A short hitory of england

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A SHORT HISTORY OF ENGLAND

CHAPTER I

THE GEOGRAPHY OF ENGLAND

1. The British Isles. — The British Isles are cut off from the rest of Europe by the waters of the English Channel and the North Sea, and their people have therefore lived a life much apart from that of the other nations of Europe. The sea forms their natural frontier and has given as much independence to their history as it has detachment to their geographical position. Although in early times there were frequent invasions from the continent, as time has gone on and national unity been more completely attained, the island home of the English people has proved to be especially easy to defend. At several critical times good fortune has transformed the narrow seas[1] into a stormy and impassable barrier, and saved the island from conquest or from a difficult struggle on its own soil.

In the few instances in which successful invasions and settlements have taken place they have been more gradual in their progress than they would have been if the invaders had come by land. The country has had time to absorb Saxon, Dane, and

[1] "The narrow seas," or "the British seas," is an expression applied to the English Channel and that part of the North Sea which lies between England and Holland. England formerly claimed to have control over these waters.

Norman, and transform them into its own island race. The same is true of more peaceful influences. Many customs lying in the realms of language, law, trade, agriculture, and manufactures have been borrowed or learned by the English from foreigners. But they have received all these things slowly and gradually, and have thus assimilated them to their own national customs.

Yet this isolation of England and its detachment from the continent must not be exaggerated. The width of the intervening waters is not great. The Strait of Dover where it is narrowest is but twenty-one miles wide; the Channel but one hundred and twenty and the North Sea but three hundred miles where they are broadest. From a point about half way along the southern coast of England to another more than one third of the way along the eastern coast there is a stretch in which the British and the continental shores are so near to one another that in all but the most unfavorable weather a few hours' sailing will bring a boat from one coast to the other.

From a geological point of view it is only in recent ages that the British Isles have been separated by water from the continent of Europe. The ancient edge of the continent lay far to the westward of the present coast, and the seas around Great Britain and Ireland are comparatively shallow waters which have in a late geological period overspread the lower-lying lands. The earliest inhabitants of Britain came in all probability by land, not by water. It is scarcely more than an accident that the coasts of France, Belgium, and Holland are separated from those of England by a shallow sea rather than by a level plain. Both coasts are comparatively low and provided with numerous harbors. Hence the countries on the two sides of the narrow seas have always been easily accessible to one another. They are natural neighbors, much alike in the character of their coast, surface, productions, and even population.

There has been much besides these geographical features through all the later centuries of history to bring about intercourse between

England and the mainland. Scarcely any great influence that affected the continental countries failed to make at least some impression on England. As its history is studied it will be found that along with its distinctiveness and marked national peculiarities it has had much in common with the other countries of Europe and has been constantly influenced by them.

Within the group of the British Isles the geographical formation tends to separate Scotland, Ireland, and Wales from England and from one another. The long, narrow shape of the principal island made union of all its inhabitants into one nation difficult. The English and Scotch at its two ends naturally grew up into two separate peoples, and the mountains of Wales long kept the race which inhabited that region separate. The Irish Sea and St. George's Channel separated Ireland and its inhabitants from all of these.

Of these four principal divisions of the islands England is marked out by nature to be the most important. Its territory is a continuous, unbroken stretch, filling far the largest part of the larger island; it is provided with a greater variety of natural resources; and it is nearer to the continent of Europe. England has therefore always been in advance of the other divisions of the British Isles, and their history has been largely dependent on hers.

In ancient times and the middle ages the situation of England was on the distant verge of the world as it was then known. Since the discovery of America and of sea routes around the world, her position has been much more central and advantageous. In early times, therefore, England was a comparatively inconspicuous country in Europe; in modern times she has played a vastly more important part. Her position as an island and her location in the far northwest of Europe have given her a particularly favorable opportunity to develop commerce and to found a colonial empire.

