**The Battle of Crayford**

**5th century, Bexley**

A short entry in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle documents a little-known event which took place in the mid fifth century, on the slopes above the modern-day town of Crayford in the London Borough of Bexley:

CCCCLVI Her Hengest 7 Æsc his sunu fuhton wiþ Bryttas on þære stowe þe is gecueden Creacganford 7 þær ofslogon iiiim. wera, 7 þa Bryttas þa forleton Kentlond 7 mid myclum ege flugon to Lundenbyrg.

[A.D. 456. This year Hengest and Ash his son fought with the Britons on the spot that is called Crecganford [Crayford], and there slew 4,000 men, and the Britons then left the land of Kent, and in great fear fled to London.] [1]

Crayford grew up around a crossing-place of the chalky River Cray, a tributary of the Darent which has yielded abundant evidence of prehistoric settlement and made possible the growth of paper and silk making industries from the eighteenth century. The town was also positioned along Watling Street, the ancient trackway which linked Kent to the Welsh borders and was famously paved by the Romans in the 1st century BC.[2] For a number of reasons, it would have been a strategically significant site.

The brief account of the Battle of Crayford above is taken from the C-version of the (Anglo-Saxon Chronicle)[http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Cotton\_MS\_Tiberius\_B\_I] (folio 18v). Other versions of the Chronicle date the conflict to 457 instead of 456, but all of them are characteristically sparse on details, and all contextualise the battle within a dramatic sequence of events in which the legendary Germanic brothers Hengest and Horsa [LINK TO OTHER BLOG POST]- and after Horsa’s death, Hengest and his son Æsc - drive out the Britons from Kent, resulting in Hengest’s accession to the Kentish throne. Places, names and dates as documented in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle need to be treated with scepticism, but the events of the Battle of Crayford - whatever the historical reality - evidently carried some cultural significance if the Chronicle’s first compilers, writing 400 years later, chose to incorporate them into the founding mythology of the English Christian nation.

For that reason, it is perhaps surprising that the Battle of Crayford was not written about by subsequent chroniclers, nor is it particularly well known in modern times, even by Crayford locals. Walking around Crayford in the 21st century, there are only hints of its possible past; there is a Hengist Road and a Horsa Road in Northumberland Heath, for example.

In 2018 the local history group Crayford Reminiscence and Youth (CRAY) sought to change this by organising (a series of summer events)[https://www.crayfordhistory.org.uk/category/projects/the-legend-of-hengest ] with local primary schools [3]. Children learnt about different versions of the story and were encouraged to create their own legends of the battle - along the way, thinking about why medieval writers would reconfigure history for their own creative and critical purposes. CRAY created a resources pack which can be used by other interested schools - see their site linked above for more.

If you find yourself in Crayford, we’d encourage you to explore the town, walking from the train station to the ‘Cray Gardens’, a pocket of greenery by the river. There, we’d invite you to imagine that the delicious smells from the brightly-lit take-aways selling every possible cuisine are instead wafting from smaller cooking fires in a bustling market. Among the cars imagine the Romans, then Catholic missionaries, then newer arrivals from across the North Atlantic medieval world passing through on their way from the coast to London. Cross over the London Road then walk up the hill of the high street to St Paulinus Church, and try and imagine what of this view has changed, and what may be recognisable, to the people who wrote down a few lines of a chronicle, 1000 years ago.

**Suggest images and captions**

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1EF9cnWqxcEZFnBuUAyuAGOdO-L3GlSkQ/view?usp=sharing>

The 456AD entry ‘Abingdon Chronicle’ (British Library, Cotton Tiberius B. I., folio 118v [http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=cotton\_ms\_tiberius\_b\_i\_f118v]. This manuscript was compiled during the 11th and 12th centuries.

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/19MNfKh5Uoje6gCmaemduHBIcCuYJ1tRj/view?usp=sharing> Hengist Road and Horsa Road, Bexley, as shown on Google Maps.

**Article by Francesca Allfrey and Beth Whalley**

**Works cited**

[1] Anon. “Entry for year 456”. 1st half 11th century-2nd half 12th century. Folio 118v of Cotton Tiberius B. I. British Library, London. Manuscript. http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=cotton\_ms\_tiberius\_b\_i\_f118v. Web. Last access 1 June 2021. Translations our own.

[2] Hasted, Edward. *The History and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent.* Volume 2. London: W. Bristow, 1797. Print. 267-268.

[3] Daniel, Peter. “The Legend of Hengest”. *Crayford History Online*. November 2018 - February 2019. <https://www.crayfordhistory.org.uk/category/projects/the-legend-of-hengest>. Web. Last accessed 1 June 2021.