

The Fore Shore

(2013)

A testimony to the decay of public things.

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Preface

This town is a testimony to the decay of public things,
things of the most durable nature.

PART I

1286

On the 1st of January 1286 a large storm swept much of the town into the North Sea.

One night of destruction, repeated again in 1386.

Three houses belonging to Reginald, son of Robert, valued at 20 shillings washed away by the tempest of the sea.

When a church goes over the cliff it doesn't go intact, it gradually gets ruined on the cliff top and then falls down on to the beach in a line of stones.

Following a series of storms, the whole town now lies under the water.



A ¼ of the city was lost.

Repeated again in 1486.

Recent discoveries date the settlement as Anglo-Saxon. At one time, this early 5th century medieval settlement held the busiest harbour on the East Anglian coast.

Fishing boats brought back catches of herring and sprat from local fishing ground, travelling as far afield as Iceland for cod and ling.

I know the site like the back of my hand because I have dived to it about 1,000 times.

600 houses,
Swept away.
5 ecclesiastical buildings, the market place.
Taverns, brick built houses.
Swept away.







So I've gone under there quite a bit and sometimes you go underneath and once more you don't see anything.

It's nearly always black.

But you can feel, you can feel sand, occasionally debris, you can go down on another occasion and you find a bottom.

Like glass.

And what it is, is polished London clay, it's polished by the friction in the sand and it's remarkable 'cos you think you're on a huge sheet of plastic.

But it isn't, it's exposed London clay.

Blocks of masonry remain on the sea bed.

And in the London clay there are holes, some as big as this room virtually and a diver quite long with his fins can float down into these holes and go down and round about a metre.
And at the bottom is the debris of the town, brick, wood, all sorts of things.

Now, I don't want to appear sceptical here, but how do we know that this random scatter of stones is not natural geology?

On the stones was mortar, when we analysed the mortar it matched the mortar we found on the medieval Franciscan friary.

The sea was already making incursions. Shingle was constantly shifted by the sea into the harbour.
Shovelling stones and sand away by hand and strengthening the sea walls.

I was constantly full of questions that no one would be able to answer; I spent Saturdays picnicking on the beach, atop the ruins.

The year started with a violent storm.

Most of the dives made in the latter part of the summer and autumn recorded nil visibility on the seabed.
Surface conditions were also very poor.
Four divers lost some of their equipment when their inflatable capsized in a rough sea.
Diving for the year ended in November when there was tremendous amount of shingle and sand movement underwater.

I was on my own for this dive; the two others had not arrived.
I was adjusting my compass in order to return to the shore.

I was finning slowly and could feel the seabed underneath by using the excavator when without any warning a large object, I assume a fish, passed over my legs. I knew there were no other divers about and of course I immediately thought of a shark.
Two minutes must have passed before I could swim on a compass course.
I was expecting to be attacked at any time and kept wondering what it would be like to lose a leg or legs.
Only a short time ago a 15 foot shark was caught by fishermen only 200m from the beach.



A remaining visible landmark.

A solitary gravestone, less than ten yards from the crumbling cliff-edge and perhaps no more than ten years from the inevitable topple.

The bones of those buried in the graveyard protruded gruesomely from the cliff.

It was once a good town, but is decayed, and as it stands on the land-side of the river the sea daily throws up more land to it, and falls off itself from it, as if it was resolved to disown the place, and that it should be a seaport no longer.

The still encroaching ocean.

Now there is but one church.

One church in this town.

And it is a very large one.

And well-built as most churches are.

Built of impenetrable flint; indeed, there is no occasion for its being so very large.

But where's the rest of the church?



Loose stone and stone structures.

A variety of heights and widths.

Ranging from single stones to structures 3 feet wide.

A large structure 2-3 feet high, 3 feet wide by 6 feet long.

Smooth level sides and top.



Even this town seems to be in danger of being swallowed up, for fame reports that once they had fifty churches in the town; I saw but one left, and that not half full of people.



A large 1 foot wide crack through the structure half way along.

The town rapidly receded as the sea encroached.



½ of the city was lost.

Repeated again in 1586.

A certaine peculiar spite and envie of Nature, that suffereth the greedy sea to have what it will.

GPS technology can pinpoint an object's location to within a metre and a sub-bottom profiler can spot objects buried beneath the sea bed.

