

# CHAPTER THE FIRST: THE BRITONS — THE ROMANS— INVASION BY JULIUS CÆSAR.



**I**T has always been the good fortune of the antiquarian who has busied himself upon the subject of our ancestors, that the total darkness by which they are overshadowed, renders it impossible to detect the blunderings of the antiquarian himself, who has thus been allowed to grope about the dim twilight of the past, and entangle himself among its cobwebs, without any light being thrown upon his errors.

But while the antiquarians have experienced no obstruction from others, they have managed to come into collision among themselves, and have knocked their heads together with considerable violence in the process of what they call exploring the dark ages of our early history. We are not unwilling to take a walk amid the monuments of antiquity, which we should be sorry to run against or tumble over for want of proper light; and we shall therefore only venture so far as we can have the assistance of the bull's-eye of truth, rejecting altogether the al

lurements of the Will o' the Wisp of mere probability.

It is not because former historians have gone head over heels into the gulf of conjecture, that we are to turn a desperate somersault after them.

Some historians tell us that the most conclusive evidence of things that have happened is to be found in the reports of the Times.

This source of information is, however, closed against us, for the Times, unfortunately, had no reporters when these isles were first inhabited.

The best materials for getting at the early history of a country are its coins, its architecture, and its manners.

The Britons, however, had not yet converted the Britannia metal—for which their valour always made them conspicuous into coins, while their architecture, to judge from the Druidical remains, was of the wicket style, consisting of two or three stones stuck upright in the earth, with another stone laid at the top of them; after the fashion with which all lovers of the game of cricket are of course familiar. As this is the only architectural assistance we are likely to obtain, we decline entering upon the subject through such a gate; or, to use an expression analogous to the pastime to which we have referred, we refuse to take our innings at such a wicket. We need hardly add, that in looking to the manners of our ancestors for enlightenment, we look utterly in vain, for there is no Druidical Chesterfield to afford us any information upon the etiquette of that distant period.

There is every reason to believe that our forefathers lived in an exceedingly rude state; and it is therefore perhaps as well that their manners—or rather their want of manners—should be buried in oblivion.



It was formerly very generally believed that the first population of this country descended from Æneas, the performer of the most filial act of pick-a-back that ever was known; and that the earliest Britons were sprung from his grandson—one Brutus, who, preserving the family peculiarity, came into this island on the shoulders of the people. \* Hollinshed, that greatest of antiquarian gobemouches, has not only taken in the story we have just told, but has added a few of his own ingenious embellishments. He tells us that Brutus fell in with the posterity of the giant Albion, who was put to death by Hercules, whose buildings at Lambeth are the only existing proofs of his having ever resided in this country. The story of Brutus and the Trojans has been told in such a variety of ways, that it is difficult to make either head or tail of it. Geoffrey of Monmouth says that Brutus found Britain deserted, except by a few giants—from which it is to be presumed that Brutus landed at Greenwich about the time of the fair. Perhaps the introduction of troy-weight into ou

arithmetic may be traced to the immigration of the Trojans, who were very likely to adopt the measures—and why not the weights—with which they had been familiar.

Considering it unprofitable to dwell any longer on those points, about which all writers are at loggerheads, we come at once to that upon which they are all agreed, which is, that the first inhabitants were a tribe of Celtæ from the Continent: that, in fact, the earliest Englishmen were all Frenchmen; and that, however bitter and galling the fact may be, it is to Gaul that we owe our origin. We ought perhaps to mention that Cæsar thinks our sea-ports were peopled by Belgic invaders, from Brussels, thus causing a sprinkling of Brussels sprouts among the native productions of England.

The name of our country—Britannia—has also been the subject of ingenious speculation among the antiquarians. To sum up all their conjectures into one of our own, we think they have succeeded in dissolving the word Britannia into Brit, or Brick, and tan, which would seem to imply that the natives always behaved like bricks in tanning their enemies. The suggestion that the syllable tan, means tin, and that Britannia is synonymous with tin land, appears to be rather a modern notion, for it is only in later ages that Britannia has become emphatically the land of tin, or the country for making money.

The first inhabitants of the island lived by pasture, and not by trade. They as yet knew nothing of the till, but supported themselves by tillage. Their dress was picturesque rather than elegant. A book of truly British fashions would be a great curiosity in the present day, and we regret that we have no *Petit Courier des Druides*, or *Celtic Belle Assemblée*, to furnish figurines of the costume of the period. Skins, however, were much worn, for morning as well as for evening dress; and it is probable that even at that early age ingenuity may have been exercised to suggest new patterns for cow cloaks and other

varieties of the then prevailing articles of the wardrobe.

The Druids, who were the priests, exercised great ascendancy over the people, and often claimed the spoils of war, together with other property, under the plea of offering up the proceeds as a sacrifice to the divinities. These treasures, however, were never accounted for; and it is now too late for the historians to file, as it were, a bill in equity to inquire what has become of them.

Cæsar, who might have been so called from his readiness to seize upon everything, now turned his eyes and directed his arms upon Britain. According to some he was tempted by the expectation of finding pearls, which he hoped to get out of the oysters, and he therefore broke in upon the natives with considerable energy.



