natural conditions must be added two further political ones: first, one must have such a society connected with that market as gives it security, and, second-

ly, such a society as is organised by its activity and adventure for production or for exchange, or for both.

Now all these four conditions London enjoyed from a very early time. I have pointed out elsewhere, and shall point out again in these pages, the nature of the political security which London has enjoyed for so many centuries. It did not lie in any particularly peaceful character peculiar to the country as a whole, for while London was growing to greatness England was a continual theatre of domestic war. It lay in the great size which the city had attained, coupled with the breadth of its stream, and in its numerical proportion to the general population of which it was the capital. The fact that London was never besieged or sacked depended upon these characters, and they in turn, therefore, guaranteed that local security which is the first political necessity of a great and continuous market.

As to the commercial and productive character of the inhabitants of Britain, it es-

capes any material analysis. We must postulate it as a constant fact running through the known and recorded centuries of our history, and we may ascribe it according as we more love ease or veracity to whatever cause we feel most flattering or most true. No proof is possible. We can only say in this respect that certain areas of Europe have shown these characters for greater or less periods of time, and that others equally well endowed have not shown them, but have shown other characters perhaps as valuable.

The main fact in this connection is that whether the productive areas of Great Britain were exporting raw material (as during the most active centuries of the Middle Ages, when wool was our chief export), or whether (as later became the case) manufactured articles and coal were the stand-by of our oversea trade; whether we consider the period before or after the development of our carrying trade; whether we are concerned with an industrial or an agricultural England; whether we are observing late

centuries in which the English showed a passionate interest in novelty and foreign adventure, or far more numerous early centuries in which they were indifferent to distant voyages—throughout the whole story with all its changes the productive area of the island has always maintained a high standard of wealth in comparison with its neighbours and its aptitude for exchange has always been equally high.

It is a point often neglected that the Norman Conquest, though of course it introduced a new and much more developed culture than Saxon England had possessed, did not find an impoverished land which the newcomers might "develop." It found an exceedingly wealthy country according to the standards of the time; and the extent and variety of that wealth stands out very clearly in the narrative of contemporaries. Four centuries later, at the end of the Wars of the Roses, foreign observers make precisely the same comment. It is the packed wealth of South England filling its com-

paratively small area which the foreign envoy notes. We have a striking piece of evidence surviving before our eyes in the number, decoration and amplitude of our churches to which I have already alluded.

To continue the proof after the Tudors would be superfluous. There was even a phase, the beginning of which is to be found in the seventeenth century, the close of which we have unhappily seen in our own generation, when the wealth of England was so superior to that of any other rival that the material circumstances of life among the wealthier classes of the country seemed to belong to a different world from that of neighbouring nations, and when the economic supremacy of England was translated into a credit, a command of money, and an almost contemptuous security to which no other European people could pretend.

London, then, for all these centuries has enjoyed the two political conditions necessary to the establishment of a chief market, security and a productive area in the hands of a race by its genius inclined to exchange.

There remain the two natural conditions: ease of approach from without and "draining power" from within.

Now when we turn to these natural conditions we find that in the matter of ease of approach the Thames was unrivalled. London was, of course, far from the sea—a point with which I will deal in a moment—but there was no haven north of the Mediterranean which called so readily for commerce upon a large scale. Given the political conditions for a market—security and active powers of production and exchange—the Thames was as good a highway to that market as any that could be found. No vessels until quite modern times had to consider their draught or fear the entry of the river (at least, through channels which the pilots commanded), and once within the inland water a swinging tide was at the service of the ships. There were, within that inland stretch, no obstacles, no high intervening hills to becalm, no narrows or islands.

In this ease of access, again, must be reck-

oned the position of the Thames relatively to opposing ports. The wide funnel opened at a few hours' sail from all that line of ports which begins with the mouth of the Seine and ends with the northernmost mouths of the Rhine. What we now call the coasts of Normandy, Picardy, Flanders, Belgium, and Holland lay, even at their extremes, within one double tide of the Thames.

It is true that they also lay equally convenient to any one of the lesser havens upon the Sussex, the Kent, the Essex, or the Norfolk coasts, but the ample space afforded by the river, the opportunity for a crowd of shipping, coupled with opportunities for inland trading, were to be found nowhere else in the south and east of the island as they were to be found up London River.

In this connection the use of the tide should be noted. By a peculiarity which has not been without its effect upon the history of the river the flood carries a man past the Kentish coast long past high water and indeed until a moment very close to that

GRAVESEND

in which *another* tide, that from the North Sea, carries its sweep of water up the river. Thus, though the tide reach high water shortly after noon in Dover Harbour, a man outside will carry the stream with him all up past the Kentish coast until close upon five o'clock. He has but to get round Longnose and he finds this other tide serving him—a tide that has been making from three o'clock or thereabouts, coming in from the North Sea, and that will carry him right up river as long as the wind or daylight permits him to follow it ; a tide that does not reach its height at Gravesend until eight that evening, or in the Pool of London until nine. In other words, the River of London afforded to the vessel coming in from the south a double tide which, clever picked up, gave a continuous voyage from the Channel right down into the sheltered water inland.

At this point it is interesting to consider why the principal harbours of the Middle Ages, in the north and west of Europe, at least, and upon tidal seas, so constantly de-

veloped not upon the coast itself, but at some distance up a stream or creek and inland.

Consider the examples: Havre comes late in the development of the Seine — the original port is Harfleur; Bristol stands up a tortuous and narrow channel well inland, and not upon the estuary of the Severn at all; Liverpool had its first nucleus four miles from the open sea; Preston quite twelve; Chester more than twenty, of which the last five or six were a narrow river above the estuary; Nantes is another striking example—something like one day's sail from the sea; Antwerp, Rotterdam—Bruges itself lying those few miles inland upon its canal —follow the general rule; and so does Norwich, and so does Colchester, and so does Boston, and so does Glasgow; Bordeaux tells the same story, and so does the Royal Harbour of Montreuil. And in general, while a great number of smaller ports rose upon the very coast of the Atlantic, the North Sea, or the Channel, there seemed to be, until

modern times at least, a tendency for the main depôts of sea-borne commerce to lie thus inland. Why was it ?

We can only guess, but I would suggest that three factors combined to establish such a state of things : First, the little boats used for inland transport and the vehicles dependent upon roads and therefore upon bridges would seek a place of trans-shipment at some point upon the river where it had not yet become too broad or too rough, and so long as this place was accessible from the sea, the higher up river it was the better for them.

