

THE ENGLISH CHANNEL

By the Same Author

THE EVOLUTION OF ENGLAND

HAWKINS OF PLYMOUTH

SIR FRANCIS DRAKE

THE ENGLISH CHANNEL

A History

BY

JAMES A. WILLIAMSON

COLLINS

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Preface

THE SCOPE of this book is the English shore of the Channel and the activities upon it of nature and man, from the shaping of the coast in ancient times to the making of the holiday resorts in modern. In so large a subject, which touches upon all the history of England, omissions have been inevitable; and I would ask those who miss the inclusion of some interesting topic to consider that if all had been brought in, the book would have expanded to prohibitive length. The subject has fascinated me for many a year and I hope will appeal to some who may not have given much thought to it.

There are two chief ways of knowing a coast, walking along it and sailing past it. Walking gives the most intimate knowledge of the geography and economic development, but from the wrong point of view to appreciate the problems of the sea-going people who have made their livings through the centuries upon the coastal waters. Wheeled transport, even by the pedal cycle, is not nearly so good: it is too fast to permit reflection or the absorption of detail, it seldom takes one along the water's edge, and it concentrates attention on the road rather than the scene. To know a country one must walk; and in most parts of our coast it is still possible to walk along cliff-edge or beach-bordered marsh, or on miles of firm sand when the tide is low. But looking out to sea does not reveal much of the things that have concerned the workers on the sea. Sailing does some of that, even yachtsmen's summer sailing, for it enforces thought on tides, winds, dangers and weather prediction, and anchorages and harbour approaches. Even with all the modern aids of coastal lights and handy yacht rigs and hulls such as no working boat could have employed, there remains much of the unforeseeable which governed the lives of the coasters and fishermen of the past. And the coast as it appears from the sea is

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different from the coast as seen from within, and at times much more beautiful. I have tried to combine the fruits or both views without attempting lyrics of description such as I could not achieve in the written word. Some are present in my mind, and perhaps the relevant facts may help to transfer them.

The illustrations are a selection from a much larger number that have been considered. Some excellent ones have had to be rejected because they are so large that reduction to book-page size would eliminate most of their value, and some smaller ones because their delicate quality would not survive the process of reproduction. Here my gratitude must be expressed to the care and experience of numbers of the publishers' staff in controlling the enthusiasm of the author.

I have many other obligations, as readers of the book will note. I have indicated some in the List of Illustrations and others in the pages on which they are apparent.

J. A. WILLIAMSON

CHAPTER ONE

The Making of the Channel

AT A very late stage in geological time, after protracted ages in which the rocks and the soil—the hard stuff, the coal measures, the chalk, the clays, the gravels and flints—had been laid down and overlaid and heaved up and denuded away, into something like the surface we know, the country now called England found itself physically part of the continent of Europe. And at that time a few stragglers of human kind, now known as palæolithic men, equipped with flint-bladed tools and weapons, were wandering through Europe and England pursuing for food the wild animals produced by the landscape and the climate—strange animals, some of them, such as we see no more in life. In the broadest sense the natural layout of the country had reached what we think of as its final shape ; although it is not final, but merely the temporary stage on which our brief history is being enacted. The general lie of the surface was not quite horizontal, but slightly inclined from west-north-west to east-south-east, towards, that is to say, northern France and the Netherlands, with unbroken land connection all the way from farthest Scotland to those regions of the Afro-Asian junction where the earliest civilisations were about to begin. In our country the hardest and most ancient rocks came to the surface in the higher western parts, and thence dipped more sharply than the general surface towards the east, where they were overlaid with softer materials more recently deposited.

All this had been effected by waves and ripples in the crust of the earth, alternate crests and troughs, slowly upheaving and subsiding, so that parts were covered deep by the sea and afterwards uplifted high into the winds and the rain. Remaining to our scene

is the present condition of the earth waves, an alternation of ridges and valleys running across the country, in southern England roughly on an east-west system, in northern England on a north-south, and in places as radiants from a central plateau such as Salisbury Plain. The east-west foldings concern our present subject, for they created it. One of the longest and deepest valleys lay between present England and present France, and it was to become La Manche, the Sleeve, the English Channel. Only less fundamental to this same subject was the next-but-one valley to the northward, for it was to produce in its time the estuary of the Thames and the port of London.

Climates rose and fell like surfaces, and there were the warm periods when the ancient hunting men killed sabre-toothed tigers, and the cold periods when great sheets of ice, the deposit of unmelted snows, covered the major part of England, grinding-off the summit rocks in resistless horizontal movement and depositing the debris, when at last the thaw came, far from its places of origin. The glaciations (there were more than one) did not actually invade southern England, but they had great effects on its climate and water-movement and thus on surface and ultimately coastline.

The Channel position after the last glaciation seems to have been as follows. There was already a long gulf reaching in from the Atlantic to form what is now the western part of the Channel. Its shore on the English side probably followed a line not very far removed from the present one, although the detail of cliffs, coves and forelands must have been different.¹ The coast of Cornwall, Devon and part of Dorset was formed by ancient erosion, and the rocks in most places are old, hard and resistant; but the hardest material does yield in time to the attack of the sea waves, some significant alterations are historically attested in the past two thousand years, and minor encroachment of the sea can be visually observed in the region to this day. The romantic story that between Cornwall and Scilly stretched the fair, rich land of Lyonesse, peopled and prosperous, but overwhelmed by a sudden tempest, is

¹ See A. H. W. Robinson, *The Floor of the British Seas*, *Scottish Geographical Journal*, Vol. 68, No. 2, 1952. The thirty-fathom contour is close to Land's End, the Lizard and Start Point. From mid-channel south of the Isle of Wight it makes a long narrow tongue eastwards, ending at a point about seven miles south of Beachy Head.