

# WALKING THE SAXON SHORE

Steve Melia goes in search of scenes of Saxon conflict and wonders if things were more peaceful than we thought

**T**HE history of England was a series of invasions, or so my generation was taught. Bronze Age people were displaced by invading Celts. They were conquered by the Romans who civilised them. When the Romans left, the Romanised Celtic Britons were killed, enslaved or pushed further west by Anglo-Saxons, who spoke a Germanic language, Old English. I learnt that story from Ladybird Books in the early 1970s, and it took me many years to realise how sparse the evidence was behind it. Since then, historians, archaeologists and geneticists have challenged much of it, but its influence remains in our national consciousness and our tourist industry.

The Saxon Shore Way runs for

153 miles around the Southeast coast from Hastings to Gravesend, linking four late Roman sites believed to be fortifications against marauding Saxons. The name “Saxon Shore” comes from a single entry in a medieval copy of a Roman document listing official positions. The Count of the Saxon Shore was responsible for nine forts, stretching over a longer coastline from Hampshire to Norfolk. I was planning to walk part of it, from Dover to Ramsgate, to visit two of those Roman sites, and dig deeper into that story of the peoples who became the English.

I have passed through Dover many times on my way to France, but I had never travelled there to visit the town, until last August. One reason for doing that towers over you as you turn



St Mary in Castor Church in the grounds of Dover Castle



Pharos Lighthouse

## In recent times, archaeologists and geneticists have challenged the whole idea of an Anglo-Saxon invasion

left out of the station. Dover Castle was my first destination. It takes about half an hour to cross the town centre and climb the hill to its entrance. Along the way I passed the Roman Painted House, which boasts some of the finest ancient wall paintings in Britain. It was closed for repairs last summer, but should be reopening sometime in 2024.

Dover was one of the Saxon Shore’s fortified settlements. Parts of the Roman fort were excavated during the 1970s, but none of them are visible today. The only other Roman structure in Dover stands inside the outer walls of the medieval castle, now managed by English Heritage. The Pharos is

one of only three surviving Roman lighthouses in the world. It was built in the century following the Roman conquest, when Dover became a naval and trading port.

It stands next to St Mary-in-Castor church, which dates back to Saxon times, though some parts, including the arches on either side of the tower, are made of Roman brickwork and look Roman in style. Whether the Romans built the original tower, or the Saxons reused Roman masonry, is unknown. Either way, the church we see today is the

work of several generations and includes a new roof after it was bombed during World War II. Local legend says that Hitler planned to occupy the castle after invading England, which is why the castle itself was never bombed.

From the battlements of the outer walls, you can see in all directions, across the surrounding countryside, the town, the beach enclosed within the harbour walls and the ferry port. At its height, Roman Dover covered five hectares, which was large for the time but small by today’s standards. Like several of the Saxon Shore forts, Dover’s was built in the late third century. Andrew Roberts, English Heritage historian, doubts the traditional view of their purpose. “For the third century there’s no evidence of Saxon raiding on Britain, although there was later on, so the point of their construction doesn’t seem connected to raiding,” he says.

So why else might they have been built? The evidence is not conclusive, but they may have had an economic and logistical function, like the port of Dover today. He refers me to a study by AF Pearson, who mentions the collapse of the Roman currency in the late third century. The authorities began collecting taxes in the form of goods, so “the military ports could have been intended to serve as collection points for this tax”.

In recent times, archaeologists and geneticists have challenged the whole idea of an Anglo-Saxon invasion. Hundreds of excavations across England have failed to produce any evidence of battles. Instead, they have found graves where recent immigrants are buried side-by-side with indigenous people. Prof. Susan Oosthuizen has written a short readable book called *The Emergence Of The English*, which tells a story of