Next must be counted the security of a perfectly land-locked harbour for the smaller craft, which formed so much the largest part of maritime transport. A perfectly land-locked natural harbour upon the coast was a very rare thing. Let the stretch of water be only of the size of Southampton Water at its mouth, or of the Solent, and they would be wrecked in a high wind, but rivers everywhere afforded a secure protec-

tion when once one had entered their narrow channel.

Thirdly, we must consider the advantage which such sites presented against the attacks of pirates, and the better opportunities for defence which a considerable inland town possessed, with its resources in the surrounding fields and population over the smaller seaports.

In considering the first of these points we must remember that there was always a tendency for the central depôt or main commercial town to arise somewhat inland and to be served by subsidiary ports, if there were no direct access to it by water—and even if there were. Canterbury is an example of this, so is Winchester, so is Amiens, and so is Arras, and so is Caen, and so is Rennes, and a host of others.

In balancing the various advantages offered by various sites for the establishment of a market, a preponderating advantage must always be a position lying in the midst

of several centres of production, and, since man is a land animal, these sites would normally lie inland. When they were served by a river so much the better; when they were served by a great and secure river, they could not fail to grow as London has grown.

As part of this ease of access must be reckoned, the peculiar character of the Thames, much more open to the wind than the Seine, not blocked by any island, affording once within the estuary a constant depth amply sufficient for all vessels until quite recent times.

But all this would not have given London its place had not a city established at the lowest crossing of the Thames exercised in a peculiar degree that "draining power" of which I have spoken.

We have seen how the system of British roads necessarily converged upon London, and if we consider one or two other features in English topography, we shall see why London provides a common depôt for nearly the whole of English exports in a fa-

shion which no other city could show for any other equally large area of production.

Before the north of England was industrialised, three things were mainly required to establish what I have called the "draining" power of any market in the island. First, that it should be fairly central to all the south and Midlands ; secondly, that it should afford a convenient centre of demand for various foreign products; thirdly, that it should be as close as possible to such continental markets as principally received our export.

Given those three conditions combined in any one place, and so far as the great mass of Britain was concerned, a point would be established to which would flow the main part of the produce which the Continent desired to purchase by exchange.

Observe how all these three conditions coincide in the case of London and of that Lower Thames which was its port.

When I say with regard to the first condition that the point we are seeking must be

"central" to the south and east of the Island and to the Midlands, I am using a word which needs expansion. I mean that we must have a point to which the communications of commerce already lead, and one not too ex-centric to the area tapped.

Now at the first glance at the map London does give an impression of ex-centricity, of lying upon one side: and that towards the east and the south.

But when we begin to consider certain qualifying conditions, we shall find that London is fairly central, even geometrically, to the area in question, and that, when we are considering the economic " weight " of the various parts of this area, London may by a metaphor be said to be near the " centre of gravity " of such an area.

Cut off, in the first place, the Dumnonian Peninsula—that is, Devon and Cornwall,—the Welsh Highlands, and the Pennines. Consider (that is) South England, East Anglia, and the Midlands. You have an area roughly square, and about two hundred miles every way.

In drawing such a square, take for your extreme points Chester on the north-west, a point midway between Portland and Exmouth on the south-west; upon the north-east a point a little north of Cromer, and upon the south-east a point in the Straits of Dover, a trifle west of the line between Dungeness and Boulogne. Such a square includes a good deal that is outside our area, much of the estuary of the Severn, a strip of the Channel, a wedge of the North Sea and of the Wash, and a wedge of Pennine land to the north; but it also excludes a certain amount properly within our area as some of the richest parts of Kent and of Norfolk and Suffolk. We may therefore take this square for a fair average, and we shall see that even upon the test of distance London is not so ex-centric as might be imagined. Draw the two diagonals of this square, and you will find that London lies upon one of them at a distance of less than forty miles from the centre.

When we consider something more than distance and think of London as the "centre

KINGSTON BRIDGE

of gravity" of the Midlands, the east and the south, we find it still more central for the centuries immediately preceding our own. Their staple export was wool. The pasturage of the chalk ranges runs right round London in the Chilterns and their extension into East Anglia, in the north and south Downs and the Uplands of Wiltshire, Hampshire, and Dorset. London is the obvious centre of all that triangle of chalk. It is again nearly equi-distant from the principal markets of Norfolk, of the Upper Trent valley, of Dorset, and of the Cotswolds. If we treat as exceptions the Lancashire and Yorkshire Plains (each with their local ports), the Vale Royal and the Lower Severn (each with its local port at Chester and at Bristol), London is very near the commercial centre of gravity of what remains. We must not forget that the Marlborough Downs and Salisbury Plain are but a few miles more distant from London Bridge than is the extremity of Kent. From the town of Pewsey to London Bridge as the crow flies is almost exactly eighty-

eight miles. From the South Foreland the distance is not ten miles less. It needs but a slightly longer radius to include all the Warwickshire Midlands and very nearly all the county of Norfolk: all, of course, of Suffolk, of Essex, of Kent, Sussex, Surrey, and Hampshire.

London is geographically and commercially central at any rate to the older England—which was all that was needed for its establishment.

It was even more central when regarded as a nexus of communications.

How all the main roads centred there we have already seen. The roads alone would have given London a pre-eminence as a market above all other towns in Britain even if the Thames had dried up after their establishment. But the position was meanwhile further strengthened by the conditions of water carriage; and it is here that the meaning of the Thames as a whole appears, and the way in which the upper as well as the lower river has built up the greatness of London.

I have no space to show why and how water carriage was of supreme importance both in primitive times (that is, before the Roman civilisation came) and during the Dark Ages through which, in spite of decline, it survived. It should be sufficient to point out that in the decline of a civilisation, or in its absence, water carriage—suited to heavy burdens, requiring no repair of ways, and providing a mode of traction ready-made—is, wherever it is available, the chief economic factor of commerce.

