**KING ALFRED THE GREAT**

**THE DEFENCE OF WESSEX**

**AND THE**

**MAKING OF ENGLAND**

**(850 – 1000)**

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# CONTENTS

Foreword

1 The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle

2 The Ravagers from the Sea

3 Sea Robbers, Sea Rovers

4 First Storms on Land, on Sea, in the Air

5 Here Be Dragons’

6 Serpents and Laithly Worms

8 The Time of Testing

9 The Captains of the Host

10 King Æthelred – ‘Noble Counsel’

11 The Great Heathen Army: First Campaign

12 The Great Heathen Army: Second Campaign

13 ‘England’s Darling’

14 Alfred – His Boyhood

15 Rebuilding Wessex

16 The Great Heathen Army: Third Campaign

17 England’s Year of Destiny

18 The Voyage to Cynuit

19 The Fight at Cynuit

20 The Lost Raven

21 The Muster of the Home Guard

22 Flight of the Wild Geese

23 ‘In Victory Magnanimity’

24 Founder of the Navy

25 Vikings Return in Force

26 The Home Front

27 Hæstan’s War

28 The Close of Alfred’s Reign

29The Danes Attack Yet Again

30 Wessex and Mercia Join Forces

31 The Lady of Mercia

32 King Edward I, the ‘Invincible’ – Character and Achievement

33 King Athelstan

34‘Peace, Lovely Peace’

35The Long Twilight of Wessex

36 Danes Return to the Attack

37 Millennial Incursions

38 Denmark in Devon and Somerset

39 Nightfall

40 The Danish Daw

# FOREWORD

T

he defence of Wessex from the ravaging onslaughts of the Vikings and Danes in the ninth century and beyond was as vital for the survival of freedom and civilization in England as the Battle of Britain in the Second World War. That is sober fact, and although both epics of defiance have acquired elements of fiction and myth, the parallel is clear to see: a peaceful people taking up arms reluctantly but with determination, suffering defeat after defeat, but led to eventual victory by two men of a genuinely heroic mould:

In the 1940s the mood of the nation reluctantly at war was embodied in a man who even gloried in it! a man of action and eloquence, statesman, writer – though mixed with the weakness of headstrong impetuosity which took his helpers much determination to correct and save him from from costly errors; while eleven hundred years before, the vision and leadership of the greatest of English kings confers on the epic story a nobility lifting it above all other sagas of the North, or even, for those in tune with its music, the victories of Marathon, Thermopylae and Salamis:

For not only freedom and civilization were at stake, but also, in both ages, the faith of a nation; and although, to tell it kindly, the Christian faith in the 1940s did not exercise the interest of most Britons as it had done in the other fateful wars three centuries before, there remained a bed-rock of belief and accepted ideas of conduct, inherited from parents and grandparents and reinforced by the teaching of day- and Sunday schools. The parallel only holds true so far, of course, and the average British soldier, when presented with the idea of a great crusade for the liberation of Europe, would respond with his customary brief words and few.

But with that, the defenders, Saxons in 878 (sometimes with Cymric aid) and in 1040 the British, sized up the enemy and knew that defeat in this war meant the loss of nationhood, freedom of thought, movement and speech and, for millions, the loss of family and life itself. We, with after-knowledge, realise that the later peril was even more desperate than that menacing the Saxons. The Vikings and their successors terrorised northern Europe for two hundred years, the Nazis and their war-machine did likewise but for less than a tenth of that time. But onceVikings had won English land they settled, farmed and in due time were content to give up Woden and Thor and live at peace as Christians with their English neighbours and become English themselves. But a Nazi overlordship could never have developed so humanely, and Churchill did not overplay the danger when he warned of ‘the abyss of a new dark age made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science.’

The chroniclers did not call the enemies ‘the Vikings’ or Norsemen nor even Danes, though the last of these, with the power of a state, were the most fateful for Wessex. They called them ‘the heathen’ or ‘pagans’, a refrain echoed after Saxon days, though with much less justification, by the poet of the *Chanson de Roland*: ‘*Paiens ont tort, et Chrestiens ont dreit.’*

# THE ANGLO-SAXON CHRONICLE

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ngland possesses in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle a continuous record of her early history that no other European nation can rival. For more than three hundred years chroniclers faithfully recorded the news brought by travellers to their monasteries, of events that were shattering or re-shaping the world outside. They told of wars, ravage and slaughter, of lands harrowed and wasted, of solemn oaths forsworn; they told of earthquakes, dragon-lights in the heavens, famine and plague, flood and ‘wildfire’ on the moors; and then, gleaming through the fire-shot darkness, the kings who strove by sword and by treaty to weld the petty kingdoms into one nation. But most gladly they lingered over the one who, when the life, freedom and faith of his kingdom seemed all but lost, created hope and victory out of despair and for his lifetime guided his people into the ways of knowledge and peace.

These chroniclers wrote on steadily through the 500 years of Anglo-Saxon rule and beyond, from the first coming of the Angles, Saxons and Jutes into post-Roman Britain,to the high noon of the West Saxons, and on to the deepening shades of late Danish England, to the murk of the Norman tyranny and the descent into ‘chaos and foul night’ of the reign of Stephen. Not every year has an entry – and in centuries of fire and storm the monks may have counted themselves happy with nothing to record. But when the martial kings of Wessex were campaigning to make the country one under their own rule, or when they raised and led army after army to repel the ferocious attacks of the Danes, then the scribes wrote all they knew, recounting the marches and countermarches, the battles and sieges, with a detail which showed that, for all their vows of unworldliness, they rightly felt an impassioned concern for the struggles to the death of Christian Saxon and heathen Dane.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Moreover, unlike chroniclers elsewhere, they wrote their native speech, here English. It is so different from ours that much of it can only be understood after study. But it is recognizably the rough, muscular ancestor of our own dulcified speech, and even to a struggling student something of their patient strength and their pride in the courage and endurance of the English comes through.

One might almost call the Chronicle a national enterprise, for it seems that a master copy was circulated to centres of learning where resident scribes made copies and sometimes inserted information on their own account. Six of these copies survived the destruction of the monasteries and initiated a renewed interest in Anglo-Saxon in the reign of Queen Elizabeth. But other scholars in late Saxon or early Norman times and later wrote down what they had heard – or read in some source now unknown – of the history, true or legendary, of England and Wales. Here I can only name them – William of Malmesbury, Æthelweard, ‘Florence’ (otherwise John or William) of Worcester, Henry of Huntingdon, Matthew of Westminster, Roger of Wendover, Symeon of Durham and Bishop Asser, to the last of whom we owe a unique debt for his biography of his master and friend, King Alfred the Great.

Ever since the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle was published in modern English, successive editors and historians have praised it for its unique value as a source for English history: ‘a substantial monument … to which it would not be easy to find a parallel in any nation, ancient or modern,’ ‘a collection … of traditions which gives (it) unique importance’[[2]](#footnote-2) and ‘a historical source of the first importance over centuries[[3]](#footnote-3).

This does not make the Chronicle, for all its virtues, a forerunner of the classic Haydn Dictionary of Dates. We must be grateful – and wonder not a little – that throughout the disasters which fell upon England in the later tenth and the eleventh centuries the annalists persevered in recording them in ever greater detail; but on the other hand, certain important events in the earlier times, such as the Saxon conquest of the Upper Thames valley, are skimmed over because no true memory from that illiterate and pagan time had come down to the annalist. But reading through the whole work we witness nothing less than the making of England.

Yet for all its unique value it can be tantalising, because for every question that it answers, at least in topography, it raises a new one. The particular problem for modern readers of the Chronicle is one which no Anglo-Saxon could have foreseen: to identify some of the places where actions took place. The annalists took much care to name the sites of the battles and other great events, but while the majority of the names are recognizable, some have changed very greatly, and others have disappeared altogether. This uncertainty has provided good sport for local historians wishing to bring the scene of a notable event home to the honour of their county. Asser’s Cynuit of 878, with different interpretations outlined in these pages, is such a case, and no amount of proof to the contrary will shake the conviction of the local patriot. E’en though vanquished, he will argue still.

It is rather more puzzling, though, when academic historians of national repute take on trust what previous writers have said and do not trouble to visit the scenes and check the probability for themselves; and generations of their students must have furrowed their brows over relief maps of the West of England, trying to make strategic sense of movements of Danish forces which apparently led nowhere. I do not presume that this study will correct received knowledge, but I hope that for some readers it will offer a little diversion – perhaps in a double sense –– and lighten a dark place here and there.

The historical sources of the quotations in this study are, unless indicated otherwise, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (ASC), Bishop Asser’s Life of King Alfred (Asser) and the History of the Kings of England, by ‘Florence’ of Worcester (d.1119), whose ‘deep knowledge and great industry have rendered this Chronicle of chronicles pre-eminent over all others.’[[4]](#footnote-4)

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Personal names: I have preferred to keep the Old English names of most of the royal house of Wessex, but Eadweard, Ælfred, Æthelstan and Æthelred would be unwarrantably pedantic.

Note: The term ‘Anglo-Saxon’ relates to the commonalty of the Germanic tribes who settled in the south of Britain from the fifth century onward: a. the Angles, by and large, between the Mersea, the Humber and the Thames, their kingdom later known as Mercia; b. the Saxons,’sax-men’, south of the Thames, the West Saxons, Wessex, and the small kingdom of East Saxons, Essex. (The term also covers the North- and South- folk (Norfolk and Suffolk) who settled in the lands formerly of the Iceni, and the Jute settlements of East Kent and the Isle of Wight). In later days under the supremacy of Wessex, simple ‘Saxon’ covered them all.

The term “Viking” seems to be used indiscriminately nowadays for the warriors and marauders from Norway, Sweden and Denmark, but it should not be applied to those who had left the roving life. The Great Heathen Army which overran all England, but western Wessex was probably made up mainly of Danes, though no doubt many freebooters tramped along.

# THE HEROES FROM THE SEA

*Look at me, dread me! I am the Hereward,*

*The watcher, the champion, the berserker, the Viking,*

The land-thief, the sea-thief, young summer-pirate.

*Ship with me boldly, follow me gaily*

*Over the swan's road over the whale's bath,*

*Far to the southward where sun and sea meet,*

*Where from the palm-boughs apples of gold hang;*

*And freight there our long-snakes with sandal and orfray,*

*Dark Moorish maidens and gold of Algier.*

*A oi![[5]](#footnote-5)*

S

o sang Kingsley's hero, Hereward the Watchful, Hereward the Wake, and as his hand swept across the harp-strings, the Danes and Norsemen among his listeners roared their praise and hammered on the board like blacksmiths gone berserk.

And well they might. It was over the whale's bath and along the swan's way that their forefathers had sailed their longships from the barren fells and dark fjords of the Northland to the peaceful creeks and plains of England, from mountain poverty to lowland wealth. Sturdy, independent-minded people were these new English of the Danelaw in the years around 1066; and for some time after that catastrophic year they stood fast in the islands of the fens and held them in the face of Norman ruthlessness, treachery and guile.

They were a settled, tenacious people, too, and whether or not they owned the land they farmed, they felt they had a stake in it, for their chiefs were of their own race and all lived under laws when, even when they broke them, they acknowledged and feared.

That had not always been their way, but five or six generations had turned lawless marauders into law-abiding farmers. Raiders from Denmark - and in Cumberland, from Norway - had settled to a life of hard and sweating toil. The invaders, having won themselves land by the sword, had taken to the plough and made of England their peaceful home. But they had made many a perilous voyage and fought many a bloody fight to get there.

# SEA ROVERS, SEA ROBBERS

E

VERYONE knows of the Vikings; everyone knows roughly where they came from, a little of where they went and what they did - fight, kill, burn, pillage, rape and enslave. Far fewer know why. Eastward by sea or river they voyages, for trade or tribute to Kiev and the Black Sea, to Constantinople and onward for gold and fighting , and the wealth that fighting brought; – then south and south-west to Friesland and Flanders, to ‘Angle-land’, Normandy, Brittany, and Galicia in the far corner of Spain; – and westward to the Orkneys and Shetland, the Hebrides and Ireland, the Faeroes and Iceland, and on to Greenland and the New World beyond the storm-swept northern sea. To most of these, at first, they dealt out the *dona Danorum:* destruction, rape, plunder and murder. Later they spent their energy and blood in colonisation, with success in Iceland, Normandy and parts of Ireland and Britain. In Iceland they found a land virtually empty of people; in Ireland they traded and ruled in the east for two centuries until overwhelmed in 1012 or 1014 by the army of Brian Boru. In Normandy they established themselves powerfully and at length acquired a veneer of Roman and Christian civilization. They attacked England, at first sparely, then in force, for two hundred years, overran all the eastern plain and the north and settled there in strength; but in seeking to expand westward they clashed with an enemy whom they might often defeat but could never overwhelm, the Kingdom of Wessex. This struggle, which in the long run ensured the spread and fusing of racial stocks and gave birth and strength to the English nation, is the matter with which we are now concerned.

No one knows for sure why the Vikings had this name. Scholars have offered various suggestions: a Viking was a pirate who came from the ‘Vik’, the Vestfold, the land on both sides of the Oslo Fjord; or who lay hidden in a ‘vik’ or bay; or lived in a ‘wic’ or camp or town; or hunted the ‘wikan’ or seal; or was a sea warrior who made a ‘viking’, a raid to distant shores; or one who ‘departed’ for a long absence from home.[[6]](#footnote-6) (There is also a Saxon verb meaning “to beach” ( a ship).

The first has been generally accepted as the most likely, but that does not mean that these sea-robbers were necessarily Norwegian, for Norway and Denmark as yet scarcely existed as functioning nation states, and a freeman’s loyalty was directed to his home, his family and in time of battle his chieftain. Indeed, the man or woman from the Vestfold may have felt much in common with the people across the narrow sea in Jutland: the languages were much the same, and the Skagerrak was a thoroughfare rather than a barrier for hardened seamen. The real barrier to converse and commerce in Norway was the hostile mountain range of the Dovre, and the nature of that land answers the earlier question: Why? The natural beauty and grandeur of Norway work their ‘magic’ on the modern traveller and tourist, and the unscaled heights and the unreachable recesses of the valleys and hidden caves inspired in the people living in their shadow two thousand years ago an awe which led them to imagine those forts of mystery as the timeless abode of trusted gods; - and in the forbidding depths between, the underground scramble-holes of those malevolent caricatures of humanity, more to be feared than any of the gods - the trolls.

One hardly need say that these Norse farmers and sailors and their families had not been introduced to the poetic concepts of the Romantic Landscape and Pantheistic Sympathy! What they did know was that a barren mountain would not feed them, and there was no substitute for good flat land ready for the plough. Otherwise, starvation.

It was the ‘true’ Norse, those of the Vestfold, the west coast, of the Trondhjem and Bergen fjords and Gudbrandsdal, who at the start of the ‘Viking era’ were suffering this shortage of land when in-migrants, forced themselves out of Sweden, moved in. TheVestfold folk moved out, but not in mere desperation, in a spirit of venture: they had heard of new land for the taking and settling across the western sea, and that was their primary and -– though often and long postponed -– final objective.

But that is not how the rest of the world saw them, because they also went raiding and, in time, and were characterised by their victims as ‘white Vikings’ or ‘black’ – that is ‘dark’– or ‘red’ (red-haired) Danes, but their ventures, as noted earlier, took them to Shetland and round Cape Wrath into the Hebrides and on to Cumbria and the Irish Sea and not directly into Wessex. The English regarded the raiders from any direction as Danes from the very start.[[7]](#footnote-7)

To be sure, the peoples who suffered at their hands had no time for ethnological reflection. For them the Vikings were ferocity, malevolence and bad faith incarnate. The Danish historian Johannes Brøndsted says that ‘early monastic historians, in their records of the Vikings, emphasised the cunning, cruelty and treachery of this warlike people. The sagas, on the other hand, show them in a different light, telling of the boldness, generosity, frankness and self-discipline of these famous warriors ... The Viking took nothing more seriously than his family ... The members of it are bound to assist and, if need be, avenge each other, and the honour of the family is supreme ... (The) fundamental principle of family responsibility and family obligation created a stubborn trait in the Viking character, as well as a check on any individual's disposition to forgive an affront or a wrong, for there was no escape from the family’.[[8]](#footnote-8) But unfortunately for the rest of Europe, this made the Viking an even more formidable enemy.

Their victims in England saw only their savagery and unwarranted cruelty, but one cannot withhold admiration for their other qualities: their hardihood, their initiative, their readiness to adapt, their tactical intelligence and, for some, their magnificent stature and comparative bodily refinement: they regularly washed and combed their hair and bathed weekly. Theirs was not the savagery of unthinking barbarians. They aimed to overwhelm and let no one mistake them.

Piracy and marauding, however, were not the only outlets for the energy of the Vikverskar or Vikverjar (dwellers in Vestfold). Trade and bargaining came as easily to them as fighting and in the right circumstances made a surer way to fortune. ‘The Norse trader of those days `was none of the cringing and effeminate chapmen who figure in the stories of the middle ages. Free Norse or Dane, himself often of noble blood, he fought as willingly as he bought; and held his own as an equal, whether at the court of a Cornish kinglet or at that of the great Kaiser of the Greeks.’[[9]](#footnote-9) And while the men of Norway and Denmark rowed to the west and south, the men of Sweden travelled and traded the length of the Baltic and into Russia and beyond. Amid all the carnage and violence, the trader steered his *kaufskip* to well-known lands, from Norway to Iceland or Shetland, or – most venturesome – after 900 to Greenland or to the high end of the Gulf of Bothnia or even round the North Cape into the White Sea and the northern coast of Russia.

Nevertheless, the name ‘viking’ was not given to those who made purely peaceful voyages, though it was said, for instance, of a great traveller Bjø**r**n that ‘he was sometimes in viking but sometimes in trading voyages’: ‘*var stundum í víking enn stundum í kaupferðum*’.[[10]](#footnote-10)

To begin with, ‘the name of Viking was honourable, it spoke of courage and daring and readiness to face the unknown.’ But when the sea-rovers settled down in England to a life of landed responsibility and Christianity, Time brought in his revenges, and the old-time sea-robber, though now largely displaced as a threat by organised Danish armies, was no longer seen as a hero but as a pirate and nothing more. Besides that, when the remembered legends of their deeds were at last written down, the transcribers were monks and clerics, who detested their ancestors’ heathendom and had no mind to grant them absolution in any way. Never, or almost never, did they present the enemy as Danes or Vikings, but always as Pagans or Heathen. ‘ It is easy to understand the bitterness with which the attacks were regarded ... But it is easy also to forget that the bitterness was felt because the Vikings were heathens and barbarians, a despised race.’ 5 And yet the Vikings, had they known, might have fairly claimed that they were doing as the Saxons and Angles and Jutes had done from the fifth century onwards, when they too as heathens had stormed over the land, slaying Christian British and Welsh by the hundred and thousand. These Saxon conquests and victories are recorded by the chroniclers, but any note of reproach is buried in a collective oblivion. We, fourteen hundred years later, are not called on to judge. It is enough to acknowledge the strength and moulding power that the old enemies, when reconciled, brought to the new nation, and recognise in Dane and Old Saxon (and Cymric and Briton) their unconquerable love of freedom to which we owe our own, and be thankful.[[11]](#footnote-11)

While the attackers moved like a single army, the defenders and their leaders were generally identified not with the greater Wessex but with their sub-kingdoms (later shires) : ‘Alfred, king of the Anglo-Saxons, steered his fleet filled with warriors from Kent toward East Anglia ’; ‘Eanulf the ealdorman, with the people of Somerset, fought at the mouth of the Parrett with the Danish army’ ; ‘when the king heard of this, he sent an army of West Saxons and Mercians (to drive the pagans back)’. According to the Chronicle, they consciously defended their homeland as Christians - as the West Saxons had been since mid-seventh century.

In recent decades the traditional concept of the Vikings as barbarian slayers and nothing more has been modified both by historians and by the evidence of artefacts that the Vikings caused to be made by skilled workers in their homelands as well as those carried off in raids or plundered from the dead in battle.

