

THE SALTING MOUNDS OF ESSEX.

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There has been, as yet, no scientific notice taken of the numerous ancient mounds of burnt earth in the marshes on the Essex and Suffolk coast. They just fringe the full-tide line of the rivers and estuaries, being only occasionally covered by exceptionally high tides. They consist of a reddish clay mixed freely with broken pottery of the rudest type, and wood ashes and charcoal. It is very strange that they should have for so long a time failed to excite the attention of antiquaries or archæologists, for it is just possible they may be able to fit the key to some of the ciphers of our half-revealed past history.

These mounds exist only in this one peculiar position. I have examined many, and I never saw one more than five feet above high-water mark, and never reaching to low-tide mark. They seem all very uniform in character and composition. Those I have seen are from 2 feet to $4\frac{1}{2}$ feet deep, and have the same appearances at the surface as when worked down to the base. I have not yet examined them sufficiently to tell the full number and extent of them; but among those I have dug into, the largest was, as nearly as I could judge, about 30 acres. It consists almost entirely of this red burnt clay, and contains an enormous number of fragments of pottery, bricks and vessels, although not one of them seems to be entire. An old man in the neighbourhood has been for years in the habit of carting away the soil from this mound, or "Red Hill," as he called it. He told me he had moved away many hundreds of loads, but he had never found a single piece of whole pottery, nor a coin. I showed him the largest piece I had picked up, and he said it was much larger than most pieces, although he remembered having seen a few pieces nearly as large again. Mixed with the earth, though irregularly, are large quantities of charcoal and wood ashes, but I could find no trace of coal. Clinkers seemed common, and they showed that great heat must have been thrown out by the fires that have burnt them.

I may give my impressions and observations during one day's work among them. Through the courtesy of Mr. Stacey Gibson, of Saffron Walden, I had permission to visit any of the mounds existing upon his land at Peldon, and, on the 7th of May last, I started with an experienced and native navvy, well provided with pick, shovel and sieve, to make a thorough research into the facts of the case. Arrived at the Brickhouse farm, occupied by Mr. Fairhead, we walked down to the marsh under his direction, and just at the sea-wall we came upon the first mound. This was nearly level with the wall itself, though a good deal of it has already been carted away on to the land. Commencing to dig, I at first had a hole made about four feet in diameter, and at the depth of 5 feet we came to the bottom of it, resting upon

London clay. In this hole we found about twelve pieces of pottery, of three or four inches square, and two or three hundred of more than about one inch square, together with an immense number of smaller pieces. I also found two bricks, one about three feet down, and the other right at the bottom—in fact, in the clay itself. The whole soil had been lowered about two feet for a hundred yards. I had intended cutting a trench through from one side to the other, but, as that would have taken several days, I preferred digging similar holes to the one already described in various parts of it. I found it of the same depth and character in every part, although I did not find any more of the wedge-shaped bricks in this mound. Its whole extent was about ten acres: so that it alone would contain upwards of 100,000 tons of earth.

Leaving this first mound, I tried another about a quarter of a mile to the north. I could not quite determine its extent; for though I fancied it ran under a wheat-field, and dug in several places to find out, sometimes the burnt earth appeared and occasionally it did not. The untilled portion of the mound was 4 feet 6 inches thick, and had also been largely carted away. Its inland face was burrowed by many rabbits. It was just the same as the others, and here I found a large circular piece of pottery which must belong to a pan at least 2 feet in diameter.

Other mounds were near, but I next walked to Sampson's farm, about two miles to the east, quite near to Mersea Strood. There I found two mounds in a field which had been recently worked and planted with beans. I carefully walked over the field, and found two more bricks, but all the fragments of pottery were very small, and like the others. When I dug into these mounds themselves, there were far fewer fragments, but little charcoal, and the greatest depth of any part not more than 2 feet 6 inches. An old man who had worked on the farm for over fifty years said, that it had been used long ago to fill up the marsh and level the field.

Another mound ran by the Strood, just in the marsh, and this I also examined. I found it just like the others. In another field, adjoining, stood two mounds, which were probably originally only one. They were very shallow, being only one foot thick, and contained much less broken pottery.