Now when we recognise that the bulk of English wealth lay for centuries south and east of a line drawn from Exmouth to the Wash, and when we appreciate what the Thames valley is in that triangle, we shall see how necessarily the main market of the Thames was also the main market of England. The natural water communications of the south consist in a number of small streams, only one of which, the Salisbury Avon, may have been navigable for more than a dozen miles or so inland. East An-

glia was better served, and particularly the northern area, which was drained by the three rivers converging upon Breydon Water. The northern part of that area was also fairly well served by the three parallel rivers of the Ouse, the Nen, and the Welland, but their service as a means of communication was handicapped by the nature of their entry into the sea through the Fens, and after that through the perils, sandbanks, and shallows of the Wash; while the good service of rivers along all the East Anglian coast had this drawback: that, as we there have nothing but a series of short systems, there was no water connection between one group of short valleys and another, not even one thought-out road. A dozen streams will carry produce from the sea to Worstead, to Norwich, to Beccles, to what was once the considerable port of Orford, to Ipswich, to Colchester, etc. But each avenue is a separate avenue. There is no "trunk" connecting the system.

With the Thames it is otherwise. Glance

down the valley and see how one point after another, each the natural market of a whole district of its own, drains the produce from the north and the south of the river, to discharge it upon the main stream. From Lechlade (up to which point ran the " measure and the bushel of London")* through Oxford, Abindgon, Wallingford, Reading, Marlow, the Middle Hythe (which we now call Maidenhead), and Windsor, you have a whole string of such centres, each gathering its own section's produce from its scheme of roads, or of subsidiary streams, and turning the mass down seaward upon the "trunk" afforded by the Thames.

The Thames, therefore, with London as its port of transhipment between the inland communications and the sea, tapped the very heart of all that was wealthiest in Eng-

* The reader may see quoted in full in Sir Laurence Gomme's *The Governance of London* (p. 346) the precedents upon which Coke founded his opinion in 1597, including the verdict of 29 Ed. I., concerning in particular the portage of salt upon the Thames.

"Quod nullus mensuarius sit de London usque Lachenlade nisi dicti mensuarii et bushelli de Ripa Reginae."

land for fifteen hundred years, and all that commerce by river as by road drained upon London because London was "central" to exchange in the rich south and east of the island.

But, as we have seen, two further characters were attached to "draining" power. We must not only seek a point central for communications, we must also seek a point where there was a ready demand for import and a ready access to the best foreign markets.

Let us consider these two characters in their order :

A ready demand for import must exist either in a port itself or behind it, if that port is to develop into a great town and to acquire political importance. You have many instances, especially in contemporary commerce, of ports which do little more than export, and of other ports in which there is no demand for import, but which merely serve to pass the import inland. In the first case the international exchange is effected

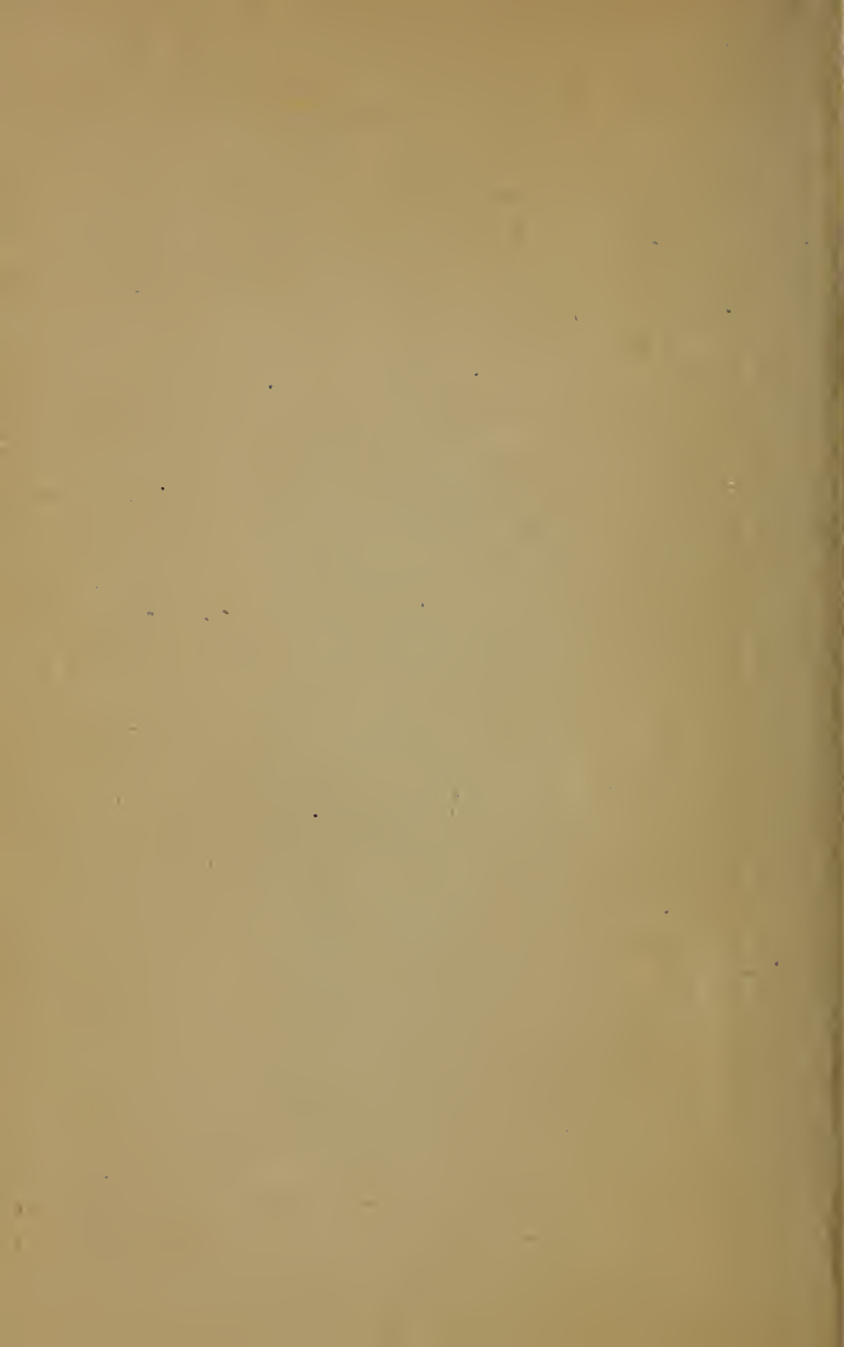
through imports at some other point. The clearing between export and import is a paper clearing, and the ships at the export point arrive in ballast—a drawback. In the second place, though a town may grow to some importance as a mere place of transhipment, it will never acquire the importance of a capital nor even of a great city—it will never have a great *political* place unless, round the handling of its imports destined for the interior, there grows up a considerable local power of demand for values. In other words, something of the imports transmitted through the town must "stick on the way." Modern Liverpool is a good example of this. The primary economic function of modern Liverpool is still the transhipment of cotton to Lancashire just beyond its boundaries, but in the pursuit of this function Liverpool has claimed its tribute for now three generations, and so vast an accumulation of other activitities connected with the port has grown up that even the digging of the Manchester Ship Canal,

the effect of which was so much feared in Liverpool, seems to have been, if anything, a benefit to that town. What proportion the power of demand exercised for imported goods in Liverpool itself may bear to the total of values entering the port cannot be exactly calculated, but it is safe to say that the toll levied is not much less than one-fifth.