Excavations in Denmark and York, and collections and museums in Scandinavia and indeed throughout the world, speak eloquently of the art fashioned for the Vikings and of the love of wealth and display which drove some of them to their conquests. Wessex saw none of this except in the carving which adorned the longships. For the whole of England, from Northumbria, where the Vikings launched the first ferocious attack on the holy site of Lindisfarne, down to Tavistock, where two centuries later they robbed and destroyed a minster, Vikings were the destroyers, were the destroyers, the fiends of the ghastly ‘spread eagle’, each one a new devil, prowling like a roaring lion and seeking whom he might devour. No doubt the targeting of religious houses, with the wholesale slaughter of monks, the despoiling of priceless treasures, and then the devastation of the countryside, made the robbers and ravagers especially hateful to the chroniclers, for although it was the material wealth of the monasteries, the gold, silver and jewels, that above all excited the lust of the Vikings, they were also stirred by hatred of this new religion which had no place for the ways of Oden and Thor.[[12]](#footnote-12)

One such implacable enemy, according to legend, was Olaf Bail (*balle*, stubborn), who had been given land in Durham from Castle Eden to the Wear. This, however, involved the payment of rent and services to the sanctuary of St Cuthbert, which had persisted despite attacks by the Vikings. Doubly offended – by the demand to pay the enemy and by irritation at the Viking failure – Olaf came one day to the church at Chester-le-Street and shouted to the bishop and congregation, ‘What can your dead man, Cuthbert, do to me? What is the use of threatening me with his anger? I swear, by my strong gods Thor and Othan, that I will be the enemy of you all from this time forth’. He turned to leave the church, but his threat lacked conviction when he thereupon dropped dead. And in due course the patrimony had his lands as well.[[13]](#footnote-13)

To revert for a moment to the monasteries: strangely enough, only a handful of those attacked are mentioned by name: Lindisfarne (793), Jarrow (794), Medehamstede (Peterborough) (870) and Tavistock (997); but obviously, when they attacked and burnt a city and slaughtered its people or took them away into slavery, the churches and monasteries suffered foremost.

One may therefore perhaps feel that the reports of the burnings and slaughter and rape exaggerated even the enormity, but that is unfair. Other armies nearer our own time have measured up **–** or down **–** to lower levels of inhumanity. “To us, looking back on the weary waste of life and the means of life, estimating in imagination the wanton destruction of art and literature, the sufferings of innocent people massacred or driven into slavery among heathens or barbarians, or left to struggle and starve in the ruins of their homes, it is easy to understand the bitterness with which the Viking attacks were regarded.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

Yet the Vikings as a fighting force in any of their campaigns over the two centuries, were not a mere horde of savages: far from it. The individual Viking in battle, with the smell of hot blood in his brain, or when searching for hidden gold, might be every whit as brutal as a pirate of the Caribbean 800 years later; but set him in a battle-array with a king or jarl or chieftain his equal in courage but much wiser, and he conformed to a discipline of movement which was sometimes the undoing of his enemies. Time and again the Vikings, defeated in battle, yet remained ‘masters of the field of carnage’: discipline in the line and the war-shield had told.

Their success was by no means a success of rude and savage force; it was a triumph of mental power as well as of moral endurance and physical bravery. In their battles elsewhere, their armour and weapons are noted as superior to those of the Irish, who were no mean craftsmen. At the siege of Paris they seem to have used machines and methods of assault as effective as those employed for several centuries to follow; and in the campaign of Ivar they fortified themselves in earthworks, the use of which was unusual in Scandinavia… The adoption of the mounted infantry system, afterwards copied by the English, put them at once into a position of great tactical advantage, just as their well-known but difficult trick of the feigned flight enabled them to break the line of the bravest Saxon fyrd, fighting on the old hand-to-hand principles. And Odin, in far antiquity, as their stories told, taught his children the ‘swine-fylking’, the charge in wedge formation, which the Highlanders a thousand years later used at Prestonpans.’ [[15]](#footnote-15)

Nowhere did the Vikings and the people of the coastland clash more violently or longer than in Somerset, and nowhere did a richer store of legend come into being.

One cannot expect to find many visible traces of the events presently to be described. Too many generations have come and gone, have ploughed, sown and reaped, raised buildings and torn them down, for anything to have remained unchanged. But we can travel to the scenes of these events, take in the lie of the land, close our eyes and re-create the little villages and rare towns as they were a thousand years ago: not houses, shops and public buildings of concrete, brick, sandstone or grey lias but low huts of timber or wattle-and-daub, thatched with rough reed or straw, with a few scrawny, scrabbling chicken and half-wild swine rooting around.

A poor, primitive economy to our way of thinking, but it held wealth enough to draw the raiders: food, sheep and cattle, men and women to be carried off and sold as slaves, a little silver money in the towns, and in the monasteries gold and silver in profusion.

The dwellers on the English coast must have been terror-stricken at their first sight of a Viking longship. They would certainly have heard of the raids and fighting afar off, and the slaughters and atrocities would have lost nothing in the telling, but the first sight of the ship close inshore must have terrified the peaceable countryfolk as much as, say, an English army in Aquitaine 600 years on. One such craft found at Oseberg is described thus: ‘The prow rises to a high spiral ending in a snake's head; the top of the stern-post…showed the snake's tail.’ The whole ship, then, looked like a fabulous monster as it breasted the waves, its head and tail glistening, and its stout body filled with men; and rows of round shields appearing along the wales as the crew prepared to land would have completed the scaly likeness. So let us imagine the flotilla of longships drawing inshore and beaching, the oarsmen wading ashore with swords drawn, and hear their fierce shouts of ‘Aoi! Aoi!’ Then see the little band of Saxon spearmen, either standing to be overwhelmed or, more realistically, taking to the woods to regather and have their revenge another day.

# FIRST STORMS ON LAND, ON SEA, IN THE AIR

T

he Vikings first attacked England in 787 or 789 with a raid on the south coast, though in view of the small number of ships involved, this may have been only an exploratory or commercial visit that went wrong.[[16]](#footnote-16) At all events, ‘while the pious King Bertric was reigning over the western parts of the English,’ says a chronicler, ‘and the innocent people, spread through their plains were enjoying themselves in tranquillity and yoking their oxen to the plough, suddenly there appeared on the coast off Portland ‘a fleet of Danes, but of three ships only, and this was their first coming.’ As reported by Æthelweard, who had access to records which have since vanished, ‘hearing of this, the king’s official (exactor), then staying at the town of Dorchester, leapt on his horse with a small retinue and galloped to the port, thinking they were merchants rather than enemies and commanding them imperiously to be taken to the royal residence,’ (as the law of Wessex required). But Vikings did not take orders kindly, and they killed the reeve and his party on the spot. The name of the official was Beaduheard.’ Thus did Beaduheard gain his place in history and the simple, innocent Saxons, living serenely in Arcadia, receive a warning of tribulations in store.

When raiders next came, they left no room for misunderstanding. In the year 793 the people of Northumbria were ‘most woefully terrified’ by signs and wonders: immense sheets of light rushing through the air, and whirlwinds, and fiery dragons flying across the firmament - most likely the Northern Lights. A great famine soon followed, and early in the new year the Vikings descended on Holy Island, Lindisfarne, sacked the monastery and killed many of the monks. Later the same year they devastated parts of Northumbria and plundered the monastery at Jarrow. But this time some of their leaders were killed. A storm shattered some of the ships, and those of the crews who escaped to shore were soon dispatched at the mouth of the river.

After these ferocious attacks they seem to have left England unmolested for a generation, and the English used much of this time to waste their own country’s strength in a series of internecine wars between the seven kingdoms of the so-called Heptarchy - most often instigated by the ambitious King Ecgbert of Wessex (802-836); and these, but for the tragic loss of life, might offer a wry parallel with modern sporting contests:

**815** Wessex v Cornwall (‘harried from east to west’);

**825** Devon v Cornwall (Britons slaughtered at *Gafulford* (Galford, Lewdown);

Wessex v Mercia (response to appeal by king of East Anglia) and the defeat of Mercia at the decisive battle of *Ellandun* (Wroughton, Wilts);

1. Wessex v Kent; winner takes Surrey, Sussex, Essex;

**827** ‘Ecgbert led an expedition against the Northumbrians as far as Dore, Derbyshire, where they met him ‘in a peaceful manner and tendered their alliance and humble submission; so both parties separated, being mutually very well pleased.’[[17]](#footnote-17)

**830** Ecgbert ‘led an army into the territory of the Northern Britons (Welsh) and, despite their resistance, brought them under his dominion’).

A Hotspur six centuries before his time, King Ecgbert: he slays him six Mercians before breakfast and cries, ‘Fie upon this quiet life! I want work.’ And yet to characterise him as ambitious and warlike and no more is to do him injustice. Ecgbert was gifted with that wider vision and generosity of spirit characteristic of the royal line of Wessex.

Mercia, Wessex’s neighbour and the kingdom encompassing the English Midlands, had been in a confused and unruly state during Ecgbert’s boyhood, and East Anglia and Wessex itself had suffered attacks and violence.

Wessex could now claim that their king, having conquered Mercia and all that was south of the Humber, was the ‘Ruler of Britain’ – and although the king of Mercia was restored and the Nothumbrians dragged their feet over the payment of dues, this was effectively so. By reason, probably, of a lack of financial support from Francia, it is true that Ecbert’s power was limited - ‘none of his charters gives him any higher title than ‘king of the West Saxons and Kentishmen’, and it is doubtful whether he exercised any real authority outside Wessex and its eastern dependencies during the last nine years of his reign,’5 yet the other kingdoms, even against their will, had been rescued from the weary round of civil war and given each one its place in a union for defence against a new and far greater danger. Moreover, they all retained their old names.

The years for recovery were all too few, and as soon as in 835 Ecgbert and his people were again at war, this time not to hold supremacy, but to stave off destruction and servitude at the hands of a much more terrible enemy than any they had known. Now began a time of testing of the mettle of the people of Wessex, and at long last alternate defeat, recovery and victory proved it hardy and sound.

The Vikings and Danes, though keeping their distance since the atrocities of the mid-790s, had raided and ravaged chosen sites in the East of Scotland, the Isle of Man, Iona, France and Friesland, and they could not be expected to stay away for ever. ‘These were no chance landfalls of semi-savage rovers, but a definite scheme to exploit the most available material. Where good resistance was offered, no further attempts were made: after the disaster at Jarrow there is no record of a descent on English ground for nearly forty years: it was not worth while.’[[18]](#footnote-18)

In that time, however, the kingdom of Denmark had been enjoying a renewal of power with a succession of strong monarchs; but perversely, the danger to England would come not from the Danish state but from the semi-professional jarls and their retinue unwilling to accept less than complete independence at home and so looking for profitable adventure oversea. Whether they came as raiders or to settle, once here in force, they could crunch up and devour the various kingdoms one at a time, and only a united ‘Saxland’, or failing that, a federation nominally under the rule of Wessex, could prevent that. And the wars initiated by Wessex can be judged more fairly in that light.

\*\*\*\*\*\*

The human cost of these wars and the Viking attacks that followed must have been immense, but somehow Wessex recovered and at the same time regained the military prowess of Saxon ancestors, so that the generations fifty and more years later found the strength to fight a more dangerous enemy and win.

The terror of the Viking raids struck deep into English hearts, so deep that they remained as folk memories for more than a thousand years. Yet more significantly, the dominant note of their poetry from that time is not terror but resolution, not flight or servitude but resistance. The Saxons’ conversion to the Christian faith and a settled life had not diminished their fighting spirit when the time for battle came. Something of the pagan idea of inescapable fate still remained, but their conception of the reward for a hero’s death far outsoared the earth-bound shades of the Viking Valhalla and gave them courage to face the final ordeal in confidence for whatever the outcome.[[19]](#footnote-19)

*Thus Waldere, a brave warrior, spoke;*

*between his hands he held his battle-friend,*

*a sword in his grip, and shouted these words:*

*“ ... . . He who is ever active and wise*

*in all men’s affairs can grant victory.*

*A man who puts his trust in the holy one,*

*in God for support, will be sustained in need*

*if he has made of his own life a sacrifice.*

and the old chieftain, Brythnoth, wounded to death at the battle of Maldon:[[20]](#footnote-20)

*He no longer stood firmly on his feet*

*but swayed, and raised his eyes to heaven:*

*‘O Guardian of the people, let me praise and thank You*

*for all the joys I have known in this world.*

*Now, gracious Lord, as never before*

*I need Your grace, that my soul may set out*

*on its journey to You, O Prince of Angels,*

*that my soul may depart into Your power in peace.*

*Then the heathens hewed him down*

*and the two men who stood supporting him.*

Pride in having resisted to the end, whether in victory or defeat, engraved the memories in the minds of the survivors, to live on in that oral tradition which outlasts marble, brass and all the onslaughts of tempest and time.

# ST DECUMAN

W

hether from these earliest assaults or later, the idea of Viking frightfulness took root and persisted in grotesque but poetic folk memories long after the incursions had ceased, and even after they themselves had been forgotten. The story of St Decuman of Watchet can be paralleled elsewhere, but that does not make the basis any less true, even if the ornamentations raise a smile that the monastic embroiderers of his reputation never intended.

Decuman was one of those many evangelists of the Celtic church who kept the Christian faith alive in the centuries of the heathen invasions. In the legend, he set sail from South Wales on a hurdle, with a cow that gave him milk in all his wanderings. He landed near the site of Watchet in the kingdom of the Dumnonii in a ‘horrid Desart full of Shrubs and Briars, the Woods thick and closed, stretched out a vast way both in Length and in Breadth, rising up in lofty Mountains, which are wonderfully separated by hollow Vallies’[[21]](#footnote-21) - or so wrote Thomas Cox in 1700. The people took to Decuman and built him a little cell near a spring, where he prayed and lived the life of a hermit, but a gentle and genial one. He might well have gone on in this way to a green old age, but one day, as he bent down to drink from the spring near his door, he saw in the water the reflection of a gigantic Dane with his sword raised, and the next moment Decuman's head rolled in the water.

Disconcerting for a lesser mortal, of course, but not for a saint, particularly a Welsh one. Unperturbed by the misadventure Decuman picked up his head, washed it carefully and as carefully replaced it on his shoulders. The Dane, suitably impressed by this more-than-Viking stoicism, gave up Odin and Thor and became a Christian. And whatever else strains belief in this story, the spring near the church still flows crystalline and free

# ‘HERE BE DRAGONS’

W

hile Decuman, in his inimitable way, mastered a Dane, other stories tell of heroes grappling with evil in a form embodying all the ferocity that the Saxon associated with the invaders, a shape which persisted in their legends and art for hundreds of years - the malevolent, destructive dragon.

As no real live fire-breathing, smoke-grinding dragon has ever been found, it may seem strange that a merely mythical beast should have so much blood and staying-power in him, but evidently he has always satisfied the imaginative need for something to be scared of and yet to defy; and his disreputable ancestry goes back to long before Caradog, to ancient Greece, when Cadmus slew one and sowed a field with its teeth, which sprang up as bloodthirsty warriors.

Yet one may wonder why the ancient world, if not China, should have made a monster of a comparatively harmless saurian when they knew well enough the really ferocious beasts prowling in Africa and seeking whom they might devour. Were there perhaps folk memories surviving from the early days of humankind into historical times to create these figures of terror? Were there still dimly remembered visions of the wild beasts that had threatened their far ancestors’ existence - the wolf, the bear, the snake, the sabre-toothed tiger, all combined into the dragon? The time encompasses thousands of years, perhaps tens of thousands, and it seems scarcely possible that even so basic and primeval an emotion lived on for so long.

Yet ravenous, devastating dragons have flourished in the lore of many lands - China, India, Iran; Greece, where Perseus rescued Andromeda from the sea-monster; Germany, where a dragon guarded a treasure; France, where a dragon still parades annually - or did till recently - through the streets of Tarascon. More than 120 places in England and Wales have names commemorating the beasts in one form or another, and our oldest English poem, Beowulf, tells of a dragon-monster whose lair was a dismal fen.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Hardly less surprising than the wide spread of these dragon myths, taking in practically the whole of Europe and Asia, is their general rough likeness, for with the time-span mentioned above one would look for the primitive monsters to have evolved into all manner of different forms. Perhaps the concept of memory persisting over many millennia is wrong, and indeed new evidence2 proposes that the origin, or at least one origin, of the Great Myth can be pinpointed to an age and a people in historical time, perhaps as little as 5,000 years ago, and that moreover, the modern idea of One World was burgeoning even then.

One theory suggests that a dragon-banner or banners were brought to Britain by cavalry from Asia who flew this emblem and are known to have served here, and in time the dragon became the emblem of the whole British nation. The idea cannot be proved by documents, but it is at least feasible

In the upward stumble of mankind one of the most decisive stages was the domestication of wild animals - of sheep and goats around 8000 BC, which gave some permanence and continuity to a nomadic existence, and of cattle a thousand years later, which made possible a life of settled agriculture. After several thousand years more of this sedentary life style, an even greater change was set in motion when tribes in the steppes of Central Asia tamed the wild horse, took him into their economy and made him the symbol and means of power for the rest of history until recent times. Indeed, in certain sections of society, the horse still rules.

One cannot give even an approximate date for this change evolving over many centuries. People were able, for the first time, to cover vast distances and with ease, and the option to roam nomadically became real on a scale never experienced before. “Around 1000 BC, mounted cultures suddenly proliferated, giving the riders vastly increased freedom of movement. People were suddenly able to cover vast distances and with ease.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

This theory reverses the accepted anthropological wisdom of the development of social life from a nomadic to a settled existence, but that ‘wisdom’ theory itself derives from an urban civilization, and the contrary development need not be seen as inferior except in the way of literacy. For developing hardihood and a love of freedom it might be seen as greatly superior) When the climate of Central Asia became drier about 900 BC, these tribes moved and expanded east and west, penetrating into China and the empires of the Medes and Persians.

One of these tribes, peoples or nations, the Saemanthians, was known to the Greeks as *Saura*-matae, from which it is not hard to guess which species of creature loomed largest in their cosmogony. They were in fact also known as *lazyges*: the lizard people, and in their vigorous art and decorations they kept close to the animal style, ‘making jewellery, belt buckles and the like in the form of real or magical animals. Their art work seems to have been influenced by the Far East and China,’ and they ‘tended to place the dragon at the pinnacle of their mystical paragon.’[[24]](#footnote-24)

‘In classical times, lizards, snakes and dragons were all considered to be very much the same, especially when the label implied a symbolic, even totemic connection between the beast and a particular people. In fact, the epithet *lazyges* may have come about through the Sarmatians’ useof a very particular battle standard consisting of a silken windsock sewn into the shape of a serpentine dragon, which hissed when it filled with air as its bearer charged into battle.’

This characteristic might have interested only anthropologists if the Sarmatians had stayed roughly where they were, but they had little choice. Round about 200 BC, moving west and south in search of a less extreme climate, they took over the land held by the Scythians to the north of the Black Sea, but in time, under pressure from a new threat, the horde of Huns, they crossed the Danube into the Roman Empire. In AD 175 they were defeated by Marcus Aurelius, but that wise emperor, knowing by report and now by experience the formidable power of the Sarmatian cavalry, took 5,500 of them into the Imperial service as a *corps d’ élite* and dispatched them to Britain under the command of Lucius Artorius Catus,[[25]](#footnote-25) with the right of settling on land of their own when their term of service was complete. And in Britain, presumably, with their tribal or national religion and ethos maintained by their elite status, eventually merging into the native population but keeping intact their military valour and its outward emblems and signs.[[26]](#footnote-26)

It cannot be proved, and though no documentary evidence has been found to confirm such lasting influence, it is at least feasible. The British Army served in India for less than 200 years, but half a century after their departure the Indian Army still maintains many of the traditions. The Romans were in Britain nearly twice as long.

The last of their legions was withdrawn for the defence of Rome in 410, but it does not mean that Britain was left entirely defenceless. From the late 3rd century a high Roman official held the title of Comes Littoræ Saxonicæ – Count of the Saxon Shore, with the responsibility of guarding against attacks by the barbarians from Germany who had begun to raid the towns along those coasts. By the 6th century the barbarians had broken through the defences and begun to settle in south-eastern England, and their next generation, perhaps disappointed of rapid progress, had turned back across the Straits and settled in the area now known as the Pas de Calais. Here, in a semi-circle radiating for some forty miles from Boulogne, every village has a recognisably Saxon name, one moreover which closely echoes (with a -ham or a -hen added) that of the place settled in Britain by the tribe or chieftain’s family from which they came: thus, Berling (Sussex) – Berlinghen; Havering (Essex) – Hauveringhen; Elling(Kent) –Ellinghen; and likewise for 60 more.[[27]](#footnote-27)

But to take up again with the defenders: the operative word is ‘legions’, and there was no call or reason for the auxiliaries, ‘time-expired men’ with a title to their land, to leave as well. Britain was their home, and probably, as cavalrymen with lively memories or traditions of their exploits to the north of Hadrian’s Wall, they would have regarded themselves as a militia or territorial force, ready to hoist their dragon flag at the approach of barbarians from across the sea.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Be that as it may, the chroniclers tell us that at the time of the Saxon raids and invasion the device on the banner of the old British kings was a dragon - and Wales has kept it. The leader was called the ‘pendragon’[[29]](#footnote-29) (whether ‘dragon's head’ or ‘chief dragon’ is not clear) and Uther Pendragon was in legend the father of Arthur.[[30]](#footnote-30) The Saxons, on the other hand, had a white horse for their emblem - and perhaps the names Hengist (stallion) and Horsa (mare) denote tribes rather than individuals.[[31]](#footnote-31) At a place since called Dragon's Hill, near Uffington in Berkshire, Cerdic, the founder of Wessex, is supposed to have defeated the army of the pendragon Naud,[[32]](#footnote-32) but the nearby White Horse was already ages old before the Saxons came, and looks like no amiable Dobbin but startlingly like some primitive nightmare.