At present, objects located on the site consist of iron concretions either fully exposed or partially buried, centred on a small mound, and another discreet group nearby.

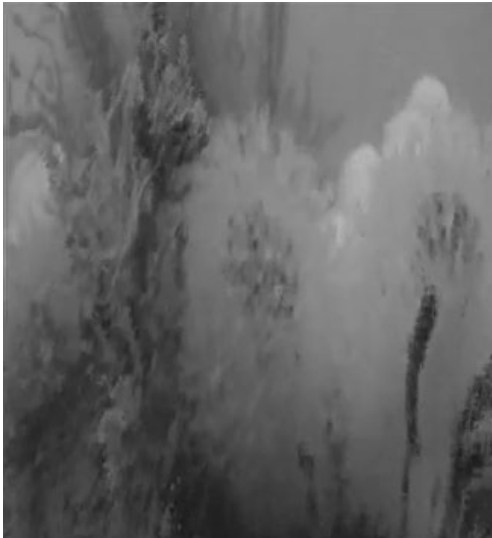
I study erosion along the coast. I deal with the whole coast, forty six point eight miles. Of those forty six point eight miles, eighteen miles are suffering from coastal erosion.

You can't see.

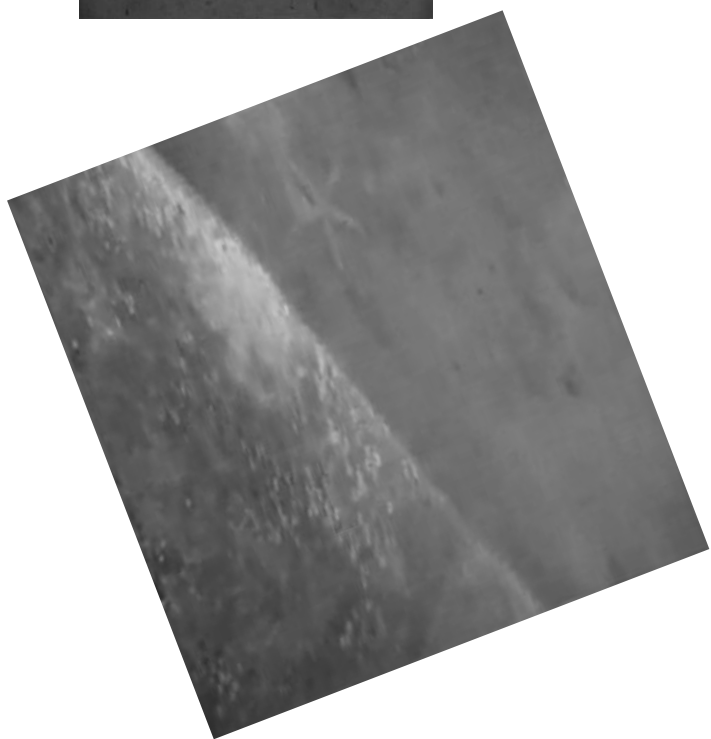
The water is black because of the sediment in suspension.

On very rare occasions visibility can be one to two metres; usually it is one or two centimetres.

You can't read your watch with a lamp on some occasions.



No business was transacted in the market that day; no drinking in many of the taverns, for they were three feet deep in muddy water, and not even a horse would have drunk that.



Its site was an eminence, composed of loose sand and loam; and both a part of that site, and parts of the adjacent coast for several miles to the east, have sunk beneath the waves.
The town just disappeared; it was swallowed up by that lousy creek.

Afterwards none could be seen.

The church was 147 feet long. That's an awful lot of masonry and tons of material.
It's not easily washed away.

Looking back to the map, you may remember a dark hint of something that was bound to happen at the points marked.

Well, it did.



