

**IN THE BEGINNING... A History of the Darent & Cray:
Feb 2013**

(ANIMALS)

The region of the two rivers once hosted herds of **wild oxen**, roe **deer** and **wild boar**.

The tusks and bones of the great **Woolly Mammoth** as well as the **Woolly Rhinoceros** have been found both in the Thames basin as well as in the Vale of Holmsdale.

The remains of **straight-tusked elephant** have been found at **Ebbsfleet**.

(MAN)

The skull bones of a young woman were found at **Swanscombe**, just 3 miles from the mouth of the Darent. They date from **350-400,000** years ago and are considered the earliest example of **homo sapiens** to have been found in Europe

She was part of a nomadic tribe of **Neanderthal** hunter-gathers who survived by following migrating herds of wild game along the fresh-water channels of the Thames and the banks of the Darent and Cray.

Many hundreds of their **flint implements**, including hand axes and knives, have been found at Swanscombe, **Northfleet** and **Crayford**.

As the next ice age advanced, these early humans left never to return leaving behind the body of the young woman.

Millennia later, and after the rising sea had drowned the land-bridge with Europe, man eventually returned. . They came, exploring, hunting and eventually settling their families here. Their bones and their implements are found throughout the river region.

The first of the new travellers were the hunters of **Mesolithic Man**;

then came the farming Bronze-Age **Bell-Beaker** people from the Rhineland;

the Iron Age **Cantiaci** tribe who built the great hill-forts at Lullingstone and Westerham;

and finally, the war-like **Belgae** invaders from Germany who Caesar records fighting.

All made their way up our river valleys and left their indelible mark.

Finally, it was the turn of **the Romans**. The year was **AD43** and they were to stay for the next 400 years. The whole Thames Valley must have looked more like the **Canadian prairie** with spruce and elder dotting a rich, broad meadowland. A dark line of thick oak woods would have stood on the rising ground of the North Downs.

The land beside the Darent was rich fertile ground, with a protective oak forest along its slopes. It was to become one of the most popular locations for Romans to settle in.

Remains of their villas occur at regular intervals almost every 1.5 kilometres along the course of our river. They range from small farmsteads to luxury homes.

At this time the river was strong and broad and their flat-bottomed boats would carry produce from their villa farms swiftly down to the Thames. The Darent was reputed to be navigable as far as Otford.

401AD. marked the final administrative severance from Rome.

Kent was suddenly vulnerable and un-defended.

Two **Jutish** brothers, **Hengist & Horsa** were invited to defend the coast.

In payment they were gifted the Isle of Thanet, which actually **was** an island at this time.

In **455 AD** a battle took place against the British and the Saxons at **Aylesford** on the Medway.

Horsa was slain, so Hengist succeeded to the kingdom. Two years later, the remaining Britons fought their final battle against Hengist at **Crayford**. 4,000 of them were slaughtered.

For the next 300 years, until **762AD**, Anglo-Saxon Kent was to be ruled by the descendents of Hengist's son, **Oisc**. The proud emblem of the White Horse of Horsa, set on its red background, became the royal standard.

Despite their aggressive reputation, the Anglo Saxons proved themselves efficient and organised, introducing systems of local and regional government across the county.

The royal court was based at **Darenth** and they made **Sutton-at-Hone** the local administrative centre.

They sited their furthest out-post near the Darent's source on what is now the Green at **Westerham**.

Our rivers too, established their names: **Derwentio**, the Roman name for 'the river where oak trees grow' – and **Crei** the Celtic name for 'the fresh water'.

Almost every one of our villages owes their origin to their Saxon names.

In 999, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records that the Danish long-boats '*came again round into the Thames and turned then up the Medway...they then destroyed and ravaged almost all West Kent and went about as they pleased.*' **Canute** had arrived – and in force.

Yet just 50 years later, it was another battle which changed the course of history.

King Harold, rode into battle with his exhausted army and was slain. His erstwhile friend, Duke William and his **Norman** followers now marched their way across Kent. It is said in folk-law that William had to recoup from food poisoning at the ruined tower of the Archbishop's great manor at Otford – which accounted for why the parish avoided being sacked.

(THE RIVERS)

We know of at least four sites of early Roman mills. By 1086, the Domesday Book recorded **30 water-mills** on the Darent and **11 along the Cray**. These were mostly for the grinding of corn with the occasional one adapted to a hammer system for the fulling of cloth.