In time, however, some of the Saxons themselves came to adopt the dragon as a tutelary emblem as they drove westward, and in the form of the wyvern he became as powerful a symbol and rallying-point for Wessex as ever he had been for the British.Trouble came and fear took over when the dragon looked as if he had deserted to the new enemy, the raiders from the sea.[[33]](#footnote-33)

The mythical beast suddenly took on reality with the longships that sailed up from the west, the ‘drakkar’ with their twenty, thirty or forty oarsmen forming, as it were, the creature's scaly coat. Very likely every tale of a dragon slain, a snake scotched or tamed represents a victory of the local farming militia over a party of raiders - and perhaps a visual echo of the origin can still be seen in the hobby horse which capers in the streets of Minehead and Padstow in early May, his coat daubed with circles which remind one of that line of Viking shields.

Tales of enemies in dragon form abound in Somerset and often appear in the work of the mediaeval wood-carvers which escaped the ravages of Victorian restorers. Near Crowcombe, it was said, a winged dragon devastated the farmers' crops, and in the parish church one may still see him, with his two heads, on a bench-end, being very effectively put out of action by the spears of two fifteenth century farmers, taking one head each.

Norton Fitzwarren, too, had its dragons, and the screen in the church has a splendidly gruesome serpent voraciously engulfing the lower half of a peasant while the top half seems to be praying for deliverance. Another Norton dragon, which materialised from the miasma of a battle on the Quantocks, was slain by a knight called Fouke Fitz Warin – though by the time his story was written down the beast had staked out a claim in chivalric romance, moved his quarters to ‘Yberia’ and carried off not a Somerset maiden but the Princess of Carthage. But his malevolent nature had not changed: ‘He liked human flesh better than any other; he breathed forth most horrible smoke and flame, and was a most ugly beast. He had a huge head, square teeth, powerful claws and a long tail.’[[34]](#footnote-34)

But Fouke slew him, and also destroyed a dragon which lay in wait for travellers from Kingston over the hills to Cothelstone and beyond – perhaps the half of the Shervage Worm. He waited high up above the steep road until the monster approached spouting and flame and then rolled a great boulder overthe cliff into its mouth.

The village of Aller, fifteen miles away in Sedgemoor, was also plagued by a dragon which came out of the marshes - a form of pestilence or marsh fever, or perhaps something more material? At length he was killed by a village hero, Sir John of Aller, and the lance with which he is said to have fought still stands on view in Low Ham church. The title ‘Sir’ was given to priests in the Middle Ages, which hints that the legend was a medieval embroidery of a heroic event, but that event was real enough, for Aller, as we shall see, witnessed the consummation of King Alfred’s victory over the Danes and his sponsoring of their chieftain for reception into the Christian faith. But that is anticipating somewhat.

Other places have visible memorials of the dreaded creatures: the flying beasts or fish on Stogumber church, and the carved flying animals around the string-course of Bicknoller church bear a strong family likeness to dragons.

Yet not all folk-memories of the Vikings are of savagery and rapine. ‘Lated travellers’ over Quantock, ‘spurring apace to gain the timely inn’ at Nether Stowey, might still be drawn aside to Dowsborough (or Danesborough?)[[35]](#footnote-35) and bend their ear to the ground to hear, with a touch of imagination, the boisterous laughter and singing of Danes carousing Valhalla inside the hill. Another story, very different and pathetic, told of a Danish boy, a harp player, orphaned in one of the battles but taken by a kindly Saxon woman into her home. Wordsworth living near Holford heard the legend and wove his reflections on it into a poem, *The Danish Boy*.

**MIKEY ADD PICTURE OF VILLAGE CHURCH**

# SERPENTS AND LAITHLY WORMS

A

n easy two-hour walk down the coast from the site of Decuman’s chapel at Watchet brings one to Ker Moor,[[36]](#footnote-36) an expanse of rough pasture west of Blue Anchor station, and here another valiant man encountered the enemy from the sea. The moor has been enclosed only in the past 200 years and, until the building of the railway embankment in 1874, the sea sometimes flooded it at high tide.[[37]](#footnote-37) In Saxon days it must have been a miry, noisome place, a slough of delectation for creatures of the slime; and sure enough, the whole neighbourhood was devastated by a huge, fierce serpent which came from the sea and varied his diet of lambs, calves and sucking-pigs with delicacies such as Dunster maidens.

King Arthur, it was said, owned the land (it should be King Alfred, who really did, but no matter for the story). The king, however, could spare no time from the affairs of state for serpent-eradication, and the beast rampaged to its heart's content and the people despaired; but unknown to them, help was on the way.

Caradog or Carantoc[[38]](#footnote-38) was the son of a prince of Ceredigion, but perhaps unusually, not a warrior or bard but a ‘saint’ in the Celtic meaning, an evangelist like Decuman. He came into possession of an altar ‘of wondrous colouring’ that had been sent down from heaven, and he set out to take it from South Wales across to Somerset. On the way it fell overboard, and it was a distressed and altarless Carantoc who landed on the Somerset coast and made his way to the court of King Arthur to ask whether he knew if an altar had been washed ashore anywhere. Arthur did, but shrewder now than at some other times, said, ‘If I am paid for it, I will tell you.’

This was hardly the pattern of chivalry that later story-tellers made so much of, but Carantoc merely said, ‘What do you want done?’

‘Bind fast the serpent in the moor,’ replied the king, ‘and I will tell you where to find your altar.’ So off went Carantoc and travelled till he reached the moor and the sea's edge, and there he stood and called the serpent. Presently the waters threshed and foamed, and the beast appeared, swimming toward him with a hopeful gleam in his eye.

But Carantoc stood his ground. As the beast came to him with ‘a great noise like a calf running to its mother’ (an oddly appealing noise for one so ferocious) Carantoc cast his stole around it and brought it, now as quiet as a mouse and amiable as an archdeacon, into the hall where the king and his knights were seated and fed it there. After that, he let it go, bidding it do no more harm to any man, woman or beast, and the serpent slid - or, if it was really a dragon, trotted - obediently away.

We may wonder how he kept himself alive if forbidden his usual diet, but thanks to Carantoc he had become as mild, courteous and mansuete a monster as ever crunched lettuce and sloughed off bad habits like a worn-out skin. No backsliding for him. He became, indeed, quite the little gentleman, and the people recognised the change, adopted him and, presumably, weaned him to a diet of bread, milk and fish on Fridays, so that he lived to a venerable old age and at length expired lamented by all.

Carantoc came well out of it, too. Arthur gave up the altar, which he had meant to make into a table for himself and his knights, and Carantoc set it up and built a church to house it - but whether the site can be identified with that of the Saxon burial ground or the present church has never been proved.

If Carantoc's vanquishing of the sea-serpent represents in parable form the victory of king Ecgbert and Christian Wessex over the heathen Danes, the tale of the Shervage Worm seems to stand for another victory, won by the countryfolk called into service for emergency: warriors for the working day.

The ‘Gurt Wurm o' Shervage 'Ood’, to give him his vernacular title, had stable mates elsewhere, such as the Dragon of Wantley in Berkshire and the Lambton Worm in Northumberland, but so much about him is unique and entertaining that he deserves to have his tale retold - with something of the native speech which Ruth Tongue so delightfully employed**.[[39]](#footnote-39)**

Shervage Wood still stands, a few acres of broadleaf a little to the east of Holford at the foot of the Quantock Hills, and although a busy main road runs across its northern edge it can be a delightful place, a summer cathedral of filtered sunlight and chequered shade; but legends cling to it, not only of the Gurt Wurm but also of black dogs and hell-hounds and a spectral coach drawn by headless horses, and on a winter night of howling storm and lashing rain it is a steel-nerved man or woman who can pass through without feeling something of that fear which Coleridge, living nearby, recalled when he wrote:

Like one that on a lonesome road

Doth walk with fear and dread,

And having once looked round, treads on

And no more turns his head

Because he knows, a frightful fiend

Doth close behind him tread.

In the days of the Vikings, however, the desolation caused by the Wurm was very real. The wood was then much larger then and he lived ‘up over’, as they say. He dined royally off six or seven sheep or ponies to a time, and in the fall he might come down near one of the villages and lie in wait from some maiden out blackberrying and carry her off to make a morsel ‘to his nummet’. When this had gone on for a year or two the folk began to notice that a shepherd here and there had gone out and never come back, so they put two and two together and decided they had better things to do than go near Shervage Wood and satisfy the hunger of the Gurt Wurm.

**MIKEY TO ADD PHOTO OF SHERVAGE WOOD**

This made good sense for most of them, but it spelt ruin for one old dear in Crowcombe, on the other side of the hills. She made "wurt" or whortleberry pies for the Triscombe revels and topped them with ‘wadges’ of rich Somerset cream so that folk came back for more and again, and in good years she not only spent most of the day in high summer wurting on the hills, she took all the wurts brought in to her. But with the Wurm up to his capers no one would venture up for her, and she did not know where to turn for help.

One day a stranger came to the village looking for work, a woodman from Stogumber, three miles away, and this gave the old woman her chance.

‘Tull 'ee what, me dear,’ she said, ‘why don't 'ee go up an' cut in Shervage 'Ood, like? 'Tis a famous place for wurts, an' maybe if I was to gi’e 'ee a quart o' zider an' a li'l bit o' bre' n-cheese to your nummet, you 'd pick a basinful for me’.

‘Done’, said the woodman, and off he strode. He put in a good morning's work and at the end of it, well satisfied, he sat down in the shade of Shervage Wood on a great log, took out his ‘nummet’, and all was contentment and peace.

Not for long, though. The log began to move.

The woodman regarded it with interest. ‘Ah-ha’, said he, ‘thee'st movee, dost? Wull, I'll larn 'ee to bide still’, and with one mighty stroke of his axe he shore right through the Gurt Wurm, and the two halves went their separate ways, one half coursing over the hills to Kingston, the other down to Bilbrook, twenty miles away, so far apart that they could never join up to make a whole Gurt Wurm again.

In the afternoon the woodman picked wurts and cut a few faggots, and toward evening he went back to the old woman.

‘Yere, mother,’ he said, thoughtful, ‘there were a gurt sarpent up in Shervage 'Ood fust off.’

‘Oh, me dear soul,’said she, ‘didn' 'ee know about he? I thought everybody knowed about he.’

As he explained later to his mates in Stogumber, ‘Wull, you couldn't look for nort else wi she. Her were a Crowcombe 'ooman.’

Legends such as these cannot always relate to particular feats of arms, though this could well be the fight at Combwich, and in any case, a legend does not contain a soberly factual account of a historical happening but preserves the selective memory of many minds, modified by affection or contempt. But because legends partake of the nature of the epic, they most fittingly introduce the story of the West Saxon resistance to the raiders and invaders, culminating after nearly a hundred years in the victories of King Alfred **–** the Great.

# THE TIME OF TESTING

T

he Vikings who ravaged along the western coasts of England and Wales were described as either ‘fair’ or ‘dark’, meaning Norwegian or Danish in origin, judged by the colour of the hair, though ‘dark’ also included a substantial element of red. Norwegian Vikings settled parts of Cumberland, the Wirrall, Dyfed and Glamorgan, but otherwise the Severn raiders were mainly of the ‘dark’ strain, though some, as likely as not, overflowed from settlements in south-east Ireland.

These Danes, or ‘heathen’, as the Saxons called them all whatever their origin, were too few for an army of occupation, but each year they fixed on a neighbourhood, squatted and devoured all they could lay hands on before moving elsewhere; and one after another the towns and petty kingdoms made a precarious peace. At last, however, the Danes’ marauding brought them into conflict with the West Saxons, whose kingdom extended from the Tamar to the Thames and eastward into Kent; and with that conflict the story of the Vikings in the West of England begins.

Anyone following the Viking trail in Wessex today, however, should know that there are three, not one, for they launched small-scale piratical raids from the west for years before they mounted a powerful concerted onslaught from the east; and for a century after King Alfred had driven them back by land and rebuilt his country, they came repeatedly by sea when Alfred's successors had dropped their guard - an historical lesson which seemingly every generation has to learn anew.

It was in Wessex that the English first resisted decisively. The men of other kingdoms had fought and won occasional victories but capitulated in the end. Wessex, like these, had tales to tell, legends and memories born mostly of the days when the longships ranged along the coasts or put into the shallow creeks to disgorge hordes of swordsmen who ravaged the land, raped the women, bore off the rich to ransom and enslaved or killed the poor without mercy. Yet time and again the threatened men of Wessex rallied and threw back the marauders, so that in these regions the Vikings, far from settling as in eastern England, could win only a precarious foothold.

None of the kingdoms had a standing army other than the king’s personal bodyguard, the *huscarles*, but in time of need or a sudden emergency the king or his local commanders, the ‘ealdormen’, could bring the *fyrd* into action, a militia or levy of farmer-soldiers and servants of the *thegns*, the local aristocrats or gentry. They did this with surprising speed, and these part-time ‘territorials’ fought valiantly and as often as not defeated and drove back the battle-hardened Vikings.

Knowledge of these distant events has more gaps than certainties, and here and there the Vikings may have established trading-posts at the edge of their familiar world, rather like the British a thousand years later in India or Hudson's Bay. These ‘tame’ Vikings may have at last merged with the local population, and the West Somerset port of Watchet is, at least by repute, a case in point. ‘The Norse trader,’ as Kingsley observed, ‘was none of the cringing and effeminate chapmen who figure in the stories of the middle ages. A free Norse or Dane, himself often of noble blood, he fought as willingly as he bought.’ In his *Early Wars of Wessex* Albany Major suggested that the seaport of Watchet during the period of the English conquest may have been such a trading settlement at the mouth of the valley which was the only practicable route from the Severn Estuary into Dyvaint, the British territory which included those parts of Devon and Somerset west of the River Parrett. These occupants of Watchet, he said, could have given the name Williton (the ‘tun’ of the natives) to the village a mile inland which lay on the route (actually it is a short distance off). ‘The sharp racial definition implied by the name renders it almost certain that here at Williton was the guarded point at which the British traders from Dyvaint met the outland seafaring merchants from the haven which they occupied.’

Some of this may be true,[[40]](#footnote-40) and the tradition of Watchet as a Danish settlement still lingers there,[[41]](#footnote-41) reinforced by the surname ‘Dane’, (though this may be a mere coincidence), and the name ‘Swain Street’, (though Swayn, Earl or Jarl of part of Wessex (including Somerset) in 1045 was the brother of Harold Godwinsson, and therefore a Saxon). One may add the belief that the unusually high proportion of native Watchet red-haired folk showed their Danish red hair. A more definite link is the Court Leet, where the ‘free inhabitants met several times a year to settle and to deal with matters of local importance as a borough moot or port-moot.’1A ‘Leet’ is a doublet of ‘lathe’, a division of Jutish Kent, but it has also been compared with Danish *lægd*, or division of the count for military conscription, and the Icelandic *leð*, a small local assembly.[[42]](#footnote-42)

But whatever the origin of its people, Watchet suffered as severely as anywhere when the later Vikings went on the rampage. As W.G.Collingwood aptly phrased it, ‘Vikings turned bourgeois were fair game’.[[43]](#footnote-43)

E

ngland's troubles began in even more deadly earnest than the wars of King Ecgbert when *(1)* in 835 the Vikings overran and devastated the Isle of Sheppey, in West Kent, the eastern outpost of the “new” Wessex.

In the followingyear *(2)* thirty-five of their ships raided a place named in the Chronicle as ‘Carrum’ (now Carhampton)[[44]](#footnote-44) in West Somerset, and though King Ecgbert hurried down with an army and ‘made a great slaughter’, the Danes remained masters of the field. (A frequent refrain, this suggests that the men of Wessex, having done what was expected of them, naturally ambled off home to get on with the farm work; and they did not fear that the enemy would settle. But more probably they were tricked into breaking ranks by the invaders’ stratagem of a feigned retreat followed by a counter-attack which gave them possession of the field).

In every one of the next four years Wessex had to repel the raiders, and although too often the Chronicle records: ‘but the Danes had possession of the place of slaughter’, I feel it a duty to these old warriors not to dismiss with a mere mention those costly battles in which, against Viking skill and ferocity, they held fast.

Only two years later, then, in838, ‘a great pirate host’ (3) came down to Cornwall. The Cornish joined them to take up arms against Wessex, but Ecgbert brought his army down and defeated the Dano-Cornish alliance at Hengiston Hill, near Callington.3 Dane and Cornish, Norsemen and Celts, were uneasy allies, only brought together, it seems, by Cornwall's urgent need and the Viking eye for a quick profit. There is no evidence that after their defeat the Norsemen stayed on in Cornwall or at any time renewed the alliance.[[45]](#footnote-45)

In839, after a reign of thirty-seven years, King Ecgbert died, and the Vikings, learning of the death of their energetic enemy, might well have licked their lips in expectation of a crumbling defence; but Ecgbert’s work went on unabated. His son Æthelwulf, taking up the challenge, proved a worthy successor and, says Brøndsted, ‘for some years was able to instil into the Vikings a healthy respect for the West Saxon fighting man.’

In 840 ‘ealdorman Wulfheard fought (4) at Southampton against thirty-three ships’ companies and made great slaughter there and won the victory. And in the same year ealdorman Aethelhelm fought *(5)* against a Danish host at Portland with the men of Dorset, and after a long, hard battle drove back the host, but again the Danes ‘kept possession of the place of slaughter and slew the eolderman.’

In 841 marauders *(6)* ‘slew many of the people of Romney Marsh’, and 842 saw *(7)* ‘a great slaughter inLondon and in Rochester.’ But the Danish leaders seem then to have taken thought and decided to attack Wessex again where they thought defence was weak, in the Severn estuary; and in 843 they rowed round Cornwall and again *(8)* fell on Carhampton with thirty-five ships’ companies (more than 1000 men). Aethelwulf hurried down like his father and gave battle. The Danes, as so often, ‘held the field of slaughter’, but they were crippled and sailed away and gave Wessex no more trouble for five years.

Then, in 848, they struck again. ‘Ealdorman Eanwulf with the men of Somerset, and Bishop Ealhstand of Sherborne and Ealdorman Osric with the men of Dorset, fought the Danish army at the mouth of the Parrett *(9)* and after making a great slaughter gained the victory.’ Where they fought is not known for sure, but the identity of the defenders --­ Ealdorman Earnulf with the men of Somerset, and Bishop Ealhstand and Eldoman Osric with the men of Dorset -- argues that the battle was fought on the east bank, probably in Pawlett Ham. The legend of a battle with the Danes in War Meadow near Stogursey Castle was long current in that village, but it seems unlikely to have been on this occasion. Mm

These nine or more battles in twelve years were costly to both sides, but while they spoke of the Vikings’ power to organise and venture together no matter how often foiled, they showed equally the readiness and ability of the Saxon defenders to muster in haste and hold the attackers to a beachhead and prevent any substantial advance inland. All these battles were fought near the shore or at least near navigable water and kept the enemy at bay. Besides, Britain was not the Vikings’ only goldfield: France, Scotland, the Orkneys and Ireland all drew them, and after their attack and repulse at Jarrow in 795 they had kept their distance for well over thirty years. In the annual raids beginning in 835 at Carhampton they had shown their strength but spaced their attacks around the coast of Wessex and Kent, as if they were reconnoitering for the purpose of an invasion and repeated the Carrum raid in 846. But a time must come when they would mount not a raid but a destructive incursion, and then an invasion with full force. They tried in the next decade, marched well inland, and were twice, if not more, routed ‘with great slaughter’, firstly by ealdorman Ceorl and the men of Devon in 850 at Wigborough,5 near South Petherton (or it may have been Wembury in South Devon), and secondly, at Ockley, Surrey. Three hundred and fifty ships **–** a formidable host of at least seven thousand fighting men – had come to the mouth of the Thames – the Isle of Thanet - and stormed Canterbury and London and put to flight the king of Mercia and his levies. Then they had pushced south over the Thames into Surrey, where ‘King Athelwulf and his son Athelbald, with the West Saxon levies, fought against them at *Acleah*, and there made the greatest slaughter of a heathen host that we have heard tell of … and there won the victory.’ And in 851 Athelstan and ealdorman Elchere fought a sea battle and won Wessex’s first naval victory: ‘they destroyed a great host off Sandwich, captured nine ships and drove off the rest.’

