

The Billericay History

Series No. I.

“ Early Billericay ”

BY Wynford P Grant

PRICE 6d.

The story of Billericay
from the Stone Age
to Roman Times
Including a map of Roman Billericay



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Introduction

The Billericay History Series.

"Early Billericay" is the first of the booklets in the Billericay History Series. The aim of this series is to produce a number of interesting booklets on various aspects of local history at a low price. Five further booklets, to be published at intervals of six months, are planned, and work on a general history of the town is progressing. Research has been going on for over a year, and the results of some of this have been published in the history articles of the "Billericay Observer". Details of the next booklet in the series will be released in due course.

"Early Billericay".

"Early Billericay" covers the history of the Billericay area from its geological beginnings to the end of the Roman occupation. It has been my aim throughout to make this booklet interesting to the non-historian, whilst leaving out no facts. I hope that I have been successful in this direction.

I would like to emphasise one further point. New discoveries are constantly being made. The information and theorising in this booklet is based on the information available at present, and it is to that extent correct. However, some major new discovery could easily change our picture of "Early Billericay".

Part I

In The Beginning Geology, Stone and Bronze Ages.

When you next walk from the "Coach & Horses" in Chapel Street, through the old "Crown" yard to the High Street, glance at the buff coloured sand and pebbles beneath your feet, and you will see the origin of Billericay. Billericay is an isolated layer of these sands and pebbles - called the Bagshot Beds - on top of the traditional loams and clays of Essex.

When considering the Early Stone Age we must not think of "Billericay" as such. It was just another part of the vast forest which covered this part of the country. The Early Stone Age peoples favoured the low-lying banks of the then wider and shallower River Thames. Only hunting parties, searching for the elephants and other warm-climate animals which then frequented Britain, would pass through Billericay. These people depended on hunting for their livelihood, and they only had primitive flints to use against the giants of the forest.

Some time ago, on the slopes facing south-east, less than a mile from the town, some burnt bone, pottery, and a Flint Axe Head were found, showing definite settlement in the area in the Middle Stone Age. Beyond this we know nothing of these earliest "inhabitants" of Billericay.

However, we do know that there was a fair-sized Bronze Age settlement in the area. This is shown by the two Bronze Age burial mounds in Norsey Woods (one was recently completely excavated and removed), which were considerably used over a long period of time. The number of dead is a sure indication of the importance of an early settlement. It is, of course, impossible to tell where Bronze Age Billericay was situated, as the rude huts of the Bronze Age peoples would leave no trace behind them. However, the highest point in an area was favoured by these early peoples, and therefore the present High Street seems as good a site as any for Bronze Age Billericay. It is possible that aerial photographs may give us a clue to the sites of further "flattened-out" Burial Mounds, which may throw further light on this period of Billericay's history.

Part 2

Iron Age Billericay

The Iron Age covers the period from approximately 500 B.C. to the coming of the Romans, when this part of the country was inhabited by a tribe called the Trinovantes, who had been driven here by a stronger tribe called the Belgae, who ruled from Colchester.

Many relics of the Iron Age have been found on the high ground behind the Hospital, and when the Railway Cutting was being dug an Iron Age burial urn was discovered. All this points to a comparatively large Iron Age population.

It is thought that Billericay was one of the chief hill forts of the Trinovantes. This means that there would be earthwork defences on the hill, with a deep and steep ditch running the whole way round it. The hillside would be covered with trees for extra protection.

Although these were the wood-covered Britons that greeted Caesar, on his first "invasion" of Britain, it would be most unfair to call them uncivilised.

They lived in huts of wattle and daub roofed with straw or reeds, and wore clothes which they had weaved themselves.

The smiths, after imitating bronze forms, began turning out more and more tool-types - shares, coulters, digging-tools, scythes, billhooks, frame-saws, hinged tongs, shears, ironbladed rotary lathes which could produce all sorts of wooden vessels as well as wheel-hubs and spokes. They made two kinds of ploughs - including a light one drawn by two oxen, and another with a large coultter and moulded boards. They made wheel-turned pottery, and decorated their vessels with patterns of men and animals.

