Historic England

Saxon Shore Forts

Introductions to Heritage Assets

Summary

Historic England's Introductions to Heritage Assets (IHAs) are accessible, authoritative, illustrated summaries of what we know about specific types of archaeological site, building, landscape or marine asset. Typically they deal with subjects which have previously lacked such a published summary, either because the literature is dauntingly voluminous, or alternatively where little has been written. Most often it is the latter, and many IHAs bring understanding of site or building types which are neglected or little understood.

This IHA provides an introduction to Saxon Shore Forts (a specific group of later Roman coastal defensive forts constructed to several different plans and portraying the development of Roman military architecture during the third and early fourth centuries, all apparently built in response to early Saxon raiders). Descriptions of the asset type and its development as well as its associations and a brief chronology are included. A list of in-depth sources on the topic is suggested for further reading.

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Front cover
Wall and bastions on the north side of the Saxon Shore fort at Richborough.

Introduction

Although referred to as Saxon Shore Forts, these forts are late Roman in date, and represent a specific group of later Roman coastal defensive forts constructed to several different plans and portraying the development of Roman military architecture during the third and early fourth centuries. They are commonly considered to represent a response to the appearance of seaborne Saxon raiders from the mid-3rd century AD, however there are likely to have been other reasons also.

The forts were built along the coast (Figure 1), mostly on potential points of penetration into the Roman province, such as inlets or estuaries, from the Wash and down round the east and south coast of England. The sites are: Brancaster, Caister-on-Sea, and Burgh Castle (all Norfolk), Walton Castle (Suffolk), Bradwell-on-Sea (Essex), Reculver (Figure 2), Richborough, Dover and Lympne (Kent), Pevensey (East Sussex) and Portchester (Hampshire).

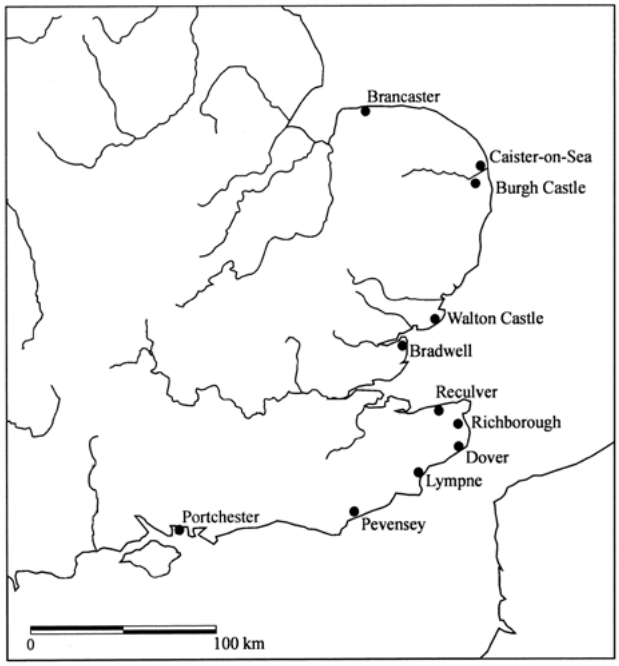

Figure 1
Location map of the forts of the Saxon Shore.

The name given to this group of forts derives from the fact that nine of them are recorded by their Roman names in the late 4th century AD document the *Notitia Dignitatum* (the 'Register of Dignitaries') as being under the command of an official known as the Count of the Saxon Shore (*comes litoris Saxonici*). As the most prominent and substantial of all of the surviving Roman monuments in Britain, Saxon Shore Forts have been the object of antiquarian and archaeological interest since the 17th century.

Several of the forts have been subject to coastal erosion, with large parts of those at Richborough, Reculver, Burgh Castle, and Bradwell-on-Sea being lost. Walton Castle has entirely gone, and is known only from antiquarian records. Others, such as the fine example in Dover, Kent, are better preserved due to silting up of the harbor within which it once was prominently positioned. The construction of the example in Dover involved some partial demolition of structures associated with earlier phases of the Classis Britannica Fort (Roman Navy). This included, a 'Mansio', or hotel, where military officials would have stayed, with painted murals of Bacchus, preserved in part by the construction of a large earth rampart for the new Saxon Shore Fort (and now opened up to see in a museum).

Figure 2
Aerial photograph of the early fort at Reculver, showing attrition by coastal erosion.

1 Description

All of the forts are located on strategic estuaries. For instance, Richborough and Reculver guard the two ends of the Wantsum channel and Portchester castle is located at the head of Portchester harbour, while Caister and Burgh (Figure 3) castles flank the Great Estuary in the Great Yarmouth area. The meaning of the term 'Saxon Shore Fort' is debated, as is the function of the forts. Different arguments suggest that they were links in a logistic chain, or designed to prevent penetration into the province by seaborne raiders and pirates.