For a time, the Vikings were foiled, but they had this new idea: to attack Wessex from both front and rear, break her army and strip her of her wealth. It might take them twenty years to try it out, but they would not forget. And when the time came, they would be fighting not only for gold, but for land to settle on and make their own.

It needed time for Wessex to feel at all secure, and no doubt it took more battles than those recorded. Wessex began to breathe more easily, and apart from 853, when ‘the Kentishmen with the men of Surrey fought in Thanet against a heathen host (and many were slain or drowned on either side)’, the Chronicle recorded no violence for the rest of the decade. Indeed, four of the years are blank pages. In 855 the Vikings took winter quarters in Thanet for the first time instead of going home to Scandinavia – an unmistakable sign that they meant to stay and take over the land. But all seemed quiet enough for king Æthelwulf to travel abroad and spend a year in Rome. As he journeyed home, king Charles of the Franks gave him his daughter Judith in marriage as queen, and after that he came to his people and they were glad to see him’ – if perhaps a touch sceptical here and there.

All too soon, in 858, Æthelwulf died, and his two eldest sons succeeded him, Æthelbald to Wessex and his younger brother Æthelberht to Kent, Essex, Surrey and Sussex. Then in 860 Æthelbald died also, and Æthelberht took all Wessex, ‘as was proper‘.

And sure enough the Danes, stirring from their hibernation, sensed prosperity and perhaps assumed that a young king would not have the experience to withstand them. The country suffered one humiliation, when ‘a great heathen host landed and assaulted Winchester‘, the capital of Wessex, ‘and laid it waste; (but) as they were returning to their ships with great booty, they were manfully opposed by Osric, ealdorman of Hampshire, and his men and by Aethelwulf, the ealdorman, with the men of Berkshire’. They joined battle, ‘and the heathen were cut down on all sides; and when they could no longer resist, like women they began to flee, and the Christians remained masters of the field of carnage’.

Apart from that, the Vikings left Wessex alone for a while.

Where these resurgent Vikings came from is not known. Thanet, perhaps, or Sheppey? But the ‘great army‘ suggests another possible base, where many hundreds of Danes were finding their spoils too few and addressing Woden and Thor with a rumble of discontent

Since the defeats at Wigborough and Ockley some Vikings had in fact found easier and richer pickings for several years in West Francia (Northern France), where one of the sons of the Emperor, in conflict with his father, had welcomed their fleet. The incomers soon realised that the great rivers were easily navigable and moreover that they opened the way to prosperous towns and monasteries. Many others joined them, and by the 860s all the rivers were their silver swan’s way to easy riches. But this could not last, for in 862 the West Frankish king fortified his towns and defended his rivers, and raiding inland became too costly, even impossible.

After the battle of Winchester Wessex enjoyed five years of precarious peace, but in 865 king Æthelberht died also. His brother Æthelred succeeded him, and the ‘heathen host’, with a firm base in Thanet, stirred again. ‘They made peace with the Kentishmen, and the Kentishmen promised them money in return for the peace’ – Danegeld if not by name ‘and under cover of the promise of peace the host went secretly inland by night and devastated all the eastern part of Kent’. This seems at first sight the kind of double-dealing and oath-breaking which sometimes marked their dealings with the Saxons, but the Kentishmen (west of the Medway) had no brief for the Men of Kent beyond the river and only negotiated for themselves. In their desperation they cannot have hesitated long before throwing East Kent to the wolves.[[46]](#footnote-46)

The chroniclers made much of the heathens’ faithlessness, their willingness to break the most solemn of oaths on the earliest occasion, but the Vikings were not a cohesive body, the travelled and fought with a particular leader whom they trusted, and his word involved his group alone. Even the notorious breaking of a truce with Alfred after their raid into Devon in 876 was committed by a section of the divided Danish army, not by their overall commander.

In 865, as Æthelred became king, the threat to Wessex and all England suddenly took on mortal danger.

In 866 a ‘great host’, the river-pirates from Northern France and perhaps others from Denmark ‘arrived in Britain and wintered in the kingdom of the East Angles. There they were provided with horses, and they made peace with them’ **–** peace at a price, and for King Edmund of East Anglia it was a humiliation demanding retribution.

# ‘CAPTAINS OF THE HOST’

The landing of the ‘Great Heathen Host’ (*myckele hæÞene hære*) created a new dimension in the struggle for Wessex, and the campaigns over the next few years give evidence of the forethought, vision and organising ability of a quite exceptional mind or minds on the Danish side. In short, before tackling Wessex, the Danish leader would, at whatever cost, remove any threat by the kingdoms on his flank: East Anglia, Mercia and Northumbria. Then he would mount two or more attacks, one from Sheppey up into the Thames, the other overland from Kent. If these succeeded, a fleet could then make synchronised attacks on the Wessex heartland, either on the south coast in Dorset or on the west in North Devon or Somerset, or in both. (The problem of synchronising without a timekeeper or communication is obvious, and the Danes did not manage it in their first campaign, but with the second campaign, bypassing the eastern land defences and sending their fleet up the Severn Sea, they brought Wessex near to ruin).

Whatever its conduct in or out of battle, this Great Army had high status, for it was commanded and led by jarls and battle-hardened warriors, some of whom claimed descent from the semi-legendary Ragnar Lodbrog.

Ragnar Lodbrog had been renowned as the foremost Viking of his age, a sea-pirate and possibly Danish king, though this is where legend and fact are hard to unravel, for his “kingdom”, the seat of his power, was probably the sea area between Denmark and Norway. He was one of those men whose qualities, even before legend magnified them, seemed to his contemporaries heroic beyond the common measure and almost superhuman, qualities which chimed with their warrior-like experience and traditions and drew them to follow him in their thousands. The Ragnarssons were kings and princes, but they were sea-kings with no landed property or subjects, only the men they could hold together by success; but the inherited genius of command and leadership enabled them to found land-dynasties in Ireland and Northumbria which lasted long beyond their founders’ time.

The name Lodbrog (Leather or Rough Skin Breeches) came from the protective dress he was said to have worn when rescuing a maiden from a dragon, Orm. In a Norse skaldic threnody, supposedly written by himself when dying, he is celebrated for having fought – and of course feasted the ravens - in Gothland, the Sound (near Elsinore), Livonia, Uppsala, Scarpey in Norway, Bornholm, the Low Countries, Kent, Northumberland, Scotland, the Orkneys, Leinster, enough battles for half a dozen fame-hungry heroes, but other Vikings ventured as far and wrought quite as much misery and destruction. In his last exploit he landed in Northumberland with three ships, was taken prisoner and brought before King Ælla, who had him thrown into a pit of venomous snakes. He died laughing. Later, his sons took their revenge and Northumberland paid dearly.

With any sense of historical reality one can only lament all this slaughter, whether for slaughter’s sake or incidental, but how can one not stand in amazement at the continual outpouring of physical energy and the sheer endurance of these voyagers? Far from exhausting his strength on distant battlefields, Ragnar Ladbrog kept enough in reserve at home to engender no fewer than fourteen sons and at least three daughers and instil into them a strong measure of his own ferocity, daring and ambition. All the men took the Viking trail, and they all stood out clearly enough in the collective memory of the Norse scalds four centuries later for their names to be preserved: Ivar (or Hinguar) the ‘boneless’ (*inn benlausi*), Halfdan ‘of the Wide Embrace’, Sigurd (or Siyard) Snake-in-the-Eye, Hubba or Ubba/Ubbi,[[47]](#footnote-47) Bjørn Járnsiða (Ironside), Rothbart or Rathbart, Dunyat, Aynar, Regnald, Hvitserk (Whiteshirt), Erik Windhat and Fridlef – and on the ground of their energy alone they deserved it.[[48]](#footnote-48)

Three of them, probably more, were leaders in these wars against Wessex, and the tales of their other exploits give an idea of the professional fighters whom the farmers of the Wesssex *fyrd* had to face.

The eldest and most formidable of these Ragnarssons was Ivar (or Hinguar), known enigmatically as Ivar the Boneless **–** a name so extraordinary and, for a battle-hardened Viking, nonsensical that several interpretations have been put forward, none of them conclusive. He may have been brittle-boned, but was carried into battle on a shield, so that his weakness became a source of strength, as from that elevation he could survey the whole battlefield, shout commands and encouragement and spy out any weakness in the shield line of the enemy. Or perhaps his ‘leglessness’ was compensated by abnormal strength in the arms and upper body, for he is said to have fought with a bow which no other man could draw as fully as he. Or again, because the Northmen had a strongly ironic sense of humour as shown in their sagas, it may have been such a contradictory nickname, but the reason remains obscure. If indeed he was born with this inhibiting physical weakness, one might expect him to have been cast out or destroyed at birth, but he was probably spared as a Danish prince.1

Be that as it may, he was regarded, like his father before him, as the leading Viking of his time, strong beyond other men, far-seeing and resourceful, an inspiring and clear-headed commander in battle, but at close quarters a berserker, and entirely ruthless and, even by Viking standards, cruel.

Not surprisingly, legends sprang up around Ivar, one, a version of the ancient stratagem employed by Queen Dido to obtain land in Carthage by marking the boundaries by strips of oxhide. But his preparations for the assault on Wessex were proof of plans carried out with determination, but also with willingness to wait long and then strike hard.

The fifth son, Bjørn Járnsída, won the title ‘Ironside’ for having defended the wounded Ragnar in battle while remaining unscathed himself. In the 850s, (as narrated earlier), Vikings settled semi-permanently on the Scheldt, the Seine, the Loire and the Garonne, and Bjørn was a prominent leader. In the year 859, with another renowned Dane, Hasting or Hasteinn, he set off from the Seine on an expedition to the Mediterranean. They attacked Coruna in Galicia but were beaten off and sailed on through the Straits of Gibraltar to Nekur on the coast of Morocco. There they fought fiercely with the Moors but won in the end and carried off many of the Blue-men, as they called the Moors, as prisoners, to be sold as slaves in Ireland. How they kept them under lock and key for the next two years is not revealed.

This was only the beginning. They next ravaged the Balearic Islands and sailed on to Roussillon, in France near the Spanish border, and advanced inland to Arles. Taking to their ships again they spent the winter in the Camargue (then an island), and from there they plundered the old Roman cities of Provence and sailed up the Rhone as far as Valence. They then headed for Italy and as a fitting conclusion to the feast, captured the cities of Pisa and Luna – the latter under the impression that they had reached Rome itself. From Luna they sailed back through the Straits of Gibraltar to Brittany in 862, resting upon their oars, so to speak, but ready for more trouble when the chance offered.[[49]](#footnote-49)

As for Rathbart, he is said to have travelled east and established himself as ‘king’ of one of the small Viking city states which composed the land later known as Russia. Probably he was not with the brothers in England.

Hubba, according to the chronicler Symeon of Durham, was *Dux Frisorum,* chieftain of the Frisians, more particularly of the Vikings who had settled in Friesland much earlier and from there had already sent emigrants to settle in those parts that became East Anglia, Linconshire and Leicestershire.[[50]](#footnote-50)

Halfdan was in effect his brother Ivar’s lieutanant in the enterprise, and in 871-2 was ‘king’ of London and issued currency with his name. Three years later he went up to York, the largest town in the North, where there was already a strong Danish element, and made himself ‘king’ of the city and named it Jorvik. He founded a dynasty, but his cruelty, resisted by the more settled Vikings, cost him his throne and he succumbed to a fresh attack and died in 877.

Hvitserk, it is said, may have been Halfdan in another name-guise, since the two are never mentioned together in the sagas. In any case, a Hvitserk survived and later went pillaging in the Gardariki, the ‘kingdom of cities’ adjoining the Norse settlements to the east of Lake Ladoga. He at length encountered such a large force that he could not win or even fight on to the end, and when they asked how he wished to die, he chose, typically, to be burnt alive.

# THE HEROIC ROYAL LINE OF WESSEX

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s for the leaders of Wessex, in an age of warrior-kings the brief reigns of three kings might have caused a fatal weakness: Æthelbald 858; Æthelberht 860; Æthelred 866-871; but King Ecgbert and his queen had produced a line of young princes with the courage and ability of their own, stretching with hardly a failure for 150 years. By all but two or three was the royal forename of Æthel- : Noble, well deserved.

1 Ecgbert 802 – 839, followed by his only known legitimate son

2 Æthelwulf 839 – 858, followed by *his* son (Æthelstanmdidmnotmreign)

3 Æthelbald 858 – 860 followed by his brother (previously sub-king of Kent)

4 Æthelberht 860 – 865, followed by his brother,

5 Æthelred I 865 – 871, followed by his youngest brother,

6 Alfred 871 – 899, followed by his son,

7 Edward I 899 – 924, followed by his son,

8 Athelstan 924 – 939, (did not marry), followed by his half brother,

9 Edmund I 939 – 946,(murdered), followed by his brother,

10 Eadred 946 – 955, followed by Edmund’s son,

11 Edwy 955 – 959, (no children), followed by his brother

12 Edgar the Peaceable 959 – 975, followed by his son

13 Edward II the Martyr 975 – 978 (murdered), followed by his half-brother

14 Ethelred II (Redeless alias Unready), followed by his son

1. Edmund II Ironside

## KING ÆTHELRED – “NOBLE COUNSEL”

He reigned for five years in trying circumstances, yet with energy, honour, and great credit.’ ‘Amid many difficulties he vigorously and honourably ruled the kingdom in good repute.’

Those are the verdicts of men of his own generation and a historian three centuries later.[[51]](#footnote-51) They might have added his resilience under the shock of defeat, and his unshakeable confidence that Right, aided by an invisible Power, would triumph over the barbarity of the men of Woden and Thor.

# THE ‘GREAT HEATHEN HOST : FIRST CAMPAIGN P.24)

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he Great Heathen Army, when last seen, had landed in East Anglia and taken over the local horses for their own use. This requisitioning, whether by purchase or more probably by threat, was a favourite tactic of the Danes, for at a stroke it made them into a whole army of mounted infantry, with all the military advantages of mobility, outpacing the slower Saxon troops, and coming into battle with strength less impaired.

How great in numbers was this “great host”? Very probably in the low thousands, but it is clear from the Chronicle that the Danes (as we may now call them) and their army outclassed the defenders in battle control and military planning. But who would fight the better, man to man, Dane hardened to piracy and warfare, or Saxon living a life of hard toil and desirous of peace? To Danes such as the over-confident Hubbe there can have been only one answer; but older men, remembering the outcome of battles ten or more years earlier, would have been more cautious.

Still, they had come to stay. Up to now they had been satisfied with plunder or ransom money. Now, with Northumbria and Mercia subdued, they were heading for conquest and settlement, and King Æthelred and his young brother Alfred and the men of Wessex could only wait, prepare and stiffen their courage for the battles soon to come.

The Danes, to do them justice, did not expect an easy conquest, but Wessex would be worth the toil and blood. At this crucial time, how would they have seen her?

Wessex was their chief enemy. She was the richest of the kingdoms and and therefore the most attractive to a plunderer or now a land-hungry Norseman, but she was also the best able to defend herself. Furious frontal attacks might sometimes carry the day, but always at heavy cost as Wessex men, with growing determination and confidence, fought to defend their homes. Why not, then, make good the earlier plan and attack Wessex by surprise and from the rear - from the west by way of the Severn Sea? Why not, better still, cut her in two?

Wessex at this time stretched from the Tamar to Kent, with the addition of Berkshire north of the Thames, but the heartland was South and East Somerset and North Dorset, with Somerton and the churches and abbeys of Wells, Glastonbury, Muchelney and Sherborne. This was protected on the east by the forest of Selwood, on the south by the eastern extension of the Blackdown Hills, on the west by the Quantock and Brendon Hills and on the north by the marshlands of the Rivers Parrett, Axe and Brue, for much of the year virtually an inland sea. The Parret formed Somerset’s western boundary, for the north of Devon, successor to the kingdom of the Dumnonii, extended much further east than now, probably as far as Will’s Neck, the highest point of the Quantocks, and even to the Parret's left bank. (The defeat of raiders near Cannington in 878, and at Watchet in 987, by the ealdorman of Devon, not Somerset, seems to bear this out.) Probably the boundary changed when King Alfred reformed the defence system, so that the ealdorman of Devon could be relieved of the burden of two coastlines and the Somerset fyrd could respond more quickly Besides, much of the coast and hinterland between Oare and the Parrett was the personal property of the king of Wessex and must be protected at all costs! (But the presence and death of Goda, the thane of Devon, not Somerset, at a battle with the Danes in 987 indicates a date for the land transfer even later; and ‘Florence’ of Worcester specifies that in 997 the Danes ‘ravaged Watchet ***in Devon’***). (Italics added).

The territorial composition of ‘Greater Wessex’ differed radically from that of the other kingdoms in its suzerainty, principally Northumbria and Mercia. These, in mid-ninth century, exhausted by conflict and nominally subject to Wessex, were ready to fall to invaders. Their kings ‘had only the shadow of empire in Britain. Their supremacy depended on prestige which a single stricken field could make or mar, (and) the victors of the hour had no garrisoned forts and no standing army in the vassal States.’ No doubt people, then as now, felt a strong devotion to the small neighbourhood which had given them birth, but none of these districts enjoyed rights of self-government, and counties and shires were not instituted till considerably later, mainly for defensive purposes and probably by King Alfred or his son Athelstan. Patriotism in a national sense was quite lacking. Wessex, on the other hand, after its recent acquisitions, was made up of several tribal areas, each of distinct character, Somerset, Dorset, Wiltshire, Hampshire, Surrey, Sussex, which already formed the basis of a shire system and could be administered and defended by men of trust, ealdormen chosen by the king and directly responsible to him.

**MIKEY TO ADD PHOTO OF GLASTOENBURY TOR**

But if the marshes protected the heartland from a hostile army, the rivers provided an easy way through for a fleet, and the Danes were now coming not as hit-and-run raiders but as a sizeable force intent on moving inland and marauding at leisure.

Clearly there would be no shifting the ‘heathen’ out of England, but mercifully for Wessex they held off for the next two years and instead attacked Northumbria by way of the Humber, stormed the city of York and ‘made immense slaughter of the Northumbrians there’.

The Ragnarsson brothers took a frightful revenge for the death of their father. They captured King Ælla and devised for him a torment so horrible that the suffering of Ragnar in the snake-pit seemed almost a merciful release.

The next year, 868, they rode from East Anglia into Mercia and took winter-quarters in Nottingham. The king of Mercia straightway appealed for help to Æthelred and his brother Alfred – the Chroniclers make a special point of this, for Alfred, by a series of ‘fraternal accidents’ now held second place in the kingdom and had just married a lady of Mercian descent ‘from the royal race of the kings of the Mercians’. At the age of nineteen (probably), this was his first major campaign, and he already showed the boldness and eagerness for decisive action which marked the rest of his career. ‘The two brothers, not slow to fulfil their promise, assembled from every part of their dominions an immense army, and came into Mercia and went as far as Nottingham, being unanimous in desiring a battle.’[[52]](#footnote-52) They prepared for a siege, but the Pagans, rendered strong by the defences of the citadel, declined the engagement; and as the Christians could not make a breach in the wall, a peace was concluded between the Mercians and the Pagans.’

The chronicler Henry of Huntingdon, writing two centuries later, commented, ‘Inguar (Ivar) then, seeing that the whole force of England was there gathered, and that his host was the weaker, and was there shut in, betook himself to smooth words - *cunning fox that he was* - and won peace and troth from the English. Then he went back to York, and abode there one year with all cruelty. And so the royal brothers, disappointed of their battle, returned home with their troops – but any observant Dane could have sized up his future opponents.

