8. Romney Marsh in the Early Middle Ages

Nicholas Brooks

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Introduction

The evolution of Romney Marsh has been such a fertile ground for antiquarian conjecture and controversy over the last century and a half that armchair historians might have learnt to leave well alone. But in the last generation major advances in our understanding of the technical processes by which the marsh has been formed have at last provided a more secure framework into which the historical evidence needs to be fitted. The work of W. V. Lewis in the 1930s and more recently of J. Eddison has transformed our knowledge of the shingle beaches that comprise the Dungeness headland and of the way that changes in sea-level have contributed to the formation of the headland (Lewis 1932, 1937; Lewis and Balchin 1940; Eddison 1983a). The second crucial contribution was made in 1968 when R. D. Green published for the Soil Survey of Great Britain his final and full report on the area to seaward of the Royal Military Canal. For the first time the complexity of the marsh soils was revealed, defined and mapped; their stratigraphical relationship was established, and many of the technical problems of the variations in land-levels within the marsh and of the relics of former creeks and water courses were solved (Green 1968). Then in 1980 Professor Cunliffe used these major contributions, together with scattered nuggets of archaeological, geological and historical information, to propound a bold interpretation of the geomorphological changes that have occurred since neolithic times. As his synthesis claimed to be no more than a 'preliminary' model, which required testing and refinement (Cunliffe 1980a, especially p. 47), it may be a propitious time to set out some of the historical evidence that can help to deepen and to delimit our knowledge of the development of the landscape of the marsh.

Of all the marshland areas of Britain Romney Marsh offers the best prospect for the historian to work alongside the geologist and the archaeologist because it is uniquely well documented. In the Middle Ages the archbishops and the cathedral community of Canterbury were the dominant landowners in Romney Marsh proper, that is the marshland to the north-east of the Rhee Wall, where they held no less than 7,140 out of the 17,300 acres of land; they also had extensive properties in Walland and Denge Marshes and around their manors at Appledore and the Isle of Oxney. Other Kentish monastic houses, such as St. Augustine’s, Canterbury, and Bilsington Priory, were also major lords in the Marsh (Smith 1943; Neilson 1928). The charters and estate-records of these houses, published and unpublished, provide an enormous corpus of material concerning the development of drainage and the many forms of land-use in Romney Marsh from the mid-twelfth century. Supplemented from the thirteenth century by the records of royal statute and central government and by the archives of the Cinque Ports, there is material here to keep several research students busy for many years. As yet the surface has only been scraped (Dugdale 1772; Holloway 1849; Teichman Derville 1936; Smith 1943). Detailed and well documented studies of the development of the marsh landscape from the mid-thirteenth century or earlier are certainly both possible and urgently needed.

Romney Marsh is also surprisingly well-documented in the early Middle Ages. The archives of Christ Church, Canterbury, and to a lesser extent of St. Augustine’s have preserved a series of charters concerning lands in the Marsh from the late seventh century onwards. Many of these charters were studied by the great Kentish topographer, Ward, in a series of articles published in Archaeologia Cantiana between 1931 and 1952 (Ward 1931a, 1931b, 1933a, 1933b, 1936, 1940, 1952). When we recall that Ward was working without any of the guides and handbooks that ease the path of the modern scholar through the difficult field of Anglo-Saxon charters (Stenton 1955; Whitelock 1955, 1979; Sawyer 1968; Brooks 1973), it is astonishing how far his enthusiasm and his eye for detail enabled him to seize upon the significance of the topographical and economic information in the charters. Inevitably, however, there were mistakes; moreover Ward never attempted any synthesis of the whole body of the charter evidence in the light of the evidence of place-names and of the Domesday survey and related documents. Now that Green and Cunliffe have confirmed some of Ward’s findings and challenged others, it is time for the evidence to be examined afresh.
Fundamental to any understanding of Romney Marsh in the early Middle Ages is Green’s distinction between the ‘Calcareaus’ or New Marshland, which has been subjected to inundation by the sea within historic times, and the ‘Decalcified’ or Old Marshland from which the calcium has largely leached away after centuries of natural drainage (Fig. 8.1). Green and Cunliffe have argued from good evidence that some or all of the old marshland already existed as land available for colonisation between the first century BC and the first century AD (Green 1968, 18, 27; Cunliffe 1980a, 43–4). With a change in environmental conditions, this old marshland itself came under threat in late Roman times. For Green detected in the decalcified marsh an elaborate system of tidal creeks which seems to be related to the routes taken by the rivers Brede, Tillingham and the two arms of the Limen (Rother) towards a wide estuary which made its way to the sea past the Roman fort at Lympne (Cunliffe 1980a, Fig. 19).

It is also argued that the reclamation of the areas of Calcareaus (New) Marsh did not all occur at one time: that of the Hythe estuary is attributed to the Middle- or Late-Saxon period, that of Walland and Denge Marshes to the late Middle Ages and early modern period (Green 1968, 30–44; Cunliffe 1980a, 47–52). Another significant proposal was indicated in Green’s mapping of the alluvial beds of two supposed former courses of the northern branch of the river Rother: one finding its way to the sea at West Hythe, the other at Romney. Green identifies these two branches with the two courses of the river Limen recorded in pre-conquest charters (but compare Eddison 1983b, 54–6). Their meandering courses establish that both are natural watercourses; but it should be observed that the Romney branch cuts through the Old Decalcified Marshland, whilst the northern branch runs through New Calcareaus Marshes. It has still to be determined whether this difference has any implications for their relative chronology.