Saxon Shore Way along the River Stour

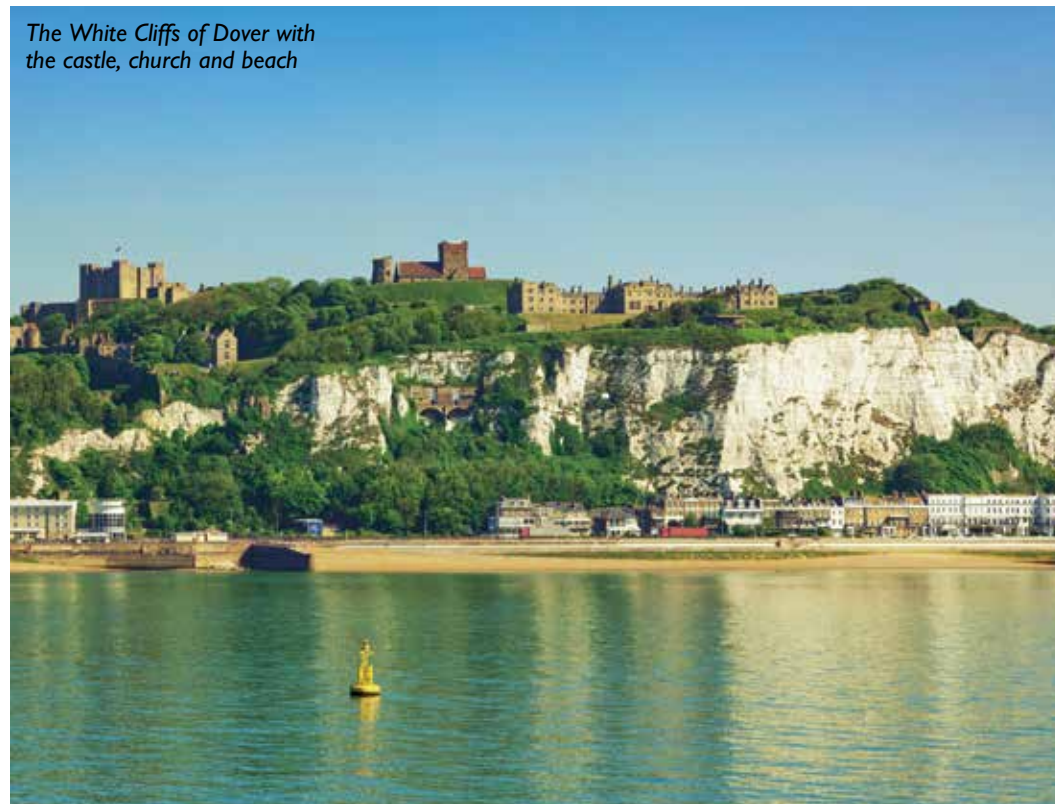
more peaceful migration. More controversially, in 2006 a geneticist, Stephen Oppenheimer, found that most of the migrants from north-west Europe arrived earlier, in Neolithic times – although a more recent study has challenged this. He speculated that those people brought Germanic languages here long before the Anglo-Saxons. He argued that the name “Saxon Shore” really meant “shore of the Saxons” – who were already living here.

Roberts and Oosthuizen both reserve judgement on that question. She says: “No-one knows to whom the term was meant to refer, or even if late Roman writers themselves had any idea. The list of forts [covered] the north-east, eastern and southern coasts, so ‘Saxon’ in this context seems to cover people from anywhere between Scandinavia and Brittany.”

I set off early the following morning. In the town centre, I picked up the signs for the Saxon Shore Way, and followed them to the harbour and shingle beach. A couple of dog-walkers were the only people out that early. It would seem a strange place to go bathing, in this narrow strip of water between the ferry port and the western harbour, but some people do.

The path follows the seafront, past the long high wall of post-war flats, then crosses the dual carriageway to follow a narrow street sandwiched between terraced houses and the famous white cliffs. It opens out by the entrance to the ferry port, from where a path leads steeply upwards.

Dover is England’s busiest ferry port. I was standing on top of the



The White Cliffs of Dover with the castle, church and beach

cliffs, watching the flow of vehicles and ferries, when a young woman asked me to photograph her with the castle behind. She was wearing an elegant black dress and tights. What was she doing here, climbing up cliffs? She told me she had just arrived from Romania to board the cruise ship docked in the Western Harbour and wanted to see the white cliffs before she left. I said, “We’re standing on them”, and she turned back disappointed. Later on, I discovered that you do catch some side-views of the cliffs.

As you turn away from the port the scenery turns wilder. The first stretch of the path has been widened and surfaced to cope with thousands of feet. It was surrounded by wild flowers, some of them garden escapes but no less beautiful for that. A pair of ravens were wheeling overhead and I recognised the cry of a peregrine falcon. Then my mobile phone beeped, welcoming me to France, which I could just see through the haze. You get the best views of the white cliffs from St Margaret’s Beach, below the village, from where the path climbs up again and stays high until the flatter lands surrounding Sandwich Bay appear below.