From York, in 870, the Danes rode back into East Anglia and entrenched themselves in winter-quarters in Thetford. Edmund, roused to action, fought them. He lost, and they killed him, but to bury an enemy with honour was not the Viking way. Edmund was said to have been taken prisoner and, having refused to become a vassal to a heathen, he was tortured to death in the church by Ivar and Hubbe, like St Sebastian in legend, by multiple arrow-wounds, after which they hacked off his head and threw it into a ditch. Almost immediately miracles of healing were reported, but the people of East Anglia then paid dearly for their king’s defiance. The Danes overran the entire kingdom and ‘destroyed all the monasteries to which they came.’ Not the least of these was *Medeshamstede* (later re-named Peterborough), which 'they burned and demolished, and slew the abbot and monks and all that they found there, reducing to nothing what had once been a very rich foundation.[[53]](#footnote-53)

At this point, with his work of conquest barely half done, Ivar disappears from English history. It seems that he saw a more immediate prospect of wealth and power than in stubborn Wessex, for soon afterwards ‘Olaf and Ivar, two kings of the Northmen, besieged Dumbarton, and after four months captured and ransacked it. In the new year the two kings then moved over to Dublin, bringing a very great spoil of captives, English, British and Pictish’; and after all his sweat and strain, in 872, Ivar, ‘King of the Northmen of all Ireland and Britain’, died.

One can only ponder on the effect of his departure on the fortunes of Wessex. Subsequent events showed that his fighting men had lost none of their fire and ferocity, and Halfdan, assuming command, was a capable general; but the overall vision was no longer there. They might beat the men of Wessex but they could not break them; and at the end of it all they had to be content with partial gains rather than mastery.

# THE ‘GREAT HEATHEN HOST’ : SECOND CAMPAIGN

E

ven in the heart of winter the Vikings could not sit quiet if they glimpsed the chance of a quick victory over an unsuspecting foe. In the last week of December 870 in the dark days after the solstice they struck into Wessex in strength for the first time with an army under two ‘kings’[[54]](#footnote-54), Halfdan and Bagsecg, capturing the royal estate of Reading, which they fortified and made their headquarters. Three days later two of their jarls and a great part of the force rode out for plunder, while the others built a rampart between the Thames and the Kennet; but the ealdorman of Berkshire, Æthelwulf, got an army together with amazing speed and fought down the plunderers at Englefield, four miles west of the town.

Four days after this, Alfred brought his own troops to his brother Æthelred’s aid and together they attacked. ‘When they had reached the gate of the stronghold by hacking and cutting down all the Vikings they had found outside, the Vikings fought no less keenly. Like wolves, they burst out of all the gates and joined battle with all their might. Both sides fought there for a long time, and fought fiercely, but alas! The Christians eventually turned their backs, and the Vikings won the victory and were masters of the battlefield; and the ealdorman Æthelwulf fell there, among many others.’[[55]](#footnote-55)

Æthelred withdrew his troops north-west, probably to Streatley and then up on to the Ridgeway, but these farmer-soldiers, ‘aroused by the grief and shame of it’, were to show some of that doggedness in defeat which has been the mark of the British infantry ever since. The Danes, four days after the battle - time to bury their dead, regroup, confer and march the ten or twelve miles - reached the place on the hills known as Ashdown to which Alfred was decoying them: an open piece of slightly hollow ground which would appeal to the Danes, giving them room to swing their axes.[[56]](#footnote-56)

The Saxon victory that followed proved the turning-point of the campaign, and although it was not wholly decisive, the chroniclers, following Asser, recorded it in graphic detail, perhaps “remembered with advantages”, and paid tribute to the first appearance and heroism of King Alfred, the saviour of Wessex. Only the poems celebrating the vital victory of Æthelstan at Brunanburh and the heroism in the defeat at Maldon can compare.

When the Danes arrived, they found that the English they had been following were only a small decoy and the main body had appeared out of nowhere and closed in behind them; but the Danes were still in a strong position, holding the higher ground, to meet the unforeseen movement of the English. ‘They split up their force into shield-walls of equal size (for they then had two kings and a large number of jarls), assigning the core of the army to the two kings and the rest to all the jarls. When the Christians saw this, they too split up the army into two divisions and as quickly put them in battle array.’[[57]](#footnote-57)

‘Alfred brought up his men sooner and more promptly to the field.’ In fact, he had little choice, for Æthelred was in his tent at prayer, hearing mass and declaring ‘he would not forsake divine service for that of men’ until the first was over.

‘So the Christians resolved that king Æthelred with his own troops should engage the two pagan kings; but his brother Alfred ... was, with his troops, to try the fortune of war against all the pagan jarls.’

Without his brother's help he must either retire or try the arbitrament of war and attack. He attacked. ‘Like a wild boar,[[58]](#footnote-58) (but) strengthened by divine help, when he had closed up the shield-wall in proper order, he moved his army without delay against the enemy.’

‘But here,’ wrote Asser, ‘we must inform those that do not know the ground , that the combatants were on unequal terms as far as the ground was concerned, for the pagans had taken possession of an acclivity, and the Christians had to move their forces up from below

‘Between the two armies there grew a ‘rather small and solitary thorn tree around which they clashed violently, with loud shouting from all, one side acting wrongfully and the other side fighting for life, loved ones and country.’

Alfred knew, but the Vikings did not, that some way behind their position was an escarpment falling to what is now known as Dean's (or Dene or Danes'?) Bottom, and the Saxons, driving with all the force and desperate courage of men with much to avenge, forced them back to the edge. ‘Now, with the king's orisons concluded,’ he brought his contingent into the fight and the weight of their numbers told, though ‘the battle (was) kept up with a great display of courage and ferocity on both sides.’ For the rest of the day the noise of battle rolled over the heights until the Danes were outfought and either ‘were cut down in thousands’ or ‘fled from the field.

‘Fighting went on till nightfall’. Bagsacg and five jarls and many thousands on the Danish side were slain there, too, or rather, over the whole broad expanse of Ashdown, scattered everywhere, far and wide. ‘So King Bagsecg was killed, and Jarl Fraene, and Jarl Harald, and the entire Viking army was put to flight.’ The men of Wessex pursued the fugitives ‘right on till nightfall and into the following day until they reached the stronghold from which they had come.’

After this victory, in five weeks the brothers fought as many battles. Not all are named in the Chronicle or by Asser, but we are assured that ‘every time they drove the enemy back; yet three times out of the five the Danes ‘remained masters of the field’.

They rallied after Ashdown, and when, only two weeks later, on 17 January, Æthelred and Alfred led their hard-suffering army to Basing, about fourteen miles south of Reading, the Danes were ready and fought as fiercely as ever. ‘They clashed violently on all fronts,’ wrote Asser, ‘but after a long struggle the Vikings gained the victory’.

And so it went on, time after time. For battle-hardihood and mastery of weapons there was nothing to choose between the men of either side. It must be said again, if only out of pride for Wessex, that the men called from the plough and trained only when time was found, could match and lay low those for whom fighting was everyday life. Where the Danes had the advantage when hard pressed was in the difficult but disciplined feigned retreat.

Two months later, on 22nd March, Æthelred and Alfred fought the Danes, who had divided their army into two bodies, at *Mæredun* (uncertain, but most likely Mardon or Merdon, west of Pewsey, Wilts),[[59]](#footnote-59) and “for some time got the better of them, all the enemy retreating”; and the Saxons no doubt then broke ranks and thrust forward to have revenge; ***but*** *the Danes returned to the charge,* and after great slaughter on both sides (they) gained the victory and remained masters of the field of carnage.’ And to compound the defeat for Wessex, their enemies had been strengthened by the coming of a ‘great summer host’ to Reading, led by Guthrum, Ascetyl (or Osketyl) and Anund. And worst of all, King Æthelred, it seems, was mortally wounded, and he died on 23rd April and was buried in Wimborne Minster.

But despite his success, Halvden had had enough. Lacking the territorial vision of his brother, he looked not for land but for portable wealth, but here in Wessex the price of plunder was too many dead Danes. He may have fought other unrecorded engagements, but in the end, he withdrew, with all commodious deliberation and a little plundering here and there, toward Reading.

Watch and caution were vital, for the Saxons had not dropped their guard. Alfred went to attend his brother’s funeral and ‘took over the government of the whole kingdom as soon as his brother had died … being unanimously chosen and approved by all the inhabitants of the kingdom’, that is, by the urgently summoned witan. ‘When a month had passed after he had begun to reign, almost unwillingly (for he did not think that he alone could ever withstand such great ferocity of the Vikings, unless strengthened by divine help, since he had already sustained great losses of many men while his brothers were alive), he led his little army on the Vikings’ trail. He caught them at a hill called Wilton,[[60]](#footnote-60) which is on the southern bank of the river *Guilou* (Wylye), and fought most vigorously, with a few men who were easily outnumbered, against the entire Viking army.’ And again, the Vikings, skilled in the technique of feigned rout and recovery, won.

But even with their legendary prowess in battle they could not recover the ground they had abandoned, and the reinforcements under Guthrum, the land-seekers, would have realised that their hope of defeating and expelling the West Saxons and taking their land would demand all their initiative and resources. They would bide their time.

Alfred’s men would have fought on in defence, but to attack again was out of all reason – and Alfred was, for his age, Reason personified. Asser paid tribute to these men, the survivors, who had become veterans of a lifetime in barely a year’s campaign. ‘It should not seem extraordinary that (we) had a small number of men in the battle, for the Saxons were virtually annihilated to a man in this single year in eight battles against the Vikings (in which one Viking king and five jarls, with countless men, were killed), leaving aside the innumerable skirmishes by day and night which Alfred, and the individual eolderman of their race, with their men, and also very many of the king’s thegns, had fought ceaselessly and intently against the Vikings.’ The loss of life must have reduced the Wessex army to a point where one more strong attack would have scattered it. – Pondering the endurance and the gradual extermination of this army of now no more than a few hundred farmer-soldiers, one has to search far forward in history to find the scale and scope of their sacrifice repeated : not at Hastings, not at Towton, not at Sedgemoor, but with those soldiers who, in Housman’s tribute, ‘held the sky suspended” in the fall of 1914, regiments which, like the Queen’s, took 800 men to France, and two months later could muster only thirty-eight.

To end the present account: the Danes seem to have learnt respect from Alfred's battle at Wilton. They ‘made peace’, and withdrew from Reading to London, still in the kingdom of Mercia, and as they wished to quarter there, spared it the usual slaughter and ruin. Mercia of course had to pay for peace, but not ruinously, while Halvden set up as king and issued silver coins bearing his name in 871-2. Possessing London, the Danes would have enough control of the Thames to row up virtually unimpeded to the head of navigation at Cricklade when the time was ripe for a second invasion.

For five years, however, they left Wessex alone and battened on Mercia and Northumbria instead, and Alfred set about his work of strengthening the defences of his kingdom and saving and rebuilding her civilization.

# “ENGLAND’S DARLING”

T

he story of Alfred King of Wessex, born at Wantage, Berkshire, in the year 849, has been told innumerable times, but familiarity breeds only admiration.

The English have generally treated their monarchs – at least by the lights of their time – much as they deserved, and to a few they have given by-names: derogatory in Unready and Lackland, descriptive in Harefoot, Rufus, Beauclerc, Longshanks, Crookback and Farmer, and laudatory in Ironside, Lionheart and Peacemaker; but only one have they acknowledged as incontestably the Great – and even so, they took several hundred years to make up their minds.

Yet Alfred's right to the title is unique, in that although he campaigned with that genius defined as ‘an infinite capacity for taking pains’ to preserve the kingdom of Wessex and Christian civilization in England, his greatness, unlike that of Alexander, Frederick, Charlemagne or Tsar Peter, rests not on military prowess and power alone but on the example of a life dedicated to statesmanship, learning, order, justice and mercy. Yet through all his adult life, according to Asser, he suffered almost unrelenting bodily pain.[[61]](#footnote-61)

The history of England (and later, Britain) shows only three names, four at the most, of which it may be truly said that the moment, the crisis, called forth the man whose example and leadership inspired the nation and preserved freedom, and Alfred was the first. Strangely, however, only a series of accidents brought him to the throne. As noted earlier, his father, Æthelwulf, King of Wessex, had five young sons, which promised well for the royal line but held the risk of disruption if the successor, the eldest son, died young and his son were still only a child. Wisely King Æthelwulf changed the right of succession so that his eldest son, Æthelbald, should be followed by *his* brother. The king so little expected his fifth son to succeed to the throne that he named him the bare Ælfred without the Æthel- or "noble" prefix given to the others; but the elder brothers ruled Wessex for only thirteen years between them, and in 871, in the midst of turmoil Alfred, twenty-one years old but already an experienced soldier, ascended the throne.

He saw, rightly, that his most urgent and immediate task was to rebuild the defence of Wessex. Any king of Wessex or loyal statesman would have done likewise, conferred with the witan and trusted thegns, raised a new war tax, improved his signalling system, bought the best arms available, and made overtures to the other kingdoms to ward off their hostility when the Vikings’ at length attacked. Alfred did all these, but in his own way and in his own good time – or, as he would have said, in God’s. His own way, his solution to the everlasting problem of a small state, was like no other, partly because of the nature of his upbringing but also because he possessed the power of looking and planning beyond the immediate problem to creating a realm of prosperity and peace. His brothers before him, with the same upbringing, had left names to be honoured; they had ‘led from the front’, fought well and ruled justly; But in Alfred, the courage of a warrior-king on the battlefield was only part of a character ultimately dominated by the ambition to save Wessex, restore what had been lost, and rebuild.

# ALFRED : HIS BOYHOOD

I

n his maturity Alfred spoke regretfully of the decline of civilization in England after a lifetime of ravaging by Vikings. But there are no grounds to assume that the love of learning had wholly sunk under a tide of barbarism and that reading and writing were vanished arts.

Asser recorded the king’s words, (and one need not dismiss the many compliments: they ring true, and Asser was the king’s servant but also a grateful confidant and friend):

He was greatly loved, more than all his brothers, by his father and mother – indeed, by everybody and he was brought up in the royal court and nowhere else. As he passed through infancy and boyhood he was seen to be more comely in appearance than his other brothers, and more pleasing in manner, speech and behaviour. From the cradle upwards, in spite of all the demands of the present life, it has been the desire for wisdom, more than anything else, together with the nobility of his birth, which has characterized the nature of his noble mind; but alas, by the shameful negligence of his parents and tutors he remained ignorant of letters until his twelfth year, or even longer.2 However, he was a careful listener, by day and night, to English poems, most frequently hearing them recited by others, and he readily retained them in his memory.

One day, when his mother was showing him and his brothers a book of English poetry which she held in her hand, she said: ‘I shall give this book to whichever one of you can learn it the fastest.’ Spurred on by these words, (or rather by divine inspiration), and attracted by the beauty of the initial letter in the book, he said to his mother, forestalling his brothers (who were ahead in years, though not in ability): ‘Will you really give this book to the one of us who can understand it the soonest and recite it to you?’ Whereupon, smiling with pleasure, she reassured him, saying: “Yes, I will.” He immediately took the book from her hand, went to his teacher and learnt it. When it was learnt, he took it back to his mother and recited it.

‘It is clear,’wrote Sir Frank Stenton, ‘that he had a natural intellectual curiosity … He was never satisfied with the conventional life of a young West Saxon noble. On the other hand, through lack of teachers he remained unable to read even English until he had passed his twelfth year; and as for a Classical language, Latinists in Wessex were *raræ aves* indeed’[[62]](#footnote-62)

This love for the transforming power of poetry and art may have been unusual for an atheling, but it in no way hindered Alfred’s training in the other arts and accomplishments necessary to a young noble, whether in wartime or in peace: riding, swordplay, archery, hunting and hawking; in fact, he delighted in them. But some time before this, in his eighth year, a journey beyond twenty horizons took him into worlds that no other Wessex lad could have dreamt of, the prosperity of the Frankish kingdom and ‘the grandeur that was Rome’.

In 855 king Æthelwulf made grants (which need not be detailed here) of a tithe of his land to the church for services that he and many others deemed necessary, and although the Viking horde had come to winter in Sheppey for the first time, he put that aside for a journey to Rome to confer with the pope, ‘taking his son Alfred with him, because he loved him more than his other sons; there he remained for a whole year.’

Nothing is recorded of Alfred in Rome. The Pope invested him with the honorary dignity of a Roman consul – which the English chroniclers mistook for an anointing to future kingship, and no doubt they made nuch of him in the ‘English School’, the fortified area inhabited by Englishmen, who formed a section, or ‘*schola*’ of the Roman militia **–** forerunners of the Swiss Guard. But what must have impressed him most deeply, even as a child, (he actually went twice), was the built legacy of Imperial Rome, the Coliseum, the Pantheon, and perhaps the Baths of Caracalla. His own land still held Roman buildings, but all were in ruin, and the awe they might have inspired was heavy with fear of the inevitable decay of all things.

Wondrous is this stone-wall, wrecked by fate;

The city-buildings crumble, the works of the giants decay.

Roofs have caved in, towers collapsed,

Barred gates are broken, hoar frost clings to mortar.

Houses are gaping, tottering and fallen,

Undermined with age.

. . . . .

Bright were the city halls, many the bath-houses,

Lofty all the gables, great the martial clamour.

Stone houses stood here; a hot spring

Gushed in a wide stream; a stone wall

Enclosed the bright interior;

The baths were there, the heated water

They led the scalding water to pour

Over the grey stone into the circular pool ... ...

Many a mead-hall was full of delights

Until fate the mighty changed it. Slaughtered men

Fell far and wide, the plague-days came,

Death removed every brave man.

The place falls to ruin, shattered

Into mounds of stone, where once many a man,

Joyous and gold-bright, dressed in splendour,

Proud and flushed with wine, gleamed in his armour,

He gazed on his treasure – silver, precious stones,

Jewellery and wealth, all that he owned –

And on this bright city in the broad kingdom.3

(*The Ruin: The Anglo-Saxon World*, 59)

Such places, and whatever villas remained above ground, had been the abode of men of power for centuries before the Saxons came, and surely their vengeful ghosts haunted them still. But the buildings in Rome, and others that Alfred may have seen in France, quite outranged these monuments of mortality. Though mute, they spoke to the continued civilization and were part of it. And here the Roman tongue that the English had almost lost was, in new forms, the language of rulers, churchmen and the common people.

Alfred can of course have had no idea that the sights and sounds would, thirty years later, direct his search for wisdom in his rebuilding of the civilization of Wessex, but so it was.

In the course of his reign, against the background of recurrent war, he brought in scholars from many lands and himself learnt Latin from them, More than that, he translated the first fifty Psalms and a number of philosophical works into English to provide teaching and models for a new literature for his people. The age-long and world-wide consquences no one could possibly have foreseen.

# REBUILDING WESSEX

W

essex needed those five years of the Vikings’ absence to recuperate, and her new king used them to rebuild the border defences in preparation for the powerful assault that must come, though when and where he had no means of knowing.

Alfred’s people had strong cause for pride in having, unlike the other kingdoms, maintained their independence and fought the Vikings to a standstill; moreover their kingdom had been, unlike Northumbria and Mercia, relatively free from civil strife, internal discord and factional rivalries, and thanks to the legal provisions made by King ethelwulf the regnal succession of his three sons went smoothly, so that when at last the witan chose Alfred no one could point to illegality or the breaking of tradition.

So much was favourable, but there was little else. Foremost among the immediate “causes for concern” was the loss of life in virtually half a cenury of war, a loss which, size for size, might almost be likened to the ‘lost generation of 1914’. Time, of course, and lusty Wessex appetites, would make it good, but for the time being the country would be short of both soldiers and farmers, of defence and food.

Other troubles arose from a much longer time and would take generations to remedy. The towns and villages, churches and monasteries ravaged by the Vikings could be rebuilt, but their treasures were scattered to the five corners of wherever the Vikings had taken them. But more harmful than these, more lamentable in the eyes of King Alfred, was the loss of the intellectual, literary and spiritual treasures for which England, and the Northumbria of Bede, had been famous before the Vikings threw them into the flames. In later years, when Alfred looked back to the beginning of his reign, he wrote, ‘Learning had declined so thoroughly in England that there were very few men on this side of the Humber who could understand their divine services in English, or even translate a single letter from Latin into English: and I suppose that there were not many beyond the Humber, either. There were so few of them that I cannot recollect a single one south of the Thames when I succeeded to the kingdom.[[63]](#footnote-63)

The responsibility that had fallen on Alfred would have been overwhelming to a man less sure of the source of the strength and dedication he would bring to it. The task of his lifetime would be to rebuild an English civilization, and nothing less. First he must strengthen the physical defences and ensure regular payment for these and the expenses of government; but then, with the Danes kept at bay, he must bring the light of intelligence into the life of his people and awaken in their leaders a sense of the value of reasoned thought and faith and the vital nature of the written word as it transmitted the wisdom of the past to enlighten men, women and children of their own day **–** in a word, to educate them. The defence of Wessex would be built into the very character of her leaders and people.