PART II

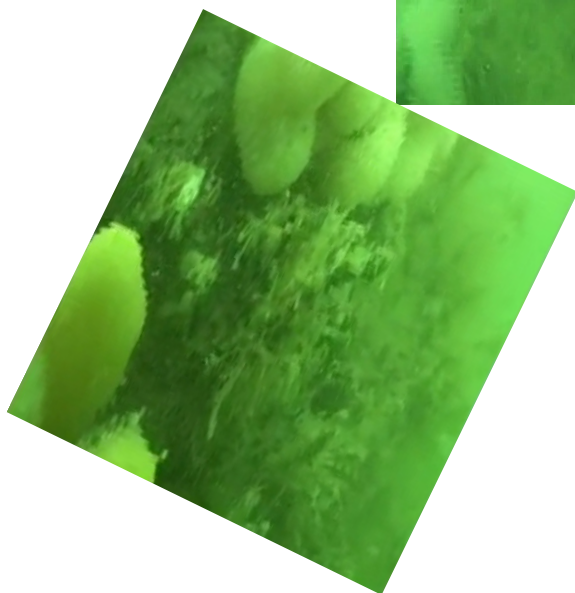
The Cannon

When he pulled up a section of timber embedded with fifty-six cannon balls, he wondered whether he had discovered a shipwreck rather than part of the submerged town.

The bronze cannon recovered was an impressive 11 ½ foot long saker.

At a depth of about 11 metres.

The expedition will use the latest sonar, underwater camera and scanning equipment to build up a picture of what lies between 10ft (3m) and 50ft (15m) down.







A minimum of 6 cannons remain.



Excluding the one of which has already been recovered.





Total dive time: 91 minutes.
Max depth: 8.4 (top of spring tide)
Water temperature: 18 degrees
Visibility in water: 0-4 inches with torches
Sea state: calm



I've dived out quite a bit and it's a very strange area.
You have this, you have this er, underwater tidal stream that takes
you out to sea.

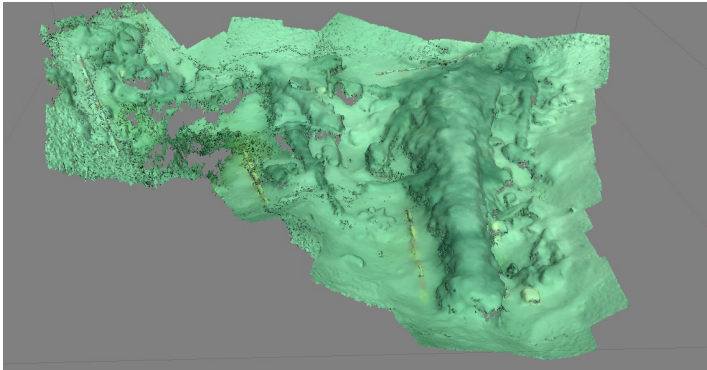
There's a big iron gun out there and that was part of the um,
armament for some kind of tower.

Length of barrel: 10ft 6.5in (3.25m)
Weight: 1.5 tons (1.52 tonnes)
Weight of projectile: 6 lb (2.72kg)
Range: about 300 yards (274m) point black
Crew: 6

And that's on the sea bed.

An unusually high tide.
Coinciding with a strong north-easterly gale.

People began to leave for the New World of North America.
Farming counties saw their people leaving to make new
lives overseas.
Many others moved to the expanding areas of Britain.



Repeated again in 1686.

The possible longevity of the weapon gives a date for the wreck of
within 100 years of 1556.





It was as if some giant reaper had swung his scythe and mown a
hundred-yard-wide swathe along the seaward side of the town.
Leaving it tangled.
In heaps.
At the end of each successive stroke.

Several skulls and many human bones littered the beach where there
had been a cliff fall at the church.

The sea wall had disappeared completely.



In October the weather changed.

Conditions were bad.

Before one underwater photograph had been taken, he gripped my mouthpiece.

Obviously he was in trouble. Moments later he headed for the surface releasing his grip.

I followed with difficulty due to the weight of the lamp.