Altogether, these mounds covered about thirty acres, and, with the others I visited, making upwards of forty acres, as nearly as I could judge; and this extent has been considerably reduced during the lifetime of the one old man I talked to, as the soil is valuable to apply to clay, and also to dress the land after an exceptionally high tide. I have no idea of the total number of these mounds, but their number may be imagined when, after the destruction of centuries, eighteen still remain between Strood and Virley, a distance of only six miles. I am told they exist on the Norfolk coast, along the wide rivers of Suffolk, and also in Kent. Still, I believe we have them in the greatest number and the largest size in Essex. They are quite peculiar to our own coasts, and are entirely distinct from the kitchen middens of Denmark and Scotland.

They present an interesting field of investigation, and I cannot pretend to account for them, but may give a few facts further, and possible suggestions therefrom.

These mounds invariably reach right down to the London clay, shewing either that the clay, at the time they were deposited, was not

covered by mud, or that the men who made them always first cleared down to the clay. When we remember the acreage they cover, this would be no small task.

I have tried for some years to collect the traditions and popular opinions about them, and they are various. Some say they were Roman brick-yards; others that they were Saxon potteries, under Alfred the Great. Some believe that they were the base of the camp-fires of Boadicea or of Alfred at the Danish invasion; while others fancy the Danes brought their dead to be buried there, and that the broken pottery was the shivered vessels of the dead. All these fancies are equally absurd; but what are they?

In the catalogue of the glass at the South Kensington Museum, published for the Committee of the Council of Education by Chapman & Hall, page 9, is the following notice:—"In 1295 English records speak of the glass painters being among the chief tradesmen, particularly at Colchester, where the sand is of a suitable kind, and the salt-marshes would furnish abundance of plants whose ashes yield the necessary alkalis." I quote this indication of an extensive industry going on in the marshes, but I hardly think it has anything to do with the formation of the mounds; yet it is a fact not to be lost sight of. In a mound five feet thick on the Creek by Strood wall, a good cross-section is given. This contains little or no pottery, but much cellular, semi-vitrified earth and burnt clay, with impressions of the sea-grass *Euteromorpha Compressa*.

I will now briefly describe the specimens collected. I. Red earth or burnt clay. II. Under-clay (London clay), containing charcoal. III. Three pieces of clinker or fused sand, one piece of which is nearly equal to coarse glass. IV. Twelve pieces of coarse pottery, which are nearly all one inch thick, of a red colour, but blackened in the centre. Some of these are very full of impressions of grass, having evidently been held together by the grass while being baked, one piece belonging to a vessel which could not have been less than two feet in diameter. All the pottery is of the coarsest possible hand-manufacture. On none of them do I see a trace of a wheel: in fact, it is all ruder and rougher than the early British urns of the oldest type. V. One piece of black earthenware of still rougher make, which was apparently nearly half grass before being burnt. VI. Four pieces of wedge-shape tile or brick. These are of much better make, being finer material well burnt, apparently made in a mould. Three of them are of the same colour—red, but not black in the middle. They are at the smaller end five-eighths of an inch square; but, as I have not yet seen an entire one, I cannot say what the complete size may have been. The largest piece I have seen is $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches by $1\frac{1}{8}$ inch thick. This piece is not of the same material as the rest, but is made of mixed clay; very like an over-burnt yellow-stock brick made from London clay and chalk, with, however, but little chalk.

Having thus very briefly stated all the facts and material I have at present been able to collect, the questions now remaining to be answered about them are, What are these mounds? How did they come there? and Who made them?—and I cannot even venture to suggest a reply to any of them. Possibly some day a more complete and thorough examination of them may remove the mystery now shrouding them, and, as I before ventured to suggest, I hope they may be able to throw some light

upon the past of our race ; for, as we in Colchester may claim the honour for our town, and our flat despised marshes of being the cradle, if not the birthplace, of the English race that has made England what she is, there may be some hidden and unsuspected revelation concerning that early time which may be of deep interest to all the world-wide, English-speaking family, although I suspect that the secret, if any, which these mounds contain belongs to a far older time. Mr. H. Laver tells me that one at Tollesbury, which I have not yet seen, was tilled during the time of the Saxons, as, having been abandoned to the sea, it still remains outside the sea-wall, with the characteristic Saxon narrow stretches which distinguished Saxon tillage.