Mention must also be made of the extensive layer of
peat, deposited in the second half of the second millennium BC, which extends over much of the western half of the marsh, most thickly just to the south of Appledore (Green 1968, 14–15). It is possible that a desire to improve the marsh pastures, led to more and more elaborate drainage-schemes. Drainage in turn would have caused the peat to contract and the level of the land to drop. As a result of one or more of these factors, sea- and river-walls had to be built even higher. The familiar vicious circle of peat-marsh management provides one possible explanation for the growing concern shown in the medieval records with the ancient

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and embankments of the medieval ‘innings’ or marsh reclamations. The parish churches for the most part lie at the north-east end of these elongated parishes, that is in that portion of the parish that lies in the Old Decalified Marshland; the relative regularity of their boundaries by contrast with the parishes of the north-eastern half of the marsh is therefore a product of the medieval and post-medieval reclamation of Walland Marsh as it progressed to the Kent–Sussex boundary (see Tatton-Brown 1988).

An interesting feature of the parish boundaries is their relationship to the various river courses of the Rother or Limen. Ward was the first to see that the fact that the parish boundaries totally ignore the Rhee Wall was one of a number of proofs that that work could not be of Roman origin as had hitherto been thought. This massive artificial water-channel had been constructed by the mid-thirteenth century in a direct line across all the existing ecclesiastical, manorial and hundredal boundaries (Scott Robertson 1880b; Ward 1940; Brooks 1964, 82 n.31; Green 1968, 37–42; Eddison 1983b, 53–6) in a vain attempt to save the port of Romney. More remarkable however is the fact that the parish boundaries are equally independent of the Romney branch of the norther Limen that may have preceded the Rhee: at no point, save in the vicinity of Old and New Romney where the river-bed detected by Green’s soil survey widens to form a broad estuary, do their courses coincide. It seems clear that the parish boundaries are older than the river-course that cuts through them, just as they are older than the artificial Rhee Wall. By contrast the northern branch of the Limen, which Green and Ward each detected by their different methods, coincides with the parish boundaries of Newchurch, Eastbridge and Burmarsh where they adjoin Ruckinge, Bilsington, Bonnington, Hurst and Lympne. Since this is an area of new marshland which in late Roman times had been a wide tidal estuary (Cunliffe 1980a, 43–5) it is likely that reclamation of the estuary and the definition

Parish Boundaries (Fig. 8.2)

One approach to the problems of Romney Marsh in the early Middle Ages is to examine the parish boundaries that existed at the time of the Tithe Awards of the early nineteenth century. Elsewhere in England it is common to find that the parish boundaries that existed until the adjustments of the later nineteenth century coincide more or less precisely with estates surveyed in Anglo-Saxon royal charters of the tenth and eleventh centuries. In the Marsh, however, we know that some of the boundaries must be of more recent origin, namely where they traverse land reclaimed from the sea in late medieval or in early modern times. Nonetheless it may be noticed that most of the parish churches in Romney Marsh are already recorded in the late eleventh century in the Domesday Monachorum (Douglas 1944, 78); moreover the four unidentified churches listed there as being dependent upon Lympne (Sewoldesceire, Meritum-nescire, Kyngestun and Swiriguldancire) may well account for some of the churches that seem to be omitted (Snargate, Snape, Burmarsh, Fairfield, Brookland, Hope) (but see Tatton-Brown 1988). We may therefore suspect that Fig. 8.2 reflects in part boundaries in existence since the early Middle Ages. Certainly the shape of the parishes seems to reveal some fundamental distinctions in the settlement pattern. To the north a series of villages is situated on the much eroded cliff overlooking the marsh, and their parish boundaries extend south so that an area of marshland is included in each of their territories – Appledore, Kenardington, Warehorne, Orlestone, Ruckinge, Bilsington, Bonnington, Hurst and Lympne. The parishes that lie wholly in the marsh divide clearly into two types: north-east of the Rhee wall, in Romney Marsh proper, despite innumerable minor irregularities, the parishes form consolidated blocks, very approximately circular in shape with the parish church in a central position (Burmash, Eastbridge, Newchurch, Blackmanstone, Orgarwick, St. Mary-in-the-Marsh, Hope, Snape); but south-west of the Rhee wall the parishes are predominantly of long, narrow form with straight boundaries which follow the lines of the water-channels and embankments of the medieval ‘innings’ or marsh reclamations. The parish churches for the most part lie at the north-east end of these elongated parishes, that is in that portion of the parish that lies in the Old Decalified Marshland; the relative regularity of their boundaries by contrast with the parishes of the north-eastern half of the marsh is therefore a product of the medieval and post-medieval reclamation of Walland Marsh as it progressed to the Kent–Sussex boundary (see Tatton-Brown 1988).

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of estate and parish boundaries proceeded pari passu in the early Middle Ages.

