



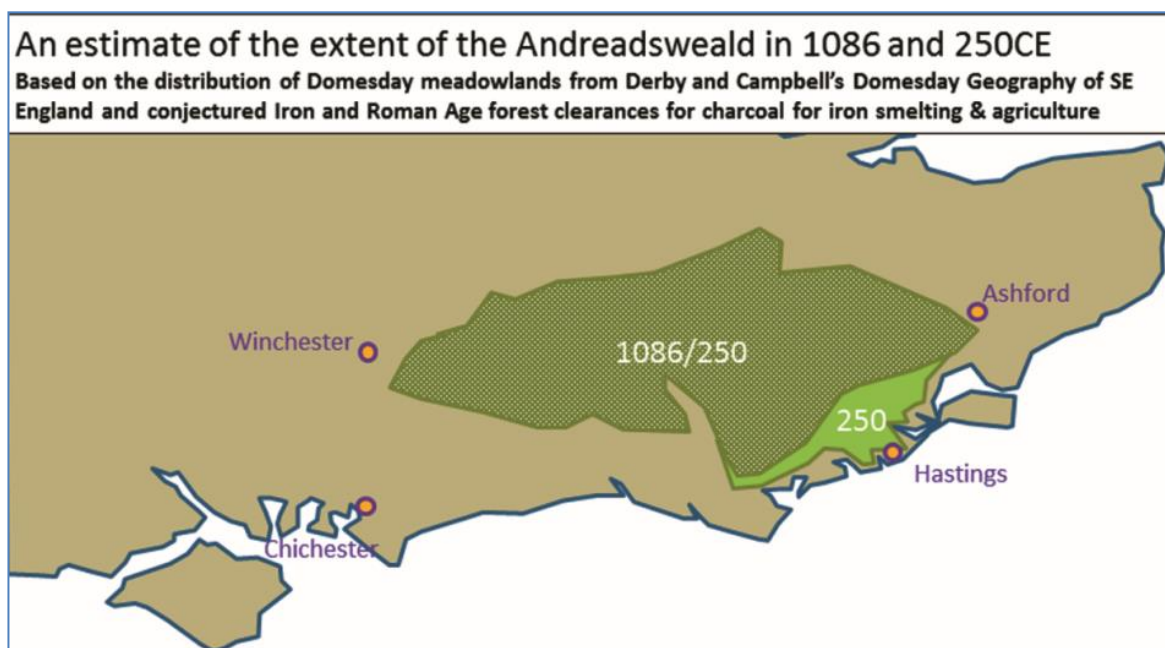
Early Eastern Sussex before 410

A time traveller to east Sussex and Kent in times of pre-history would find that the coastline was markedly different. Sea levels have risen, there has been much coastal erosion, shingle and sand has been deposited and also washed away and extensive early marshlands are virtually gone, both from natural causes and the activities of man.

2000 years ago the Romans were able to use several small local ports now kilometres inland to import goods and export the iron ingots produced locally across the Channel to Gaul.

Before Rome

The pre-Roman period in eastern Sussex from the Mesolithic period (ca. 10,000 years ago) was characterised by scattered settlements in an unpromising environment of heathland and dense forest (the Andreadsweald was 30 miles deep and 120 miles long and stretched over the north of Sussex and into Kent). Isolated settlements might have shared common activities such as iron extraction, and the larger centres of population were probably based in what are now the Eastbourne and Hastings areas.



This map assumes that the Andreadsweald in 1086 occupied the area where virtually no meadowlands are recorded in Domesday. It may have extended to the coast in the late Iron Age and Roman times, when the coastal zone was deforested for charcoal and agriculture. Modern place names are given for orientation only. Other methods of estimating the extend of the Andreadsweald have been used by other authors

The Historical Atlas of Sussex (Leslie and Short, 1999) tells a story showing south-east Sussex to be largely devoid of settlements. But recent excavations associated with the Hastings – Bexhill link road have suggested significant pre-historic and historic habitation, sometimes only temporary, around the Coombe Haven valley.

Thinking of England as a whole, the landscape altered in the period 2000BCE – 1500BCE as fields, trackways, boundaries and settlements became evident. So it is likely the countryside in the east Sussex area would have been noticeably altered by cultivation over a thousand years before the Romans arrived.

In addition there is evidence of some Iron Age iron-making activity in the area, notably at Crowhurst Park but also at several nearby sites, including the newly discovered finds near Wilting Farm. Even small iron-making endeavours would have led to considerable deforestation as trees were cut down to make charcoal for furnaces, which created land for cultivation, mainly of cereals.