Two groups of forts can be differentiated morphologically. One group resembles most of the forts in Roman Britain, sharing their size and internal layout. The second group, however, features novel aspects of Roman fort architecture, common in examples across most of the Roman Empire, but represented uniquely in Britain.

Figure 3
Aerial photograph of the bastioned fort at Burgh Castle, showing attrition (lower right) through coastal erosion.

‘Early’ group

The early group of forts comprises the two forts on the Norfolk coast, at Brancaster and Caister, and Reculver in Kent. These three forts are virtually square with rounded corners (the so-called ‘playing card shape’ common in Roman military architecture). The external walls were narrow (2.4 m), and backed by a substantial earthen rampart. The gates were flanked by internal square towers, and there were also internal angle- and interval-towers. It is assumed that they contained the range of buildings common to Roman auxiliary forts. At Brancaster, aerial photography shows a conventional headquarters building *(principia)* and other buildings rather irregularly disposed. A barrack is known at Caistor, while at Reculver, excavation has revealed the *principia* and barracks of a fort of conventional layout, together with an internal bath-house.

The three forts have been assumed to be early because of their conventional architecture, and excavation has confirmed this judgement. The forts were built at an early stage of coastal defence during the early 3rd century AD.

Main group

The other forts named in the introduction fall into this category. The principal differences with the early group are the thickness of the walls (up to 3.5 m), the variability of plan and, most importantly, the presence of semi-circular bastions on the outer faces of the fort walls.

The massive outer walls were often founded on chalk and flint rafts with the underlying ground stabilised with timber piles. Above a plinth course the walls were faced with flint or stone, including re-used materials. The wall-core comprised concrete and stone, predominantly flint, which occurs abundantly in the chalk areas in which these forts are situated. At regular intervals up the wall were bonding and levelling courses of either flat stones or ceramic tiles. The walls were built in sections, possibly by separate work-parties, and this is shown by horizontal cracks in wall faces. Although most sites were square or rectilinear, there was the potential to fit the defences to a specific site. This is particularly seen in the oval plan of Pevensey.

The external bastions are the signature feature of these forts. Most of these were solid masonry ‘drums’ as at Burgh Castle, Bradwell-on-Sea, Pevensey (Figure 4) and Lympne, though hollow bastions appear at Portchester (Figure 5 and 6). Bastions in late Roman military architecture were provided to give the fort (or town wall) a defensive capability. They allowed attackers to be subjected to enfilading fire along the faces of the walls from the bastions. In some Saxon Shore forts (like Burgh Castle) the bastions are too far apart to enable such fire, suggesting that the builders did not fully understand the function of the bastions.

The layouts of the internal areas of the forts are little known. A grid of roads, wells and pits was found at Portchester, but little convincing evidence for internal structures. Traces of buildings have been found at Burgh Castle. Because of incomplete survival, long histories of later disturbance and adverse ground conditions, geophysics and other remote sensing techniques have not been able to elucidate these issues.

Figure 4
Aerial photograph of the fort of Pevensey, showing the medieval castle (top) within the oval Roman walled circuit.