A feature of the parishes of the Marsh (as they existed until the early nineteenth century) was the large number of detached portions that lay at considerable distances from the parishes to which they belonged (Fig. 8.2). Some of these outlying members, such as the detached portion of the parish of Ebony, may represent marsh reclaims of the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries. Indeed most of them are situated in the New or Calcareous Marshland. But in reality many of them have a simple tenurial explanation of much greater antiquity. Thus the detached members of the parish of Aldington are clearly some of the holdings in the marsh of the great archiepiscopal manor of Aldington; one of them, lying between the parishes of Lympne and Burmarsh, is already mentioned in the boundary survey of a charter of King Eadmund of the year 946 (CS 813; S510; Ward 1933b, 133–7). Even more ancient is the outlier of Sellindge parish that lay between Blackmanstone, Orgarswick and Dymchurch; Ward showed with some brilliant topographical detective work that there was a strong probability that this detached member was the pasture for 300 sheep called Rumining seta given to the minster of Lyminge by King Wihtred of Kent in the year 697 or 700 (CS 98; S 21; Ward 1936, 20–27; Chaplais 1969, 538–40). Already at that early date this land was the ‘Romney enclosure’ (or ‘enclosed pasture belonging to Rumen’) attached to an inland estate at Pleghelmestun (now Wilmington) which was later part of the manor of Sellindge. At that time it was not uncommon for manors in central and even northern Kent to have distant sheep pastures in Romney Marsh. Thus we know that in the eighth century Ruckinge belonged to Ickham and Denge Marsh to Wye (CS 141, 214; S 1180, 111; Ward 1933a).
The county boundary between Kent and Sussex also deserves some notice, for it makes little sense in terms of the marshland rivers as they have existed in the last six or seven hundred years. The boundary follows the old course of the southern branch of the river Rother passing south of the Isle of Oxney, but then departs from it at the point where the Rother now turns south towards Rye, as it has done since the storms of 1287–8. Very shortly thereafter, where the county boundary forms the northern limit of Guldeford Level (the parish of East Guldeford), it follows a straight and clearly artificial line across land that remained tidal marsh for many years after 1287–8. It resumes an irregular course as soon as it approaches the Old Decalcified Marshland. At this point the county boundary bisects the parish of Broomhill, so that astonishingly half of the parish is in Kent and half in Sussex. Since, as we shall see, the Kent-Sussex boundary was already on or close to the modern line here in the mid-eighth century, an explanation of the division of this parish is needed. The course of the boundary through Broomhill parish might repay detailed geological investigation (see now Eddison 1983a, 41–4; and Gardiner 1988). The Brede or Tillingham rivers, or even the southern branch of the Rother, may once have forced their way to the sea at this point. Alternatively it may be that the whole parish was originally in one county and that a storm such as those of 1287–8, which inundated the township of Broomhill, left only the eastern part of the parish intact. Thereafter it may have been inconvenient to reckon this tiny fragment as part of Sussex, since it now lay at the extremity of a marsh that was otherwise entirely in Kent.

**The Domesday Survey of 1086 (Fig. 8.3)**

The evidence of boundaries that survived into the nineteenth century can be supplemented by the evidence of the Domesday survey and by the contemporaneous *Domesday Monachorum*. By 1086 there were four ‘hundreds’ whose territory lay entirely in the Marsh: Worth, Newchurch, Aloesbridge and Langport. As elsewhere in Kent, and indeed in Wessex as a whole, the hundreds are likely to have been the product of a major reorganisation of local government carried through in the mid-tenth century (Jolliffe 1933, 121–2; Lown 1974). The choice of hundredal centres is therefore of interest. Newchurch is the only Domesday hundredal centre situated on the New or Calcareous Marshland. Its name, which was applied to settlement, parish and hundred, implies that the church was for some time the dominant feature of the landscape and that there were other older churches nearby. We cannot be certain when the church was ‘new’, but it was certainly in existence by the date of the establishment of the hundredal system. By that time the colonisation of this area of new marshland was sufficiently far advanced for Newchurch to be chosen as the hundredal centre in preference to Bilsington which is situated upon the upland. Some of the parish churches in the vicinity are certainly of later date: thus the church at Eastbridge, which is also in the Calcareous Marshland, is called *Ælthwulf* in the *Domesday Monachorum* after *Ælthwulf* (Ælsige) the pre-conquest tenant of Eastbridge; nearby both the settlement at Blackmanstone and its church (*Blacmanescirce*) were named after the Englishman, Blaceman, who had held the land in the ‘time of King Edward’; Orgarswick and its church *Orgarescirce* are likely to have been similarly named after a founder called Ordgar, and Dymchurch (*Demancirce*) from a judge (OE *dem*). These names point not only to the building of private churches and the creation of the parochial system in this area of the marsh in the late-Saxon period, but also to the existence of prosperous and significant settlements in and on the fringes of the ‘new’ marshland at much the same time.

The other Domesday hundred names are less suggestive. We do not know the identity of the *Ælthwulf* who gave his name to Aloesbridge hundred, but Wallenberg’s plausible suggestion that the hundred meeting-place was near Summer House would locate *Ælthwulf’s* bridge as a crossing of the supposed Romney branch of the northern Limen at TR 008272. Langport hundred probably took its name (‘long market’ or ‘harbour’) from an extension of the settlement or harbour of Old Romney; the name suggests that it may have been an attempt to solve the recurring problem of the siltting of the Romney estuary by siting a new harbour nearer the sea.

Though there are several small estates and a number of churches in the Domesday records which cannot now be identified, it is striking that the locatable manors, churches and hundreds are all (apart from Midley and Lydd) in Romney Marsh properly so-called, that is they are all north-east of the Rhee Wall. Of course many estates in the Marsh are not named in the Domesday survey because they were subsumed in the record of the large ‘discrete’ estates of which they formed part, such as the great manors of Aldington, Wye and Ickham. But it is unlikely that the distribution of estates would be very different even if it were possible to include them all. For the Domesday evidence is strikingly complemented by the wider evidence of place-names. Kent is unfortunately one of the counties not yet covered by the English Place-Name Society’s surveys. But the extensive researches of the Swedish scholar J. K. Wallenberg provide a corpus of evidence that is almost as comprehensive (Wallenberg 1931, 1934). North-east of the Rhee Wall names found in pre-conquest charters abound. South-west of the ‘wall’ they are found only in the parishes of Lydd, Midley and Old Romney. Indeed in the parishes of Fairfield and Brookland and in those portions of Snargate, Brenzett, Ivychurch and New Romney that lie to the south-west of the Rhee Wall, Wallenberg found no single place-name evidenced before the thirteenth century – with the possible exception of Mistelemah in Brookland parish, if it is correctly identified as the Mistelemah granted to Christ Church in the mid-ninth century (CS 408; S 1623; Wallenberg 1931, 170–5).
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The contrast between the settlement history of the two halves of the marsh is therefore clear enough. Place-names and boundaries both point to the antiquity of the colonisation of Romney Marsh proper and to the late date of the development of Walland Marsh. The contrast between the form of the drainage channels in the two halves of the Marsh is equally apparent. South-west of the Rhee Wall the straight 'sewers' and drainage cuts of medieval and modern reclamation abound; north-east of the wall the water-courses are predominantly irregular, being the survivors of natural creeks and streams.