Now when to this power of demand created by the "sticking" at the point of transhipment or port of import, of goods coming from abroad, there is added the power of demand caused by the residence of government, of a court and of wealthy men apart from those who are wealthy through commerce, you get, of course, a very highly increased power of demand which makes of the port of import a specially great economic centre. A ship coming to such a port in order to take on board there the export in which it deals, can enter loaded with imports which are sure of a ready market.

It so happens that London during all the centuries of its growth, and especially dur-

SUNBURY



ing those four hundred years of the Middle Ages which chiefly established its great position, was in exactly this position. Not only was it, as modern Liverpool is, a point of transhipment round which a vast quantity of subsidiary activities had grown, it was also close to the more or less permanent residence of the court, to what became the permanent seat of legislature, and to what was very early the permanent seat of the central courts of justice. The process continued uninterruptedly. After the loot of the church land of the endowments of the poor under the Tudors, the great palaces of the new aristocracy lined the Strand, and from the early seventeenth century—when this process was completed—onwards, the power of demand exercised by London alone and its local call for imports, has never ceased to grow, until to-day the position of London as an importing centre is due almost entirely to this character, next to its value as a clearing-house: It is now only in a much less degree a point of transhipment.

The type of goods for which this local power of demand existed had also a very great effect in helping the growth of London through the traffic of the Thames.

Perhaps the principal import of the Middle Ages in value was that of wine. It was a luxurious import for which there was a local demand, especially where you had the residence of the wealthier people, and, what was exceedingly important, it was *an import large in bulk*. It meant that ships would come either in great numbers or in heavy tonnage, and this in itself suggested London as a place of export for their return, made a speculative voyage to London worth taking, and developed the warehousing space and the wharf space of the port. Later came coal, later still the tropical products, and last of all the great passenger traffic. But in every stage of the development London has exercised a local power of demand for that kind of import which demanded bulk in storage.

As to the second point, the easy access

to the foreign port whither export was to be made, London was again especially favoured, in its point of growth. To-day it is no longer so, as we shall see in a moment. London is going forward with the momentum of its past. But until quite modern times London looked more favourably at the points to which England exported than did the other island ports, its rivals. It lay in the full focus of that long curve of the Norman, the Picard, the Flemish and Dutch coasts, which were the principal markets of the Middle Ages. Right opposite were the Flemish cities that bought English wool—the staple export—right opposite, also, the mouths of the Rhine for communication with the interior Germanies and, though a little more distant than the northern ports, agreeable to all that Baltic and North Sea trade which grew up with the close of the Middle Ages. The league of mercantile towns called Hanseatic had its depôt in London from the middle of the thirteenth century. The northern ports of England that lie a

little nearer had no hinterland to feed their commerce, and London was, moreover, the best clearing-house and centre of general exchange for them in all the north and west. In this character it surpassed even Bruges.

When all these conditions changed—when the discovery of the New World, and of the Cape route to the Indies, when the growth of north-country industries and one hundred other factors had taken away from the site of London its old topographical supremacy, the port was so firmly established that it provided its own sources of vitality.

It is always so in the economic affairs of a town or of a nation. Material causes are discovered to be more powerful in the middle period of their growth; once the town or nation are rooted they nourish themselves. The River of London to-day is the capital example of this truth out of all Europe. A basin far too small for modern commerce, lying much too distantly up a river too narrow for modern commercial needs, dangerous of entry for ships of modern draft, and needing

perpetual and enormous labour to keep it properly open, none the less preserves its place at the head of the ports of the world. As a depôt for commerce its wharves and docks extend to Tilbury, and that system of clearing which grew up naturally on the low gravel height above London Bridge, when the pool held all the shipping of the place and was a large and secure harbour, is still established on that same hill in the shape of the banks and the exchanges of the City of London, which cancel the exchanges, not of the pool below, but of I know not what fraction of the shipping of the whole world.

There is one last point to be considered in connection with London river as a port. It has been well made by Mr. Lyde in one of his short but remarkable geographical studies. The estuary of the Thames exactly faces that great and permanent frontier line between two parts of our European culture, upon either side of which lie contrasting speeches, traditions, and even religions.

That frontier roughly divides such areas of Western Europe as have continuously preserved the traditions of the Roman Empire from outer regions to the east and to the north, which only received the Christian religion and the Roman civilisation after the breakdown of central authority exercised from the Imperial city.

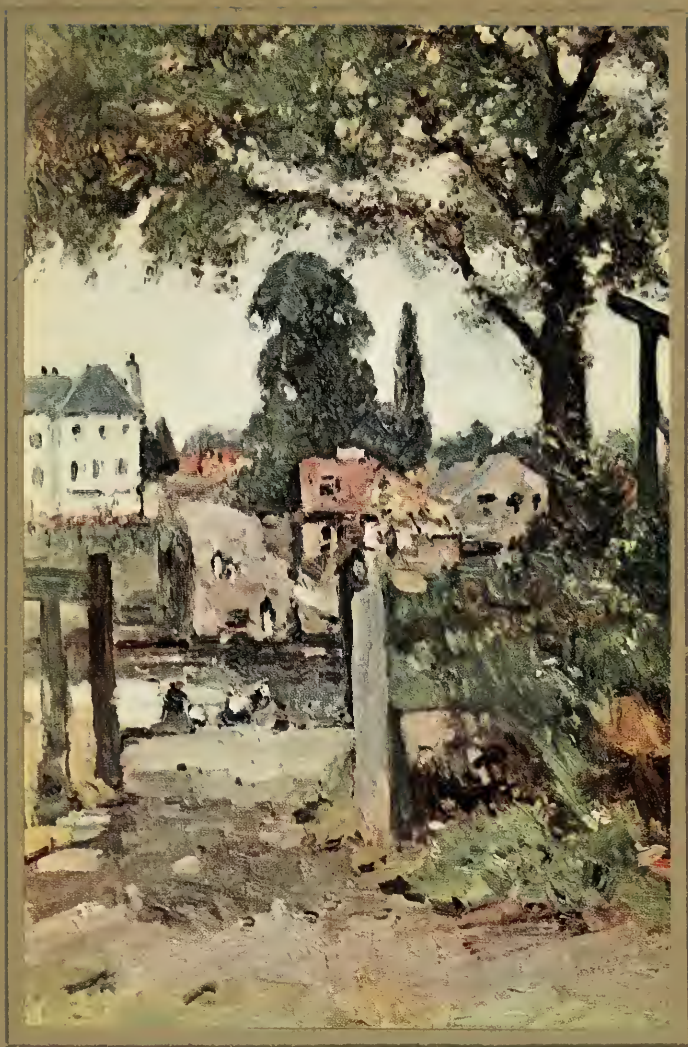
The estuary of the Thames opens like a funnel just opposite the point where this frontier between what some would call the "Teutonic" and "Latin" areas, reaches the sea.