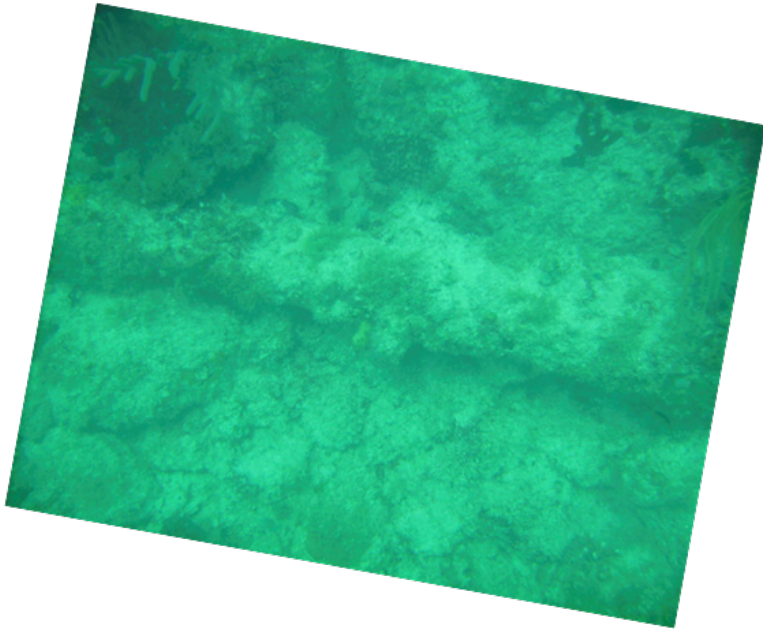
As he reached the surface I could see his mask was half full of water. He had inflated his life jacket and dropped the camera.

I caught the camera and watched him swim to the safety of the shore.

I headed in the direction he had taken rather slowly due to the equipment I was carrying.

I saw him being pulled out of the sea.

It is true; the cannon is manifestly decayed by the invasion of the waters.



The blackness increases.

This can cause panic for the inexperienced diver even though he has carried out a test in training with a blacked out mask.

Ascending bubbles from his demand valve give him the vertical plane.

In dark water it is possible to lose both horizontal and vertical direction.



The featureless sand and mud of the seabed.

Repeated again in 1786.

By the middle of the 18th century, the town had been all but abandoned, yet it continued to elect its two members of parliament. With people travelling to town on Election Day, going out in a boat to the point where the town hall used to be, and casting their vote.

Afterwards none could be seen.

After basic conservation treatment the bronze cannon was displayed until 2001.

It was then mysteriously removed by the Royal Armouries.

This action created a huge outcry from the general public, and so it was returned.

Remaining in its original state.



Crumbling shapes under the sea.
A bronze bulk discarded from the land.
This gun has suffered from being on the seabed.

Repeated again in 1886.

Barrels, crates, and baulks of timber jostled each other on the quay.

Ships strained at their moorings, buffeted the submerged wharves
and other ships until the inevitable parting of timbers resulted in
their gently settling in the swirling mud.

Some whose ropes were worn and chafed broke free, shortly to lose
their freedom by being driven aground upon the marshy side of the
harbour.

In the early days of archaeological excavation treasures were dug out
of the earth without regard for their stratigraphical context.

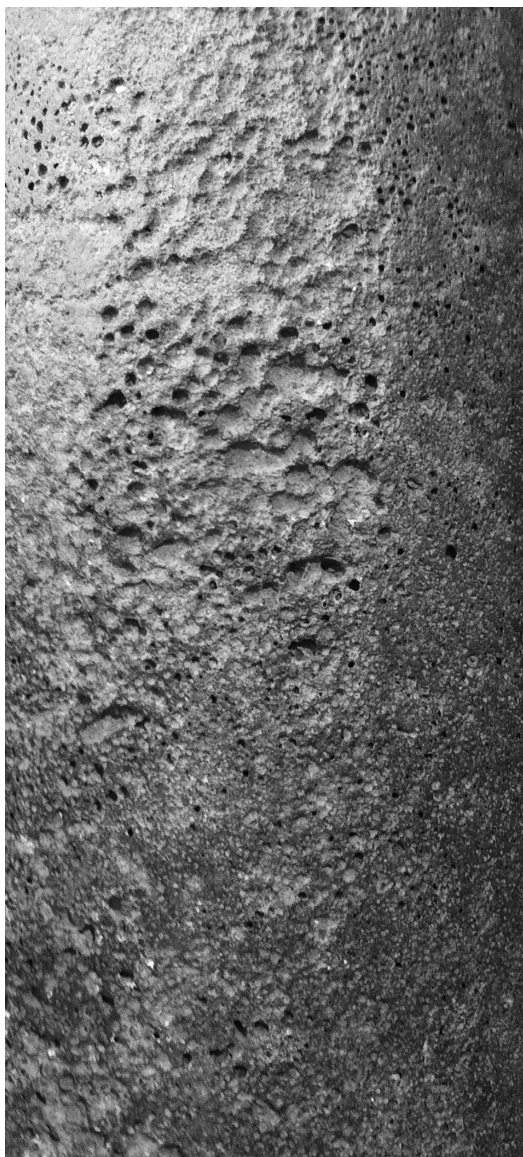
This has been repeated underwater by many divers only interested in
finding treasure or individual artefacts.