Yet England is a small country. Its area, with Wales, is 58,320 square miles, — about equal to Scotland and Ireland

together, somewhat larger than the state of Pennsylvania, and almost exactly the same as the state of Michigan. It is 365 miles in length from north to south, and 280 miles in its greatest breadth from east to west.

2. The Coasts and Rivers of England. — That part of the coast of England which lies nearest to the continent is made conspicuous by the long line of white chalk cliffs that face the sea. They rise two or three hundred feet above the narrow strip of stony strand at the edge of the water, and extend for many miles along the southeastern and southern coast. These white cliffs are visible in clear weather from the opposite shore where the Channel is narrowest, and from far out at sea where the waters are wider. They have served as a landmark to friend and foe in all ages, and the old poetic name of Albion[1] is said to be due to the white front which Britain turns toward the continent.

Although much of the coast is cliff-bound, there are at least equal stretches of low-lying shore, especially on the eastern coast. Both the cliffs and the low shores are cut by many bays and harbors. Most of these are the mouths of rivers which have been converted into estuaries by the gradual sinking of the coast which has been in progress for long ages.[2] This subsidence has allowed the sea to flow part way up the courses of the rivers, filling with its waters the lower reaches of their valleys.[3] Harbors are therefore as numerous as the rivers; there is in fact no considerable stretch on the whole coast of England without its harbor. Especially is

[1] From Latin *albus*, white. Shakespeare describes England as

> that pale, that white-faced shore,
> Whose foot spurns back the ocean's roaring tides
> And coops from other lands her islanders.
>
> *King John*, Act II, sc. 1.

[2] Even within the last few centuries several hundred square miles of territory, including the sites of some thirty-five towns and villages, have gradually crumbled and slipped into the sea or been submerged by the advancing tides.

[3] See illustration of a small harbor on p. 11.

this true of the southern and eastern coasts, although even on the more rugged western seaboard the deep and broad mouths of the Severn and the Mersey make possible such fine harbors as those of Bristol and Liverpool.

The rivers not only form harbors at their mouths but give access by water far into the interior of the country. At least they did so in earlier times when vessels were small. Of several of them the lower courses are navigable even by the larger vessels of the present day. The Thames, the Severn, and the Trent are long rivers draining the very center of the country. With their tributaries and with the smaller rivers, they make a complete network of water courses. This abundance of streams has been used in modern times to feed a canal system intersecting the country in all directions. The more rapid streams also provide water power.

3. **Surface.** — The cliffs which line so much of the coast give a false impression of the land that lies behind them. Much the greater part of England is a level or but slightly hilly country. It may be divided, as far as its surface is concerned, into three regions, — the southeast, the center, and the north and west. The first of these, covering almost two thirds of England, is undulating though intersected by several ranges of soft rounded chalk hills about five hundred or six hundred feet high. This was the earliest part of Britain to be inhabited by man, and until the last two centuries continued to be by far the most populous, wealthy, and influential. The level and slightly rolling lands which make up the greater part of it are fertile and in the main devoted to agriculture. Its open, treeless hills, downs or wolds, covered with soft, springy turf, are generally utilized for sheep pasture.

If a traveler passes from this region of smooth surfaces, gentle slopes, and moderate ridges northward or westward, he descends into the midlands or "great central plain" of England. This plain extends from the Bristol Channel northward to Liverpool and northeastward through the vale of York to the coast at Durham, broken only here and there by a few groups of rugged hills. In

early times it was thinly populated and backward compared with the region already described. It is now, except the region surrounding London, the richest, most active, and vastly the most populous part of England. Around its edges lie the coal fields; in it are the great manufacturing towns; it includes Liverpool and other great seaports, and contains stretches of country famous for their grazing and dairy products. Its rivers have been connected by canals; it is traversed in all directions by railroads and tunneled by mines; and in many parts its large towns almost touch one another. A district lying west of Birmingham in this region is known as the "black country." It lies upon a coal field, and is dotted with iron furnaces and manufacturing establishments, overspread with cinder heaps, blackened by smoke, and almost stripped of its vegetation by the fumes and soot. It is one great workshop, where labor goes on day and night, above ground and below. Other sections are devoted to equally active but less smoky industries, and not far away rich dairying districts form a peaceful contrast to the manufacturing towns.