Anglo-Saxon charters (Fig. 8.4)

For a more accurate picture of developments in the Marsh during the early Middle Ages we must turn to the surviving pre-conquest charters. Unusually a majority are charters of the eighth and ninth centuries. Most of these diplomas came from the archives of the 'double-minster' of Lyminge, whose lands and archives passed to Christ Church, Canterbury in the ninth or tenth centuries. Lyminge was of course the minster of the lathe of the Limenwara, the 'Limen-dwellers', so it was natural that the monastery should have extensive lands in the marsh. Whilst it is invaluable to have early information about the Marsh, the brevity of the charters' descriptions of the estates means that their topographical implications are not always clear. Nonetheless, if we map all the identifiable estates granted or mentioned in pre-conquest charters, we find that most of them are consistent with the findings of the soil scientists (Fig. 8.4). For with exception of the Sandiun charter of 732 (CS 148; S 23), the Lydd charter of 774 (CS 214; S 111) and the Ruckinge charter of 805 (CS 1336; S 39), all the estates recorded in the charters were situated in or on the edge of the Decalcified or Old Marshland.

The northern branch of the Limen (Fig. 8.5)

The charters are most informative in locating one of the branches of the river Rother. The present name of the river is a modern invention, perhaps as late as the sixteenth century. It is a back-formation from the Sussex village- and hundred-name, Rotherfield (from OE *Hrydera-feld, 'open land of the cattle') near its source, in exactly the same way as the river of the same name in West Sussex is a back-formation from Rotherbridge, 'cattle-bridge' (*PNSussex, 7, xlvi). The previous name of the eastern Rother throughout its entire length in both Sussex and Kent was the Limen, which is a common Celtic river- and lake-name (*Lemana) found in the rivers Leam, Leven, Lemon, Lynne and Lynn, in the lochs Lomond and Leven, and on the continent in Lac Leman. When it is found in the Kentish Anglo-Saxon...
charters the river-name has the suffix -ea (OE ‘river’), which must have been attached at a time when the knowledge that the British name also meant ‘river’ had been lost. It is likely that the name Limenae was used for any of the branches into which the river split as it neared Romney Marsh and its shingle barrier beaches. If we can therefore locate a river named Limenae in the Marsh from the early charters, we cannot assume that it was necessarily the only, or even the principal, branch of the river.

In 732, in what seems to be an authentic and contemporary charter, King Æthelberht II of Kent confirmed to the priest-abbot Dun (of Lyminge) the grant that he had made to Dun’s predecessor, Hymbra, of a quarter sulung of land beside the river Limen to serve as a saltern (sali coquaenda accommoda); he also added a new annual gift of 120 cartloads of timber “for cooking the salt” and a further 100 acres of the same property at Sandtun (CS 148; S 23). The site has been convincingly identified as the lost Sampton in West Hythe (TR 122338), situated on an ancient sand mound in the midst of the new marshland immediately beneath and south-east of the Roman ‘Saxon Shore’ fort of Lympne (Portus Lemanis), whose name also derives from the river (Ward 1931b; Green 1968). The charter shows that the calcareous marsh to the east of Sandtun was royal property (terra regis), whilst on the north and west where once had been the anchorage of the Roman fort was now a creek named hudan fleet, ‘Huda’s fleet’ (which was not detected by Green); the southern boundary was the river Limen (Liminaeae), apparently already following the course detected by Green which runs immediately south of Sampton and is represented today by the Lower Wall. Sandtun surely is that rare phenomenon, a well-dated early medieval industrial site that would certainly repay further archaeological investigation; Birchell and Ward’s unpublished excavations there in 1947 revealed occupation levels of middle-Saxon and of Saxon-Norman date with both imported and English pottery and with important assemblages of iron tools and of animal bones (Dunning et al. 1959, 21; Wilson 1976, 258, 312, 376, 382, 437; Cunliffe 1980b, 228). The material, now in the British Museum, still awaits systematic study, and the site must still have much to tell us of the fortunes of coastal and estuarine salt manufacture, as well as of the development of the Marsh, in the early Middle Ages.

The northern Limen as defined by Green recurs in other early charters. In 805 King Cuthred of Kent gave to Ealdberht and his sister, Abbess Selethryth (of Lyminge), 2 sulungs of land at Ruckinge ‘on either side of the river Limen’ (CS 1336; S 39). Ward’s identification of this estate at the southern end of the parish of Ruckinge has been strikingly confirmed by Green’s demonstration that the northern Limen does indeed cut through the parish on the line now followed by the Sedbrook sewer (Ward 1933a). In the same vicinity must have lain the sulung ‘about the river Limen’ which Æthelberht II had given in 724 during the last year or two of his father’s reign to abbess Mildryth of Minster-in-Thanet (CS 141; S 1180); for this property had formerly belonged to those who dwelt in Ickham, and we have other evidence that Ruckinge had once belonged to Ickham (Ward 1933a). It deserves to be noticed that estates of one or two sulungs are (in Marsh terms) very substantial ones. The fact that the Limen passes through these estates, rather than forming their boundary, indicates that the river (flumen, fluvius) was not a significant barrier to farming in the Marsh; evidently we are here dealing with a bridgeable stream or small river, not with a great tidal estuary. Similar conclusions result from a mid-ninth century private charter by which a certain Ealdbald sold his half-pasture at Burmarsh to a certain Winemund (CS 837; S 1193). The Limen formed the northern boundary of this estate and the channel of the Limen identified by Green still forms the parish boundary of Burmarsh. Ward’s identification of the bounds of this charter and of the neighbouring estate aet Gamelanwythee granted by King Eadmund in 946 to two brothers, Ordhelm and Elfwold (CS 813; S 510) is also corroborated by the fact that Green has detected a substantial creek-relic exactly in the place where Ward placed the widan fleet (‘wide creek’) of the latter charter (Ward 1933b) – that is at the junction of Dymchurch, Burmarsh and West Hythe parishes. Taken together these charters of the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries indicate that the northern Limen, as detected by Green, was in existence when these transactions took place but that it was a river of minor importance, not the main course of the Rother.