At the risk of more prosaic matter, however, a few words must be said on Alfred’s fiscal provisions, his relations with church men and women and the importance he attached to endowing and supporting monasteries and other religious foundations.

He was deeply religious, but not oppressively so. Far from it: he held Christ in the centre of his life and from this, and the confidence it gave him, he found almost – but not quite – inexhaustible strength and patience for work, warfare and the remaking of his kingdom. Admittedly he was subject to a number of superstitions, but they arose not from fear of the unknown but from the offices, rituals and practices that the leaders of the church had accumulated in the eight hundred years since scriptural times and were common to his age and more than six centuries to come. They in no way hampered his clarity of thought in governing:

‘Once he had taken over the helm of the kingdom,’ wrote Asser, ‘he alone struggled like an excellent pilot to guide his ship with much wealth to the desired and safe haven of his homeland, even though all his sailors were virtually exhausted; similarly, he did not allow it to wander from course, even though the course lay through the many seething whirlpools of the present life. For by gently instructing, cajoling, urging, commanding, and (in the end, when his patience was exhausted) by sharply chastising those who were disobedient and by despising popular stupidity and stubbornness in every way, he carefully and cleverly explained and converted his bishops and ealdormen and nobles, and his thegns most dear to him ... to his own will and to the general advantage of the whole realm.’

At the outset of his reign ‘he promised that he would faithfully with all his heart give to God one half of his service, both by day and by night, and one half of all the riches which, acquired by right, steadily accrued to him during the year … He then considered how he might justly divide what he had generously promised to God … (and) commanded his thegns to divide the revenue from all taxation in any one year into two equal parts in the first place.

‘When the revenues had been divided up in this way, he decreed that the first part should be reserved for secular affairs, and this in turn should be divided into three portions.’ The first was paid out every year to his fighting men and the thegns who lived as the royal court in turns and served him in various capacities, but to each according to his own rank and even to his own office’

The fighting men were his huscarles, a small, devoted bodyguard, not the fyrd; and as for the thegns who served him, they would not become the all-too-familiar established courtiers whose idleness led to conspiracy and treason. ‘The royal household was systematically managed at all times by means of three shifts, serving a month at a time’. When the first group’s month was up, they went home for two months so that each man could see to his own private affairs. The second group took over immediately and followed the same plan; the third group did likewise, and then the first group came back and relieved them. ‘By this arrangement the administration in the royal court (was) taken in turns at all times.’ His ingenious system was effective, gave employment and responsibility to his thegns, and built loyalty to the king and to Wessex.

The second portion he gave to his craftsmen, who were ‘skilled in every earthly craft and whom he had assembled and commissioned in almost countless quantity from many races;’ and also, ‘with admirable generosity and a cheerful disposition’ which were certainly not applauded by all Wessex natives, ‘he paid out the third portion to foreigners of all races who came to him from places near and far and asked money from him (or even if they did not ask), to each one according to his particular station.’

So much for the first part of his revenues. The second portion, which ‘he marked out for God in full devotion’ for the restoration of the lost heritage, we may look at later.

The success or otherwise of Alfred’s first five years as king will be seen as we take up the history of the Great Danish Army and its return to the attack.

# THE GREAT HEATHEN HOST : THIRD CAMPAIGN

W

hen the Danes withdrew from Reading in 870 they quartered in London, where Halfden ruled as king for two years. Then, looking to refill their coffers, they moved into the south of Northumbria and wintered in Torksey[[64]](#footnote-64) (Lindsey, now part of Lincolnshire), and the Mercians, their neighbours, ‘made peace’ with them – paid a ransom for peace and quiet.

That could not last any longer than the silver, and in the next year they took over the whole of Mercia, which was in a “miserable condition”, and installed as puppet king ‘a stupid thane named Ceolwulf, on condition that he should resign it peaceably to them whenever they desired.’ Then they wintered at Repton on the River Trent, fortifying their riverside encampment and wharf with a ditch and embankment incorporating, as a gross insult to Mercia, a church which had become the burial-place of their kings.[[65]](#footnote-65)

This wintering at Repton should have given them strength for their next campaign, but it was no more a time of rest and recuperation than, let us say, those ‘rest periods’ inflicted on British soldiers in the First World War. Excavations carried on over twenty years from 1978 have revealed nearly 250 Viking graves or cremations, of both sexes. Some skeletons bore signs of violent death, but most of the death seem to have resulted from an epidemic.

The Danes now had only to complete the last stage of preparation for the grand assault on Wessex: they must nullify any threat to their rear from Northumbria. The Grand Army quit Repton and divided into two bodies. One of them with Halfdan invaded Northumbria, wintered somewhere near the Tyne, reduced all Northumbria to subjection, and, as if to keep in practice, made life even more wretched than usual for the Picts and borderers. The other division, with the familiar Guthrum, Oskitell and Amund, “three kings of the Pagans”, went south-east, quartered in Cambridge, helped themselves to whatever could be had, and re-furbished their longships and sharpened swords and axes for the new campaign, the concerted land and seaborne attacks for which the landing and defeat thirty years earlier had been, so to speak, a Dieppe raid.

Their army, says the Chronicle, ‘left Cambridge by night’ and ‘went to a fortified site called Wareham between the two rivers Frome and Tarrant, in a very secure position except on the west, where it is joined to the mainland.’ In a thousand years it has changed little, and in 1940, in anticipation of a German invasion, the approach to this fortification was laid out as a tank trap.

The Danes could not have marched two hundred miles through Mercia and Wessex unchallenged. Almost certainly they came by boat through the Straits of Dover, and the events of the next year bear this out.

Events had moved too swiftly for Alfred to get together a force strong enough to besiege the Danes in this fortified stronghold and starve them into surrender. He hurried down and made a treaty with them, ‘and they gave him as hostages the most distinguished men next to te king in the army and swore him oaths on the sacred ring, which before they would never do to any nation, that they would leave his kingdom as quickly as possible.’

The years of peace had evidently left Alfred sanguinely unaware that his own standards of truth-telling and oath-keeping had no meaning for these ‘paladins of Thor’. He quickly learnt, but was not tempted to emulate them.

The Danes had set their sights on advancing west and spreading disruption, and when Alfred withdrew from Wareham, they had a clear field. They divided the army for a forked attack, one overland, the other by sea. ‘Regarding neither their hostages nor their oath, nor their plighted faith, they violated the treaty, and *one night killed all the king’s horsemen’* (FW)– though this phrase is suspect: more likely, they killed all the hostages (*obsides*) and then, as mounted soldiers (*equites*) rode west. ‘Avoiding the English levies by night, the mounted host appeared without warning outside Exeter and were let into the town.’ There is no record of a battle, and perhaps the Exonians, mindful of the days when Isca was the pride of the Damnonii, were not so enamoured of Saxon rule that they considered it worth defending. Alfred, with fewer mounted men, could not overtake the Danes in time to prevent them. He laid siege to the town,[[66]](#footnote-66) which was probably no larger than the present-day centre, but he had not enough men to dislodge them, and stalemate ensued until the Danes ran out of supplies.

Meanwhile the fleet, sailing from Wareham, had encountered a violent storm and 120 ships **–** with three to four thousand men, enough to destroy the Wessex besiegers **–** were wrecked at Swanage.

The Danes in Exeter surrendered, and Alfred made a fresh peace. They gave him hostages ; but he must have made it unmistakeably clear that Saxon mercy was finely balanced and the Saxons awaited only one false move, for the Danes swore a solemn oath to leave the kingdom “and then kept a firm peace” – till another chance came their way. .

But as a Viking brood they must be up and doing. Perhaps they had exhausted the resources of mid-Devon - though that seems unlikely. For whatever reason, at harvest time part of the army went back to Mercia and camped in Gloucester. The other part, under the chieftain Hubba,3 sailed round Cornwall to South Wales, landed in Dyfed, slaughtered some of the inhabitants and spent the autumn and early winter there; but this was all part of the master plan by which Hubba should move on eastward to strike at Wesssex from the rear.

Thus began 878 which, as surely as 1940, attracts the melodramatic but accurate title of

# ENGLAND'S YEAR OF DESTINY

T

he parallels between the two years are true enough: for just as Nazi Germany in 1940, through blitzkrieg or coercion, had engulfed nearly all Northern Europe, so had the Danes by 878 gained mastery of all England save the western half of Wessex; and just as the powerful German military machine, run by professionals superbly armed and made confident by successive victories, had only to defeat armed forces largely of amateurs, so had the battle-hardened Danes; and lastly, if the homeland went down in defeat, then, in the words of Churchill, ‘all that we (had) known and cared for (would) sink into the abyss of a new dark age made more sinister and protracted by the lights of a perverted science’, so, in 878, would a Viking conquest have destroyed a more humane Christian civilization, at least for generations.

From Gloucester in Mercia to Chippenham in Wessex is a little over thirty miles, a hard but fair day's march, and it is some measure of Alfred's leadership (though perhaps also of his misplacedn confidence in the pagans' solemn oath) that he should be spending the twelve days of Christmas here, so near the Danish camp. The news must have astonished his enemies, but it gave them the chance of a winning stroke by taking the king, even if it meant anticipating the concerted plan of attack and campaigning in the depth of winter when days were dark and ways were foul. They ‘stole out’ of Gloucester, says the Chronicle, captured Chippenham and ‘rode over the land of the West Saxons, where they settled, and drove many of the people over sea’ (which could mean to the Isle of Wight or over the Severn) ‘and of the rest the greatest part they rode down and subdued to their will - *all but Alfred the king*.’ In this all-important aim they failed. Alfred escaped, and with a small band of nobles, warriors and thanes he made his way through the forests of East Somerset and the flooded marshes of Sedgemoor to safety in the Isle of Athelney.[[67]](#footnote-67)

There they remained through dark January and February and into the early days of spring, ‘in great distress,’ says Asser, ‘amid the woody and marshy places of Somerset. He had nothing to live on *except by what he could forage, either secretly or even openly, from the heathens* as well as from the Christians who had submitted to the Vikings' authority.’ But Somerset had not wholly deserted him, and if materially distressed, morally he very rapidly recovered, and planned fresh moves to strike back at the Danes.

They, for their part, were not resting content with their easy conquest. They were pressing on with the plan of double invasion. Not all their subsequent movements have been recorded, but from Alfred's actions and reactions it is evident that part, if not all, of the Chippenham army commanded by Guthrum, moved westward through Wiltshire into Somerset in search of Alfred and eventually learnt where he was. The closest they could get to him in the wilderness of marsh and swamp, the only land on which they could have marched dry-footed and lain dry-backed, the western end of the Polden Hills, was also the closest to the expected landings of the invaders from the sea. These three factors, seemingly so favourable to the Danes, would combine to Alfred's advantage - if he had the genius to see it.

For a while, then, he was safe from attack. Athelney to-day is no island except in time of deep flood. It is a low ridge of some 180 acres, its highest point only 26 feet above the surrounding plain; but in Alfred's time the Island of Nobles (for that is the meaning of the name) was ‘surrounded by swampy, impassable and extensive marshland and groundwater on every side.’ It lies at the confluence of the Parrett and the Tone and ‘(could) not be reached in any way except by punts or by a causeway which (had) been built by protracted labour between two fortresses. A formidable fortress of elegant workmanship was set up by the command of the king at the western end of the causeway’ - in fact, at East Lyng. Only the inhabitants knew the trackways through the swamp, and even they could come by no more than twos or threes.

Whether the Danes could or could not find a way through, defensive works would not save Wessex; and with the few men he had, though growing in numbers, Alfred ‘struck out restlessly and tirelessly against the Vikings’ - which implies that they were within a day's or a night's journey, not up in north Wiltshire. As an anonymous writer has expressed it, ‘From this island he sallied forth to keep the Northmen off balance with guerrilla tactics while he sent message through the countryside to rally support.’ And the support came.

Before he could launch a counter-attack, however, a new threat had to be dealt with.

# THE VOYAGE TO CYNUIT

A

s winter drew to a close and Easter came with spring on 23rd March, the Danes under Hubba sailed over from South Wales to carry out their part of the strategy planned long before: to link up with the army from the east, then strike south along the rivers and cut Wessex in two.

Hubba seems, in fact, to have made two landings on this coast, the first with a fairly small force for a reconnaissance with the customary pillage, the second, with his main army, as part of the strategic plan. The story of the first venture is, however, only known from a legend recorded in or about 1670 by Rev. Thomas Hearne, vicar of Bleadon,[[68]](#footnote-68) and a ‘Mr John Gibbons, who was living about1670 and also made enquiries of local people. The incident he recounted could quite as well have happened on the second landing, but no matter: the story is worth retelling and also gives some idea of the speed with which the Saxons could recover from a surprise attack and strike a devastating blow.

The legend tells that a small Viking fleet sailed into the creek of Uphill, from where they might later row or sail up the River Axe to the ‘hithe’ or landing stage at Rackley(or Radeclive),, two miles west of Axebridge, whence a short march would bring them to Cheddar and the palace of the Kings of Wessex[[69]](#footnote-69) – though they might have been disappointed with the plunder, for the treasures of Wessex lay elsewhere They may well have expected an easy run through, but the affair turned out otherwise, thanks to one person whom they overlooked.

The name Uphill gives a misleading idea of the place. There are hills nearby, dominating the little village, and on one of them stands a mediaeval church which served as a landmark for ships in the channel; but the village stands no more than a few feet above sea level at the head of a small creek or pill leading into the mouth of the Axe, and the old names were actually Uppepill or Opopille (up on Pill)**.[[70]](#footnote-70)**

Nothing as abstract as this occupied the minds of the blood-boltered pirates out in the Channel. They could see Uphill as a hamlet of a dozen to twenty huts and farm buildings, a small plum ripe for the picking but, more importantly, a place to capture before rowing on upstream to the towns, villages and monasteries beyond. On a rising tide they rowed into the mouth of the Axe and up to the village, where they moored at the foot of the great crag and landed unopposed, for the inhabitants had already withdrawn inland to await a relief force.

Only one graphic detail of their incursion, in the person they overlooked, has survived into legend,[[71]](#footnote-71) but the events that followed, though fanciful in the telling, help one to form a clear enough idea of the Vikings' course of action.

Hubba, as suggested above, must be seen not as a mere landganger out for booty but as a partner of Guthrum in a joint assault according to a general strategic plan - but the word ‘general’ must be stressed, for although they no doubt agreed on specific objects at the start of the campaign, the hazards of war might upset the most comprehensive scheme, and difficulties of communication must have obliged both leaders to act independently and often in ignorance of the other.

It seems, though, that Hubba, after landing, divided his force into two and sent - or led - part of it inland, either toward the Polden Hills to link up with the Danish garrison watching Alfred over in Athelney or eastward along the old road which led from Uphill to Priddy and on to Old Sarum, to seek contact with the eastern Danish army wherever it might be found. The other part he would have kept back near Uphill and Bleadon in order to hold a bridgehead and replenish supplies.

Raiding the village, they found little worth taking in the poor huts, but the thane's store, to which all the small farmers had to contribute, would have been very different, holding "ambers" of light ale and mead and enough dark ale for the whole army to bathe in. An intolerable deal of ale to one half-pennyworth of bread, but one that suited the Vikings ideally. They fell to feasting and one by one fell further still and snored the sleep of the contentedly unjust. At least, no other explanation occurs for their failure to guard against the danger creeping up on them.

Her name is unknown, but she was an old woman too lame to run away with the others, and she had found shelter in a cave in the rocks. There, though half-starving, she waited until the shouting and the tumult died, night drew on and the tide that had brought in the Vikings began to ebb a second time. Then she crept out of hiding and moved stealthily down to the ‘hithe’, holding a knife. The blade was sharp, but none too sharp for the work it had to do. Now she could hear the rush of the ebb, and she cut and sawed at the mooring-ropes till they parted and the Viking ships with the sleeping watchmen were swept down by the current and out to sea. She then made her way round the village and on to the track to Bleadon until she felt safe from pursuit by any Dane who had kept his head; but none came.

Soon, though, her own people did. ‘The people of the Country, having intelligence that all the ships were cast away, took courage, pursued (the Danes) to Bleadon, there fought and destroyed them with ... a bloody slaughter.’ The author goes on, ‘Some of (the farmers) have informed me that, when their Husbandmen plough their grounds, they find Multititudes of Men’s Teeth there, which being naturally the hardest bones in the body ... are almost as permanent as little stones. And a Gentleman there ... having bought a piece of Moorish ground, lying at the foot of the said Bledon, when his labourers renewed the dyke filled up about it, they found great heaps of Men’s skulls, and other humane bones, as entire as ever they had been.’ But teeth and bones have all, like their finders, since returned to the earth.

Hubba survived with his contingent, however, and somehow retrieved the ships and lived to fight another day – just one day; but it was long supposed that he may, after all, have left a relic of his presence here – and it was an attractive if illogical thought.

A short distance upstream from Uphill there stands an inn known as Hobb's Boat. It stood there two hundred years ago and probably for as long before that, and this was once thought reputed to be the spot where the boat bearing the chieftain’s body for a Viking funeral drifted to land. But alas! documents, those ravagers of the romantic imagination, prove otherwise. In a survey of the lands of Glastonbury Abbey commissioned in 1515-1516 it is ‘stated that the passage or ferry next Justineshayes was held for 5s. a year, with other lands, by one – Thomas Hobbs.[[72]](#footnote-72) The ferryman gave his name to his ferry and the ferry to an inn, a name which it still

Bears nearly five centuries later.’ (And yet, as personal experiences teach us, the most impossible coincidences do occur.)

# THE BATTLE AT CYNUIT

H

ubba’s next landing was mentioned only briefly in the Anglo Saxon Chronicle; but it was described in graphic detail by Asser.

Hubba had survived a reverse, but it did not teach him respect for his adversaries, and he and his army paid heavily for over-confidence. Asser, ignoring the Uphill episode, says that Hubba sailed from Dyfed ‘came to Devon. There, acting on an erroneous assumption, he met an unhappy death with 1,200 men, at the hand of the king's thegns in front of the stronghold at Cynuit, for many of the thegns with their followers had shut themselves up for safety inside this stronghold. When the Vikings saw that the stronghold was unprepared and altogether unfortified (except for ramparts thrown up in our (Welsh) fashion), they made no attempt to seize it, since by the lie of the land that place is very secure from every direction except the east, as I myself have seen. Instead, they began to besiege it, thinking that those men would soon give way, forced by hunger, thirst and the siege, since there is no water near the stronghold. But it did not turn out as they had thought; for the Christians, long before they were liable to suffer want in any way, were divinely inspired and, judging it much better to gain either death or victory, burst out unexpectedly at dawn against the Vikings and, by their aggressiveness, from the very outset they overwhelmed the enemy in large part, together with their king, a few escaping by flight to the ships.’

The victory was complete. And yet, says the Chronicle, the Danes ‘remained masters of the field.’ How was this? and where *was* Cynuit?

According to Asser, Hubba had acted ‘rashly’, ‘on an erroneous assumption’, and by this 800 of his men lost their lives, and the Raven-banner, which had waved them on to victories, was carried away by the Saxons. In the previous few days the defenders had lost one battle, rallied and won another, but the victory cannot have been lightly gained. Another Danish army, as we shall see, lay within striking distance and it would have been madness for the weary Saxons to wait and take on an enemy fresh and clamouring for revenge. The Danes thus ‘remained masters of the field", but the grand strategy had been dealt a crippling blow. Other coastland legends suggest that the Danes pursued the Saxons into the Quantock villages and wrought the usual havoc, but it is uncertain whether they refer to Hubba's assault or to others never written down.

As for the location of the mysterious Cynuit, the various attempts to identify it have generally been promoted by an understandable local pride, and although three of them are not truly relevant in the end, it is worth summarising them as a brief record of antiquarian persistence in the impossible. Four make up the popular short-list: Kenwith Castle near Abbotsham in North Devon, Countisbury, Selworthy Hill and Cannington Park.

To sum up a thousand words of argument for and against: At first sight, Kenwith and the nearby Hubbastone look so right that disputing their claim might seem perverse, but the “castle” dates from later than Saxon times and the names quoted did not appear until a 19th century local historian made this identification; and a large-scale Danish attack this far west would have failed the purposes of their joint plan.