Age-old crafts like pottery, leatherwork, plaiting, and netting were given a new stimulus. There was a considerable amount of textile expansion for clothes and wall-hangings, and the skill of dyeing was stimulated. Trade took place between different parts of the country and abroad. No doubt Billericay was affected by all this. +

With their iron weapons the British assisted their friends and relatives in Gaul against the Romans. This led Caesar to consider invading Britain, and in 55 B.C. he marched several miles inland, before returning to Gaul for the Winter. In 54 B.C. he returned with a larger force. He crossed into Essex at the invitation of the Trinovantes, who wanted aid against the Belgae under the famous Cassivalanus. A decisive battle was fought, probably somewhere between Billericay and South Weald, and Cassivalanus was defeated and promised to pay a tribute, leaving the Trinovantes secure in their last remaining corner of Essex. Thus in 54 B.C. the Roman eagles were first seen in Billericay.

The Romans retired to spend the next hundred years in completing the conquest of Gaul, leaving this country in peace. Meanwhile the two peoples had united to form a kingdom covering Kent, Hertford, Essex, and part of East Anglia, with Colchester as their capital.

In 43 A.D. the Romans again invaded Britain. For their conquest of this part of the country the Romans probably used the age-old river crossing at Tilbury. The Trinovantes were no match for the well-trained Roman legions, and no doubt Billericay was soon in Roman hands. But the story of the foundation of Roman Billericay is another story

Part 3 ---- "Roman Billericay" ---- overleaf.

+ They used gold coins, at first copied from Greek designs, but later of a more original character.

Part 3

Roman Billericay

When the Romans first came to Billericay it appears that they established a military station of the Ninth Legion, which had its headquarters in Colchester, in Norsey Woods. From Norsey Woods a commanding view could be obtained of the surrounding plain, which was until recently open on the long northern (Norsey Road) side. On its southern sides the slopes are steep and boggy, so it offered special advantages as a defensive position.

Until the end of the last century there was a large ditch around the wood. There are also the mysterious pit holes, and the Danepit, a mysterious pit roughly round in shape, from three to six feet deep, and about twenty yards in diameter. There are also a number of mysterious trenches. These earthworks could be the remains of an Iron Age or Roman fort, on the other hand they could be quite recent. Certainly during the late 19th century a large number of discoveries were made in the Woods by local archaeologists. Unfortunately these were incorporated in their own private collections, which have since been split up, and lost. However, descriptions of some of the finds made can be read in the "Transactions" of the Essex Archaeological Society.

After defeating Caractacus and organising this part of the country, the Romans proceeded to deal with the strongholds of the Celts in Wales and Anglesey, leaving this district practically unprotected. It was not long before the Iceni, under their Queen Boudicca, rose, and ravaged the countryside burning and killing. They were joined by the Trinovantes, angry at the dispossession from their farms.

It has been suggested that the final battle between the Romans and the Iceni, took place in Norsey Woods. Certainly it tallies closely with the description given by Tacitus. However, there is no conclusive proof to support this theory. Legend also states that Boudicca committed suicide locally, but there is no substantiation for this theory at all.

Anyway, it is pretty certain that the fort in Norsey Woods and the growing Roman settlement was destroyed in the fighting. When the revolt was finally crushed, the Romans started to think of rebuilding. They decided not to rebuild their fort at Norsey Woods, but chose a new one at what is now Blunt's Walls Farm, Tye Common, about a mile south-west of the present town. Traces of this could be seen up to the early part of the 19th century. The Essex historian Morant gives a full description of the site. It appears that it covered about four acres, including part of the farmyard, consisting of various mounds and ditches. It is a pity that some 19th-century farmer levelled them out. It is also possible that there was a Roman villa at Blunt's Walls apart from the military station. Also note the use of "Walls" in the name - a sure indication of the presence of the remains of some ancient fortification.

Another Essex historian - Camden - went so far as to suggest that this was the site of the Roman Caesaromagvs, but this has now been definitely established as Moulsham.

Apart from Norsey Woods and Blunt's Walls what other evidence is there of a Roman settlement in the area?

The answer is - a great deal.

First of all there is the hoard of 1,100 Romano-British coins discovered at Tylde Hall (at the eastern end of Norsey Woods) at the beginning of the 19th century by a workman. Apart from this many other Roman coins have been discovered scattered at various sites throughout the area.

Roman Billericay, continued.