One further important, though very local, change to the landscape of this area of the Marsh can be more precisely dated within the early medieval period, namely the collapse of the clay cliff on which the late-Roman fort of Lympne (Portus Lemanis/Stufall Castle) had stood. Archaeologically it has been shown that the southern gate, walls and bastions of the fort broke up and slid into the Marsh at a time when the deposition of calcareous silt was still in progress there (Cunliffe 1980b, 244–7 and 288). But the presence of ‘Huda’s fleet’ at this spot in 732 means that we cannot suppose that this process was complete by the early eighth century. Indeed there are hints that the fort’s collapse occurred much later. In the ninth century Lympne served as the centre where food-rents from the archbishop of Canterbury’s properties in the vicinity were collected (Harmer 1914, no. 1); yet by the time of Domseday Book these estates were administered from the nearby Aldington. Moreover Lympne was a mint (and therefore perhaps also a borough) in the tenth century. A single coin of Athelstan’s reign (924–39) is followed (when mint-signatures become the rule) by coins of every type from Edgar’s reform of 973 to Cnut’s ‘short cross’ issue of c. 1030–1035 (Blunt 1974, 77–9; Metcalf 1980b, 228).
Fig. 8.4 Estates granted or mentioned in pre-conquest Charters.

Fig. 8.5 The Northern Branch of the Limen.
presbyter. This charter does not refer explicitly to Romney had been established at Hythe, some two miles to the east (Hildebrand 1881, 245; Hutchinson et al. 1985; Hutchinson 1988).

The borough and river of Romney

The emergence of Romney as a significant port and urban settlement may have occurred about the time that the mint was established there in c. 1000 (Metcalf 1978, 211). Though the town’s population was probably still small in 1086 when Domesday Book records just 156 burgesses at Romney, it is clear that it was already an important source of naval ships and crews. That was why both the Godwin family in 1052 and William the Conqueror in 1066 took good care to secure Romney (A-S Chron., 1052; William of Poitiers, 211). Pre-conquest sources know only of a single settlement called Romney and are presumably always referring to Old Romney. The name of the town, recorded on coins as Rume, Rumene, Ruman and Ruma (Smart 1981, 103; Hildebrand 1881, 134) and in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle in 1052 as Rumenea, is not a settlement-name at all but a river-name. The suffix is OE -ea, ‘river’; the first element may be a pre-English river-name, so that the whole would be parallel to Limin(a)ea, ‘the river Limen’. If the reference is to the branch of the northern Limen whose course to Romney from Appledore was detected and mapped by Green (1968, 39–42), derivation of the first element from OE ram, ‘wide, broad’ seems improbable for this narrow winding channel.

The earliest references to the river, however, are found centuries before the first mention of the town. Kentish antiquaries have long recognised that a charter of Æthelberht II of the year 741, which survives in an eighth-century manuscript, should probably be understood as referring to the Romney branch of the Limen (CS 160; S 24): Æthelberht granted to the church of Lyminge a fishery (capitum piscium) at the mouth of the river Limen, together with the part of the estate on which the oratory of St. Martin and the fishermen’s houses were situated, and also a quarter sulung of land round about; in addition the king conveyed a pasture for 150 draught cattle (jumentorum) at the south-west boundary of the Marsh, which had formerly belonged to Romanus presbyter. This charter does not refer explicitly to Romney and there must remain doubt whether the fishing settlement at the mouth of the Limen with a church of St. Martin should indeed be identified with St. Martin’s church at New Romney. The present church is Norman in origin, and is listed in the Domesday Monachorum; its antiquity may be suggested by the fact that at least from the thirteenth century it was the meeting-place of the hundred and liberty of New Romney (Scott Robertson 1880a, 237–8; Ward 1952, 13–14). There is no difficulty in supposing that a fishing settlement and a church should have existed long before the creation of a borough at New Romney. If this charter is correctly interpreted, it provides evidence that by the first half of the eight-century the river had a mouth at New Romney in addition to the (minor) northern course which disgorged into the sea in the vicinity of Hythe.

