

Caesar's Invasion of Britannia.

The following are extracts from two of Syd Caplan's lectures on the Roman Empire.

The 55 BC campaigning season in Gaul was over, especially so far north. Despite the late season, Caesar decided on a cross channel jaunt. The tribes of Britain had sent a British Expeditionary Force to France, so needed to be taught a lesson. As he himself records, he did not intend a full-scale Sea-lion invasion of Britannia, merely a reconnaissance, to find suitable harbours, to survey both the countryside and the people. Until Caesar's expedition there is no record of a Roman ever crossing to Britannia; and, the Gauls appeared rather ignorant of the topography and geography of the island. Despite questioning many traders who had been there, information was sparse - a few harbours, but nothing on the size of the island, nothing on the demography, nor the war skills nor customs of the inhabitants; which harbours were large enough for a fleet, how many Dreadnoughts did the British have?. The first reconnaissance was a single ship commanded by Gaius Volusenus Quadratus, one of Caesar's most successful military tribunes. Caesar arranged for the assembly of a fleet on the coast of the Morini tribe, near enough to the present Pas de Calais, and he commandeered a number of Gallic transports.

Gaius Volusenus was away four days, and found what he thought was a suitable harbour. What no Romans knew about were tides, and their effects on harbours. Except for the races at Gibraltar and the Dardanelles, the Mediterranean was effectively free of tides.

Nor would any of the North Sea coast tribes think to enlighten the Romans; after all, they were used to seasonal large tides and had no idea that the Romans were not. This ignorance of tides almost led to the complete loss of all the Roman ships and troops, which would have ruined Caesar's career. Gaius Volusenus recommended Deal, being unaware of the channel separating the Isle of Thanet from the promontory of east Kent, nor was he aware of Richborough, chosen a hundred years later.

The reason Gaius Volusenus failed to identify Richborough as a good harbour, as the Claudian surveyor did, was more likely to be due to periodic silting rather than due to lack of Gallic intelligence gathering, or his own intelligence data.

About eighty transports and several warships were assembled, probably at Boulogne (Roman Gesoriacum). Another eighteen transports were loaded with cavalry elsewhere, possibly at Ambleteuse nearer Calais. The force consisted of two legions and auxiliary troops. The Britons were nervous, as the promised submission to Caesar indicated. Caesar accepted the submission and sent across the king of the Atrebates, Commius, respected not only by Caesar also by the Britons. He was to warn of Caesar's coming and to encourage respect for, and loyalty to, the Romans. Although the main fleet successfully anchored off Deal, the cavalry were slow to load and the turning tide swept them back to Gaul, an incident that was to prove near fatal to the success of the expedition.

The Britons assembled on the cliffs of Dover knew the place was a lot more advantageous to them than to Caesar, who, on realising this drew anchor to land further west at Deal, on the advice of Gaius Volusenus; the Britons following along the cliff tops, down to the beach. Caesar ordered a speedy grounding of ships at the Briton's right flank, intending his archers and ballista's to overpower the enemy's right (by then he knew the worth of the Briton's submission, recognizing armed troops with war chariots). At this time there occurred the famous incident of the Tenth legion's hesitation and their standard bearer shouting 'jump comrades, unless you wish to betray our eagle to the enemy: I at any rate intend to do my duty to my country and my commander', and leapt ashore with the standard. The legionaries followed and this action eventually led to the overpowering of the Britons. But Caesar's lack of cavalry stopped a follow-up rout.

After four days of negotiation and promises of hostages, nature produced near disaster. As the Romans watched, helplessly, the cavalry transports failed to reach the beach and were swept back to Gaul by a fierce storm. Caesar and his legions were helpless to intervene as the combination of storm, high tide and full moon destroyed all his ships in what they thought to have been shallow water. Although the Romans knew a full moon they had no idea of tides, high or low.

It was winter, the Romans lacked stores, especially food. As hostages failed to arrive, and British envoys left his camp, Caesar guessed the truce would end. He was not to be beaten, salvaging what was possible from his damaged ships he rebuilt some, sent out the Seventh legion to forage for corn, and saved the Seventh by reacting to rising dust which alerted Caesar to a British attack.

Over the next few days an army was assembled, including, one may surmise, British mercenary troops, and Commius bringing cavalry from Gaul. Caesar achieved victory and demanded double hostages.

Nearly all the invasion force returned to Gaul on the next favourable tide, taking British hostages with them, although representing only two British tribes. He warned the British that he would return the following year and would demand submission. Although his honest dispatches to Rome, free of glosses on his own errors, impressed the senate enough to decree a lengthy period of thanksgiving. Caesar appears to have made no serious attempt to find a safe harbour for the following year. During the winter whilst Caesar was in Italy attending to affairs, his legates in Gaul had 600 transports and 28 warships built. Caesar had learnt the lesson of speed and facility of beaching, and had the ships built broad, with low gunwales and facility for both sail and oar. They were easily manoeuvrable and with their shallow prows could run right up onto the beach.

In 54 BC Caesar invaded Britannia for a second time. The 28 new warships were designed as fighting platforms, dual propelled and for swift beaching. Leaving three legions and 2000 cavalry under Labienus to control Gaul, Caesar's invasion force of five legions and 2000 cavalry in over 800 ships landed at the same beach as last year.