It may not be at first sight apparent why a position of this kind is of capital commercial importance. The reason is rather moral than material, though it has its material element in the cheapness and expedition of carriage by sea.

Areas which differ in the type of their culture tend to become polarised one towards the other for the purposes of exchange. Each will tend to produce something that the other lacks. Now the exchange be-

tween two such areas will, of course, proceed actively enough across innumerable points lying upon the frontier between them, but it will not penetrate very far inland, if there is in competition with the inland routes a water route. Thus Arras will exchange easily enough with, say, Aix-la-Chapelle, Metz with Trèves or Frankfort, but what of Rouen and the Baltic, Bordeaux and the Frisian Lowlands, Brittany and Vendée and the German Plain? It is evident that if no friction existed a direct sea-borne commerce along the north-western coasts of Europe would effect these exchanges; but there does exist a friction, especially in early times, consisting in the ignorance and, as it were, the credulity, separating places so far distant in mileage and, what is more important, in culture. If, then, a half-way house is found sufficiently familiar to either party, that half-way house will tend to become in this new aspect out of so many, a centre of exchange—and this is precisely what hap-

pened to London. The North Sea and the Baltic were familiar with London—but then so was the Channel and the Bay of Biscay. London river attracted in this fashion a sheaf of trade routes, drawn from the north and east, another from the south and west. And so true is this that to the present day, and in one curious slight but emphatic modern instance, you can see the process at work. Travellers intent upon no purpose of commerce but merely upon an excursion will leave London river for Boulogne and Calais, sometimes for Dieppe and Havre; other travellers will leave the same facility of egress for the Scheldt and the Rhine and the Dutch ports and the Elbe. But, unless I am mistaken, the more obvious track of a passenger steamer route between the French ports and the Belgian, Dutch, and German ones does not exist save in the case of the great liners which touch at Cherbourg. A man desiring to go from Boulogne to Flushing by sea or from some lower French port to, say, Amster-



TWICKENHAM FERRY

dam, would very probably find his cheapest road to lie by way of going into the Thames and out of it. We must not exaggerate this element in the present position of London, where it is but a survival and that a small one: but in the past, and particularly in the establishment of the port at the end of the Dark Ages and the beginning of the Middle Ages, this 'facing' of London River towards the great political frontier line of Europe, was of capital importance. Scandinavia, the Baltic, Frisia, and the Dutch ports had all known their way to London for centuries when the Norman Conquest, and still more the succeeding Angevin monarchy, brought round into London River a new wealth of trade from the Seine, the Loire, and the Garonne.

In all that has preceded we have been considering London as the creation of the river in its civil aspect alone; it remains to consider the town and the stream in their effect upon the military history of the country, and to that I shall now turn.

V

LONDON AND THE LOWER THAMES IN WARFARE

LONDON AND THE LOWER THAMES IN WARFARE

THE LAST HISTORICAL ASPECT IN which we must consider the River of London is the military aspect; and this aspect has three clearly marked divisions. We have first to consider the Lower Thames as an avenue of invasion; next as an obstacle to invasion of the northern part of the island, or to the passage of the troops from the north to the south. Thirdly, we must estimate what effect upon the military history of the country London itself has had, commanding as it does the lowest crossing of the Thames, always forming a vast base of supply, and for centuries by its stores and munitions forming an ally or an enemy of capital importance to whichever party it supported so long as warfare was waged in England.

The first two of these considerations are very sharply defined not only in their nature, but also in the historical periods over which each one predominated. The Thames as an avenue of ingress or invasion belongs

to the earlier part of English history. The importance of the lower river in this category ends very nearly with the close of the Dark Ages. Its second character, that of an obstacle to the invader who would go northward or to troops marching from the north southward, in the main is discoverable of course throughout history, but chiefly belongs to the Middle Ages and the seventeenth century. I will take these three points, therefore, in their order and deal first with the invasions of England which the Lower Thames has served. These invasions from the first recorded case of the almost to the last may be grouped together under one description. They were the raids of the pirates. It is true that these raids became, as the Dark Ages developed and the true Middle Ages approached, better and better organised, more definitely political and dynastic in plan, until at last they took on the character of regular warfare. But from the beginning to the end of the process we have little or no use of the

Thames on the part of regular forces proceeding from the ancient civilisation of the Continent, from Gaul, or from the mouths of the Rhine. The whole story is a story of invasion from the outer and barbarian limits of Europe, that is, from the North Sea and the confines of the Baltic.

The early pirate raids upon this island, which were first called Saxon, hundreds of years later Dane, but which had through the whole of the Dark Ages much of one character of purposeless devastation, used the Thames for one of their chief entries. The earlier and less powerful raids seem to have made nothing of London. It was too much for them. But the later and worse tempest of the eighth and ninth and tenth centuries had London for their main object when they forced the river, and since it is a piece of history very little explored, it is worth a moment's digression here.

What were the conditions under which the pirates conducted their raids upon the waterway ?

First let us establish a little list of what was certainly known with regard to these attempts.

