

Harris, in his "History of Kent," mentions an old manuscript which he had seen, which stated that the parish of Woolwich had on the Essex side of the river "five hundred acres, some few houses, and a chapel of ease." "There is a vague tradition," observes Mr. Brayley, in the "Beauties of England and Wales," "that a man, a native of Woolwich, was found drowned on the opposite shore, in Essex, and that the parish in which he was thrown refused to bury him; on this, he was buried by the parish of Woolwich, which afterwards claimed the land where the body was discovered, and obtained a verdict in a court of law."

That Woolwich was occupied by the Romans during their invasion of England there is little doubt, from the fact that funeral urns and fragments of Roman pottery have been found at different times during excavations in the Royal Arsenal and its neighbourhood. The great Roman road called Watling Street, which passed through Kent from London to Dover, and portions of which are still traceable, crossed over Shooter's Hill, at a short distance southward of the settlement, which was, in those far-off days, at the foot of a green and sloping hill, and by the side of a broad and noble river. To the Romans has been assigned the credit of having reclaimed the great river marshes by the embankments of the Thames between Gravesend and London, for whose maintenance, as we learn from the "Minutes of Proceedings of the Royal Artillery Institution"—so far as the Arsenal is concerned—the Government still pays annual "wall-scot" dues. In Walker's Thames Report of 1841 it is stated that "the probability is that they are the work of the ancient Britons, under Roman superintendence. That they are the result of skill and bold enterprise not unworthy of any period is certain." Sir William Dugdale, Sir Christopher Wren, and many others, considered these great works to be of Roman origin; whilst some have supposed that they were constructed by the abbots of Stratford, in Essex, and Lesnes, near Erith, whose convents were founded in the twelfth century. In 1236 a sudden rise of the tide caused the river to overflow the marshes, and Henry III. appointed a commission "for the overseeing and repairing the breaches, walls, ditches, &c., in diverse places between Greenwich and Wulwiche."

For many centuries Woolwich was little or nothing more than a small fishing village, consisting of only a few streets, which were huddled together by the river, and below a place called the Warren, now covered by the Arsenal; but small and insignificant as it was, it had from a very early date a weekly market, which, by an Act passed in 1807, was made

to be held twice a week, on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Under the provisions of the above-mentioned Act a new market-house was erected; the market, however, is now mainly carried on in the High Street.

In the Conqueror's time, when Haimo, or Hamo, the sheriff of Kent, was the great man of the neighbourhood, there were, as shown by Domesday Book, but eleven cultivators of the soil, or "bordars," rich enough to pay a yearly rental of forty-one pence. In the reign of Henry VIII. these payers of *rent* had been replaced by one hundred and twelve payers of *rates*; and since that time, owing to the foundation of the Royal Dockyard and Arsenal, the town has gradually increased in size and importance. Towards the end of the last century the number of houses in Woolwich was only 1,200, and the population under 9,000 souls. By 1821 the latter had increased to 17,000, and the number of houses to 2,500. Half a century later, according to the census returns for 1871, the population numbered a little more than 35,500, including 4,100 military, and in 1881 it had risen to 36,200. The area of the parish, as set down in Kelly's "Six Home Counties," is nearly 1,113 acres, of which about 400 acres, or nearly one-third, lie, as already stated, on the Essex side of the Thames.

The Woolwich of the present day, apart from the Royal Dockyard, Arsenal, and Artillery Barracks, is a singularly dull and uninteresting town. It occupies the slope of the rising ground extending southward towards Shooter's Hill, and runs eastward for about two miles, from Charlton to Plumstead, the Dockyard and Arsenal lying between the town and the river nearly the whole distance. The streets are mostly narrow and irregular, and the shops and houses poor and mean-looking. In some of the principal streets there are a few shops and residences of a better class, but their presence scarcely relieves the squalor of the town generally. The public buildings, apart from those connected with the Government, are few, and altogether devoid of interest, even the churches scarcely affording any relief to the general dulness.

The parish of Woolwich lies within the limits of the Parliamentary borough of Greenwich. The town is eight miles below London Bridge by land, and nine by water. It is built on the northern declivity of Shooter's Hill, sloping gradually down towards the bank of the river. At the summit, however, is a spacious level, known as Woolwich Common. On the south and west Woolwich is bounded by Eltham and Charlton, and on the east by Plumstead.