

THE BEACON SYSTEM IN KENT.

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It is probable that it was from Lord Macaulay's magnificent fragment, "The Armada", that most of us first learned of the system, used in olden times, of transmitting warnings of danger by means of beacon fires lighted upon hills, and it is unlikely that many of us have ever read anything else upon the subject. It seems strange that historians have almost entirely omitted any reference to such a system, except that some of the older ones, such as Camden and Strutt, briefly touch upon the subject. The only literature on the subject of beacons in England consists of four papers, published at different dates by the Society of Antiquaries,¹ paragraphs in the Encyclopædias and in "Notes and Queries", and one or two papers in County Archæological Society journals.

This has not by any means been caused by want of material, for, from the early part of the fourteenth century onwards, the State Papers contain orders and instructions for the setting up and lighting of beacons, extending over a period of some 350 years, from which a good idea of the working of the system may be obtained.

The idea of signalling by means of a fire lighted upon a hill is a very old one. We read in Jeremiah of a "sign of fire"² to be set up as a warning of coming evil; and the prophet Isaiah,³ after describing the calamities, which are to come upon Israel, ends with the words, "till ye be left as a beacon upon the top of a mountain; and as an ensign on an hill."

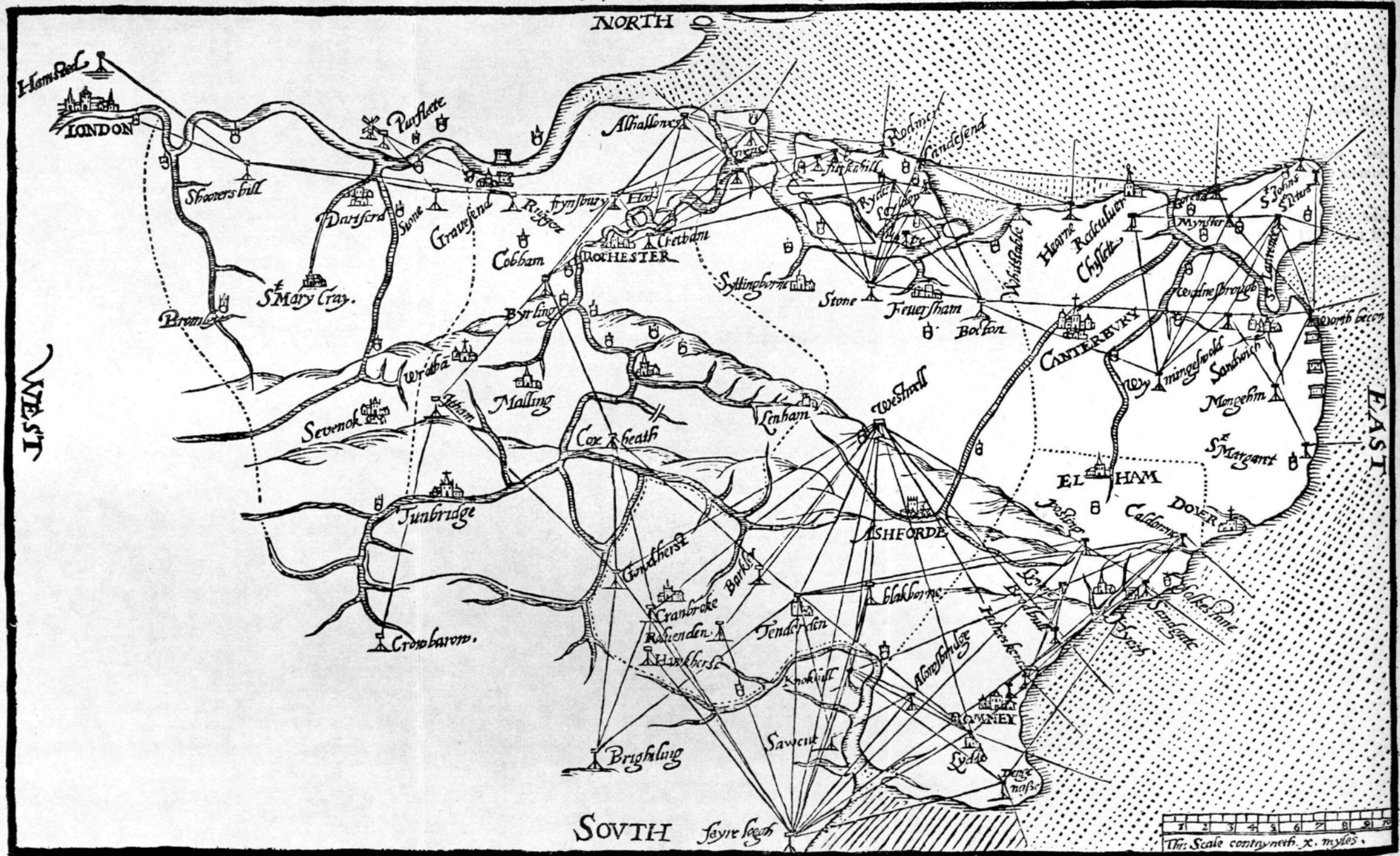
If we turn to the classics we find several references to the use of beacon signals by the Greeks and Romans, and

¹ *Archæologia*, Vols. I, p. 1; XIII, p. 100; XV, p. 302; XXXIV, p. 57.