Of the first Saxon raids in connection with the Thames we know nothing. Even the distorted legends set down hundreds of years afterwards only preserve a recollection of a landing in Kent, in Thames, and the fighting that follows them is upon land and south of the river. Of what raids were made upon the Essex shore, or whether any were made, or whether (which is improbable) any attempt were made by these sparse destroyers against the walls and bridge of London, all the part, small or null or whatever it was, which the Thames played in the first pirate raids of the fifth and sixth centuries escapes us.

This is not the place in which to insist upon the unreliable character of that vast mass of popular history erected upon sheer guess-work and describing the early raids of the Saxon pirates as effecting in some way a reconstruction of England. The wil-

HAMPTON

der sort of fiction dealing with that remote and almost unknown period talks of these first pirate raids as "the coming of the English." We must, of course, neglect rhetoric of that kind. But it is worth while admitting a moment's digression to impress on the reader upon what an absence of any thing approaching evidence all this academic guess-work has been raised. The one definite fact and the only one connected with the pirate raids which descended upon the eastern and southern river mouths and beaches of Britain in the fifth and sixth centuries, is the fact that these raids cut off southern and eastern Britain from the rest of civilisation. Of contemporary evidence there is nothing for more than 150 years, save one very vague denunciatory or apocalyptical document more in the nature of a sermon than a record, which testifies to the violent impression produced upon the civilised inhabitants of the island by these raids, and a couple of fragmentary sentences written perhaps by contem-

poraries, certainly not by eye-witnesses, and probably at a great distance from the scene of the trouble.

We do not know when the raids of the pirates began, nor whether they were already severe before Britain was cut off.

We do not know whether Southern and Eastern Britain was already occupied by kinsmen of the pirates serving as Auxiliary Troops within the Empire or no.

We do not know whether the maritime belts of Suffolk, Essex, Kent, and Sussex spoke a Teutonic language before the pirate raids or no.

We do not know whether a Christian Church was sufficiently established in those belts for the raids to have had an opportunity of "destroying" such a Church.

We do not know in what numbers the pirates came nor with what object nor what the towns (which were the nucleus of that society) suffered or did not suffer from the invasions.

We have, as almost the sole instrument

of historical analysis for a full 150 years, nothing but inference and the consideration of what is physically possible and physically impossible in the various theories that have been put forward.

Thus it is physically impossible that any very considerable number of men can have come over seas at any one moment in the small and shallow boats of the time, but for all the rest we have nothing but legend and our varying estimate of how the society attacked would probably have behaved and what the internal reactions within it under the strain of such an anxiety would probably have been. We can be fairly certain that an attack of this sort could not deal with a defended Roman town, though here and there a garrison on the coast may have been overwhelmed. We can be morally certain from all that we know of that society that men coming for loot would not kill slaves. On the other hand, we do not know how far the anarchy may have been increased by the presence of numerous es-

caped slaves in the welter. We have a right to exclude the fantastic—such as the astonishing idea that a great Roman town like London could be wiped out *and then resettled by a totally new population*, and we have a right to exclude as very nearly worthless odd stories cropping up hundreds of years later in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. On the other hand, we are bound to pay more respect to such a remark as that of the Venerable Bede when he testifies to the migration of a whole body of pirate population from the capital of Schleswig to that of Britain.

If we could discover what happened between the first generation of the fifth century and the first generation of the seventh, the discovery would be the most important and interesting that could be made in connection with our history. For in Britain as in every other province of Europe the process by which civilisation entered into the Dark Ages is the explanation of all that followed. But the discovery has not yet been granted to us, and in all human probability never will be.

We know that the avenue of approach from the Continent to Britain, that is, the coasts of the south and east, were so far ruined or occupied or degraded, the communication with the rest of the island was cut off ; we know that when civilisation came back with St. Augustine it had to work through the medium of little courts scattered up and down these shores, and we can presume that writing and record and government thus filtering through the south and east to the rest of the island gradually spread the speech and certain of the customs of that south and east eastward throughout the succeeding centuries.

Of more than that we are ignorant.

The Lower Thames, therefore, and the part that it played in that first capital piece of fighting lies, unfortunately, outside the field of positive history. We do not begin to get any true record of the Thames as an avenue of invasion until the second raids begin, three centuries after the first: those second raids which are collectively known in this country under the title of "Danish."

At the end of the eighth century the pirate raids from the north struck England again. A few boats' crews would land, especially in the north, and raid a monastery or loot the outer barns of a steading, only to be beaten off.

But a lifetime later, in the middle of the ninth century, the raids increased in pressure. As early as 832 you get them in the mouth of the Thames. It is a small matter. They land in Sheppey and raid that sparsely inhabited, isolated island, but their raid was successful and it taught them the way back. The next year they meet Egbert down in the south-west in some considerable conflict, killing two of his leaders and holding the battlefield. Two years later again they were in the Irish Sea and were caught and beaten in an island raid in the west. In 837 they were beaten off Southampton, to which they had come with thirty-three ships—and perhaps at the most five thousand fighting men. But again that same year a raid of theirs in Dorsetshire succeeded, and the next

year between Kent and Sussex they struck again, and before winter in the hollow land of the Fens and in the Broads and in Kent.

It is with the year 839 that you get the first hint at an attack upon London. It is not certain that that attack was Danish, but it is almost certain that the mention in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle refers to a great simultaneous series of raids upon the French and the English coasts which struck Picardy and Rochester in Kent as well as London. Something we shall never know is what was pushing them. They had some more adventurous man with his companions to rouse them in the Baltic and off the Norwegian inlets, or there was passing over that unknown pagan society of the north one of those spirits which pass over human societies and lead them out to peril. They would risk the Bay of Biscay, but their ships were caught by the Christians in the Asturias. They even dared for the first time to winter without going home, and to pass the time between one fighting season and the next upon an island

in the mouth of the Noir Moutier. They pushed as far as Seville and the Moors ate them up. They ran up the Elbe to Hamburg in a force far larger than anything that has been seen in the west. They ran up the Seine to Rouen and further. They pushed through a gate of Paris and were turned out.

They first charged at and then carried Bordeaux, and all this while they raided Ireland. It was in the year 851 that there came at last a great fleet of these purposeless destroyers to the Thames mouth, three hundred and fifty ships so came, and Canterbury and London were stormed. But their host, which so considerable a fleet must have brought for the first time in numbers really threatening, was beaten as it marched down the Stane Street to the raiding of the south. They were met at Ockley* by the host of the English King Ethelwulf and were cut to

*The reader should be warned that this famous action has been ascribed by modern pedantry to all manner of other places and sites. For my part I will trust our ancestors, the tradition of the place, and the obvious strategies of the Roman Road.

