

# A walk along...

## The River Wantsum

This footpath leads down to a modest watercourse, which is all that remains of the wide sea channel that separated the Isle of Thanet from mainland Kent during the Roman and Early Medieval periods. The Wantsum Channel was an important shipping route, 40 feet deep and two and a half miles across at its widest point. How did such a major waterway come to disappear?

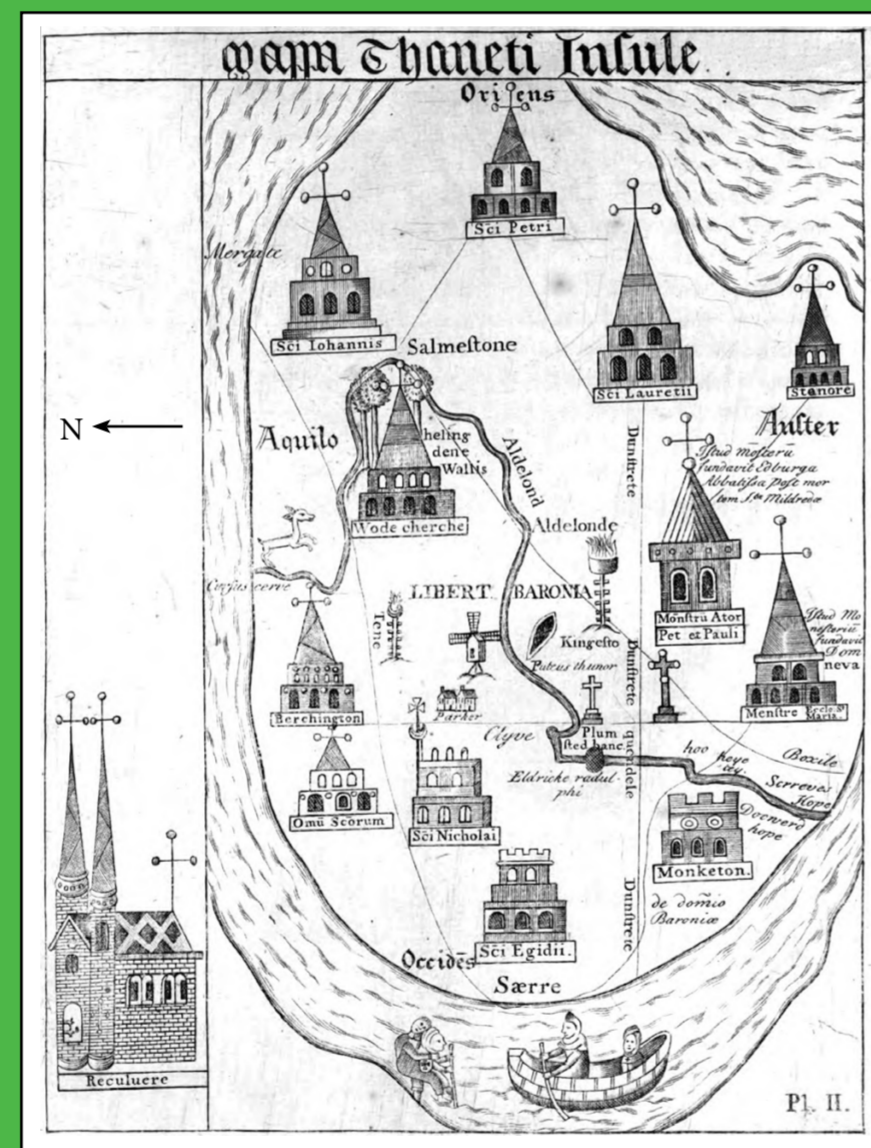
You are standing in what was the northern mouth of the Wantsum. In the Roman period, the land in front of you would have been under water, with small ships navigating this busy sea route. There were many islands and large areas of tidal saltmarsh. Far to your right, where the Reculver towers now stand, was a Roman fort defending the northern end of the channel. A second fort, at Richborough, defended the southern end.

Richborough had been the landing place for the Romans in AD43 and became no less then the gateway to 'Britannia'. Both forts were rebuilt in stone during the 3rd century to protect against Saxon raiders – these walls can still be seen today.