² Jer. vi. 1

³ Isaiah xxx. 17.

A Carde, of the Beacons, in Kent.



Aeschylus, in his *Agamemnon*, has a vivid description of the transmission, in a single night, of the news of the fall of Troy, to Argos in Greece, some 320 miles away. It matters not whether the siege of Troy be fact or fiction, it is enough, from our point of view, to know that the poet Aeschylus, who was born in 525 B.C., was well acquainted with the possibilities of signalling long distances by beacon fires on hills. When we come to our own country, although Camden in his *Magna Britannia*,¹ tells us that beacons were used in the time of the Saxon Heptarchy, no original evidence of this appears to remain. There is indeed a reference, in the Saxon Chronicle, under date 1006, to "army-beacons" (here beacna), but it seems to refer rather to the burning of houses, as signs of war, by the marauding Danes, than to fires lit to convey an alarm.

But the absence of actual record does not show that warning beacons were not used. It is recorded² that in Saxon times, one of the duties of the cottager, who dwelt by the sea, was to keep the "sea-watch"; and, to signal the approach of an enemy by lighting a fire upon the nearest hill is a method that would readily be thought of, even if the tradition had not been handed down from previous ages.

The earliest recorded use of beacons as warnings in the British Isles is to be found in the Orkneying Saga,³ where it is stated that the Earl of Orkney, in the year 1136, instituted a system of beacon fires to pass, from island to island, news of the approach of raiders from Shetland and the North.

It is nearly 200 years later that we find the first mention of beacons in England. This is in the form of a report of an Inquisition held in the Isle of Wight in August, 1324, which gives details of the measures taken for the defence of the island in case of attack, which included the provision of no less than thirty-one beacons. These are described as "such

¹ Camden's *Brit.* (Gibson's), Vol. I, pp. 219-20.

² *Rectitudines Sing. Pers.*, Liebermann, p. 185.

³ *Heimskringla*, Morris & Eiriker, Vol. I, pp. 174-5.

as have been of old", the watch for both night and day is carefully arranged.¹

The first order sent to the County of Kent is dated two years later, and is found in Rymer's *Foedera*,² and as translated runs as follows :

"The King to his beloved and faithful arrayers of men-at-arms, both horse and foot, in accordance with the Statute made at Wynton, and confirmed in our Parliament assembled at Westminster on the octave of St. Martin last past, to be made and carried out in the County of Kent—greeting. Notwithstanding it is contained in our former commission to you, on the above matter, that certain men shall be assigned by you as a watch of foot-soldiers, in all places where it seems necessary to you, on the coast of the County, where such watch has formerly been kept, and that the said watch have a sign of fire, or of other effective means, which can be seen from afar, so that the men of the neighbouring parts may be able to betake themselves to the fire, or other signal, in the night, if need be ; and that all and singular, who hold land in the said County, shall continue to make contributions for the said watchers in that County. . . . We wish, nevertheless, that the men of this County, living on the sea coast, as often as there shall be need, shall light such signals, so that others, by their light, may be prepared, at all times, to do whatever may pertain to the safety of those parts and this you shall with all speed diligently arrange. Given at Claryndon, the tenth day of August."

The same was ordered to be sent to most of the counties of England.

From this time onwards, similar orders from the King occur in the State Papers of the period, when danger from abroad threatened, as it frequently did.

In 1338, an order sent to all counties begins : "Having recently learned that certain aliens, having collected an immense multitude of galleys and ships, both on the sea and in foreign ports, intend to do upon us and ours what evil and harm they can, both on sea and on land, we instruct you

¹ Cal. Inq. Misc., File 99, m. 10.

² Rymer, 20 Ed. II, Aug. X.

to cause to be made the common signal by fire upon hills, or in some other manner, in the said county ; there and as often as seems best to you ; and as has usually been done in similar cases.”¹

In 1372 the word “ beacon ” is for the first time introduced into the Latin Ordinance ; for, as we have seen above, the Latin scribe had failed to find a word in that language, which represented the English word and could only write “ signum per ignem ”, sign of fire. This order is addressed by the King to the arrayers of men-at-arms, armed men, hobelers and archers in the County of Kent ; and commands that common signals, called “ Beknes ”, by fire upon hills and other high places in the said county shall be made where and as shall seem best.²

It should be explained that a man-at-arms was a man bearing armour upon his person, the armed man merely carried weapons. Also the hobeler was a light horseman, that is, a man who rode a hobby.