Towards the end of the Iron Age, around 75BCE, the Atrobates, one of the tribes of the Belgae (themselves derived from a mix of central and northern European peoples) moved into southern Britain. Then came the Regni and others followed by the Romans. Very likely the indigenous inhabitants of Sussex encountered several centuries later by the immigrating Saxons would have been from a wide gene pool.

Some scholars speculate that the Iron Age inhabitants of Sussex created the north-south droving roads, which were later used by others and in due course had an effect on the pattern of Sussex settlement. Later churches and villages might be sited, it has been suggested, where a drove road crossed a river. A known pre-historic ridge road leads from Fairlight through Ore along the ridge to Battle then via Netherfield to Heathfield, a cross country route still used today. At Netherfield this track was joined by another which followed the ridge from Rye via Brede and Udimore.

The Coming of Rome

What interested the Romans about this remote end of eastern Sussex? It was virtually cut off – to the west by the extensive wide tidal flats of Pevensey and its surrounding marshes, to the north by the dense Wealden forest and to the east by the flooded estuarine waters of the Rye Camber and the tidal valleys of the Rivers Rother, Brede and Tillingham. Their routes in were by road from the north-east and by sea from the south.

No known Roman road directly links south-east Sussex to the nearby Roman shore fort at Pevensey (Anderita) which stands on what was a peninsula on the western shore of what was then the large tidal expanse of sea water and salt flats and marshes. Hastings Area Archaeological Research Group (HAARG) have found elements of a small Roman town at Bridge Farm, near Boreham Street, near to extensive Roman finds, old Roman saltpans, and a Roman period jetty at the head of Waller's Haven. This was probably a small Classis Britannica port or settlement pre-dating the fort at Pevensey.

It has been postulated that there may have been a high ground earthen track-way eastwards between this and Beauport Park and westwards to the area north of Eastbourne. Interestingly a later cross-country road along the south coast is shown on Gough's map of 1360 which links Rye, Winchelsea, Battle, Boreham Street (which is specifically depicted and named) and Lewes, with Pevensey lying off line to the south. Could this follow an old Roman line?

What spurred the building of a substantial Roman road from the north, and also harbours for the berthing of ships, was the presence of iron ore and wood – lots of both. Julius Caesar had first drawn Rome's attention to iron being produced in the coastal parts of Britain in 54/55BCE. The Romans may also have heard about iron production in eastern Sussex and

when they arrived in 43, they found an established local tradition of iron-making. The Romans' own surveyors would also have noticed the rich orange-brown colour of many streams and drawn their own inferences. It is interesting that there is also evidence of Roman trading with this area as HAARG member Alan Charman found Roman coins dating from 83 BCE –31BCE at Ashburnham.

At the eastern extent of Coombe Haven Way at Upper Wilting near Crowhurst, occupation from the 1st century through to the late 2nd century has been found, comprising a large iron-working site and an adjacent ditched enclosure. The iron-working site included areas for preparing charcoal, roasting ore and then smelting, with the remains of fourteen bloomery furnaces and hundreds of cubic metres of overlying slag and cinder deposits.

Evidence for Romano-British settlement has also been found on the ridges of the Coombe Haven valley. This suggests the rural landscape of the Roman period around Bexhill and Hastings would have appeared quite settled. Deforestation would have been obvious as the furnaces' hunger for charcoal would have been huge.

The ore was prepared before smelting by roasting it, breaking it and removing unwanted stone. The prepared ore was then smelted using a technique called 'bloomer smelting', where the particles of iron metal formed do not melt, but stick together to make a spongy 'bloom'.



Gough's Map 1360. The road between Rye, Winchelsea, Battle, Boreham Street and Lewes. The orientation of the map is curious, with the English Channel to right. Modern place names overlaid.