Unequivocal evidence of the Romney river is found in an authentic charter of the year 920 by which Archbishop Plegmund leased for three lives 80 acres of land at Waring marsh next to the river Rumenea (CS 638, S 1288). This awkward form of the name, which occurs twice in the charter, is more than a century older than any other full spelling of either the town or river. As Wallenberg (who was not normally disposed to derive place-names from personal-names if he could avoid it) came to recognise, the genitival form of the first element would suggest that it should be taken as a personal-name, were it not highly unusual for a river to be named after an individual. Moreover, it is at least a remarkable coincidence that a priest Romanus (OE *Ruman or *Rumen) is recorded in the charter of 741 as a burgess at Romney, it is clear that it was already an important part of Northumbrian affairs as chaplain to King Oswy’s wife, Ælflaed, in the years leading up to the synod of Whitby in 664 (Bede, HE III.25). For Ælflaed’s mother was the Kentish princess, Æthelburh, who after the death of King Edwin in battle in 633 had returned to Kent with her daughter and founded the monastery of Lyminge, to which so many marsh properties (including that of Romanus) were given. Since none of the later forms of the name Romney have the medial -s-, we have no means of knowing whether a false etymology from Romanus was already current by 920, or whether the origin of the name Rumenea was forgotten and the river-name normalised as Rumenea in subsequent centuries. The small pasture for 300 sheep called Ruming seta or Rumening seta which, as we have seen, was given to Lyminge in 697 or 700, could be based on Rumen whether it were a river-name or a personal-name. But since this property is so far distant from the Romney Limen it seems most likely to mean ‘the enclosure which had once belonged to Rumen’; otherwise we should need to suppose that the Romney river had already given its name to the whole marsh on its north-eastern bank by the beginning of the eighth century.

Lydd and Denge Marsh (Fig. 8.6)

Two early charters, Æthelberht II’s grant to Abbot Dun in 741 and a purported grant of Lydd by King Offa in
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774, throw light on the south-eastern portion of the Marsh (CS 160, 214; S 24, 111). Included among Æthelberht's grants to Lyminge in the first charter was grazing for 150 cattle "next to the marsh called biscopes uuic, as far as the wood called ripp and as the bounds of Sussex (Suthsaxonumae)"). This is the property that had once belonged to the priest Romanus. As Wallenberg and Ward showed, the name ripp survives in the modern East and West Rype and in The Midrips; it refers to the stretches of shingle banks extending from the shore northwards to Lydd (Wallenberg 1931, 37-8; Ward 1931a, 35-7). An extensive wood of holly trees (hence Holmstone) still grows on the shingle and on Poker's map of 1617 is shown extending from 'The Rype' (TR 030196) to the marsh known as 'The Wicks' (Green 1968, pl. X). It is therefore reasonable to identify the biscopes uuic of 741 with The Wicks, and to interpret the boundary clause to mean that the Sussex boundary formed the western limit of the pasture and The Wicks the eastern as far north as the holly-wood on the Rype. These bounds in fact delimit the saltings now known as The Midrips, still used for rough grazing to this day.

Offa's purported grant of Lydd to Archbishop Jaenberht of Canterbury in 774 is more problematic. The charter survives on a single sheet of parchment which was not written at its purported date but in the second half of the tenth century. The formulae of the Latin text are highly distinctive and are under suspicion of having been doctored in the tenth century. Strictly therefore this charter cannot be taken as evidence for the boundaries of Lydd before the late tenth century. Nonetheless it is clear from the witness-list and from much of the text that the forger or interpolator of this diploma did have a charter of 774 before him; and the brevity of the Latin boundary clause encourages us to believe that the bounds formed part of the authentic charter he was using. By the late tenth century, and perhaps therefore already in 774, the three sulungs at Lydd were bounded on the north and east by the sea, on the south by the "terra regis aduui called Denge Marsh usque in lapidem adpositum in ultimo terrae", and on the north and west by the king's boundary at bleccing. Fortunately bleccing can be recognised as the old name for the manor of Scotney (named from the family in possession from the late thirteenth century); the identification is confirmed by the survival into the later nineteenth century of Bletching Fleet (TR 020207), immediately north-east of Scotney and Scotney Court - a creek relic whose full

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Fig. 8.6 Romney, Lydd and Denge Marsh.
extent has been detected and mapped by Green (Wallenberg 1931, 56; 1934, 481; Ward 1931a, 33). The other bounds of Lydd have, however, occasioned some difficulty. Ward (1952, 13–14) interpreted the fact that the sea is named as forming the boundary on the north and east to mean that a wide tidal estuary of the river Limen separated Lydd from Old Romney. But this would be a curious way to refer to the estuary and in fact the phrase need mean no more than that the sea formed the north-eastern boundary of Lydd, which would fit very well with the north-easterly direction of the earlier shore-lines detected by Lewis (1932) in the shingle of the Dungeness headland and with the mouth or haven of the Romney Limen revealed by Green’s soil survey.

Lydd’s southern boundary (Denge Marsh) was certainly misunderstood by Ward (1931a, 33) who sought to make the terra regis aduui into an estate of an unknown Kentish King (E)adwiga. But since Denge Marsh is known in the Middle Ages to have been an outlying part of the manor of Wye at least from the time when Wye was given by King William I to Battle Abbey in 1071 (Davis 1913, no. 62; Searle 1964), the phrase means no more than that Denge Marsh was a ‘royal property (belonging) to Wye’.

It is also difficult to interpret the rather clumsy statement that Denge Marsh formed Lydd’s southern boundary “as far as the stone (asque in lapidem) situated at the end of the land (adpositi in ultimo terrae)”. Ward (1931a, 33) was surely correct in taking lapidem to refer to the shingle as in the names Littlestone, Greatstone, Holmstone – which are all in the immediate vicinity of Lydd – rather than as a reference to a particular standing monument. Moreover it should be observed that the parish boundary of Lydd (Fig. 8.6) reaches the shore at Greatstone, whose name at least until the seventeenth century was ‘Stone End’. This is the name, for example, found on Cole’s engraving (c. 1737) of Poker’s map of the marsh in 1617 (Green 1968, pl. X). The charter should therefore be understood to mean that Denge Marsh formed Lydd’s southern boundary as far as Stone End, though we must allow that ‘Stone End’ will itself have moved progressively north-eastwards with the development of the Dungeness headland.