In 1377, the first year of Richard II, a detailed order was issued by the King for the erection of beacons on each side of the Thames to give warning of the approach of hostile ships in the river. This, as translated from the French of the period, runs as follows :

“ An ordinance for safeguarding the Counties of Kent and of Essex, particularly for the towns lying on the River Thames from the perils which, may suddenly come upon them from our enemies, which God forbid ; and also for the safeguard of the Navy being in the ports of the said river.

First, let there be ordained in the Isle of Shepeye a beacon (beken), and at Showbery in Essex another beacon. Item, at Hoo in Kent a beacon, and at Fobbyng in Essex another beacon. Item, at Cleve in Kent a beacon, and at Tilbery in Essex another beacon. Item, at Gravesend in Kent a beacon, and at Hornedon in Essex another beacon. Item, that by the especial command of our very noble Lord, the King, the Sheriffs (Viscountz), Constables and other officials in the aforesaid parts of Kent and Essex

¹ Close Rolls, 12 Ed. III, Aug. 15th.

² Close Rolls, 46 Ed. III, May 14th.

be charged that all the said beacons be speedily and suitably set up and prepared in the above-named places for the safeguarding of the country and of the said Navy.

Item, that as soon as the said beacons be made, they shall be well and suitably watched, as well by day as by night, without fail. Item, that the watchmen, who, at the time, shall be at the said beacons, and particularly, at the beacons of Shepeye and Shoubery, shall be from time to time warned and charged that, as soon as they can see any vessels of the enemy coming by sail or by oars towards the said river, then the said two beacons of Shepeye and Shoubery be set on fire, and therewith to make all the noise they can with horn or by shouting, to warn the country round to come with all their force to the said river, each to the aid of the others, to resist our enemies.

Item, that the counties aforesaid be warned and admonished, under greivous penalty, that as soon as they see the said beacons, or one of them, set on fire, or they hear the noise of the horn or shouting, they come immediately, in their best array of arms to the said river, to safeguard the towns lying upon the same, and the Navy being in the ports, from damage by our enemies."¹

Although it is not stated in the order, the beacons higher up the river, no doubt, took the alarm from Sheppey and Shoebury, and it was rapidly passed to Gravesend and Horndon, and thus to London. Thus, the capital, and all the country on each side of the river would soon know of the arrival of an enemy, and the banks would be manned by all in the district who could bear arms, that is, by all men between the ages of 16 and 60.

During the following two centuries, orders for the reinstating of the beacons and the watch occur from time to time, according as there appeared to be any danger of an invasion from abroad or not.

In 1468 an order issued "by the King himself" is headed "concerning the keeping of wards and watches, the truce with France having expired", and it goes on as follows: "We assign to you the placing of such wards and watches,

¹ Parl. Rolls and Close Rolls, 1 Ric. II.

and the signals called beacons (ac signa vocata Bekyns), in such places in your county most suitable for the same, and as has been the custom of old ; and the supervising and repair, and, where necessary, the provision of new.”¹

England was now beginning to be more concerned with events in other parts of Europe, and Henry VII felt it necessary to send an order to the Sheriffs of Norfolk and Suffolk to put their coast watch and beacons in order because “ there is lik to be open werre had moved and stered, as well by water as by Lond ” between Charles VIII of France and Maximilian, King of the Romans.²

In the next reign, a note of “ remembrances ” in the hand-writing of Thomas Cromwell, of matters to be dealt with by the Privy Council contains the item : “ The Beacons throughout the realm to be repaired ”³ ; and, again, some five years later, he writes to King Henry, who seems to have interested himself in the matter, that “ the commissions for beacons were sent more than three weeks ago, understands that some sheriffs have done their duty, some perhaps are negligent.”⁴

In the same year, a letter from the French Ambassador to the Constable of France, shows us that the English system of warning by beacon fires was considered by him, at any rate, to be extremely efficient. He writes, “ five or six ships do nothing but circle round the Kingdom in order to explore and correspond, if need be, by fires, with those who watch by night upon certain ‘ gardes ’ of wood, lately erected, so that no foreign vessel could show itself, without the whole country being warned.”⁵

A few years later the system was made even more perfect, very definite instructions as to the placing and arrangement of the beacons being sent out by the Privy Council. This order was issued under the King’s seal from

¹ Rymer’s *Foedera*, 8 Ed. IV, Jan.

² Rymer, 1 Hen. VII, June 10th.

³ Gairdner’s *Letters and Papers of Hen. VIII*, 1534.

⁴ *Idem.*, March, 1539.

⁵ *Idem.*, April 13th, 1539.

Greenwich in 1546, and, according to a copy among the Shrewsbury Papers in the Library of Lambeth Palace, it runs as follows :

“ An order appoynted for the placing of the Beacons.

Firste, you must cause to be made alongest the see cost in sondrye places belowe in the vallies next unto the see, where you shall thynk convenient at everie place three beakons, which must be sett as they be all three sene from the place where the next three beakons be sett.