The walls of Richborough Roman Fort

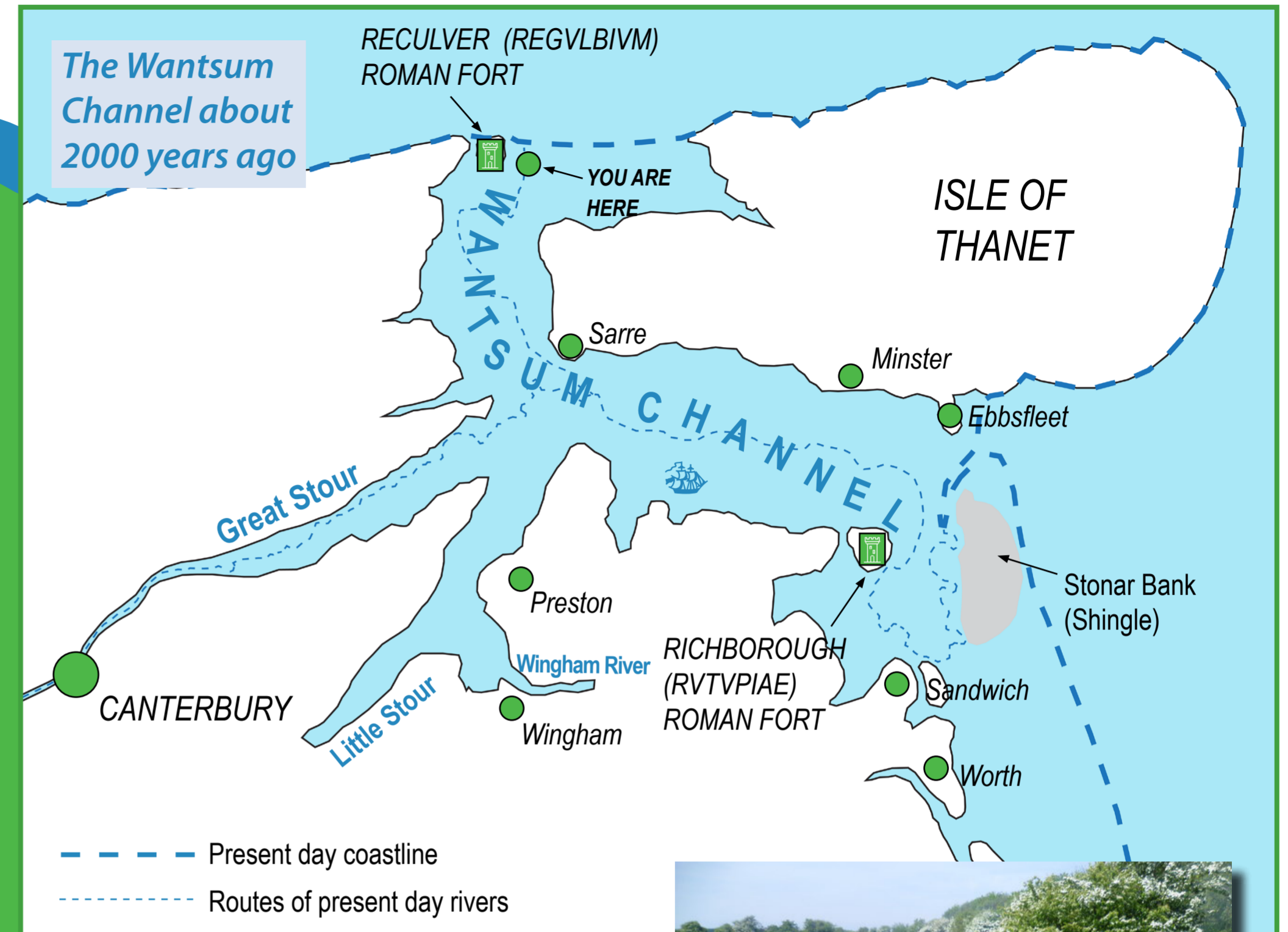
With the decline of the Roman Empire, those raiders became colonists, and Ebbsfleet is traditionally said to be the landing place of the first Saxon settlers in 449. The Wantsum continued to be important, with Sarre being one of the principal ports of the Kingdom of Kent. The main ferry crossing is also



This 15th century map of the Isle of Thanet depicts the Wantsum Channel and shows a ferry crossing at Sarre as well as many settlements familiar today, including Birchington, Monkton, St Nicholas and Margate, and features such as beacons and a windmill

thought to have been at Sarre. Rivers like the Stour, Little Stour and Wingham River were much wider and deeper – navigable inlets off the Wantsum – and towns and villages now well inland were ports.

Historical references to changes in the Wantsum start to appear in the 13th century. The channel was gradually silting up, becoming narrower and



shallower. This was probably caused by the presence of a shingle bank known as Stonar Bank in the southern mouth of the channel. It altered the way water flowed in the Wantsum leading to settling of silt. By 1267, at the southern end, silting had left just two narrow entrances – at Ebbsfleet and Sandwich Haven (now the River Stour at Sandwich).

These changes were being accelerated by the process of 'inning' – reclaiming land from the sea – driven primarily by the Church (in particular the Abbot of Saint Augustine) expanding its lands. By the early 14th century, the Ebbsfleet mouth was unusable and Sandwich Haven was silting up fast. The people of Sandwich reacted angrily, burning watermills belonging to the Abbot, who they blamed for the threat to their livelihood as a port.

By 1485, the Wantsum was so narrow a bridge replaced the ferry at Sarre. We don't know when the last vessels used the channel, but historian John Twine, writing in 1590, claimed he knew only eight men still alive who could remember this happening.



The River Wantsum today, near St Nicholas

We would like to thank SNCF for permission to install this panel.

Find more information and download a leaflet about the Stour Catchment from our website [www.kentishstour.org.uk](http://www.kentishstour.org.uk)



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