TEDDINGTON

pieces. He had probably come up by that old way from Winchester which leads through Alton into the Dorking Gap, and so had come up with the raiders. Four years later these pirates, who had already learnt to winter upon Christian land in Gaul, wintered in Sheppey. That they went up the river next year we have no record, but ten years later, in 865, they had been wintering in England, this time in Thanet. The Kentish men paid them ransom, but the pagan kept no faith. He took the ransom and harried the land. Thenceforward it is perpetual raiding up and down England north of Thames. In '71 they are in Reading, but not, it would seem, by river, and Alfred beat them on Ashdown, but they were in no way driven off. They held London all that winter, and year after year they still marched up and down England.

The pirates, keeping more or less together in one horde, marched and ravaged without strategical purpose and with no power of

conquest, organisation, or government, ruining as they went, and you have in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle such phrases as: "Here the host travelled over the mouth of Humber to York." "Here the host went to Mercia and to Nottingham." "Here the host went again to York." "Here the army rode across Mercia into East Anglia and took up their winter quarters in Thetford." "Here the host went into Northumbria, and took up their winter quarters at Torksey." "Here the host went to Repton"—and so forth, to Cambridge, to Wareham, to Exeter—a perpetual raid until in 878 Alfred came out from behind Selwood and his hiding in the crisis of his kingdom, and beat them for good on the bare chalk Down above Eddington. Thenceforward the pressure is against the pirates.

More than twenty years later they raided from Boulogne into Kent, and it was in that same raid in 893 that again the Thames was violated. Haesten, whom we call Hasting, came up so far as Milton, that is the first good landing-place upon the southern shore

of the inland Thames just opposite Tilbury.* He was working with another force to the south in the Rother, but nothing came of this double attack. There was no sailing up river. The station at Milton was broken up and Hasting went down river, crossed to the northern shore, and established himself at Benfleet. The men of London, with a reinforcement of the national army, took his fort and broke all that part of the Danish force, and his ships were either destroyed or brought up river to London, or some up the Medway to Rochester, but Hasting himself who had been raiding was not captured. He came back with that part of his force which had been with him, summoned sundry parties of the raiding Danes from other parts of England, made a new base not far from the old one, and started upon a new raid right across England to the Western Sea. When he had returned he brought such ships as re-

* Or Milton Creek out of the Swale. So Professor Oman will have it in his book upon *England Before the Conquest*. But he gives no proof. Milton on the Thames itself would have seemed a much safer and more accessible base.

mained to him up river into the Lea, built yet another fort upon that stream twenty miles from London. Once more that base was destroyed. The river Lea was blocked below their settling place, such ships as they had, destroyed or taken to London again. And meanwhile the astonishing Danish host survived, raiding out again across England in a final effort. But their sea power was gone. They wintered at Bridgenorth in the west. Their few remaining ships, six in number, attempted the Isle of Wight and Devon. Alfred beat them off, also catching three aground, but of the remaining three two were left upon the Sussex coast and their crews hanged in Winchester. The last one left, full of wounded men, made East Anglia. In 901 Alfred died, but though he had prevented the raiding of the Danes from destroying Christian England, the plundering went on year after year, but for many years the Thames was free. Seventeen years later they fell upon Severn mouth and were beaten off, and the story goes on with a gradual

reconquest of the posts which the pagans had established in the Midlands. It was not until 980 that they touched again at Thames mouth in Thanet, harrying it, and two years later they seem to have come up river and attacked London once more, but there is a bare mention of it, and nothing further. But with that end of the century you come to a very different set of wars—a political attempt of the northern raiders, now organised in regular fashion, and almost a kingdom by themselves, upon the verge of accepting Christianity and of entering into the European Commonwealth. These new fights were fought not for plunder but for conquest. They ended in success, and the critical moment of the campaign was decided in the Thames.

All the fighting of the thirty odd years which established the Danish dynasty in England and led up to the great reign of Canute, has for its pivot or centre the estuary of the Thames and in successive attacks upon the defence of, or in the alliance of London.

Ethelred the Unready, when he forms his first plans against Olaf, gathers his fleet in the Pool of London—though he does nothing with that fleet (992). When, two years later (994), Olaf makes his alliance with Sweyn, it is again up the estuary of the Thames that he sails to make his great attack upon the City—but London beat him off. Though London is attacked again from the *land* in 1009 and with very great vigour in 1013, Edmund Ironside, a boy who all but saved his house, fought alternately north and south of the estuary against the armies landed from the invading fleet.

That campaign (the campaign of 1016) is as excellent an example of the part the Lower Thames played in the warfare of this island before the Norman Conquest as one could choose. In the month of May Canute makes his attempt to reduce the capital. He cut a canal through the alluvium of Suffolk to get his ships round the Bridge head, so that he held London from the River side both above bridge and below, and he dug his trench all round the north, east, and west over a-

gainst the walls. But he did not reduce the town. Edmund Ironside coming up from the west, re-entered it. The invader retired to an entrenched camp at Greenwich. When later the whole invading fleet had dropped down the Thames and sailed out of the estuary, you get a strategical playing north and south of that obstacle which is most illuminating. Canute attacks the Suffolk shore. Edmund marches thither, having the estuary to the south of him. Canute then sails across the mouth of the Thames and attacks Kent shore. Edmund counter-marches, *is compelled to take the long route crossing the Thames at London,* and finds the Danish advance at Otford to the south of the estuary. He defeats it. Canute thereupon once more crosses the mouth of the Thames and attacks the Essex shore, and once more Edmund goes back by the long land route, crosses at London, gets to the north of the estuary, and fights and loses (by treachery) his great action on the Crouch at Ashington, near Rochford.

You could not have within a shorter space

of time a clearer view both of what the Lower Thames meant as an avenue of approach to invasion during the Dark Ages that were coming to a close, and what it was to mean as an obstacle to a passage of armies during the centuries of the Middle Ages which were about to open. The Lower Thames played no great part between this date, 1016, and the invasion of William the Conqueror. A fleet seems to have stood on it perpetually for the defence of the kingdom under Canute, but did not serve as an avenue of invasion, nor was that fleet brought to action.