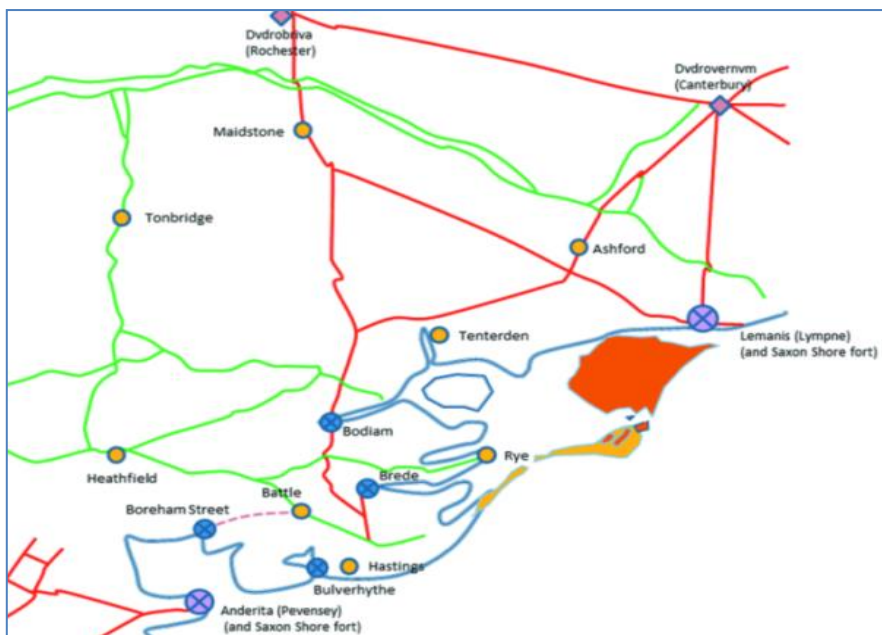
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The Beauport Park iron bloomery between Battle and Hastings was possibly run under military supervision by the Classis Britannica fleet. Its and other furnaces' peak activity was up until about 250, during and just after the northern British campaigns and the construction of Hadrian's Wall. It may also have supplied the Roman legions in Gaul and the wider Roman Empire with iron for weapons as it has been estimated that this was the third largest iron bloomery in the whole Roman empire.

The bathhouse for the ironworks was excavated by Gerald Brodribb in the 1970s, and was re-covered to preserve it, but was noted to be a 'Scheduled Ancient Monument at risk' in 2013. Beauport Park is one of the Romans' lasting industrial memorials and deserves better attention than to be buried under earth and covered with corrugated iron. It is apparently one of the most complete Roman industrial sites ever to have been discovered in Britain and has never opened to the public. When excavated the remains were found to contain cold, warm and hot rooms, plunge baths and changing rooms. There are also furnaces, under-floor heating chambers, flues in the walls which channelled heat around the building, and painted plaster which decorated the walls.

The local haematite iron ore from Petley, Sedlescombe, Icklesham, Beauport, Bynes Farm, Brede and Crowhurst Park etc. was smelted with charcoal, and then the crude iron shipped out - northwards via a port run by the Classis Britannica at Bodiam, which sat at the upper end of a then navigable River Rother, or by a smaller port at Brede, just north of what appears to be a large iron-processing site, and to the south by a possible port at Bulverhythe. It is likely that the chosen route was downhill which would have made transporting the heavy iron easier. At the nearest small port the iron was transhipped in barges across the shallow Rye embayment, called the 'Camera Romera' to Lympe to be transferred to larger boats Slightly to the west further bloomeries produced iron which was barged via a small port at Boreham Street at the Waller's Haven headwater of the Pevensey harbour to the deeper waters near the harbour for transshipment.

Margary traced the Roman road from Beauport on the edge of Hastings via Sedlescombe (where there is a side road to Brede) and Cripps Corner to Bodiam, where it continues north to near Sissinghurst, then divides, continuing north to Maidstone and eastwards to Tenterden, Ashford and Canterbury. At Sedlescombe there is a large road connecting to the iron working site at Footlands Farm.



After Margary: Roman roads (red) and track ways (green) in SE Sussex and S Kent. The dashed line represents a possible high level Roman track way between Boreham Street and Battle. The 400CE Coast is shown in blue, small ports blue, larger ones pink. The Saxon Shore forts and the small ports were no necessarily contemporaneous (see text). Modern towns and place names are shown as small yellow circles for orientation. © BDHS

The Roman Empire in 300 – 400 was in decline, but Roman interest in the Battle area had declined well before that. The iron extracting industry moved north-westwards into the higher Weald, possibly as local ore deposits were becoming more difficult to find and the Hastings area had been denuded of timber. The Classis Britannica had also withdrawn. This dating is evidenced by dating of coin finds, the majority of coins in the area being dated between 69–193, with much reduced activity occurring after about 250.

There were increasing Saxon raids on the vulnerable coast. The Roman shore fort of Anderita was built circa 293CE in response to this. Also by this time a new Roman fleet with its headquarters on the Seine in Gaul provide transport and protection from Saxon raiding parties on both sides of the Channel.

The shore fort at Pevensey was mainly a trading station, but also protected the Roman interests in the Vale of Sussex, between the South Downs and the Weald. In terms of their fortifications, Pevensey fort is an obvious lasting Roman memorial to their local presence.

With the departure of the Romans, the area suffered setbacks. The iron-making sites had been abandoned; the Roman navy had gone, natural decay set in and Saxon attacks increased. The iron-making industry collapsed, with only minimal and cruder iron making in the later Anglo-Saxon period, with no significant revival until medieval times.

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