On the east side of the High Street behind the houses between Crown Road and Chantry Chase, traces could be seen recently of a deep moat and rampart possibly originating from an even earlier period, and converted by the Romans for their own purposes. It is thought that the approach to this fort was through the drive of Dr. Rilstone's house. Certainly a large number of Roman coins have been found there over the years, though not of late. It has been suggested that the Military Station of the Ninth Legion was here, and not in Norsey Woods.

Various fragments of pottery have been found in the triangle of land formed by Sun Street, Chapel Street, and High Street. It was in this triangle that a Roman burial was discovered in the last century, near the Dissenters' Burial Ground, although the authenticity of this now appears to be in doubt.

In 1724 men digging near the artificial mound on which Billericay's Windmill formerly stood (on Bell Hill) found "A place made like an oven of hard, dark clay, large enough to hold six half peck loaves". This was three feet below the ground, in a layer of black earth or ashes, and contained Roman Potsherds, Fibulae, 2 Denarii of Trajan (A.D.98) and Hadrian (A.D.98-138). In the middle of the 19th century workmen digging found, in a layer of dark earth, subterranean masonry, remains of an oven, potsherds, and incineration burials. They also found a 25 feet deep pit full of potsherds, incineration burials, a British gold coin, and Roman coins of Trajan, Hadrian, and Constantine (306-337 A.D.)

Just before the First World War two Roman tiles were discovered at Cowbridge Brook in Queens Park, although these have unfortunately since been lost. In Perry Street a line of curious earthworks could be traced until building operations began a few years ago, and it is possible that these were Roman in origin. It is interesting to note the use of "Street" in Perry Street, as this is rare in old roads. When it does occur it indicates Roman connections, for the Latin name for "Street" is "Strata".

However, one of the most prolific sites is the area of the Secondary School. Particularly in the past few years many Roman remains, including urns and pottery, have been uncovered. It seems that Roman Billericay had six or seven known cemeteries - a sure sign of settlement. Below the Secondary School in Crays View a fragment of an urn was discovered by a schoolgirl some years ago.

Further finds were made in 1877 when work was being undertaken for the preparation of the Gas Holder site in Laindon Road. Discovered were parts of a Roman pavement, with urns, and broken Samian ware, one of which bore the legend "DACMUS", as on a similar piece discovered at Tilbury.

Further discoveries have been made in the grounds of "Foxcroft" in the High Street, near Little House in Laindon Road, and at Great Burstead.

In addition to this there are two known Roman roads leading into Billericay. The more important one is that from Tilbury to Chelmsford. It is interesting to note, that Noak Hill Road was once called "North STREET", and no doubt the Roman road followed approximately the same line as Noak Hill Road does today. It is also interesting to note that many discoveries of Roman remains have been made along its approximate route. The other Roman road leading into the district, slightly less important, ran from Ongar to Brentwood thence through Billericay to Rayleigh, and from there on to Shoebury.

Roman Billericay, continued.

I am inclined to agree with the local archaeologist of the late 19th century, Mr. J.A. Sparvel-Bayly F.S.A., who lived at Burghstead Lodge in the High Street who wrote in 1878; "In view of the large number of internments and frequent discovery of tiles in Billericay I am persuaded that it was not only a very early settlement, but a numerously populated one".

If there was a Roman town in the area where was it? In Norsey Woods? NO, if it was there, traces of it would have been discovered many years ago. Then at Blunts' Walls? NO, once again it would have been discovered long ago, Blunts' Walls is not in a high position, nor does it fit in with the Tilbury to Chelmsford Roman road.

Where then? The answer - underneath the present town. I give the following support to this theory:-

- 1) The present High Street occupies the highest part of the area (321 feet), and this would give the Romans a good view over the surrounding plain. It is also in sight of other high hills such as the Langdon Hills and Stock.
- 2) It fits in with the Roman roads. The Tilbury-Chelmsford road would be intersected at this point by the Brentwood-Rayleigh road.
- 3) It fits in with the Roman cemeteries. It was usual for the Roman cemeteries to line the roads just outside the town. If my theory is correct the cemeteries would line both roads on their approaches into Billericay.
- 4) It would explain why, although all the traces pointing to a Roman town have been discovered, no actual town has been found. Rebuilding in the High Street has only scratched the surface, and the Roman town would be several feet down.