Bronze items are frequently recovered in good condition.

After washing and drying they normally survive. Most decay.

A decayed and disfranchised borough.
The ancient sunken city, that lies between 10ft (3m) and
50ft (15m) down.





It's not really like the other towns, you know, it surprising that we found what we did.

What the wind did do was to set firmly east and blow with fury.
All that day.
All the next night.
So that the sea could not fall.

In the early morning of New Year's Day the waves were pounding against the sea-wall and sweeping right over it in torrents of foam beneath showers of spray.

We were in the water for about 25 minutes.

As other towns seem sufferers by the sea,
or the tide withdrawing from their ports,
so this town is,
as it were,
eaten up by the sea,
and the still encroaching ocean seems to threaten it with a fatal immersion in a few years more.





PART III

The Museum

Once a city, now a tiny village.

The town's coastal defence, visible at low tide and the museum are the only vestiges of the ancient town.

It preserves all that remains, and houses a magnificent model of the town.

The position of the current shoreline is marked by yellow sticky tape, presumably chosen because it is easily removable.



We watched and recorded as the cliffs subsided.
Everything collapsed.

Visibility is only a few centimetres.



The shore line now lines up exactly with the original town wall.

Clearly, significant numbers were obliged to leave whenever serious erosion occurred.

And one of the main things about it is I've always been interested because it's a lost village but you know, it was very active, there was a pub there, brick-built houses, warehouses, ship building, a big complex.





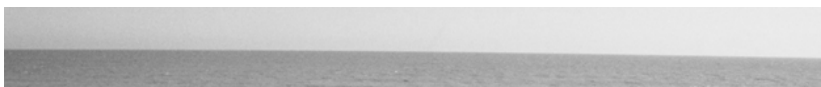
We've just had news that this is late Saxon pottery.

The shore of the Saxons.

The Saxons were here.
Some Saxons were here.
That much is certain.
The rest is speculation.

Take a closer look.
Please, borrow our magnifiers to take a closer look.

The sea rose higher still.



Much has gone over with the cliffs.

It was a very severe storm that night and I was carried out on the shoulders of one of the men that worked down on the quay and his name was George.

I've got a photograph of shingle nearly up to the second floor and my mother and I standing outside the gate and shingle all around us. After that we had to move, we had to leave the house because it was so badly damaged.

Since 1971 people have been diving around here. Visibility is poor but they've discovered bits of ruins.

Repeated again in 1986.



Today we've recovered some cooking pots dating from the 13th and 14th centuries.



It is remarkable that a town is now so much washed away by the sea, that a town can become so small and ruined. The shore is unsafe and uneasy for the boats.

Afterwards none could be seen.

Our small museum preserves and displays coins, pottery, and many other objects which have been found locally and which belong to earlier times.

The explanatory material comprises maps, diagrams, copies of documents, photographs and concise texts based on the sources used by historians.

Around the walls of the gallery on the ground floor are displays relating to the Roman settlement, the Saxon town, the large medieval port and town, the loss of the harbour and subsequent decline of the local market town and village.

A central feature of this room is a large model of the town.

Attempts were made to mend the breaches in the wall. There was no lack of material; no lack of willing hands.

What they lacked most was time.

As darkness fell, the hopeless task was abandoned.

That was virtually the end.

Despite modern technology the encroachment of the merciless sea continues.

There was a stone coffin, the bones were covered with tiles. *
They were digging a trench to drain the marshes, they found a strong,
cemented stone wall. *
We found several other pieces of old coins. *

*It should not be overlooked that all of these discoveries could have a strong connection with a possible Roman settlement.

A detailed sketch plan of the remaining objects has been produced.

Articles have been published in journals.

Complete reports.

The seabed analysed.

The museum has been supplied with a number of artefacts.

A printed archaeological survey finalised.

His map is beautiful but not at all accurate.



I was about to signal to my fellow diver that it was time to go up. Then I spotted what appeared to be a silver handle in between two large portions of stonework on the seabed. I started to dig the sand away with my hands and signalled to the other diver to help by digging from the other side, this he did but ran out of air at about the same time and made for the surface. My contents gauge showed I had one or two minutes left, I worked even harder but it was useless and I had to surface. We had no reserve tanks of air and at that time carried no marker. Of course I have never seen the silver handle since.