Beyond this central plain rise the mountainous districts, — the high moors of Somerset, Devon, and Cornwall in the southwest; Wales in the west; the Lake District in the northwest; and the Pennine Chain, rising from the midlands and extending north into Scotland. The population of the moors and mountain valleys is necessarily sparse and their industries are simple. But on the edge of the mountain ranges where they drop to the plain or the shore, the greater number of the mines of tin, copper, and lead lie, and here there are several large cities and a thicker population.

4. **Climate.** — The aspect of England compared with the continental countries is remarkably green. It is made so by the rich growth of grass and other herbage, and by the verdure and undergrowth of the woods. This luxuriance of growth is due to two causes, — the frequent rains and fogs and the mild climate.

There is often a superabundance of wet weather, especially in the west; a drought is very unusual. The weather is seldom very hot in summer or very cold in winter, although England is in the same latitude as Labrador in America and as central Russia on the continent of Europe. Plowing can be done in much of England as early as February and as late as November. These two conditions, the large rainfall and the mild and equable climate, are due to the position of the British Isles. They lie in the path of a current of southwest winds which blow more than half the days of the year. These winds give the surface waters of the ocean a set toward the northeast, and bring the warmer waters of southern latitudes to the western and southern shores of Great Britain and Ireland. The southwest winds also carry this warmth and the moisture of the ocean far inland, moderating the cold of winter and causing frequent rains and fogs.[1]

The reputation of England as a "foggy isle" is, however, partly due to the peculiar climate of London, which is situated in the valley of the Thames and particularly subject to fogs. Foreigners who spend most of their time there get a false idea of the whole country. The downs and uplands are often bathed in clear sunshine and blown over by crisp breezes while the river valleys are covered with a mantle of fog. On the moors and mountains the weather is often severe, notwithstanding the moderating influences just mentioned; and all over the island there are occasional though seldom prolonged periods of snow and freezing in winter. The weather is changeable from day to day, and the coasts are liable to sudden and violent storms.

5. Forests and Swamps. — In primeval times a large part of the island was covered with thick forests. They stretched dark and impenetrable over much of the great central plain; and even

[1] The warmer waters which bathe the shores of the British Isles are sometimes described as an extension of the Gulf Stream; but this is a mistake. The Gulf Stream disappears by the time it reaches the middle of the Atlantic.

in the more open eastern rolling country many of the upland regions and most of the river valleys were wooded. Whole sections of the country were separated from the rest by these forests. The largest forest in England covered the district known as the Weald, and stretched from Kent almost one third of the way across the island to the westward. The word "Kent," as well as the syllable "Win" in Winchester, is a Celtic word meaning an opening in the forest. Sherwood, where Robin Hood and his merry men hunted the deer; Arden, where Rosalind walked; and many other forests of later times were only surviving fragments of these wild, primitive woodlands.

An Old Oak still standing in Sherwood Forest

Great swamps filled the lower courses of many of the rivers. The "Fens" formed a broad, marshy expanse of several hundred square miles in the east of England. They were scarcely above the level of the sea, and formed a wilderness practically impassable and uninhabitable, except here and there where low hills of gravelly soil rose above the water. This region and several similar morasses were even wilder and more impenetrable than the forests.

Thus in early times but a small part of the land was open to habitation. Strips along the seacoast, steep hillsides bordering the river courses, bare moors and hilltops, occasional open stretches of the rolling country, formed the only dwelling places for early men. Even these open districts were divided from one another, hemmed in and bounded by the vast forests and swamps. The existence of the widespreading forests and fens exercised a deep influence on the early history of the country, and affected it strongly even in later times. The clearing and draining of the

Forests and Swamps of Early England