The Lower Thames last appears before the Conquest as an element in warfare when Godwin and his sons enter the mouth of the River in 1052, the fifty ships of the King not daring to offer battle. London favoured this particular advance, allowed Godwin to pass under the Bridge without obstacle (which shows how the masts were stepped), and with that successful but hardly challenged expedition ends the first chapter of the Lower

PANGBOURNE

Thames in English warfare : the chapter of its use in the Dark Ages as an avenue of invasion into the heart of the country and against London and, already by the early eleventh century, its strategical value as an obstacle to the movement of troops from north to south.

The Lower Thames in the warfare of the Middle Ages, and indeed up to that of the seventeenth century and the Civil Wars—that is, throughout a space of six hundred years (from 1066 to 1644), appears in English warfare only in the character of the main obstacle of crossing South England.

It is impossible to develop a negative aspect of this kind at any great length, nor is it even possible to affirm it as an universal negative. I can indeed call to mind no case of the transport of troops in any considerable numbers from the north to the south of the Lower Thames, or vice versa, during the period in question. But even if some considerable exception be discovered, it does not affect the general thesis that the great

groups of civil war which marked the history of England in the Middle Ages and during the seventeenth century were powerfully affected in their strategy by the interruption to eastern communications to north and south, which was caused by the Lower Thames and its estuary.

Thus the whole plan of the Wars of the Roses, infinitely confused though it is in detail, involves a striking up from or down to London with perpetual action west of London, but there is never any attempt to turn a southern or a northern position by the crossing of the Lower Thames in force—at least that I can call to mind. You have the same thing earlier in the Barons' Wars. When Henry III. wishes to make a base for himself in South England and begins by advancing on Rochester, Simon makes no attempt to cut across anywhere below London. On the contrary, he marches south from that lowest crossing, making sure of intercepting the King on his march round parallel with the coast. In the succeeding campaign the line

of the Severn determines everything, and here again the Upper Thames is crossed and recrossed as well, the Lower Thames not at all; and when we come to the great Civil Wars of the seventeenth century or, as our forefathers called them, "the Great Rebellion," you have perhaps the clearest instance since the campaign of Edmund Ironside of how the estuary of the Lower Thames determined by its obstacle the strategy of the east of England. Speaking in very general terms and from the point of view of strategy alone as distinct from the great moral and social forces at work, the Parliament won because it continuously held not only London but a great triangle of the Eastern English land; Kent in the main, and all East Anglia, and after the second year of the war Lincolnshire as well.

Now imagine in the place of the estuary of the Thames continuous land communication and you will see what a difference that change would have made. Charles at the very beginning of the campaign, though he

could not have besieged a town as large as London, could very probably have marched past it and chastised East Anglia, broken up its recruiting centres, etc., confident that there was open to him an alternative retreat to the west upon either side of London. Nay, he could, had he been successful in this early part of the war, in an East Anglian raid have continued that success in the south-east. He might, I imagine, have isolated London, though he could not have besieged it. As it was, the two halves of his enemy's country divided for *his* purposes by the Lower Thames were for *their* purposes united by common radii converging at London and by the control of all the Lower River as a continuous avenue of transport and supply.

What was still heartily Royalist in Sussex (and I believe I may count here many of the castles) was, through the action of that same obstacle, a hopelessly isolated patch which Parliament had later little difficulty in reducing. But suppress the Lower Thames and it would have given Charles a solid base for advance.

We must not exaggerate the point, for the strategy of the time was very confused, and sometimes at first almost purposeless; but none the less in any campaign, however muddled, the main natural strategy imposed by topography invariably appears, and for what it is worth I cite it in this case of the Lower Thames and of the Civil Wars.

The third point, of course, in this connection of the Lower Thames with the Civil Wars waged in this island is the position of London: and that position is twofold. London has one great strategical character as the lowest crossing place of the Thames; it has another great strategical character as the chief natural base in the island.

The first of these two characters is obvious, and as obviously recurs throughout the whole history of battle between the Norman Conquest and the Parliamentary Wars. Whoever has possession of London has possession of the secure crossing place nearest the sea which gives immediate interior communication between one section of the east of the

island and the other, and as a rule to have possession of London is to have command sooner or later of the whole of the south and east upon that account.

But the second character, London as a base, is of even more importance. You had here a town so great that after the Dark Ages it need never stand a siege. It is further a town the supplies of which under primitive conditions lay almost always uncut. Unless a man had so considerable a fleet that he could cut off supplies by River, so well organised a transport that he could keep both banks of that broad stream perpetually in touch, and finally so very large a command that he could hold the whole circuit of the walls securely and the Bridge end on the Southwark side as well, London could not be, strictly speaking, besieged, and, from the Danish Wars onwards, London never was.

Not only was this great centre of supply nourished by the Thames immune from such isolation, but it could also furnish stores of provision, remounts, and all that was neces-

sary for a medieval army in quantities more than sufficient for the restoration or recruitment of such a force; hence we find London perpetually turning the scale during six centuries of fighting, and it is almost true to say that he who has London ultimately wins the war. It was the size of London, and in particular its value as a recruiting centre, which checked Charles I. after Edgehill. London made the fortune of Simon de Montfort; London appears to have remounted the Barons in the most critical moment of the campaign of Magna Charta; and London was the necessary pivot upon which William the Conqueror was compelled to hinge all his work of pacification after Hastings. Indeed, the position of London could not be better illustrated than in this early example, where the Norman found it impossible or inadvisable to attempt a direct attack upon it, was compelled to isolate it temporarily by sweeping a line of devastation around it, and made it his first care to recognise its customs and pre-eminence in the kingdom.

With the conclusion of this brief survey of the part which the Lower Thames and London as the creation of the Lower Thames has played in the history of warfare I must close this Essay.

I would close it, as I began it, by the qualification that all those material causes which are the delight of one who traces out the effects of historical geography are but half the story. Of the spirit of place and of the human motive without which such mere topography would be meaningless, I have said little or nothing in this consideration of the River of London building up London through two thousand years; but that is because this business of the soul in any historical matter must be separately treated, and that in a spirit always alien, and sometimes antagonistic, to the chain of material cause and effect.

Nevertheless, it is the soul of London and of London River which has driven forward the story of both of them together, much more than any material limits within which

that soul was compelled to act. And that is why to-day overlying the vestiges — often now completely hidden — of the original material framework, London and the River rather control that framework and what were once the necessary condition of port and market and crossing place than are controlled by them.

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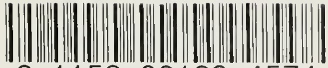
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