Item. Uppon certayne hills next unto thes places, which may be beste seen bothe to the seewarde and landeward, uppon everie suche hill must be sett twoe beakons. Item. Within the bodie of the Shire, in sondrie such places as may best take knowledge from the beakons on the said hills, and gyve knowledge to the rest of th'inner beakonnes within the Shire, must be sett one bekon. Item. For kepyng of all the forsaid beakons you muste appoynte such a number of wyse and vigillaunte p'sonnes as maye w^oute much oncharging of the next inhabit-aunts countynew abowte the wach and kepyng of the said beakons by course as hit shall come abowte to ther turnes. Item. Order must be taken that nother twoe nor three beakonnes of the said beakonnes in one place in the vallies uppon the see syde be lyghtened but bi appoyntment by some suche speciall men as for ther dyscretion shalbe thought mete by you to have the chardge therof cōmytted unto them. And likewyse th'other watchinge the beacons one the hills in th'inner parte of the cuntry must take hede that they fier not ther beakons unadvisedlie uppon any other fyers whatsoever shall fortune, in any place then uppon the view, and warnyng of th'other beakons that is to saye th'inner beakons to take warnyng of the beakonnes one the hills, and the beakonnes on the hills to take warnyng of the beakons belowe in the vallewes alongest the coste in manner and forme followynge :—

First, he or they that have the charge of three beakonnes in any place in the vallies shall assone as he discriethe any nombre of shippes uppon the see fiere one of his three beakonnes uppon view of w^{ch} beakone so fiered all other that have charge of th'other beakons in the vallies shall fyer everie man one of his beakons in the vallies, wich one beakon of all or eny of the three beakons in the vallies shall onely be but a watche to th'other beakons

one the hills to be in a Redynes and not a token for them on the hill to fyer any of theyr twoe beakonnes.

Item. As sone as the kep^e of the beakonnes in vallies shall see any armye upon the sees to approche towards the cost and be wthin foure myles bi estymacon upon the shore he or they that kepe the beakonnes next to the place where it is like they will land shall fyer two of the three beakonnes/ And so shall not any others the kep^e of the three beakons in the vallies in any other place/. And then they onely that wache upon the hills next unto the burnyng beakons in the vallies and no other shall fyer one of ther twoe beakons. At whoes warnyng all the men of such p^{te} of the shyre next unto the fyer one the hills shall resorte to suche place as shalbe appoynted by suche as the King's Ma^{ty} bi his lr^{es} (letters) haithe appoynted to have his special chardge of that shere till his highnes shall further determyne his pleas^{re} in that behaulfe.

Item. When the Kep^r of the three beakons in the vallies shall see th'ennemyes one lande in suche a number as the force assembled ther abowtes for the defence of theyr landyng shall not be able to resiste them, then shall they in all the hast possible fyer all the three beakonnes next unto the place wher they lande, upon the sight whereof the twoe beakones upon the next hill must be bowth fyered, and at theyr fyeryng one beakon of everie th'other twoe beakonnes upon the hills, And all other the beakonnes within the land must be fyered one of them upon the sight of an other. And everie man as well appoynted as he can for the defence of ther enemies to resorte to the hill where the twoe beaconnes burne and so to the place where thennemyes be dyscended. Yeven under our synet at o^r mano^r of Grenewth the XXth day of Aprill the XXXVIIth yere of our Reigne.¹

About this time a use was made of the beacons very far from what was intended, for, in the rebellion in the north in 1536, which was headed by Robert Aske, the rebels were called together by the firing of the neighbouring beacons in Lincolnshire and Yorkshire.² Also frivolous use was feared in 1545; a caution was sent to the defenders of the South Coast that they were to fire no beacons unless it were well

¹ Lambeth MS., 709.

² Gairdner, 28 Hen. VIII, 1537, Oct., et seq.

known that at least ten hostile French ships were on the coast, and evidently intended to make a landing.¹

In July in the same year the county of Sussex passed a false alarm to Kent and called out the gentlemen of that shire, who, on learning that the alarm was false, sent a rather indignant report of the matter to London. Sir Richard Long, who headed the Kentish force, writes as follows :

“ On Saturday last, July 25th, one Mychell, of Sussex, sent a post to us in Kent with a great alarm that the Frenchmen were on land ; but as he sent no letter, ‘ we neyther dyd ryng the larum nor steeryd nat.’ The same evening, at 10.0 p.m. came a letter (copy herewith) from Mr. Gawge, out of Sussex, whereupon we rang the alarm and fired all our beacons. We were at Ukfyld by 9 or 10 a.m. on Sunday and all the rest of the gentlemen were there the same night. After waiting for some advertisement from them of Sussex, who lay near to the Frenchmen, we were constrained to send a gentleman, with a guide, to them, and, on Monday at 11.0 a.m. they sent word that we should turn back. As they sent no letter, we thought ourselves, being so many gentlemen, not gently handled, and therefore advise your Grace of these premises.”²

In the same month the men of Worcestershire were in like case, for on the second firing of the Oxfordshire beacons, they set out for Portsmouth, and went a three days’ journey before they were told to turn back, as there was no present danger.³

I must now come to William Lambarde, the only writer who has dealt with the beacons of a county, and who has even made a map of them. In this respect Kent has what no other county has,⁴ and one may suppose that, with

¹ Gairdner, May, 1545.