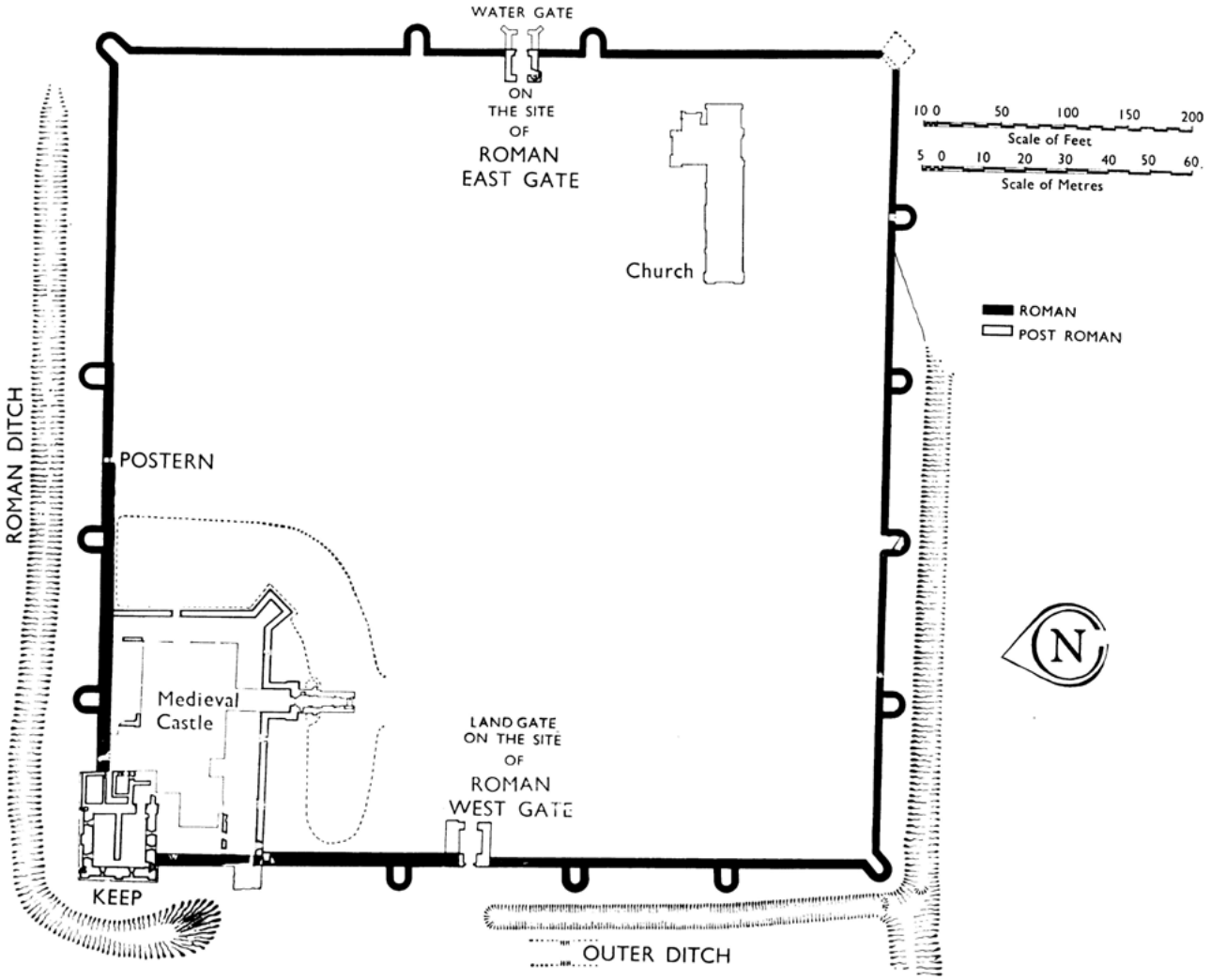

Figure 5
Plan of the Saxon Shore fort of Portchester.

Figure 6
Stone and tile bastions on the south wall of Portchester Castle.

2 Chronology

The early group, as already noted, were constructed in the early to mid-3rd century. The later group were constructed in the final quarter of the 3rd century. Dates of desertion vary. There is evidence that occupation in most of the forts continued into the 5th century, though Lympne (Figure 7), Reculver, Caistor and Burgh Castle seem to have been deserted at some time in the years 360-380. Excavations at Portchester revealed occupation in a more 'disorderly' manner in the early 5th century. Saxon occupation has been discerned at least at Portchester and Richborough, while Pevensey, Portchester and Burgh Castle later housed medieval castles. Portchester also contained an Augustinian priory, which was related to the castle.

Figure 7
Tumbled bastion of the fort at Lympne.

The massive nature of the forts made them suitable for later re-use in some cases: Portchester was used in the early 19th century as a Napoleonic Prisoner of War camp, while at Pevensey pill boxes were built in flint within the ruins as camouflaged defences during the Second World War (Figure 8).

Figure 8
Bastion of the Saxon Shore fort of Pevensey. The upper part of the tower is a concealed Second World War pillbox. Note the slit for a machine gun.

3 Development of the Asset Type

The exploration of these sites has largely been through excavation. As noted above, some of the early group, notably Brancaster and Caister, reveal internal arrangements through geophysical survey. Excavations of the interior of the forts have largely been small in scale, and only the work at Portchester has revealed good information on the layout of the interior.

4 Associations

Some of the Shore Forts had civilian settlements or *vici*, though little is known of these parts of the sites. In military architecture, the early group of forts is associated with the auxiliary forts that are widespread in the Roman military north. The character of the bastioned defences relate to the bastioned late Roman town defences such as Chichester and London.

The forts of Dover and Richborough certainly dominated Roman harbours, and given the location of most of these forts in sheltered places, it is probable that most of the forts were associated with harbours. The Dover fort was associated with a lighthouse of Roman date, while the amphitheatre at Richborough might conceivably have been contemporary with the fort (Figures 9 and 10).