Since the principal elements of the boundary of the archiepiscopal estate of Lydd as it existed in the later tenth century (and perhaps already in 774) can be established with some confidence, we can be certain that Denge Marsh was already by that time a marshland estate attached to the royal vill of Wye. Here, however, the historical evidence conflicts with recent interpretations of the geology of the Marsh. For Green has defined the whole of Denge Marsh as Calcareous New Marshland which he suggests was first won from the sea in the later Middle Ages: on the contrary they regarded Denge Marsh as one of their original possessions going back to the Conqueror’s foundation of the monastery (Searle 1964). It would seem therefore that either the definition or the chronology of the calcareous marshland in this area needs re-examination. It may be that the manor suffered from temporary inundation after 1287–8, and that this has affected the classification of the Denge Marsh soils.

**Walland Marsh (Fig. 8.7)**

We have already seen how the shape of parish boundaries and of drainage channels suggests that the settlement of Walland Marsh has been fundamentally different from that of the rest of the Marsh. The distinction is made sharper by the absence of Domesday settlements and the scarcity of names recorded in Anglo-Saxon charters in Walland Marsh. However, an estate named Mistantham is listed amongst a number of properties in the vicinity of Romney Marsh which are said in the cartularies of Christ Church, Canterbury, to have been given to the community by King Æthelwulf of Kent at some date between 833 and 858 (CS 408; S 1623). As Wallenberg pointed out (1931, 171–2), there can be little doubt that this name can be identified with Misleham in Brookland parish, though there has apparently been Norman confusion of ‘l’ and ‘n’ either in the cartulary form of the name or in the subsequent medieval and modern spellings.

Equally it is possible that the property “inter torrentem heorat burnan et haganan trae” (“between the stream harbourn and Hagan’s tree”) granted in 785 by King Offa to the comes Ealdbeorht and his sister, Selethryth (the later abbess of Lyminge), was indeed the manor of Agney as the monks of Christ Church later supposed (CS 247; S 123, and compare Brooks 1964, 84). One might argue that the stream-name heorat burnan has been lost because its course ran in the new marshland which was overrun by the sea at some date subsequent to the charter. But names terminating in -bourne do not recur elsewhere in the Marsh, and since the charter gives no other indication of the estate’s location, we should not build any theory on the monks’ identification of the property as Agney.

The question therefore has to be asked whether the area of Old or Decalcified Marshland that lies to the south-west of the Rhee Wall is indeed older than the areas of New Calcareous Marshland around Newchurch and in Denge Marsh that we have found in occupation at least from the tenth century and possibly as early as the eighth. In this connection attention needs to be drawn to the series of water courses and sea defences in this area that bear the names of medieval archbishops of Canterbury. It was the nineteenth-century engineer Elliott (1862) who first suggested that these works represent the first ‘innings’ in Walland Marsh and attributed them to the initiative of Archbishops Thomas Becket (1162–70), Baldwin (1184–90), Boniface (1240–70) and Pecham (1279–92). We should hesitate, however, before attributing too much initiative to the archbishops. Baldwin’s wall and Baldwin’s sewer which enclose Misleham and Brookland must surely be related
Fig. 8.7 Walland Marsh and the Branches of the Limen.

not to the archbishop of that name, but to the charter of c. 1150 by which the prior Wibert of Christ Church, Canterbury, gave Baldwin Scudaway "as much land about Misleham as he could inne at his own expense against the sea" (Holloway 1849, 66). There is an urgent need for a new search of the cartularies of Christ Church for other twelfth- and thirteenth-century charters to enable us to date the construction of the drainage channels and sea walls in this area of the Marsh (see Tatton-Brown, 1988).

Green was right, however, to resist the argument that this decalcified marshland was first won from the sea at that time. For there are two pre-conquest charters which throw some light on conditions in this area of 'old' marshland. In 811 King Coenwulf of Mercia granted a number of estates to archbishop Wulfred in return for a handsome payment of gold (CS 335; S 168). Nothing is said in the contemporary manuscript of this charter of any estate in Romney Marsh. But a tenth-century version of the same charter has an interpolation which includes one sulung of land in the Marsh whose bounds are as follows: on the east, *ala mearc*, on the south *byttlinc hopa* in the marsh, on the west the king's boundaries, and on the north *frodeshammespend* (or *flothamespynd*) (CS 336; S 1617). The name *byttlinc hopa* is preserved in Bedling Hope Sewer which runs close to the western limit of the decalcified marshland. We cannot be certain exactly where *byttlinc hopa* lay in relation to the sewer, but there must be a strong probability that it lay towards its north-eastern end at Hope Farm (TQ 992283), just south of the Rhee Wall at Snargate. Since *byttlinc hopa* was the southern boundary of the property, the estate must have comprised, or at least included, the area of the settlement of Snargate, a name which is first recorded in c. 1200 (Wallenberg, 1934, 478) and which clearly refers to a medieval sluice-gate (perhaps intended to admit seawater to the Romney branch of the northern Limen at high tide). It is instructive too that *frodeshammespend*, the northern boundary of this estate, must have lain very close to the *flothammas* (*flothhamman*) of CS 396 (S 282);
Wallenberg convincingly argued on the basis of later forms that *frodes-* is a corrupt form for *floses-* (Wallenberg 1931, 114–5, 165), and that the first element is either OE *flood* ‘flood’, *stream*, *flode* ‘channel’, ‘gully’, or *flat* ‘deep water’ or *sea*. The second element of the name, OE *hamm* ‘enclosure’, ‘meadow’ or ‘dry ground in a marsh’, is found in several local names: in Ham Farm (TQ 997296), and also in Ham Lees Farm (TR 003320) and Ham Mill Farm (TR 002316), both just in the neighbouring parish of Ham Street (TR 001334). The final element is OE *pynd* ‘pound’, ‘dam’, ‘embankment’. Whether the whole name refers to an embanked river-channel (presumably of the river *Limen* or one of its branches), to a stock-pound in a water-meadow or to an embanked enclosure subject to flooding is important, for the name might mean that by the tenth century artificial water-channels or embankments were already being constructed in this corner of the marsh. Equally intriguing are the *contunia regis* which formed the western boundary of this unnamed sulung in the Marsh. If the ‘king’s boundaries’ are simply those of an unnamed royal estate, it would seem to have lain in the calcareous marsh south-east of Appledore; if on the other hand they are perhaps some form of linear boundary-dyke it may be that in late Saxon times the king had already played a role in attempting to protect the Marsh and the river *Limen* from the inroads of the sea.