² Idem., July 28th, 1545.

³ Idem., July 31st, 1545.

⁴ Sussex, Suffolk and Dorset have maps of the coastal beacons only.

Lambarde's map in circulation, the system must have been more intelligently worked in Kent than elsewhere.

Lambarde is described as of Lincoln's Inn, and in 1570 he published *A Perambulation of Kent*, a book which was reprinted in 1826. I need, therefore, only epitomize what he says on the question of beacons.

The Lord Lieutenant of the County, Lord Cobham, who was responsible for the beacon watch, found that on the firing of the beacons, "not only the common sort; but even men of place and honour were ignorant, which way to direct their course, and thereby (through amasednesse) as likely to run from the place affected as to make to the succour of it." He therefore caused "the true places of the beacons to be plotted in Carde, with directorie lines, so many sundrie waies, as any of them did respect the other." By this means, Lambarde goes on to say, "any man with little labour may be assured where the danger is." By way of illustration he supposes that the beacon on Shooter's Hill be seen to be alight, then, he says, "he that will go thither may know by the watchmen from whence they received their light, which must be either from the west neare London, or Hamstede; or else from the East, by warrant of the fiered Beacon at Stone, near Dartford, or of that which is neare to Grauesende." He then rebuts the charge, which had been made against him that by publishing his "Carde" he gave away information to the enemy, pointing out that the increased speed in mustering forces far outweighs any advantage an enemy might gain from knowledge of the beacon sites. With the carde before us, upon which no less than fifty-two beacon sites are shown, we can well suppose that, in clear weather, any warning of approaching danger would very rapidly be flashed from one end of the county to the other; and London would soon be aware of any threat of landing on any part of the coast. Pl. II.

In addition to the warning beacons along the North coast of Kent, there were certain navigation lights which would burn continuously. It occurred to the seamen frequenting the river that these lights would help an enemy

to approach. They therefore sent a suggestion to the Privy Council that these lights, which they called "showe-beacons" should be removed.¹ Their advice was taken, for ten days later Lord Russell reports to the Council that "the beacons and other marks which may lead into Temmys are plucked down, which advice is surely right good."²

That the maintenance and watching of the beacons was of the nature of an emergency measure is shown by the orders for the discharge of the watch at various times, which now begin to appear. This, no doubt happened when there was no threat of invasion from abroad and latterly it was usual during the winter months.

We have to remember that in those days of small ships propelled by sails, the stormy seas round our rocky coasts offered a very effective protection against invasion; and, further, even if a landing should have been made, roads hopelessly impassable through mud, would have proved a very real barrier against the progress of an armed force inland. In October, 1570, and in November, 1574³ orders were sent to Lord Cobham to discontinue the beacon watch for the Council "thinke it reasonable that he do unburden the countrie of those charges untill he shall see cause moving him to renue the same."

The need for vigilance in the summer months remained as great as ever, for threats of invasion became more definite as Philip of Spain matured his crusade against the ex-communicated Queen of England. The Lords Lieutenant of the different counties received constant reminders to look to their beacons and maintain the watch, and they took orders accordingly, and appointed, as directed, "wise and vigilant" persons to oversee the regulation of the system in different districts.

Among the State Papers Domestic is a commission given by Lord Cobham, the same Lord Lieutenant of Kent, who

¹ Gairdner, July 12th, 1545.

² Idem., July 23rd, 1545.

³ Acts P.C., Oct. 12th, 1570; Nov. 22nd, 1574.

inspired Lambarde to make his "carde", to Nicholas Gilbourne, of Charing. This, as transcribed from the original in the Record Office, runs as follows :

"Forasmuch as there is noe particular matter more necessarie for the servyce of her Ma^{tie}, and defence of the country againste incursions or attempte of invasion by any the enemyes of this Realme than to haue Scowts and Beaconwatche within the County dayly kept and well ordered by men of wysdom and circumspection. J knowinge your sufficiency hearin, by vertu of her Ma^{ties} comission vnder the Great Seal of England, do hereby nominat, constitute and authorize you, the sayd Nicholas Gilbourne to be Scowtmaister throughout the lath of Shipway, and the hundrede of Scray therevnto annexed, and the seaven hundreds as well within libertyes as without. To oversee and order all the watches that be or shalbe to be kept within the sayde Lath and Hundreds, and to refuse and displace such watchmen as you shall fynde vnfitt, and to charge and commande all or any the constables, Boursholders and other offycers within the said Lath and Hundreds to repayre, amend and builde the Beacons and watchhouses, and to peryvde all things necessary for the light to be given by the sayd Beacons at the charge of the sev'rall Hundreds as accustomedly hath bin used, and to cause the sayd Constables, Boursholders and other Offycers to make such provision of armor and other weapons for all and every the watchers as to you shall seme most mete and serviceable.