The canons of Walmer Castle, pointing towards the coast path, offer a stern welcome to the town, which is now joined to Deal. There are so

The ramparts of Walmer Castle, an artillery fort originally constructed by Henry VIII between 1539 and 1540



many historical sites along this coast, you would need several days to explore them all.

Deal seemed sprucer and livelier than I remembered it. Beach Street was draped in its annual flower display. This beautification faces one of Deal’s famous features – the last pier to be built in England, in 1957, with all the architectural beauty of a motorway service station.

I was booked to stay in Sandwich, making the day’s walk about 17 miles. The Saxon Shore Way follows the seafront to the Royal St George’s Golf Links, which crosses into the town. Sandwich is smaller and prettier than the other towns along this route. It was founded in late Saxon times and



ABOVE: Flower show in Deal, Kent



Hugin – the replica Viking longship in Cliffsend

some of its buildings date back to the Middle Ages. I was staying in a 16th century inn, with some rickety sash windows. As I tried to open one, its lower frame crashed down into the courtyard below. The landlady said something about the joys of old buildings as she offered me a towel as a draft excluder.

The Saxon Shore Way turns inland here, towards Richborough Fort, where I walked the next morning. As I climbed through some trees, the Roman remains suddenly came into view. The walls, up to eight metres high, form three sides of a square, surrounded by rows of ditches, inside and out. A building near the entrance houses a small museum, displaying finds from the site, including the sculpture of a goddess, believed to be an offering from sailors or traders from the Rhineland. As Roberts and Oosthuizen both told me, we don’t know when the first Germanic-speakers settled here, but we do know that people came to Britain from all over the Roman empire, including some Germanic-speakers.

The audio guide was one of the best I have heard. It explains how what you see today is only a snapshot from one period of time. Buildings were built, demolished and rebuilt over three centuries. A replica wooden gateway illustrates what the earliest fort might have looked like, shortly

after the Roman invasion. The stone walls were built 300 years later. Do we know why?

Roberts believes that it was probably built by Carausius, the rebel emperor who declared independence from Rome in 286 AD. “It’s designed to withstand sieges . . . It seems odd that you would build this to combat sea-borne raiding. We don’t have precise dating, but it was more likely to prevent a re-invasion from Rome.”

I left Richborough in the early afternoon. My final destination lay on the opposite side of the River Stour. As there were few crossings, I had two choices, and made the wrong one. I should have continued on the Saxon Shore Way to Minster and then turned East. Instead, I retraced to Sandwich to join the England Coast Path. Thanks to a diversion for “commercial” reasons, it now follows main roads through industrial areas for three miles, until you reach Pegwell Bay Country Park – or you can take a bus. I wanted to finish where the Saxons were reputed to have first arrived in 449 AD. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* names the place as Wippidsfleet, believed to be Ebbsfleet, a couple of miles inland – the bay has silted up since then. The path follows the limit of the solid land, with coarse grasses colonising the mudflats, which stretch further out into the bay. I stopped at a bird hide,

Richborough Fort



where a man was explaining to a boy, “that’s a *Larus Argentatus* – otherwise known as a seagull”.

The path rejoins the road in the village of Cliffsend, three miles from Ramsgate station, where I planned to finish. On a small fragment of green space, beside a café, lay the final thing I wanted to see – Hugin, a replica Viking longship, sailed to England by Danes on the 1500th anniversary of the Anglo-Saxon landing – if that ever happened. The Saxon leaders named in the *Chronicle*, Hengist and Horsa, are now regarded as legendary figures. There was something kitsch about the replica, more suited to a theme park than a monument, reminding me how each generation retells old stories in its own image.

I will leave the last word to Susan Oosthuizen. “I do not know whether or not there was large-scale migration into southern England from [the Anglo-Saxon] regions at that time,” she says. “There is currently no evidence to support that contention, but that is not to say that it doesn’t exist, and may yet be discovered . . . The archaeological evidence indicates that, like those before them, early medieval immigrants came from all over Europe and the Mediterranean; that they came as individuals or in small groups; and that they were assimilated into the communities in which they settled.”



Cliffsend sign in Kent