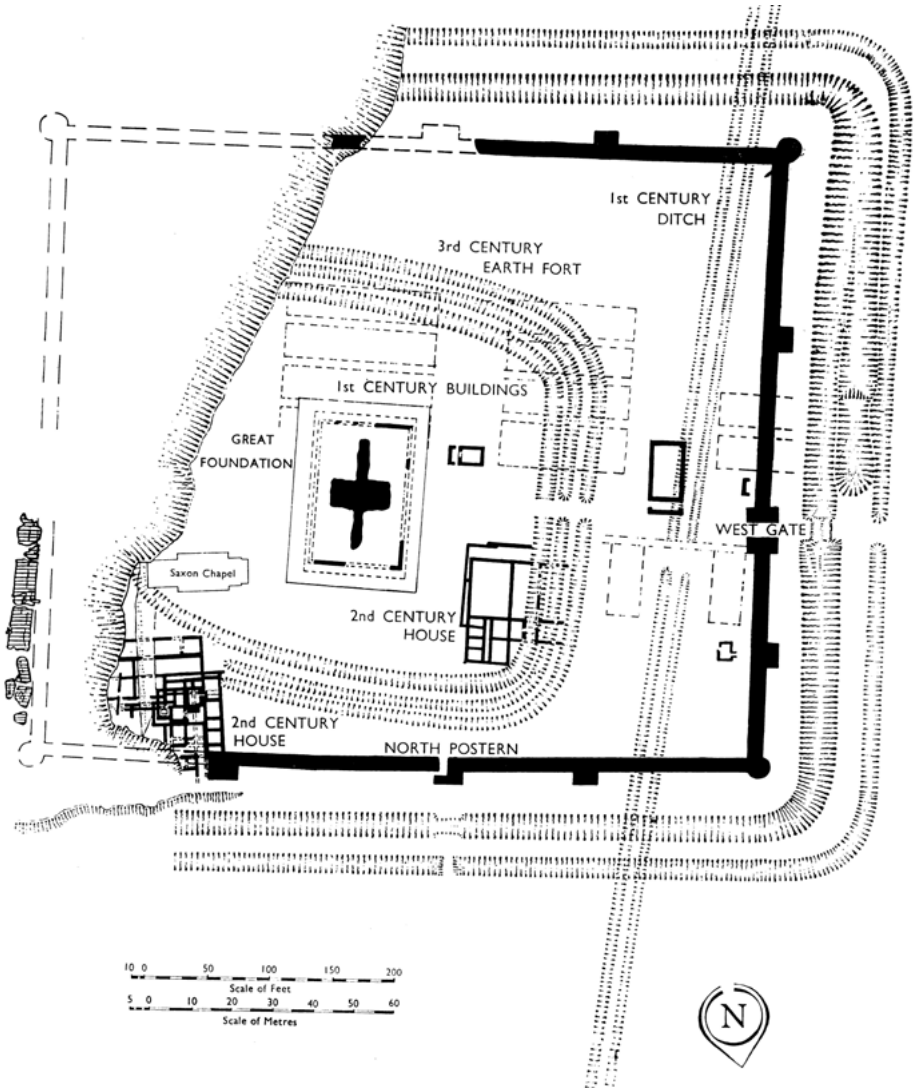

Figure 9
Plan of the complex Roman site of Richborough, showing the walls of the rectilinear Saxon Shore fort.

Figure 10
Wall and bastions on the north side of the Saxon Shore fort at Richborough.

The re-use of several fort enclosures as the outer baileys of medieval castles has been noted above.

5 Further Reading

Two major overviews have been published in the last forty years. These are S Johnson, *The Roman Forts of the Saxon Shore* (1976), and A Pearson, *The Roman Shore Forts* (2002).

Two volumes of edited papers have appeared during the same period, D Johnston (ed), *The Saxon Shore* (1977), and V A Maxield (ed), *The Saxon Shore: A Handbook* (1989).

There are also a number of excavation reports relating to the forts, the most important of which are:

B W Cunliffe, *Fifth Report on the Excavations of the Roman Fort at Richborough, Kent* (1968);

B W Cunliffe, *Excavations at Portchester Castle I: Roman* (1975);

M J Darling and D Gurney, Caister-on-Sea: *Excavations by Charles Green 1951-55* (1993);

S Johnson, *Burgh Castle: Excavations by Charles Green 1958-61* (1983);

B J Philp, *The Excavation of the Roman Fort at Reculver* (2005).

6 Where to Get Advice

If you would like to contact the Listing Team in one of our regional offices, please email: customers@HistoricEngland.org.uk noting the subject of your query, or call or write to the local team at:

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7 Acknowledgments

Cover: Saxon Shore Fort at Richborough, see Figure 10

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