In recent years, magnetometer and swath bathymetry surveys of the site have been undertaken as a basis for monitoring the area.

The trustees supplement the displays with a series of inexpensive publications, postcards and ornaments which are all on sale with souvenirs on the ground floor.

We hope that this guide will help our visitors to enjoy to the full their stay, however brief, in our village.

Additionally the wreck is visited on a regular basis.

The wind blowing very hard about North-East with a continuance for several days.

The great sea.

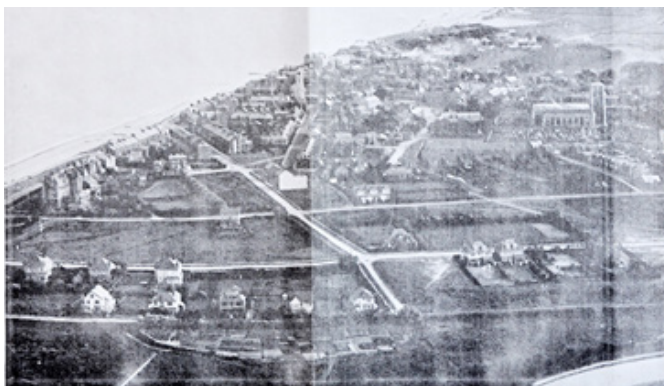
Doing much damage on the coast during that time by inundations breaking down the banks and overflowing many marshes.

The town's on its knees, gasping for breath and still dazed from the shock.

Little now remains of this splendid city.
Its artefacts are scattered far and wide.

Diving continued into the winter.

Wind direction and strength affects underwater visibility as does the water temperature. Minute particles of sand and mud are the main reason for such poor condition.



By numerous examples we may see,

That towns and cities die as well as we.



The sea came over and took the lot.

All the sheds.

All the boats.

What the sea throws up.

When the men that worked on the quay looked over the edge of the sea wall there wasn't a stick standing, there was nothing. Everything had been swept over into the river.

And my father lost his business then and he never opened anymore 'cos he was getting to an age where he didn't think he would start again.

It was too late so I just gave him a job, keep him occupied, repairing clocks behind the museum.

Eastward.
From left to right.

The eye could scan the whole of the town; a network of streets and alleys appearing.
A mass of buildings, less than half of them distinguishable because the houses and fences on one side of a street obscured all but the roof-tops of those opposite.





It was very cold that day and there was a strong wind blowing from the south west.

There was a very fast current offshore.

I descended to the seabed and found completely black conditions.

So dense was the blackness that I could not read my compass with the underwater lamp.

I was in an area of mud on the seabed.

My fingers and toes were numb due to the cold.

I was being dragged along the bottom by the current.

I managed to swim to the surface. As I reached the surface I found I could not keep vertical.

When I tried to swim for the shore I swam in circles.

I was suffering from loss of balance so I descended to the seabed.

After a few moments I crawled to the shore using the current as a guide to direction.

As I reached the shallow water the sea threw me about like a cork.

I have to hold my demand valve to prevent it being pulled from my mouth.

The sea tossed me on to the beach.



For a private town.
A seaport.
A town of commerce.
To decay, as it were.

I must confess, seems owing to nothing but the fate of things.

Even this town seems to be in danger of being swallowed up, for fame reports that once they had fifty churches in the town; I saw but one left, and that not half full of people.

Volunteer museum attendants have the intention of constructing full size in situ models of all the churches that have collapsed into the sea, using extremely large upright steel rods.

If the project is implemented, the number of annual visitors would soar.

Into the millions.

A motorway would be needed to get them here.



P.S

What is it about this place that fascinates such a variety of people?

I have aimed at truth. Not the whole truth. That will never be known.

If it ever existed, it now lies somewhere out there at the bottom of the sea, or mingles with the insubstantial breezes that caress the cliff-top grass.

But something like the truth.

Across the intervening gap of centuries; we penetrate, as it were, that square mile of turbulent cloudy water out there; to get a glimpse, if only momentarily, of some of those vanished.

I can vouch for the fact that all the events in this story did actually happen, that all the people mentioned in it did exist and nearly all did do, approximately, what I have said they did.

Maps



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