This theory is elaborated by the map re-construction of Roman Billericay, and the Notes and Key, on pages 8 & 9. I am sure that reference to this will make my theory clearer to readers.

There are one or two further points I would like to make. Firstly, Norsey Woods. It seems that this was used in Roman times as a "light industrial area" for smelting and similar activities, from the various discoveries which have been made there. It also seems that there was a Kiln somewhere near the old Windmill, from the discoveries that have been made there.

Secondly, the question of the fort between Crown Road and Chantry Way. As I mentioned previously it has been suggested that the military station of the Ninth Legion was here and not in Norsey Woods. It is very difficult indeed to prove that it was in Norsey Woods or in Crown Road. It is my own opinion that the station was up to the Boudicca Revolt in Norsey Woods, and from then on at Blunt's Walls. I do think there was a fort between Crown Road and Chantry Way, and I also think that the entrance was by Dr. Rilstone's drive, but I consider that the main function of this fort was to defend the approaches to the town by the road from Chelmsford.

The third point is the question of Blunt's Walls. This does not fit into my theory properly. This was the largest fort in the area, yet why should it be built a mile from the town just to defend the minor Brentwood - Rayleigh road. It has been suggested that its purpose was to defend the important Tilbury - Chelmsford road. Yet this road is one mile from Blunt's Walls. Nor is Blunt's Walls in a high position - it is just above the 200 ft. contour line, and the Tilbury - Chelmsford road is on the 300 ft. contour line. Perhaps some discovery in the future will throw new light on the role of Blunt's Walls in Roman Billericay.

Fourthly, the question of Perry Street. Was there a Roman road in the area? Are the curious earthworks remains of a Roman fort? With the scanty information I have it is very difficult to answer those questions at the present time. I am of the opinion that there was a Roman villa somewhere in the area, probably on the site of the present Perry Street farm. But there is no evidence to support this theory. Perhaps a discovery in one of the gardens on one of the new housing estates will throw light on the use of this part of Roman Billericay.

One further point arises - a town must have a name. Many people think that the modern name of Billericay is a corruption of the Roman name. Others say that the Roman name is in turn a corruption of a Celtic name. Unfortunately, as Billericay was one of the smaller Roman towns, no records exist which would solve the problem. It is made harder by the fact that Billericay is included in Great Burstead in the Domesday Book. The English Place Name Society has tried and failed, a pamphlet with all sorts of interesting derivations has been published, but we are no nearer the truth. I think the best answer is given in Essex Place Names - "No suitable origin can be found for this name".

However, there are many interesting theories as to the name of Roman Billericay. One is that it was a corruption of the Celtic from Bell Hill, which is said to be connected with sun worship, and is in a similar position to the Bell Hill at Vange. (It has been suggested that the artificial mound on which the Old Windmill stood was used for this purpose).

Other suggestions are in Latin:-

Bellerius Bastion - camp of a Roman general, Bellerius.
Bello Castrum - Fair Camp.
Villa Erica - The fair heath.

I favour the last suggestion. Firstly, Billericay and the surrounding area was in a wild and natural state in Roman times, and heathland is associated with Bagshot gravels. Secondly, provided it stood the test of time, it could easily be corrupted into "Billerica", which is the most common form of the name. However, there is no documented proof for this theory.

From the coins that have been discovered in the area it seems that the Romans occupied the Billericay area for the whole of their stay in Britain. The Romans here were mainly soldiers and officials, with retired veterans who had decided to settle in Britain as landowners living a cultured life among the native people. The Britons were allowed to develop their own way of living, incorporating the Roman way of life as they wished, without having it forced upon them. It is easy to imagine the Romans and Britons going about their business, despite the two thousand years, which separate the two Billericays.

As you have seen, new discoveries are being made all the time, and helping historians and archaeologists to build up a picture of Roman Billericay. Perhaps when you are next digging in your garden, you may come across an urn, or a piece of Roman pottery, or some other relic of Roman Billericay. It may be the relic which will some gap in this important part of the Story of Billericay.


Many major discoveries were made locally in the 19th century. Unfortunately the archaeologist of the 19th century treated it like collecting stamps. They kept their finds in their private collections. When they died these were split up, and the archaeological treasures lost to the town for ever.