As much may be said of Countisbury, in spite of Ekwall’s explanation of the name by Old Welsh; for why should Hubba have landed his substantial force to make a suicidal attack on a cliff-top fort nearly 1000 feet above sea level, a village offering even less plunder than Abbotsham and leading only to the wild and uninhabited moorland of Exmoor? and how, for that matter, can the populace of this wild coastline and desolate hinterland have mustered enough strength to defeat him and slay more than 800 of his men?

Selworthy, with its Danes Cross and possibly Danish field names, makes a fair case, the topography corresponds pretty well with the historical account; the coastland was a rich royal manor, and land hereabout could have well supplied a garrison.[[73]](#footnote-73)But doubts remain: There is no name remotely like Cynuit, and why on earth, why ever would Hubba have chosen a landing and line of march so far away, like Countisbury, from his intended destination, and abandon his ships? No doubt a battle was fought, but the invaders were more probably the Danish fighters whom the sons of King Harold Godwinsson brought over from Ireland in 1068. Twenty years later the Vale of Porlock was still suffering the effects.

As for Cannington and its park, the case starts unpromisingly, for no historic spelling of Cannington has been found which would indisputably identify it with Cynuit; but that is not the end of the story, and the direction is right and the later evidence conclusive.

In so far as Hubba was in control of his fleet under the stress of wind and tide, the rational choice for a landfall was the familiar estuary of the Parrett,[[74]](#footnote-74) and for a landing place Combwich, a port dating back to Roman times; and the surge of the battle can be better understood and makes clearer sense here than anywhere else.

Quite apart from that, Combwich, secluded on the far edge of that myserious and time-marooned triangle of Somerset between the Quantocks and the sea, is a little town rich in visible memories of the past but traversed by few people, whereas in Roman days and long after, it had a more than local importance as the port for travel between mid-Somerset or North Dorset and South Wales. (Bishop Asser from Sherborne travelled this way to and from his earlier monastery at St David’s.)

Hubba’s longships would have sailed upstream and disgorged their warriors here, for although Combwich was not the head of navigation for single ships it was probably as far as a fleet needing room for manoeuvre could well be ventured. Then almost certainly, if tradition says true, Hubba divided his force, kept the main body under his command on the west bank to raid as far as Cannington, and sent the smaller contingent over the marshes to the bend in the river known later as Vikings' Pill, from there to move up on to the Poldens and make contact with the eastern army.[[75]](#footnote-75)

**MIKEY TO ADD PHOTO OF CANNINGTON FORT**

Hubba was not the first war leader, nor the last, to misjudge the mettle of the Anglo-Saxon infantryman and his capacity for recovering from defeat, and like the other aggressors he at length paid dearly. The land for two miles south of Combwich is flat, but then, north-west of Cannington, it rises abruptly to the hill or ‘camp’ dominating the Park, and some of the people of Cannington had taken refuge in the ‘camp’ and were no doubt joined by people fleeing from Combwich. ‘But the Pagans, seeing that the fort was unprepared for a siege and wholly undefended, except by walls constructed in our usual (Welsh) manner, did not attempt to take it by storm, (because the place is by its position naturally very secure on every side except the east,) but made preparations for besieging it; thinking that as there was no water near the fort, hunger and thirst, and the consciousness of being in a state of siege, would soon compel its defenders to surrender. But they were disappointed in their expectations: for the Christians, being reduced to such extremities, (and nerved thereto by divine inspiration,) made an unexpected sally upon the Pagans very early in the morning, and at the very first onset overthrew their king and the greater part of his army, only a very few of them escaping to theirs.

‘It is worth making a trip to the tope of this eminence’, wrote C.Bazell, ‘to see for ourselves like Asser.You will realise at once why Hubba decided not to assault the fort. It is only 262 ft high, (but) the ground rises sharply and in Alfred's time there was, as Asser says, a big stone wall ... In 1913 I drove a trench in and found fortifications of dry stone walling, carefully constructed and of great strength ... A personal visit will show that the ground rises steeply on every side except to the east, as Asser described it from his own observation. There is no spring on the hill and the nearest water could be controlled by any investing force.’

That is why the Saxons, rather than die of hunger and thirst, broke out, attacked the Vikings and drove them back downhill to the plain, slaying at least 800 of them, including Hubba. The armto y on the east bank, cut off by the morass of mud uncovered by the ebbing tide, could only look on helplessly as the battle, already ferocious on the high ground, reached its climax *at the gates of Combwich.* At length some of the survivors found safety in their ships or withdrew to the north of Combwich and occupied that small area at least long enough to bury their chieftain and perhaps raise a memorial to him. For the moment the Saxons could do no more, and they withdrew, taking the Raven banner with them. But despite the Saxon victory, the Vikings, crossing with the returning tide, yet again ‘remained masters of the field.’

There is still more evidence for the site. Near the foot of Cannington Park is a quarry - abandoned now, but leaving a scene of desolation over which Nature has only partly drawn a veil. When the quarry opened is not known for sure, but to judge by its absence from the early Ordnance Survey maps it must have been mid-nineteenth century. In 1875 it was reported that ‘the men who work these quarries have found here many remains of bodies lying scattered immediately under the surface,’ which of course indicates a hasty mass-burial, and one after a battle rather than a pestilence, since many of the skulls were marked with gashes that could only have been made by weapons. Few of these remains were properly conserved or examined by archaeologists, and whether the thousand burials were of men only, or of men of both armies or only one, is impossible to say.[[76]](#footnote-76) Nor is it certain that the Vikings were all driven out, and though some - mainly those on the east bank - may have gone off to join Guthrum, the survivors of the battle, when they had buried Hubba, may have remained between Combwich and the sea for some little time, may even have settled there, if the names of Stolford, Steart and Wick (pronounced Week for Vík ),[[77]](#footnote-77) are as genuinely Norse as some believe. As for the suggestion that the farm name Upper Cock represented Ubba Coc (the mound or tomb of Hubba), perhaps one should say that hope springs eternal in the philologist’s breast and leave it at that.

If all these considerations are not enough to identify Cynuit with Combwich, it is worth saying that Asser was a Welshman writing for his own people,[[78]](#footnote-78)for whom he regularly translated or transliterated English place-names into Welsh, and "Cynuit" is not the far cry that it seems from "Combwich". The familiar pronunciation "Cummidge" is recorded as early as the Domesday Book, but in Asser's time, two centuries earlier, the primitive "*Cum-witch*" may well have still been current. In either case, the ‘neutral’ sound of the Welsh ‘y’ (as in ‘C**y**mru’) virtually equals the "u" of "Cummidge", and since Welsh has no equivalent for "-*dge*" or “-*tch*”, (Welsh ‘ch’ is a quite different sound,) then "uit", perhaps voiced, was as near a transcription as any Welsh speaker could make for the English "-*wich*".5

And finally, the name Combwich is clearly written in thirteenth century legal documents ‘Cinyt’ and ‘Cyniz’.

(And post-finally, we don’t know for sure what Asser wrote: we have only an Elizabethan transcription. It may as well have been ‘Cymit’. What then?)

All this goes far to prove that Combwich *was* Cynuit; but local patriotism elsewhere and the laudable desire to be linked with brave men of a heroic age will ensure than the argument will not readily die away.

# THE LOST RAVEN

T

he Vikings had not only lost their leader and a thousand men: the Saxons had struck an even more deadly blow at Viking confidence when they captured their war-flag, the magical "Raven" banner, supposedly woven in a single day by three daughters of Ragnar Lodbrog[[79]](#footnote-79) - and therefore sisters of Hubba and Hingvar. It was said that before any battle the raven would predict the outcome. If a victory, he would flap his wings; if a defeat, they would hang limp. (Perhaps the magic depended on a favourable wind, but pagan superstition would not have accepted this).

Whether he flapped aloft or drooped disconsolately on that fateful day is not recorded, but in any case the sagas reveal such a deep-seated delight in fighting that the sight of a mournful and bedraggled corbie might only have hardened their resolve to rely on themselves alone. But even the nearest parallel, the loss of colours by a British infantry regiment, cannot be compared with the loss of the Raven with his supposed powers, his identification with the slaughter of enemies and his constant reminder of the prowess of Ragnar the Brave. The men of Wessex had a prize worth a thousand Vikings.

Whatever the fate of Hubba's remnant, the news of the victory on or about 20th March must have cheered Alfred with the removal of the danger of being outflanked when he was able to move against the main Danish army. He was no longer the refugee, and ‘with a small company he built a small fortification at Athelney, and from that fortification, with the men of the part of Somerset nearest to it, he fought on against the host.’

# ‘DEFEAT INTO VICTORY’

B

ut time was pressing. With the coming of spring and spells of dry weather the enemy might at last find a way through, if only by following the return trail of one of Alfred's raiding parties. One old story tells improbably of how he had the great mound of Burrow Mump, near Athelney, raised, so that he might the better keep watch for any movement by the Danes four miles away on the Polden Hills – (and clearly they were there in some strength, or how else could he have harassed them throughout the winter as he is reported to have done?) It was also said that in order to keep enemy ships away from Athelney he must surely have thrown a barrier across the River Parret a little way below its confluence with the Tone In another tale – though this has been told of other warriors also – he visited the Danish camp in the guise of a Saxon harper. He moved around freely, heard what was being planned – the Danish language giving him no difficulty? – and could make his own plans accordingly. However that may be, military necessity imposed itself: he must gather his army in secret, approach the Danes by stealth, and overwhelm them by surprise. All this he did.[[80]](#footnote-80)

**MIKEY TO ADD PHOTO OF BURRROW MUMP (2 PHOTOS)**

The campaign that followed lasted only a few weeks, but it yielded results more decisive than all the ten years before. Alfred's generalship was masterly and, while one recognises that the different sizes of the armies make proper comparison impossible, his concealment of purpose from the enemy, and his outmanoeuvring them by a series of feints, mark him as an exceptionally able general and, apart from the scale, remind one of, say, the Shenandoah Valley campaign of Stonewall Jackson a thousand years on, or General Slim's crossing of the Irrawaddy with the Fourteenth Army in 1945.

The work at Athelney took several weeks, for the locality had to be made into an impregnable fortress in case the Danes should beat off Alfred's attack and force him back. Soon, however, he became confident that this would not happen and that although he still had fewer men than the Danes the tide was invisibly turning and victory would be his.

In Alfred’s character energy and determination stood at bay to physical illness, but energy, military genius and religious devotion lived harmoniously side by side - as far as one can tell. At all events, he would have felt at one with such military and religious irregulars as Blake, Cromwell, Jackson and Wingate. One manifestation of his religious life may seem strange to us but was typical of his age: devotion to the saints, and prominent in his hagiolatry was St Neot, whom he respected for the saint’s having reproved him in his youth. A story recorded in an eleventh century *Life of St Neot*, that when Alfred had been meditating on the saint on his feast day, he appeared to him in a dream and promised him victory, seems little more than a monkish attempt to enlist the regal memory in aid of a scheme to move the saint’s relics from Cornwall to Huntingdonshire; but more convincing is a story told by William of Malmesbury in the twelfth century, that the king had a similar dream of St Cuthbert of Lindisfarne, for the feast of that saint was 20th March, on which day, or very near it, the battle of Cynuit was won.[[81]](#footnote-81)

Be that as it may, Alfred sent out the rallying-call his people had so long been hoping for, and in the seventh week after Easter (4 - 10 May), that is, just before Whitsun, he rode to Ecgbryhtstan or the Rock of Egbert, the boundary stone set up in the forest of Selwood**,** perhaps by Alfred’s grandfather, to mark the point where the lands of Somerset, Wilts and Dorset meet. And here, says the Chronicle, there assembled ‘all the men of Somerset and Wilts, *Sumorsæte[[82]](#footnote-82) alle ond Wilsætan*, and those of Hampshire who had not gone beyond the sea for fear of the pagans, and they rejoiced to see him.’

# THE MUSTER OF THE HOME GUARD

T

he speed of the Saxons in assembling the fyrd to counter a Viking attack may surprise, and more than once it surprised the invader. But although much of Southern England was still forested, it was not a trackless waste; villages were nearly always built at a distance from the old Roman roads for safety's sake, but the roads remained, neglected but indestructible; and as well as these, the even older cross-country trackway from before the Romans, now designated "harepath".

An impressive memorial to our forefathers' ability to organise the human resources of a region for a common purpose, the harepath or ‘army track’ ran - and long sections of it still run to-day - from the Midlands through Gloucester and Bristol and thence, by secret trackways through the marshes, to Pawlett, Stretcholt and the River Parrett, which it crossed at Combwich. From here it climbed over the Quantocks to Hartrow (or Hare Trow), (the local pronunciation of “trough”), then along the ridge of the Brendon Hills to Exford and Simonsbath, and thence, diverging, to Barnstaple and Cornwall.

**MIKEY TO ADD PHOTO OF COMBWICH ESTUARY**

We, mentally stepping it out in company with Alfred’s infantry, might well take a break at Simonsbath, for it is a unique place, a hamlet in the wilderness, with a unique and evocative name. All the tales of a mythical outlaw, Simon, who here splashed or bathed in the River Barle are so much idle fancy. Here is a place where the real defenders of the realm have passed, and the sound of the name shows it: not Si-mon but Sim-mon, and was not this the path of the dragon-slayer Siegmund or at least of the lesser Siegmunds who hurried along it to beat off the dragons who came from the sea? [[83]](#footnote-83)

Yet the harepath almost certainly dates from long before these Danish wars, and ‘army track’ no more implies exclusively military use than does ‘Royal Mail’ or ‘Queen's Highway’. The harepath was also a long-distance trade route. No one has ventured to put even a rough date to it, but that indefinable yet almost tangible feeling of extreme age hovers over it, and it antedates all written history; and modern travellers have felt that the company they share on it is not merely in the mind. The author S. H. Burton wrote in his *Exmoor*: ‘On a louring April day on Exmoor I was unknowingly following the harepath near Mole's Chamber when an overwhelming feeling of antiquity seized me. I had no companions but was suddenly conscious of no longer walking alone. I had no clear idea of where I had travelled back to in time, but shadowy figures moved along the track beside me, their backs bowed beneath great bales, and kept company with me until the clang of my boots on a metalled road brought me back to the present and the empty moor.’ [[84]](#footnote-84)

As well as the harepath, the Saxons possessed a serviceable beacon signalling system from hill to hill through Wessex, and it is unlikely that those vigorous kings would have neglected to provide for stand-by messengers in the event of mist or fog. The king must rely on these to rally the whole region to a certain place while denying the knowledge to the enemy, and in fact the one Fire Beacon on the Quantock Hills designated as such could have been seen as far as Athelney and beyond, but would have been invisible to the Danes on the Polden Hills.[[85]](#footnote-85)

Alfred had his army at last, and if the men of Devon and Dorset are not mentioned it must signify that he had to keep them in their shires to forestall any fresh assaults from the sea. He was sure of his army's readiness to fight, and his immediate task was to bring them secretly to within striking distance of the Danes. He succeeded brilliantly.

The defeat he was shortly to inflict on the Danes was so overwhelming and decisive, and so fully described by Asser, that any doubt over the exact location might seem impossible; but in fact, the Saxon reports can be interpreted in two ways, and though probability leans toward one of them, both deserve more than a glance.

‘They made camp there (at *Ecgbryhtessta*n)[[86]](#footnote-86) for one night,’ says Asser. ‘At the break of the following day the king struck camp and came to a place called Iglea, and made camp there for one night.

‘When the next morning dawned he moved his forces and came to a place called Edington’, and fighting fiercely with a compact shield-wall against the entire Viking army, he persevered resolutely for a long time; at length he gained the victory through God's will. He destroyed the Vikings with great slaughter and pursued those who fled as far as their stronghold …. and boldly made camp in front of the gates of the Viking stronghold with all his army. When he had been there for fourteen days the Vikings, thoroughly terrified by hunger, cold and fear, and in the end by despair, sought peace.’

# FLIGHT OF THE WILD GEESE

A Diversion

T

hat simple account, however, like that of Cynuit, has lent itself to differing interpretations, and all of them, as retailed here, leave questions unanswered. To begin with, two villages forty miles apart, in Somerset and Wiltshire, have the name Edington; both have been ‘claimed’ by local patriots; both have legends of Alfred's victory over the Danes, and two places on the way to either Edington might reasonably be identified as *Iglea;* and while only one of them can be right, to weigh the two possible campaigns is a fascinating exercise.

What, however, makes the question of identification especially interesting is that nearly all the clues – Alfred’s situation and activities in the months before, our knowledge of the Danish strategy, the military sense or non-sense of the disposition of the Danish forces, the strength of local legend, the presence or absence of physical or archaeological evidence – in fact, all the clues, but one*,* point in the “wrong” direction. It is that single clue which defeats rational speculation – and for that matter, special pleading.

With that we may follow in Alfred’s track both east and west, but bearing in mind that one of these ventures is an exercise of the imagination, ask ourselves which is the more satisfying to our sense of historical and military probability. The final answer may surprise.

To consider first the Wiltshire Edington, then the Somerset one, and for both the starting point is *Ecgbryhtsstan*, the rock of Egbert, reputably identified as Whitesheet Castle or Hill, on a hill also bearing the names of Kingston Down (Cynges-stane-dun – the hill of the king’s rock), near Kingston Deveril.

From here Alfred would have led his army a half-day's march to a place which has been identified as the Oak Lea near Sutton Veny in the Wylye valley, and halted for the night. Daybreak saw them on the move again, not heading north toward Westbury but climbing up on to the Plain, where they would have fetched a circuit eastward to the heights overlooking Edington and attacked the Danish army there. Alfred would have expected the war-wise enemy to be especially vigilant with the new campaigning season, but from such inhabitants as had not been harried to extinction by the Danes he would have learnt more of their strength and concentration than they of his, and events showed that the Danes and either neglected to post sentries in depth or had failed to learn caution from Alfred's raids in the winter. At any rate, he caught them in the open on the hillside, and after hard fighting and bloody slaughter pursued the survivors, it is said, ‘as far as their stronghold’, drove them inside and camped before it for two weeks until ‘fear, hunger and cold forced them to seek peace.’ But where?

At first glance, the famous White Horse above Edington dispels argument, but both his age and original shape are unknown, for he was altered in the eighteenth century, and unlike the Uffington Horse he may only date from the early days of gentlemanly antiquarianism. Besides that, serious objections arise: What possessed the Danes to take up a position which the Saxons making for Chippenham could have by-passed by heading across the lowland and also have thereby blocked their return?

Some historians have read Asser's account to mean than the Danes fled helter-skelter to Chippenham, but two objections come to mind: Is it likely that Alfred, knowing the danger concealed by a feint retreat, would have let his little army out of his immediate control? and even if in the flush of victory the risk had appeared worth taking, could the battle-weary English have kept up a harassing pursuit in good order for twelve miles across country all the way to Chippenham and then invested a royal borough for two weeks?

Besides that, Asser, who wrote earlier of the Danes' capture of Chippenham, here says specifically, and thrice, ‘the stronghold’.[[87]](#footnote-87) Somewhere else must surely be meant, somewhere near at hand, and everything points to the Iron Age fort a mile or so west of Edington: Bratton Camp.

It is a bleak place, 750 feet above sea level, and can never have been meant to serve as more than a brief refuge, for it lacks water; but to the hard-pressed Danes, forced back to a cliff edge, it would have offered the only hope, but a hope soon cut short by ‘fear, hunger and cold’, and shelterless nights of early spring. The wonder is that without a spring of water they held out for fourteen days. – Or were there different places altogether?

Might not the armies have fought at the other Edington, in Somerset?[[88]](#footnote-88)

We have followed Alfred in his march to the rallying-point at Ecgbryhtsstan, and to reach the Somerset Edington he would then have led his army west. The great forest of Selwood would have concealed them from any Danes venturing far from their Polden camp, and the Saxons would have marched in a day the twenty or so miles to Iglea (present-day Edgarley or Eggarley) and rested there to regain strength for the battle, to cover next morning the remaining twelve miles along the Polden Hills, take possession of a high promontory overlooking the Danish army and wait for Guthrum's attack

The Polden Hills, 300 feet high, scarcely show on a relief map of England and Wales, and even in the Bartholomew half-inch map, which has created a colour symphony of the landscape, it raises only a pale woodwind murmur. But seen from ground level they are very conspicuous, for they rise abruptly out of a broad and level plain. About eight miles long but little more than a mile wide, they run from Ashcott, near Street, west by north to the outskirts of Bridgwater, and while the eastern approach is gradual, the western end, named Downend, falls very rapidly to the plain. In section they are wedge-shaped, their southern face very steep, almost an escarpment, their northern slopes fairly gentle and providing sites for six villages along a spring-line. Edington stands about three miles from the western end of the ridge. But in early May, before the winter waters had gone back from upon the earth, the plains to both north and south would have been impassable.