And in case intelligens shall be brought of any great Navye of Enemyes preparinge, approachinge or attemptinge to Lande vppon this parte of the Coast of England, it shalbe lawfull for you to putt yourself and your retynew of servants and Horsse in armes to performe whatsoever doth belonge to this your office and charge. And to command all and every of the Constables, Boursholders and other officers within the sayd circuit, to take vpp, for such persons as you shall think fitt to imploye, horsses, geldings, hackneys or naggs, to be only employed vnder you in the tyme of any enemys approache, or any suspition therof, to scowt, vancur¹ and carry intelligens to me and to my Deputy Lieutenants vnder me, what the enemy doth, with what force and in what manner he commeth. . . . And for the avoydinge of trouble and raysinge the country without cause,

¹ C.f. vancourier = a forerunner. Not in O.E.D.

it shalbe lawfull for you to inioyne all men within the sayd circuit to forbear makyng of fyre, flames, smothers and smokes or ringing of bells in any such place as shalbe nere to any beacons, or may giue cause to the country to suspect that they are fyres, or tokens, or signes to rayse the coutry. . . . Dated at Cobham the XXVth of October XXIX Eliz. (1587) (signed) W^m Cobham."

We are now at the time when it might be thought that the Beacon system would be put to the crucial test, namely, when the huge Spanish Armada, containing 166 great ships, and, as Macaulay says, "the richest spoils of Mexico and the stoutest hearts of Spain" came up the channel at the end of July in 1588. This was no surprise attack, it had been long expected from the preparations made in foreign ports, which were well known. The Armada took from July 20th to 27th to sail from off Plymouth to Calais, and it never showed any intention of landing, nor, probably got within four miles of the coast, being kept much too busy by the English ships which hung upon its rear. What beacons were lighted is not recorded, but if the watchers followed their instructions, as given in the order of 1546, the watchers in the valleys will have fired one of their three beacons, and the watchers on the adjacent hills will have stood by, ready for a further signal, which Macaulay, with some poetic licence finely describes: "Far on the deep the Spaniard saw, along each southern shire, Cape beyond cape in endless range, those twinkling points of fire." On the other hand it is possible that so huge a fleet caused the "discreet and vigilante" persons in charge of the beacons to ignore the order and exercise their discretion, and call up the whole force of the Kingdom by lighting all their beacons.

No record appears to exist of the lighting of the Kentish beacons, but there is a report, among the State Papers, of the names of the Captains and the number of men under them, who repaired to Portsmouth for "the aied and reliefe of the towne upon the firing of the beacons," and were reviewed by the Earl of Sussex on July 29th. The response in this case was remarkably small.

Although this great attempt on the part of Spain came to nothing, the need for vigilance remained, for Philip constantly threatened to repeat the attack and worked for that end. The beacon system was therefore kept up and we get various Privy Council orders during the remainder of Elizabeth's reign and during the reigns of the Stuarts, for the reinstatement of the beacons and the watch in Spring and for their discontinuance at the approach of Winter. In an order for reinstatement dated 1596¹ the reason for it is given as follows: "Foreasmuch as the Queens Majestie by good intelligence is undoubtedly given to understand that the Kinge of Spayne, her capitall enemye, wounded with the late enterprize happely atcheived against him at Caliz, intendeth some speedie revenge uppon this realme," and the matter was thought to be so urgent that the Council sat on Sunday, forenoon and afternoon.

Of special interest to us in our study of the beacons of Kent is an order dated 1596, for the guarding of the River Medway, in which the beacon system is involved.² This order is headed: "The Ordre gyven to the Ayde guardinge at Queeneborowe, to the Pynnace Sonne rydyng at Okamnesse, and to the Ketch that attendeth wthout Shyrenesse."

"The Ketch is appointed to attend wthout Shyrenesse to see and discover what vessels cometh inward as for this Ryver Medwaye, and, likewise for the Ryver of Thames. And if they perceave any vessels to be suspected approachinge towardes the West Swale to come into this river Medwaie: then is she to make all the speede she can in towardes the Ayde, wth rydeth wth in Shyrenesse, and, beinge resolued they are enemyes, she is by the waye as she cometh in, to shoot of as fast as they can six musketts, wth she hath in her, to give warninge to the Ayde of Enemyes approachinge, that she may be readie against they come. And the Captaine of the Ayde hath ordre that sone as he prooveth and is resolued of such Enemyes Approache, she is presentlie to shoot of three peices of great Ordinance together, so as the sound of them maie be distinctlie hearde the one from

¹ Acts P.C., Oct. 31st, 1596.

² S.P. Dom., Nov. 10th, 1596.

the other, whervppon the Pynnace Sonne rydinge at Okamnesse is to take knowledge of such enemyes cominge, and presently to make what speed she canne vp the Ryver towardses Upnor and Chetham, and by the waye all alongst as she cometh to be shootinge of the demye Culveringe she hath in her prow, and the rest of her ordinaunce as fast as they can, to giue the Alarme and warninge of Enemies approach to the Shippes here at Chetham, to the Castle Vpnor, the Beacons of Chetham and Barrowehill, and to the 4 Sconces and bordres of the Ryver on eche syde.