Whatever Caesar looking for the Pearls for which Britain was formerly celebrated, may have been Caesar's motives the fact is pretty well ascertained, that at about ten o'clock one fine morning in August—some say a quarter past—he reached the British coast with 12,000 infantry, packed in eighty vessels. He had left behind him the whole of his cavalry—the Roman horse-marines—who were detained by contrary winds on the

other side of the sea, and though anxious to be in communication with their leader, they never could get into the right channel. At about three in the afternoon, Cæsar having taken an early dinner, began to disembark his forces at a spot called to this day the Sandwich Flats, from the people having been such flats as to allow the enemy to effect a landing.

While the Roman soldiers were standing shilly-shallying at the side of their vessels, a standard-bearer of the tenth legion, or, as we should call him, an ensign in the tenth, jumped into the water, which was nearly up to his knees, and addressing a claptrap to his comrades as he stood in the sea, completely turned the tide in Caesar's favour. After a severe shindy on the shingles, the Britons withdrew, leaving the Romans masters of the beach, where Cæsar erected a marquee for the accommodation of his cohorts. The natives sought and obtained peace, which had no sooner been concluded, than the Roman horse-marines were seen riding across the Channel.

A tempest, however, arising, the horses were terrified, and the waves beginning to mount, added so much to the confusion, that the Roman cavalry were compelled to back to the point they started from. The same storm gave a severe blow to the camp of Cæsar, on the beach, dashing his galleys and transports against the rocks which they were sure to split upon. Daunted by these disasters, the invaders, after a few breezes with the Britons, took advantage of a favourable gale to return to Gaul, and thus for a time the dispute appeared to have blown over. Cæsar's thoughts, however, still continued to run in one, namely, the British, Channel. In the spring of the ensuing year, he rigged out 800 ships, into which he contrived to cram 32,000 men, and with this force he was permitted to land a second time by those horrid flats at Sandwich. The Britons for some time made an obstinate resistance in their chariots, but they ultimately took a fly across the country, and retreated with great rapidity.

Cæsar had scarcely sat down to breakfast the next morning when he heard that a tempest had wrecked all his vessels.

At this intelligence he burst into tears, and scampered off to the sea coast, with all his legions in full cry, hurrying after him.



The news of the disaster turned out to be no exaggeration, for there were no penny-a-liners in those days; and, having carried his ships a good way inland, where they remained like fish out of water, he set out once more in pursuit of the enemy.

The Britons had, however, made the most of their time, and had found a leader in the person of Gassivelaunus, alias Caswallon, a quarrelsome old Gelt, who had so frequently thrashed his neighbours, that he was thought the most likely person to succeed in thrashing the Romans.

This gallant individual was successful in a few rough off handed engagements; but when it came to the fancy work, where tactics were required, the disciplined Roman troops were more than a match for him. His soldiers having been driven back to their woods, he drove himself back in his chariot to the neighbourhood of Chertsey, where he had a few acres of ground, which he

called a Kingdom. He then stuck some wooden posts in the middle of the Thames, as an impediment to Cæsar, who, in the plenitude of his vaulting ambition, laid his hands on the posts and vaulted over them. The army of Cassivelaunus being now disbanded, his establishment was reduced to 4000 chariots, which he kept up for the purpose of harassing the Romans.

As each chariot required at least a pair of horses, his 4000 vehicles, and the enormous stud they entailed, must have been rather more harassing to Cassivelaunus himself than to the enemy. This extremely extravagant Celt, who had long been the object of the jealousy of his neighbours, was now threatened by their treachery. The chief of the Trinobantes, who lived in Middlesex, and were perhaps the earliest Middlesex magistrates, sent ambassadors to Cæsar, promising submission. They also showed him the way to the contemptible cluster of houses which Cassivelaunus dignified with the name of his capital. It was surrounded with a ditch, and a rampart made chiefly of mud, the article in which military engineering seemed to have stuck at that early period. Cassivelaunus was driven by Cæsar from his abode, constructed of clay and felled trees, and so precipitate was the flight of the Briton, that he had only time to pack up a few necessary articles, leaving everything else to fall into the hands of the enemy.

The Roman General, being tired of his British campaign, was glad to listen to the overtures of Cassivelaunus; but these overtures consisted of promissory notes, which were never realised. The Celt undertook to transmit an annual tribute to Cæsar, who never got a penny of the money; and the hostages he had carried with him to Gaul became a positive burden to him, for they were never taken out of pawn by their countrymen. It is believed that they were ultimately got rid of at a sale of unredeemed pledges, where they were put up in lots of half a dozen, and knocked down as slaves to the highest bidder.



Before quitting the subject of Caesar's invasion, it may be interesting to the reader to know something of the weapons with which the early Britons attempted to defend themselves. Their swords were made of copper, and generally bent with the first blow, which must have greatly straitened their aggressive resources, for the swords thus followed their own bent, instead of carrying out the intentions of the persons using them.

This provoking pliancy of the material must often have made the soldier as ill-tempered as his own weapon. The Britons carried also a dirk, and a spear, the latter of which they threw at the foe, as an effectual means of pitching into him.

A sort of reaping-hook was attached to their chariot wheels, and was often very useful in reaping the laurels of victory.

For nearly one hundred years after Cæsar's invasion, Britain was undisturbed by the Romans, though Caligula, that neck-or-nothing tyrant, as his celebrated wish entitles him to be called, once or twice had his eye upon it. The island, however, if it attracted the Imperial eye, escaped the lash, during the period specified.