That the area north of Snargate was already under threat from the inroads of the sea is confirmed by a charter attributed to King Egbert of Wessex but bearing the date 845, which is impossible since Egbert died in 839 (CS 396; S 282). The charter, which purports to be a grant to a layman of Warehorne and *Flothammas* (Ham?) survives in an eleventh-century manuscript and may therefore be taken as some guide to the topography at that time at least. On the west of Warehorne and Ham was *Genlida* (OE *gegnlad*), literally a ‘counter-channel’. Green has not reckoned any part of ‘The Dowels’ to be amongst the calcareous soils, though some of the creek-ridges in the area have calcareous subsurface horizons and may yet prove to preserve the form of this channel (Green 1968, 107–8). The presence of a tidal channel or of an artificial river-course here in the eleventh century suggests that the whole branch of the *Limen* that flowed around the north of the Isle of Oxney was already endangered from the encroachment of the sea from the south and would already have needed extensive sea defences. The future of Romney as a harbour kept clear of silt and shingle by the current of fresh water was therefore already at risk, and once again the question of the antiquity of the embankments in this vicinity is brought into focus. A programme of planned excavation on the embankments and sea-defences of the marsh could alone resolve the uncertainties of their date and chronology.

**Narrative accounts**

Early medieval narrative sources have sometimes been held to throw light on the Marsh. But we may surely discount the ninth-century description in the ‘British Marvels’ attributed to ‘Nennius’ of a ‘lake *Lomonoi*’ with sixty (340) islands each with an eagle’s nest, and with sixty (340) rivers entering it but with only one (named *Lemna*) leaving it to the sea (Green 1968, 18; Cunliffe 1980a, 48–9; Nennius *HH*, c. 67). The reference is rather to one of the Scottish lochs – Lomond or Leven – whose name (like *Limen*) is also based on the Celtic root *Lemana*, but which fit the rather fanciful description of lake, islands, eagles and rivers very much better than does Romney Marsh. Some manuscripts indeed specify that Loch Leven in *regione Pictorum* is intended. By contrast, in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* account of the arrival of the great Danish army at the mouth of the *Limen* in 892 with 200 (250) ships, we do have a strictly contemporary account of high authority and whose Kentish location is certain (*A-S Chron.*, s. a. 892). The Chronicler describes how the Viking fleet came into the mouth or estuary of the *Limen* and then rowed their ships four miles up river to a half-built fortress which they stormed; thereafter the Danes built for themselves their own winter-camp at Appledore, which is described in the next annal as being on the mouth (estuary) of the *Limen*. It is clear that in terms of the Romney or Hythe branches of the *Limen*, Appledore was already some seven or twelve miles up river and could scarcely be described as on *Limenemuthan*. Moreover if the half-built *burt* of 892 is correctly identified as Castle Toll, Newenden (Davison 1972) then the chronicler’s ‘four miles’ up-river would be a pardonable exaggeration if the mouth were at Appledore (six or seven miles) but a gross error had it been at Romney or Hythe. The conclusion seems clear. At least at high tide, the bulk of the calcareous area of Walland Marsh must have been covered by sea water, so that a huge fleet could be based at Appledore. Such a tidal lagoon might also explain the presence of the *genlida* or counter-channel on the west boundary of Warehorne and Ham, perhaps some early version of the Rhee channel designed to take in sea water at high tide. If we therefore picture Walland Marsh as already an area of tidal mud-flats in the ninth century, then we must recognise that the northern branches of the *Limen* must already have been under threat from the sea at that time. The surprise is perhaps that it took so long for the sea to capture the *Limen* in a definitive course to Rye. The traditional obligations of the *les marisci* in the Appledore area that involved contributing to the work of building sea walls and water channels must have been just as necessary in the ninth century as they were when first recorded in the twelfth.

**Conclusion**

This survey of the extant historical evidence for Romney Marsh in the early Middle Ages must therefore raise as many questions about the current understanding of the geomorphological development as it answers. We need to bear in mind that the surviving charters do not record
the date of the first settlement or colonisation of a particular area of the Marsh, but merely tell us of the ownership and the boundaries of Marsh estates on particular occasions when they happened to change hands. The charters show that in Romney Marsh proper the decalcified marshland estates had boundaries that are recognisable on the ground today. Moreover much of the calcareous marshland here and in Denge Marsh between the eighth and tenth centuries. By contrast the calcareous marshland of Walland Marsh may have been inundated, at least at high tide, by the late ninth century: it was not to be reclaimed until the later Middle Ages, whilst the decalcified area of the Dowels contained a tidal channel at least by the eleventh century. We therefore need to question how far the geological evidence can accommodate these contrasts and apparent contradictions (see Green 1988). For the future, the need is clear. Historians, geologists and archaeologists must work in collaboration if the problems of the Marsh’s evolution are to be solved.

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Nicholas Brooks