He marched inland intending to take the British fort at Bigberry, a heavily wooded area. The seventh legion stormed the fort, the Britons fled across the Great Stour. The chase was called off as news reached Caesar of the fleet beginning to drag anchor in the teeth of coastal storms. Back at the coast forty ships were beyond repair and many more seriously damaged. Again, Roman experience in the Mediterranean overrode thought of a repeat of last year's channel disaster; despite Caesar's brilliance such lack of forethought is quite understandable; 2000 years later we British are quite incapable of guarding against coastal storms.

However, Caesar did learn on this second occasion, beaching all his ships including the replacements sent by Labienus, and enclosing the fleet in a fortified compound (the site never located).

Such a long delay enabled Cassivellaunus and his powerful Catuvellauni tribe plus other British tribes centred on modern Hertfordshire to build defensive preparations at what was to be Wheathampstead (Wikipedia has a concise history of the Catuvellauni). Returning from the coast to his marching camp near Bigberry Caesar found his force threatened by Cassivellaunus. Roman army tactics were initially at a disadvantage compared to the swift chariot tactics of the British, who rushed a host of chariots to one spot where the chariot crews dismounted, fought, re-mounted and quickly drove to another part of the battlefield. Caesar then realised that legion strength was more effective than his Gallic cavalry attacks. The Britons pulled back and the next day Caesar sent out three legions plus all his cavalry to forage, a temptation the British failed to resist and were decisively beaten back and routed.

The loose British confederation under Cassivellaunus broke up, Caesar's force bypassed the British forts spread across Kent either side of the north Downs, and marched on to the next barrier, the Thames. The British on the north side were ready to make a stand, but Caesar crossed the Thames and again routed the Britons. The crossing was probably at Brentford. Cassivellaunus disbanded his main force, retaining 4000 charioteers. Caesar marched north looking for the main camp of Cassivellaunus, using scorched earth policy en-route, but constantly harassed by the British chariot forces. It was during this search that Caesar's fortunes improved by the appearance of enemies of Cassivellaunus. One Mandubracius prince of the Trinovantes (Essex) had been exiled to Gaul some time previously when Cassivellaunus defeated and annexed Trinovanti territory.

The Trinovantes appealed for Caesar's help in the return of Mandubracius and his help in freeing them from the rule of Cassivellaunus. Just what Caesar needed, grain, and allies to the rear of Cassivellaunus. Some other tribes, subject to Cassivellaunus, saw their chance and offered Caesar their services, too; one service being the location of the Catuvellauni base, at what was to become Wheathampstead. There had been clues, mainly in the writings of Caesar, that the Catuvellauni armed camp must have been in the Welwyn-Wheathampstead-Harpenden area, not too far from *Verulamium*. And, the 1998 excavations at Wright Close have more or less confirmed Wheathampstead to be the Catuvellauni armed base.

Until recently no one was really sure of the identity of the main fort of the Catuvellauni. But 1998 excavations in Wheathampstead unearthed a coin of Tasciovanus and moulds for making cart fittings (*Britannia* xxx,1999,p.348; see below). We know that Tasciovanus ruled the Catuvellauni from 15 BC. Caesar attacked the stronghold from two sides, the Romans killing and capturing many, although most of the defenders fled via a back entrance (Note;Syd had begun to suspect that daughter Louise was shedding her Welsh identity, and now her move from Welwyn Garden City to Wheathampstead showed she had joined the Brits!).

The Journal **Britannia** is published every year, a hefty tomb containing learned articles by experts on the Roman Empire, and annual excavation reports, England, Wales and Scotland, county by county (traditional counties). The Journal was launched in 1970; until that time items on Roman Britain had been included in *The Journal of Roman Studies*, a journal published for the last 200 years, which includes learned papers covering the whole of the Roman Empire and peripherals, and still includes articles relevant to Roman Britain. *Britannia* No.30 of the current series has 480-odd pages and includes 66 pages of on-going excavations and finds during 1998. There were seven reports for Hertfordshire. Quoting the seventh;-

"**Wheathampstead, Wright Close**(TL 1800 1335): a 1.5 m-deep ditch running north-east-south-west 300 m west of the *oppidum* was excavated. It contained material of the third quarter of the first century A.D. and residual material including a coin of Tasciovanus and moulds for manufacturing cart-fittings or linch-pins. The ditch also contained an unaccompanied inhumation (Excavation by S.Foreman, Oxford Archaeological Unit. Information supplied by K.Smith"). Page 348,*Britannia* XXX,1999).

Explanations.

Planning laws stipulate that all building operations which will or may disturb ground surfaces and/or sub-surfaces must be surveyed by an Archaeological Unit and any excavations thought necessary must be allowed to take place before building operations may proceed. One assumes house-building at Wright Close.

The Oxford Archaeological Unit are acknowledged experts, and do much work all over southern England; similar units have predominated as Counties have cut back on expenditure, and shut down their own traditional archaeological departments.

An oppidum is a fortified town of the late Bronze Age and early Iron Age. They have been found all over Europe.

Catuvellauni. A very large tribal area centred on modern Hertfordshire, Greater London, Buckinghamshire and Bedfordshire, plus large slices of Essex and Cambridgeshire. Their capital was *Verulamium*, modern St.Albans, and their armed camp(*oppidum*) became Wheathampstead (Watamestede in the Domesday Book).

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