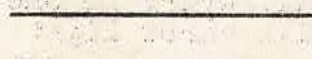
Most of the finds of Roman times in the area have been found at the 2 - 3ft down level, but this is possibly because most excavations have not probed down further. Other finds have been made at much deeper levels.

KEY


C = CELTIC REMAIN † SITE OF CEMETRIES

R = ROMAN REMAIN

 ROMAN ROAD

 MODERN ROAD

V = ROMAN VILLA (Unproved).

 SITE OF ROMAN FORT

 APPROXIMATE SITE OF ROMAN TOWN

NOTES

The Countryside - A great deal of the "countryside" consisted of dense forest and undergrowth, the cultivated proportion being very small. The area around the town was probably heathland.

The Roads - It is impossible to fix the exact line of the Roman roads that went through Billericay, but we can make a sensible estimation of their course. Please note that although Roman roads followed a straight line over a given length, they often made quite sharp turns at fairly regular intervals. Also note that the two roads pass by many Roman sites - the Brentwood road passes Blunts Wall, and the Rayleigh and Tilbury roads pass close to the Roman cemeteries, just outside the town.

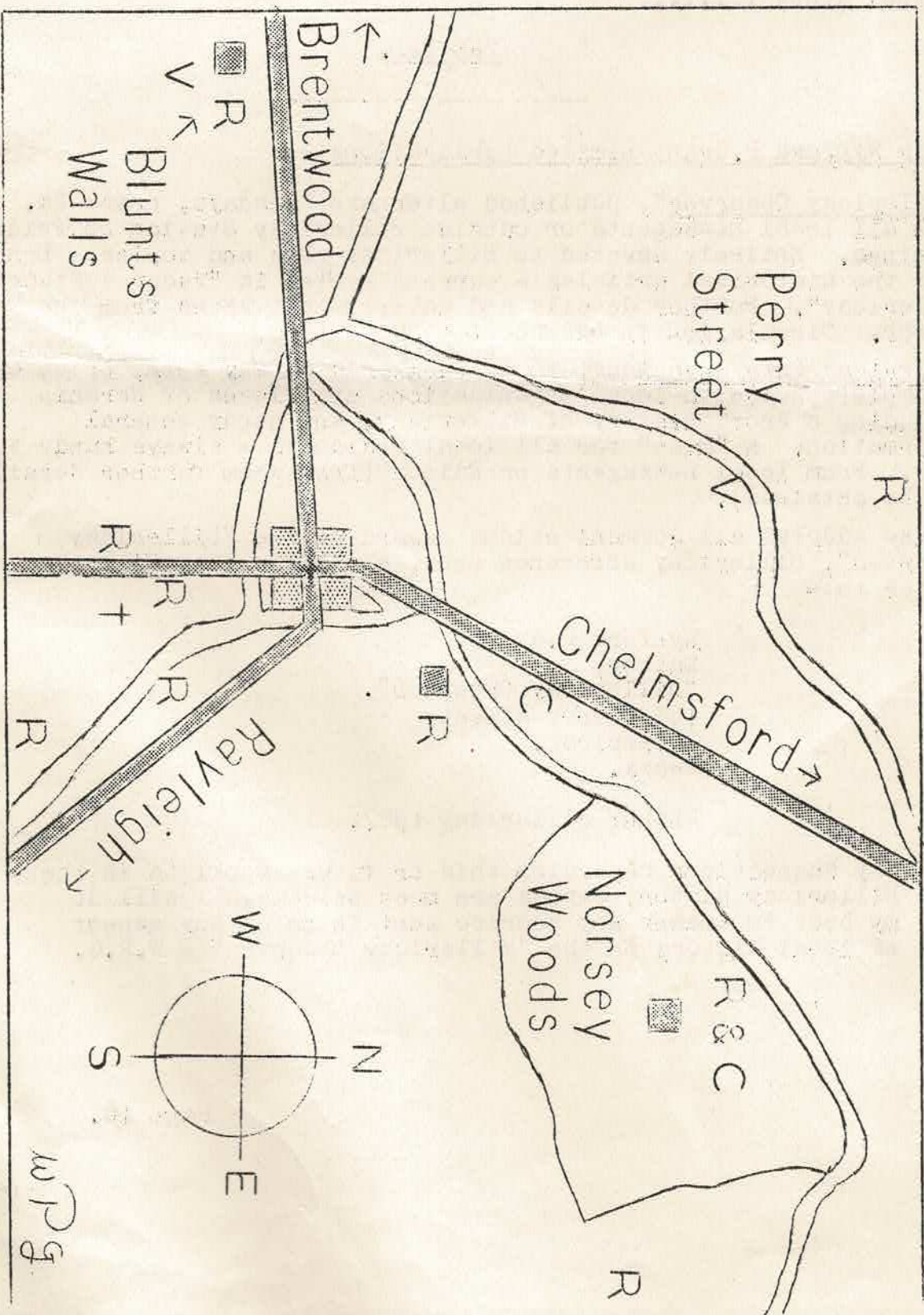
The Town - I have already given on Page 6 the reasons for my theory that the Roman town was on the same site as the present one - height of the site, courses of the Roman roads, proximity to the cemeteries, and explanation of why, although all the traces of a Roman town have been found, no actual site has yet been discovered. One must also take into account water supply, and how much easier it would be to build on heathland or possibly the cleared site of an earlier (Iron Age) settlement. Now, as you will see on the map, I have shown what I think was the approximate site of Roman Billericay. The map shows it as extending in length from just below the Post Office to Laylands, and in width from Chapel Street to a line running parallel with the Women's Institute. Only excavations can prove the actual site, and these would involve tearing down half the town before work could start. Obviously impossible! However, it is possible for small-scale investigations to be made on the sites of demolished properties due for re-building, and in the back gardens of High Street properties. Until these produce some concrete evidence we can only guess at the approximate site of Roman Billericay, which is what I have done. I consider that the town was centred round the crossroads of the two Roman roads. After some lengthy research with the aid of a large-scale O.S. map and various books, I arrived at the approximate course of these roads. I was pleased to find that a town based on this crossroads fitted in with many of the other facts and theories concerning Roman Billericay. However, I must emphasise that my site is based on theory, and is therefore somewhat approximate. Only excavations can find the exact site.