Whervppon, one of the greate Ships, the Beare rydinge against St Marye Creeke mouthe, is to shoote of 3 peices of great Ordenaunce in like sorte to continewe the Alarme, and vpon the Beares so shootinge of, the Marye Rose rydinge open against Rochester Bridge is to shoote of other 3 peices of great Ordenaunce in like manner so as their soundes maie be distinctlie heard and perceaved the one from the other, to the ende the contrie all aboutes wth in the hearinge of the saide Ordenaunce maie be the sooner warned to make their speedie repayres to Chetham Church, and Upnor Castle, accordinge to directions and ordregyven to eche hundred and p^cincte by the Deputie Lieutennts of the Shyre”.

Up to 1640 the beacon system appears to have been kept in good repair, orders to the southern counties being fairly frequent; after that date it was evidently allowed to drop out of use.¹ In 1672² there was an idea of reinstating them, and Viscount Brouncker was instructed to ascertain which were fit places for the setting up of beacons from the South Foreland to Sheerness, and from Orfordness to Lee, for the defence of the river; but we have no report of what was done, and the State Papers as far as published, contain no further notices of beacons at all.

There was, indeed, some partial reinstatement in 1745, when Prince Charles Edward was expected to land on the South Coast, and again something was done at the time of Napoleon's threatened invasion in 1804.

¹ At Hawkhurst “In the west hedge of a field (called Beacon field) near the highway (called Beacon lane) . . . lately stood a Beacon and Watch House both since down.” Kilburne, *Survey of the County of Kent*, 1659.

² S. P. Dom, April 10th, 1672.

In conclusion, something should be said about the form of the beacons, and about the cost of their upkeep, which latter, as we have gathered, became very irksome to the neighbouring population, who were charged with it.

The early form was just a bon-fire of brushwood lighted on a hill, but in the reign of Edward III, orders were given that, as Lambarde describes it, beacons should be "high standards with their pitch pots."

Illustrations of such beacons are to be found in the coats of arms of the Dauntre, Beltnap and other families,¹ and we have very graphic representations of them, including the flames, in a MS. map of the coast of Dorset of sixteenth century date.² Here the beacon is seen to consist of an upright timber, evidently a roughly squared tree, let into the ground and supported on all sides by struts. On its top it has a circular iron brazier, which is reached, for lighting and refueling, by a rough ladder, formed of a single pole, sloping against the main upright, with rungs nailed to it. At Farley Chamberlayne, in Hampshire, the ironwork of such a brazier is preserved in the church.

Lambarde in his "Carde" gives only a very rough representation of this erection; but in Archdeacon Battely's *Antiquitates Rutupinae*³ are two bird's-eye views of the Isle of Thanet (see Plates I and III) in which several neatly drawn beacons are to be seen, which conform to the pattern of those on the Dorset coast. In the West and North where stone is plentiful, stone towers, some of which remain, were used to carry the beacon fire, and act as shelter for the watchers at the same time.

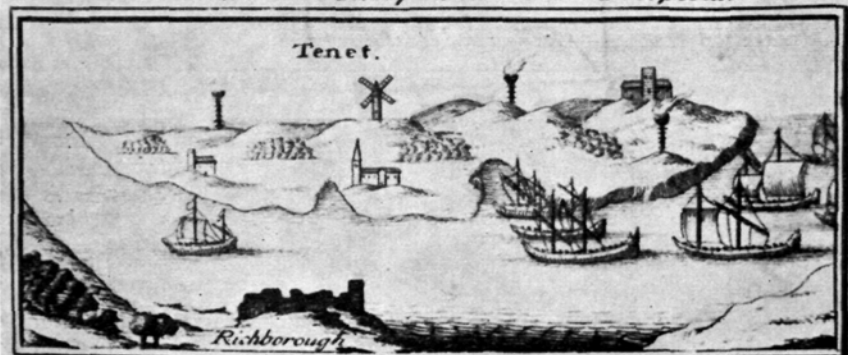
As regards the cost of maintenance and watching of the beacons, not much has been recorded. We know that originally the hundred was charged with it; later, in some cases the neighbouring towns or villages bore the expense, while in some counties a levy per head was made, varying from 20s. per annum for a lord to 6s. for a man with property

¹ Gwillin's Display of Heraldry.

² Cott, Aug. I, I, 31, 33.

³ Battely's *Opera posthuma*, Oxon, 1745.

Castri & Portus Rutupini ab Austro Prospectus



Viz. Rev. J. Lewis A. M. Historia Thanetis Auctor delin. 1738.

THANET BEACONS.

Archdeacon Battely's *Antiquitates Rutupinae*, 2nd Ed., 1745.

worth £5. Probably a good deal of information on this question may be buried in parish and borough accounts, which are mostly unpublished. Kent is fortunate in having accessible an example of both the above, in which some details of beacon upkeep are given.

