WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY CIC

SAXON SHORE FORTS

THE SAXON SHORE FORTS AND EARLY CONFLICT
BETWEEN THE ANGLO-SAXONS AND THE ROMAN
PROVINCE OF BRITANNIA. A SHORT HISTORY.

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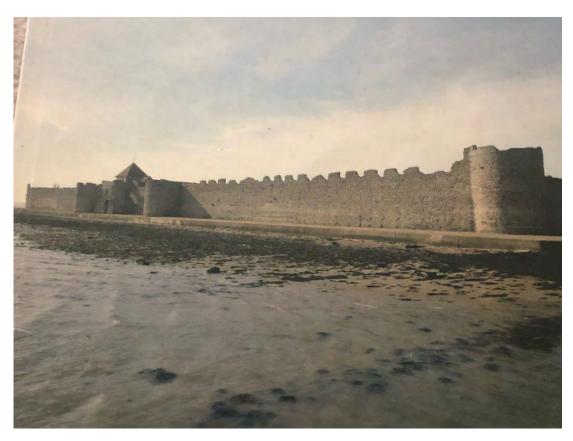
Introduction

By the mid third century, the Roman Empire was facing major economic and military issues. The response in Britain to military threats from Germanic raiders was to build a series of fortresses along the Eastern coast.

Saxon Shore Forts

Today we refer to these great bastions as the Saxon shore forts. Eleven forts have now been identified but it is likely that there were many more and that time and nature and human activity have removed all trace of them.

The known forts are placed in positions of strategic locations, namely guarding estuaries or inlets from the Wash and down the east coast and along the south coast. Forts are situated at Pevensey in East Sussex, Brancaster, Burgh Castle and Caister on Sea, all in Norfolk, Portchester in Hampshire, Bradwell on Sea in Essex, Lympne, Reculver, Richborough and Dover in Kent, Walton Castle in Suffolk.

THE ROMAN SAXON SHORE FORTRESS OF PORTCHESTER OR PORTUS ADURNI.
THE TOWERS AND THE CURTAIN WALLS ARE THE ORIGINAL ROMAN CONSTRUCTIONS.

The third century

The third century in Britain was troublesome. A number of revolts by Roman Commanders had resulted in Britain becoming part of the so- called Gallic Empire which elected usurper Emperors. The legitimate Emperors would restore the province to the legitimate Empire, but it took from 260 to 274 until restoration was achieved. Assassinations, invasions, raids and conspiracies all played their part within the history of the third century and this was synonymous with what was occurring across the whole of the Roman world. Civil wars, rebellions and Barbarian pressures on several of the Empire's borders instigated a crisis across the Empire from the west, east and north.

A surviving ancient fourth century Roman map and document, the Notitia Dignitatum records the forts and refers to the commander of them as the *'Comes littoris Saxonici per Britanniam'.*

This was the title given to the overall commander and it means the Count of the Saxon shore of Britain. Some sources argue that the forts were a deterrent to ward off invasions from the legitimate Roman Empire but it is generally accepted that the province was being attacked by Germanic pirates, namely Saxons, Franks and Frisians.

There were similar forts on the coasts of Gaul which may indicate that the defences on each side of the channel were designed to co-ordinate actions against raiders and invaders and that they allowed the Roman fleet to operate between a series of safe harbours.

The raids seem to have occurred for decades and there were periods in the fourth century when such incursions seemed to happen with increasing regularity.

367 AD

In 367 AD, during the reign of the Emperor, Valentinian the first, an event called the 'Great Barbarian Conspiracy' occurred. The Roman garrison on Hadrian's wall is said to have rebelled in the winter and allowed the Picts from Caledonia to enter the Roman Province. Tribes from Ireland, namely the Scotti and the Attacotti are believed to have attacked the west coast below Hadrian's wall, whilst Saxons and Franks launched attacks from the continent against the east coast. These raiding warbands attacked loyal Roman troops and towns across the north and east of the province. Cities were sacked and the populations were murdered, raped and enslaved.
It has also been suggested that Roman spies (The Arcani) who had infiltrated many of the invading tribes had turned traitor to Rome and had been promised sanctuary and wealth for providing intelligence against their own side.

The *'Comes maritime tractus'* The commander of the British coastal areas is said to have been killed, presumably in some sort of military engagement. His name was Nectarides. No other details are known. Fullofaudes, The Duke of Britannia (Dux Britanniarum) overall commander of the military of the province, is said to have been captured or killed, but again no further details survive.