Norsey Woods - I have placed the Fort in Norsey Woods in the centre of the Woods, as its precise site is not known.

Villa in Perry Street - The existence of this has not been proved, and I can only guess at its approximate site by placing it on the site of Perry Street Farm.

ROMAN
BILLERICAY

Scale approx.
3" to 1 mile



Roman Billericay, continued.

At the beginning of the 5th century A.D., because of the troubled times in Italy, the garrisons in Britain were gradually withdrawn, after being in the country for over four hundred years. Without the Roman soldiers to whom they had left their problems of defence, With Hadrian's Wall undefended the Picts and Scots launched attack after attack against England, and by 637 A.D. they had penetrated as far south as London. Taking advantage of the confusion Saxon pirates began to attack the costal areas. Soon the people of Billericay could see their sails in the River Crouch, then navigable as far as Wickford, and the smoke from the burning homesteads along the heights between Rayleigh and Thundersly. No doubt these pirates saw Billericay on the hill, and in its turn it was pillaged and burnt. Eventually these Saxons came to settle in the area, and built a new settlement at Great Burstead, away from the ghosts of the Roman cemeteries on the hill. But then that is another story

THE END.

Other Wynford P. Grant Limited publications:-

"Billericay Observer", published alternate Tuesdays, price 2d. From all local newsagents or outside Billericay Station on Friday evenings. Entirely devoted to Billericay news and topics. Don't miss the historical articles - current series is "Tudor & Stuart Billericay". Further details and advertisement rates from the Editor. Circulation in excess of 1,000 copies.

Billericay Reference Book, to be published on May 29th, price 6d. A complete guide to local organisations and Places of Worship including a short history of Billericay, and handy general information. A "must" for all local residents - always handy to have. From local newsagents or Editor (from whom further details can be obtained).

Please address all communications regarding the "Billericay Observer", Billericay Reference Book, and Billericay History Series to:-

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Any suggestions regarding this or future booklets in the Billericay History Series are most welcome. I will do my best to answer any queries sent to me on any aspect of local history in the "Billericay Observer" - W.P.G.