Among the papers of the Corporation of Lydd,¹ published by the Historical MSS. Commission, some interesting entries are found, as follows. Under date 1450-2 :

“ For a cry made for keeping the wacche and the warde on the sea-shore 1*d.*”

“ Paid 3 men for drawyng of brome for a day for the wacche 15*d.*”

“ For the carriage of brome to divers places on the coast for the wacche 15*d.*”

“ For expenses made at Romene (Romney) for to enquire of the wacche, and where the bekyns should be made 4*s.*”

Ten years later are further entries :

“ Paid to James Base for his labour to help to set up the bekene at the Weyis Ende 3*d.*”

“ Paid to Seefowghill (elsewhere called Seefowl) for wayche ynne the Steple for 8 days 16*d.* He watched a further 6 and 14 days in the steple.”

“ Paid for gunne wheles and a whele for the bekene 4*d.*”

“ Paid to Richard Lowys for waycchyng at Weyis Ende, for hym and his horse 6*d.*”

“ To John Benett to warne the Constabyll to sett a fyre the bekyng 2*d.*”

Further items occur in the fourth and fifth years of Henry VIII :

“ Paid a man bringing a letter from the Lord Howard, the Admiral, for watching the bekons for the Scottes and Frenchmen 8*d.*”

¹ Hist. MSS. Commission, 5th Report.

“ For wyne spent upone the Mershemmen at the beakone.”

“ Paid Robert Bysshop for watching at the bekene with Henry Howlett 16*d*.”

These entries give us a glimpse of the homely and everyday arrangements made by the Corporation of Lydd for the maintenance of their local beacon and its watch. The broom was, no doubt, used as fuel ; but to what purpose the wheel was put is not clear, unless it may have served as a platform on the top of the vertical post, to carry the brazier.

The other Kentish record of beacon costs appears in the Accounts of the Churchwardens of Eltham.¹ In the year 1566-74 are the following entries :

| | |
|--|-------------------|
| “ Paid for watchinge the beacon at Shutter’s Hill | vs |
| “ Paid to the becon at Shutter’s Hill, 10 th year | xs |
| “ Paid to the becone in the xj th yeare | xs |
| “ Paid to Richard Bori for the beacone, in the xij th yeare | xxxxs |
| “ To Mr Bromhead, constapell of the hundred, for watching the beacon | vjs iijd |
| “ Paid to John Petley for making the becon ” | ijs iiij <i>d</i> |

These costs are not serious ; but in some counties payments got very much in arrears. There was a complaint, in 1630, from Suffolk, a county with an inviting sea board for invaders, that a certain watcher had 2 years’ wages due to him,² and that the total arrears in the county were “ about thrie hundreth pounds.”

We are now in a position to make an estimate of the value of the beacon system as a protection against invasion, which our ancestors must have thought it, or they would not have kept up what was distinctly a costly institution for several hundred years. We can see that its disadvantages

¹ *Archæologia*, Vol. XXXIV, p. 57.

² S. P. Dom, April 30th, 1630.

were many. With a brazier on a pole, the Hampshire specimen is only 1 foot 9 inches across, the range of visibility would not be great, and in wet and misty weather it would be very difficult to keep it alight.

Lambarde, in his "Carde," supposes that the watchers at Westwell could see the beacon at Fairlight, in Sussex, a distance of nineteen miles, but this could only be possible in very clear weather. In this connection we have to remember that invasions in these days were not embarked upon in the winter season, and, that the state of the roads prevented much movement in wet weather, so that in estimating the value of the beacon, summer visibility might with some safety be counted on. If an alarm did occur in misty weather, hobelers were in attendance to supplement the beacon as best they could.

A second disadvantage was the ease with which a false alarm might be raised either maliciously or by accident or want of judgment, and we have seen cases in which the King's subjects were launched on long and unnecessary marches in consequence.

On the credit side, what we cannot well estimate is the deterrent effect that the knowledge of this system being in operation had upon the intending invader. We have seen from reports of Ambassadors that exaggerated accounts of the efficiency of the scheme were transmitted abroad, which would have convinced a potential enemy that, at all events, he would not have the advantage of making a surprise attack. It is quite possible that the beacon system may have done a good deal to contribute to the fact that since 1066, no invading army has crossed the channel and landed on our shores. The few landings there have been were merely hasty raids.

There would be considerable interest in identifying the sites of the fifty-two beacons given by Lambarde, and, since the Ordnance Survey takes more and more interest in things archæological, it might then be possible to restore the beacon symbol, which the old cartographers used, to the modern map.

By consulting the sixteenth and seventeenth century maps and by noting elevations on the modern Ordnance Survey, it is possible to identify most of Lambarde's sites ; but some remain uncertain and in the case of these, there is room for local investigation.

The interrogation of the oldest inhabitant as to hill names, might reveal a " Beacon Hill," which the Ordnance Survey has missed, and there is a good deal of history buried in farm and field names. And, finally, excavation might reveal the hole in the ground which once contained the " beacon-tree."