368 AD

Early in 368 AD, the Imperial Roman relief force arrived in Britain. The Roman Commander was Count Flavius Theodosius. His son, and future Emperor, also called Theodosius accompanied him.

The following was recorded by one Ammianus Marcelinus.

"There he divided his troops into many parts and attacked the predatory bands of the enemy, which were ranging about and were laden with heavy packs; quickly routing those who were driving along prisoners and cattle, he wrested from them the booty which the wretched tribute-paying people had lost. And when all this had been restored to them, except for a small part which was allotted to the wearied soldiers, he entered the city, which had previously been plunged into the greatest difficulties, but had been restored more quickly than rescue could have been expected, rejoicing and as if celebrating an ovation."

Theodosius restored order but the province would still be plagued by raids and rebellions.
The Roman Empire in the West was in terminal decline and between 408 and 410 AD, the Roman military withdrew from Britain.

The raiding that occurred throughout Britain was similar and just as disruptive as the Viking raids were from the late eighth century. The situation was complicated too, by the fact that the Romans and the Romano British ruling classes often used members of these tribes as mercenaries and that they had been awarded lands on which they settled their families and kinsmen.

The Roman Military withdrawal

After the Roman Military withdrawal, Romano-British leaders engaged in civil wars and attempted to gain territory and form their own Kingdoms. Whilst the south west of Britain probably maintained Roman culture and civil organisation for several decades, the parochial warfare and wars against the Germanic settlers and invaders eventually brought about the downfall of Roman Britain.

The subsequent social and economic upheaval and the long periods of warfare that followed the withdrawal of the Roman military lasted for two centuries. The Romano-British culture eventually fractured and the Britons were forced into what is now Cornwall, Wales and the North of Britain. Ancient hillforts across these regions were re-occupied and re-fortified. There would be successes for the Britons as there would for the invading Anglo-Saxons but eventually the Saxons would gain control over the majority of what we now call England.

The scope of the events of this period is both complex and substantial and therefore too large to be covered in this short article.
Many battles are recorded in the Anglo-Saxon chronicles and within the records of the Britons themselves but a flavour of what happened can be gauged by events that took place in or around the latter parts of the fifth century.

477 AD

In about 477 AD, a Saxon Chieftain called Aelle landed in what is now Sussex and carved out a small Kingdom for himself and his sons. They continued to expand their Kingdom over the following years and took the Roman city of Noviomagnus Reginorum, today's modern Chichester.

Battles against the Romano-Britons would occur at Mercredesburne and Cymenshore but an important event happened in 491 AD, and is recorded in the Anglo-Saxon chronicles.
Anderitum was the Roman fort at Pevensey. After the Roman Military withdrawal, it was occupied by the Romano-British. The Romano-British still retained a military that mirrored the late Roman army and they dressed and looked like Roman Legionaries of the fifth century.

Aelle attacked and besieged the fortress, whose defenders initially repelled the Saxons. It is recorded that fighting took place every day over a long period of time. It would also appear that local population had taken refuge within the fortress so it is reasonable to accept that many women and children had to endure this siege.

ANDERITUM OR PEVENSEY ROMAN FORT. TOP RIGHT IS A NORMAN CASTLE BUILT WITHIN THE FORTRESS.
IT WAS HERE THAT THE ROMANO-BRITISH DEFENDERS WERE SLAUGHTERED BY THE SAXONS UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF AELLE.
THE NORMAN INVASION FORCE LANDED HERE ON SEPTEMBER 28TH 1066. THE CASTLE SAW ACTION IN THE FIRST BARON'S WAR AND WAS ATTACKED BY THE FRENCH DURING THE 100 YEARS WAR.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY LIEVEN SMITS

A relief force of Romano-Britons arrived and attacked the Saxons, causing many casualties. The relief force had appeared from the great forest of Andredcester, which the Saxons called Andredsweald.
The present-day Ashdown Forest is a remnant of this once huge woodland.
The Saxons managed to defeat the relief force and eventually they broke into the fortress where they slaughtered the Britons. It appears that a massacre took place though the numbers killed cannot be ascertained. Aelle had now carved out his own Kingdom and he is recorded in the Anglo-Saxon chronicle as the first Saxon Bretwalda.

It would appear that many of the ancient Roman forts of the so -called Saxon shore would be occupied and utilised for the whole of the Saxon period and that following the Norman conquest that some of them were converted into castles.

Therefore, these great defensive edifices throughout their long and continuing existence, were used by Romans, Britons, Saxons, Vikings and the Normans. Now they are visited by tourists but how many are aware of their incredible histories and the events that occurred within them?