In **1588**, in the reign of Elizabeth 1, something momentous happened that would change life on our two rivers immeasurably.

Elizabeth loved finery and expensive jewellery. And that's where **John Spielman** enters the picture. He was a jeweller from Germany. He was also a charming entrepreneur and provided the queen with exactly what she desired most. So a deal was made. Mr Spielman could have the monopoly in manufacturing the new paper sheets that people seemed to use on the Continent, and Her Majesty could keep her new jewellery.

Spielman set up the very first paper mill in England at Dartford. Skilled paper workers arrived from Germany and his new business became an immediate success. His raw materials were rags and occasionally old fishing nets! It is alleged that Shakespeare particularly preferred Spielman's paper to parchment. To identify his high quality product, Spielman had each sheet water-marked with his own coat of arms... It was a jester's head. And so the term 'fools cap' was born.

By 1900, there were **8 mills** specialising in paper-making along the Darent and **3** on the Cray.

Paper for banknotes, for ledgers, for writing, for painting. The downside was that the bleach employed in all these mills began the pollution of the river.

Paper-making wasn't the only trade being milled. Between them, the Darent and Cray soon contained more mills per mile than any other river in the South of England. Mills custom-designed to split iron for the making of wire or nails, mills to hammer wrought iron, mills to manufacture gunpowder, mills to create silk crepe, mills to saw timber and even to produce calico and shoe laces. The industrial revolution had arrived. But with affluence, came **the effluent**. And at the end of the day, it was the rivers that paid the price.

Industry was changing the profile of our rivers for ever. Straight, mill leat streams had to be dug: The river had to be diverted; gravel had to be excavated leaving behind deep lakes. Man was changing the essential topography of the river's natural course.

(FISH)

For 400 years, the broad, fast-flowing Darent held the reputation as one of the finest trout streams in the South of England and anglers would come from all over the country to fish here. In 1818, a Mr. Colyer, the owner of Farningham Mill, caught a 9lb trout in his mill stream. A life-size replica stood until recently as the weather-vane above his Farningham Mill. It is alleged that in Elizabethan days, even **salmon** used to spawn in the Darent but this may be just wishful thinking

The once-abundant fresh-water **Crayfish** provided a staple, if limited, food source to local communities for centuries. These small crustaceans got their name not from their alleged river of origin, **the Cray**, but from the old French word, **ecrevisse** – cray-visse – crayfish. But they need clean clear water to survive and so their demise has been tied to the state of our two rivers.

Lampreys, eel-like creatures, once also abounded in the Cray and Darent. They were highly appreciated by the ancient Roman settlers. During the Middle Ages, they were eaten by the upper classes, especially during fasting periods. I'm told they have a much meatier taste than most fish. Henry I is alleged by Shakespeare, to have **died** from eating "**a surfeit of lampreys**". And it is certainly known that Henry V would always insist they be on the menu at Otford.

Chepsted was the early English name for a market. And **Chipstead** got its name because for centuries it was the main market-place for the buying **of fish** for the London trade. They were carried up each day in panniers on horseback along the track known as the Rye Way. The boast was that fish landed in Rye that morning could be on the London tables that very night. This profitable trade only ceased when Rye Harbour eventually silted up in 1636.

(THE COMMUNITIES)

At the start of the Norman occupation many of the so-called **villages** were little more than - 'archipelagos' of odd farms divided by woods or fields.. Several would have had small, often thatched, Saxon-built chapel. It was Norman architects like Bishop Gundulf, who built Rochester Cathedral, who kick-started the revolution - the village church. The churches were to provide the essential corner stones for communities which have lasted over a thousand years. It was these beautiful Norman stone churches along the Darent and the Cray, that effectively provided **the glue** that created our river communities.

Our two rivers have a long and noble history. They have been nurturing our predecessors who hunted or farmed on their banks, for many thousands of years. But the Industrial Revolution, using the rivers' **power for profit**, almost choked them to death. And by 1976, the rate of abstraction, using the rivers' **volume for profit**, almost starved them to death.

The moral is writ-large. Survival of our rivers **has to depend** on maintaining a natural balance. The once broad and powerful Darent and Cray are today, so very fragile. Those **industrious mills** are gone and the **rising trout** are now few and far between. We should never forget the lessons our past has taught us. The Darent and Cray have moulded the communities in which we live.

There is **not one** of our villages that does not owe its very existence to its river.

Perhaps it's now time that these two generous providers receive our care and respect.

Rod Shelton
March '13