Yet there must have been surprise in the direction of Alfred’s approach, for the disposition of the Danish army in the middle of the hills, near the only two tracks leading down southward into the plain, seems to imply that they were preparing an attack on Athelney, either across the marsh when the waters had receded or by an approach round the hills that ring the plain to the east.

Alfred would now have had at least the tactical advantage of higher ground, provided that his Saxons were not lured down by a pretended retreat, as at Hastings two centuries later. They watched the movements of the Danes lining up for battle, they shouted loud cries of defiance, but they stayed put and waited for the onslaught.

The battle began at noon and raged for several hours along much of the ridge with varying fortune, until at length Guthrum led in person an attack on the high ground which was still the key of Alfred’s position. The Danes advanced under a cover of close-packed shields, preceded (unusually) by a volley of arrows, and here the fighting was the most ferocious. The memory of it persisted for a thousand years, and although the origin of the name is lost, a thousand years later a place known as Righton’s Grave, where a track leads down from the ridge to the marsh, was spoken of by an old man in the 1890s as ‘where Alfred buried the Danes’; and another ancient illiterate sage spoke of a battle at Downend..[[89]](#footnote-89)

The king seemed tireless, encouraging his troops until the enemy broke and fled in disarray. Some turned to stand and fight at bay, but the rest did not stop until they either found shelter in a fortified camp west of the battlefield or were cut down by their pursuers. Guthrum, fearing lest the Saxons might enter together with the fugitives, shut the gate while many of his men were still outside; but the Saxons had suffered too many atrocities at the hands of the Vikings to give quarter at the end of a fierce battle, and they slew every one of them; but they intercepted the horses and cattle, so that the Danes in the fort had no food. They were safe for the time being, but had no means of escape and would soon starve.

But where precisely was this Danish stronghold? “It is not named by the chroniclers, but certain facts can be deduced: it was in a plain and had a water supply, and to take it by storm would have cost many lives; on the other hand, those immured there had no way out and the Saxons and hunger reduced them to submission in a fortnight.

The one place in the locality fulfilling all these conditions is at the very western end of the Polden Hills, and unlike Brycge (later Bridgwater), the only other possible choice, Downend, was small enough for Alfred’s army of amateurs to besiege the Danish professionals and let none escape”.[[90]](#footnote-90)

Since Alfred’s day the scene has been changed almost beyond recognition by human agency, principally the draining and reclamation of the moor, a diversion[[91]](#footnote-91)of the River Parrett and the building of railways and roads. The village stands at the foot of the western slope of the hill, where the motorway and the A39 converge, and on a spur off the old road from Bristol to Bridgwater. Until the year 1677 it stood within a large meander enclosing 160 acres and so nearly circular that a cut of only 40 to 50 yards was needed to straighten the river. That does not mean that the river had followed the same course 800 years before, but the point at which it came closest to Downend was mentioned in a document of the reign of Henry IV as Vikings Pill or anchorage - whether or not this refers to the Danes of 878 - and it kept the name until the feature disappeared with the new cut in 1677.

Albany F Major wrote in 1920, “Anything like a complete record of the changes in the course of the river is unattainable, and the construction of a high-road, an artificial rhine and two railways through the tract that now lies between Parrett and the Poldens has obliterated many traces that must once have existed. But the course of the loop that ran up to the foot of the hills prior to 1677 can still be traced fairly well, and the river is known to have shifted its course even since that date.”[[92]](#footnote-92)

Lastly, it is worth recording that the work which most thoroughly obscured the nature of the Downend fortification provided the most effective evidence of the happenings there. In 1847 the engineers of the Bristol & Exeter Railway[[93]](#footnote-93) blasted their way through the hillside and destroyed the original contours, but it was said with relish that in shifting the “arisings” the navvies “dug up bones by the bushel.”

On all sides the Danes would have been hemmed in, to the east by Alfred's army; to the north by water; to the south also by water and by the garrison in Athelney and Lyng; and to the west, by the River Parret, in which, at Vikings' Pill, their boats either floated or lay on the mud according to the state of the tide. But the fact that the Danes did not try to escape that way suggests that either the ships were away fetching provisions and the river had been blocked near Combwich or, more probably, they were taken by a detachment of Alfred's men.

So Alfred, with his victorious army, pitched camp before the gate, and sure enough, after fourteen days, hunger, cold and a gnawing fear broke their Viking fortitude and they sued for peace. They were so desperate that they offered, as they had never done before, to give the King as many and whichever hostages he chose, without his giving any in return. This Alfred accepted, ‘moved by his innate mercy,’ says the Chronicle, and made the Vikings swear to leave his kingdom without delay - which they did.

With two possible sequences conforming with Asser's account, two Eddingtons each with its strong supporters, and passing over the Heddington near Devizes of an early translator, one is bound to ask which is the more likely?

At first glance, the famous White Horse of Westbury is a strong challenger, but both its age and original shape are unknown, for it was altered in the eighteenth century, and unlike the Uffington Horse it may date only from the early days of gentlemanly antiquarianism. Setting that aside, and bearing in mind the Danes' two-pronged attack, their need to keep up pressure on Alfred during the winter, and Alfred's guerrilla raids during that time, these considerations, together with the graveyard evidence of battle at Downend but none at the Wiltshire Edington, seem to tip the scales in favour of Somerset. Yet one objection remains: the original forms of the name Edington.

The first known for the Somerset village (and much later than Alfred – nearly 300 years, in fact) is in the Domesday Book: Edwinetun: the "tun" of Eadwine or Eadwynn (a woman’s name); but the Wiltshire Edington appears there as Edondone: "waste or uncultivated hill"; and against the arguments of strategy, tactics, legend and archaeological evidence, Wiltshire wins. And yet, and yet,

And so, the lesson for a researcher into the origin and history of any community is to refrain from theorizing on unsure foundations, but trace the name back to its earliest recorded stage and work from that, (while in retrospect accepting with good grace this author’s apology for having initiated a Wild Goose Chase, but with the best of historical intentions).[[94]](#footnote-94)

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Afterthought

But again, on the evidence the Poldens from Edington to Downend almost certainly witnessed one of the many battles (such as the destruction of the Danish ships at Vikings’ Pill) which were fought to the bitter end but were never recorded in the Chronicle - but one cannot venture into that morass of guesswork and doubt 8

# “IN VICTORY MAGNANIMITY”

A

fter Edington, the Danes swore,as usual, to leave the kingdom, but Alfred extracted another promise, that Guthrum would become a Christian and receive baptism. Guthrum complied. Perhaps the thought of the hostages in Alfred's hands helped to persuade him to keep his promise, but might not the King's clemency toward a beaten foe - conduct so alien to the Vikings, so unexpected - have also touched a chord in the hardened warrior's heart? At any rate, seven weeks later he and thirty of the captains of the host came to Alfred at Aller, on the edge of the moor, three miles east of Athelney and almost within sight of the Somerset Edington - a tactful warning to him not to slip back into the old ways. Here Alfred ‘adopted’ him as his ‘son’ and stood sponsor for him at baptism, giving him the name Athelstan; and eight days after, at the royal palace at Wedmore, the ceremony was completed by the chrysom-loosing - the white fillet round Guthrum's head as a sign of baptism was ceremonially removed.

Here also the King made a treaty with the Danes, and, as J.R.Green wrote on its millennium in 1878, this Peace of Wedmore ‘at once marked the temper of the man. Ardent warrior as he was, with a disorganised England before him, he set aside at thirty-one the dreams of conquest, to leave behind him the memory, not of victories but of ‘good works’, of daily toils by which he secured peace, good government, education for his people. His policy was one of peace. With England across the Watling Street he had nothing to do.’ All that he retained was his own Wessex, with the districts north of the Thames that the peace restored. ‘Over these latter districts Alfred set the ealdorman Æthelred, the husband of his daughter Æthelflaed, a ruler well-fitted by his courage and activity to guard Wessex against inroads from the north.’ (London, for the moment, remained in Danish hands)[[95]](#footnote-95).

Alfred kept Guthrum as a guest for three or four days more, and then ‘with great liberality bestowed on him and his followers many and very valuable presents’ and sent them back out of Wessex duly chastened, as object-lessons to other wishful invaders.

From Chippenham the Danish army went back in the following year to Cirencester. Then they returned to East Anglia and shared out the land with Guthrum at their head. Guthrum kept his promise faithfully and for eight years the Danes remembered and turned their destructive energy elsewhere.

But while Guthrum's men were about to settle down in East Anglia and the newcomers had retired for a season, others were still coming along. They were not driven by mere hunger for wealth as the Norsemen had been. Conquest, for the Danes, might have been ‘the most attractive way of making a living, but ... it was not the only way. Land was available in Denmark for the man who would undertake the hard work of clearing it and breaking it in - and many did this. But only a few days’ sail away to the west there was excitement, as well as land ready for the plough and cheap labour, as well as glittering prizes in treasure and ransom-money. Success bred expectation of more, and Scandinavian confidence in seafaring and soldiering took a long time to ebb.’[[96]](#footnote-96)

# FOUNDER OF THE NAVY

N

o one knew better than Alfred that the thousand-headed Viking serpent had been only ‘scotch’d, not killed’. He might reasonably hope that Guthrum in his new Christian guise would keep his oath and, as far as lay in his power, hold the turbulent youth of the Danelaw in check. But for how long? And what if, or when, fresh hordes of ravagers came and attacked before Wessex had had time to make good the losses suffered the past ten years? The case was urgent, and no time must be lost.

And so now, rising to the challenge, Alfred took those measures of defence which have earned him the title of Founder of the Navy. Peace was vital to the very existence of Wessex, but it would remain precarious as long as there were hot-blooded, plunder-hungry young men across the North Sea. Wessex had shown that she could defeat the Danes in pitched battle on land, but how much better if they could be prevented from even reaching the shores! And so the king gave orders to build or acquire a fleet for that very purpose, and a good number of his ships were twice as large as their adversaries would be. There had indeed been naval successes before Alfred’s day, but he was the first Saxon leader to appreciate that the sea demanded more than assembling of a nondescript fleet to meet an emergency. He gave orders to build numerous vessels, larger than the Vikings’ and manned by up to sixty oarsmen, and to train men to handle them no less capably than the enemy.[[97]](#footnote-97)

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Alfred knew he must never drop his guard; rather, he must strengthen the defences of Wessex and also of that large part of England over which he held suzerainty; and sure enough, only a few months after Edington, another Viking army, ‘sailing from foreign parts, came to the Thames and made contact’ with the Danes still upstream, but spent the winter at Fulham. What they learned from the first Danes may have given them second thoughts about Wessex, for in the next year, when Guthrum parcelled out and settled land in East Anglia, the incomers left Fulham and went overseas to the Low Countries to try their luck there.

A new Danish tactic was emerging, the use of an oversea base not a week distant in Scandinavia but two or three days, perhaps less, apparently in or near the estuary of the Rhine, with mooring for a fleet of any imaginable size. This seems to have served a double purpose: as a base or rally-point for other Northmen intent on attacking England and as a refuge to which defeated Danes could retire and recuperate and re-organise free from fear of reprisal.

From here also they could row and sail ravaging up the great rivers of Europe at their pleasure. Besides this, Danes had settled in Friesland by this date, and although friendly neighbours were not essential to Viking happiness, no doubt they helped.

The history of Saxon England is so studded with stories of the attacks of the Vikings that it sometimes creates the impression that the tribulations of England at their hands were unique, but no. As Canon Taylor memorably phrased it, “For three centuries the Northmen were the terror of Western Europe. They sailed up the Elbe, the Scheldt, the Rhine, the Moselle, and the Neckar. They ravaged the valleys of the Somme, the Seine, the Maine, the Yonne, the Loire and the Garonne.” [[98]](#footnote-98) In Northern France (Picardy and Artois) and Flanders, where, in contrast to Wessex, the weak successors of Charlemagne were unable to organise any large-scale resistance, the great, slow-flowing rivers allowed the raiders to sail hundreds of miles inland to the rich cities, monasteries and cornlands. Paris was attacked three times (in 845, 855 and 861).

Now they raided the valleys of the Scheldt to Condé and the Somme to Amiens, and in 885 another army of 40,000 in 700 ships – if the chroniclers tell the truth - led by one Siegfried, attacked Paris, but found it bravely and successfully defended. At length Charles, king of the West Franks, brought a large army to Montmartre, but at the last moment declined to fight and bought the invaders off for 700 pounds of silver. They never dared attack Paris again.

With four years of comparative quiet after Ethandune, by 882 the king had made enough progress with his fleet to put it to the test. Leading the venture himself, ‘he went out to sea with ships and fought against four ships’ companies of Danes, and captured two of the ships, and slew the men;’ (there was never any question of taking prisoners in the heat of a naval battle); and two ships’ companies surrendered to him, and they were badly cut about and wounded before they surrendered. The numbers are small, but the battle was important for the clear warning that Wessex would seek out the enemy by sea as well as by land and destroy him.

# VIKINGS RETURN IN FORCE

**N**

evertheless, the wealth and land of Wessex still drew the Vikings, and two years later, (885), while a half of those over the water (most probably in Friesland) went south and east, the others crossed over to Kent and besieged Rochester. Alfred brought his levies, raised the siege and drove the raiders away and back to Francia. It was a bloody affair, and the chronicler writes of “all this burning of cities and slaughter of people.” Besides this, another “army of the Pagans who dwelt in East Anglia disgracefully broke the peace which they had concluded with King Alfred.”[[99]](#footnote-99)

Vikings never gave up for long, and when Wessex had beaten off one attack another would start up elsewhere. But nor would the king rest content with a victory and march home again.

Experience taught him that the boundary between the Danelaw and Wessex defined with Guthrum had a serious weakness for the defence of Wessex, for at the southern end it followed the River Lea and ran to the west of London, tacitly accepting the presence and rule of the Danes there. London was not yet the leading city of the realm, but it was growing in importance as a trading port **–** for peaceful traders still voyaged in the most troublous of times **–** and also served as a land bridge between the Danes of East Anglia and whosoever might be wreaking havoc in Kent at any time – such as now. Moreover, as long as the Danes held London the way up the Thames was open to the enemy’s ships and army as far as the heartland of Wessex and even beyond, to Cricklade, the head of navigation. Danish London must fall.

Following up the relief of Rochester, the king sent a naval force from Kent to East Anglia to harry the place in punishment. As soon as they came to the mouth of the Stour, ‘thirteen Viking ships rigged for battle immediately advanced to meet them. A sea-battle was joined: there was savage fighting everywhere. All the Vikings were killed and all their ships, with all their booty, captured.’[[100]](#footnote-100) But it took more than a spectacular defeat to keep the Vikings on shore. ‘As the royal fleet was about to go home, the Vikings in East Anglia assembled ships from everywhere and met it in the mouth of the same river’ (the Stour) ­­– and this time the Vikings won. The sea-serpent was not yet tamed and could still bite or crush to death.

This did not weigh too heavily on the king, and in the next year (886), while one band of Vikings was laying siege to Paris, Alfred besieged and occupied London and, says the Chronicle, ‘the whole English nation turned (or submitted) to him, except that part of it which was held captive by the Danes.’ He made a treaty – known, mistakenly, as the Frith of Wedmore[[101]](#footnote-101)– defining the boundary between Wessex-with-Mercia and the Danelaw. It would run up the Thames and the Lea to a point near Hertford, and then to Bedford and up the Ouse to Watling Street near Stony Stratford, and thence up Watling Street to the sea. London was thus now part of Wessex. It would not, in Alfred’s lifetime, be the capital of the kingdom, but to hold it was a sure sign of the power of Wessex, the kingdom by which, in due time, Saxons, Danes and Norsemen would all be re-made and re-named as the English people.

Alfred ‘rebuilt the city of London in a splendid manner, making it fit for habitation’**4** (missing reference) and then placed it under the rule of his Mercian ally and son-in-law Ealdorman Æthelred

This was a wise and statesmanlike move, designed to convince the Mercians that their interests were interlocked with his own, as they were indeed, for he himself already had the closest of ties with Mercia in his marriage with Ealhswið, ‘ a most excellent lady’ of Mercian royal stock. Æthelred had acknowledged him as overlord three years before, but he retained comparative freedom of action and the ability to go with it, and Alfred sealed his trust when, in due time (the date is uncertain, but probably about 890), he entrusted his daughter Æthelflæd to him in marriage, (of which more in due course).

# THE HOME FRONT

I

n 886 Alfred had reigned for fifteen years, and nine of them had been taken up with war or rumours of war. But even more unremitting had been the work of government and, side by side, his determination to restore, as far as possible, the cultural heritage that the Vikings had destroyed, and to create or fashion a new Wessex in which men and women sought wisdom and right conduct, learnt to read and write and so preserved their found treasures for future generations.

It is pleasant to find light radiating out of the so-called Dark Ages, and Alfred’s mind was not always focussing on government or warfare or wisdom. Flashes of Saxon humour shine through in his comments and writings, amd he had an enquiring, original and inventive mind.

The Puritan in him, if that is the word, made him take up the challenge of Time, to use it and profit from it, not waste or kill it, for the good of his own soul and for the good of his people. A well-known story tells of how he had candles made which would burn for eight hours, so that he could apportion out the day: one third for work, one third for sleep, one third for reading, sport and prayer. But it seems very unlikely that he lingered mechanically over the last page of a document with an eye on the guttering wick.

His solution, as told by Asser, shows both inventiveness and forethought for problems ahead and the way to overcome them:

‘He reflected thoughtfully on what he might offer to God by way of service of his own body and mind …He had promised to render to God, ... in so far as his health and resources and abilities would allow, one half of his mental and bodily effort both by day and by night. But because he could not in any way accurately estimate the duration of the night hours because of darkness, nor of the day-time hours because of the frequent density of rain and cloud, he began to reflect on how he might be able ... to preserve the substance of his vow unfailingly till he died, by means of some enduring principle, without any kind of uncertainty.’ (The problem was that the hours of daylight and of night were divided into twelve hours each, and only at the equinoxes were the hours of day and night equal).

‘When he had thought for some time, he hit upon a useful and intelligent solution. He instructed his chaplains to produce an ample quantity of wax, and when they had brought it he he told them to weigh it against the weight of pennies on a two-pound balance. When a sufficient amount of wax, equivalent in weight to seventy-two pennies, had been measured out, he told the chaplains to make six candles out of it, each of equal size, so that each candle would be twelve inches long and would have the inches marked on it. Once this plan had been devised, the candles were lit to burn without interruption throughout the twenty-four hours of each day and night ...

‘But because of the extreme violence of the wind, which sometimes blew day and night without stopping through the doors of the churches or through the numerous cracks in the windows, walls and partitions, and through the thin material of the tents, ... this caused the candles to burn up more quickly than they should, so that they had finished their course before the appointed hour. Alfred considered how he might be able to exclude such draughts of wind, and ... he ordered a lantern to be constructed attractively out of wood and ox-horn – for white ox-horn, when shaved down finely with a blade, becomes as translucent as a glass vessel. Once this lantern had been constructed and a candle had been placed within it at night so that it shone as brightly without as within, it could not be disturbed by any gust of wind, since he had asked for the door of the lantern to be made of horn as well ... The six candles could (now) burn one after the other without interruption through the course of the twenty-four hours – neither more quickly nor more slowly. And once those candles were consumed, more were lighted.’

This constant, ever -renewed light might be seen as a symbol as Alfred worked and planned and invited scholars and artists to his court, some to be sent on again to spread their knowledge and crafts throughout the country.

But the learning of the past must be recovered and entrusted to capable guardians, and so he bestowed a generous part of his revenues on the two monasteries he himself had instituted (Athelney and Sherborne) ‘and to those serving God within them’; and while this was a first attempt to repair the destruction that the Danes had inflicted, it also took the first step toward re-establishing the monasteries, with their teams of scribes, illuminators and learned scholars, to be the centres in which the recovered knowledge could be preserved and generate new thought and letters, not only in the learned tongue, Latin, but much more importantly, and with results passing all imagination, in the language of Wessex, which became the mother-tongue of England and of lands beyond even the furthest ventures of the Vikings.

Next, and here is the mark of depth of his concern for the rescue of his people from darkness, the third portion was to be given to the school, which had assiduously assembled from many nobles of his own race *and also from boys not of noble birth.*

This was truly extraordinary, and not in King Alfred’s age alone. Charlemagne had collected scholars at his court, including the Anglo-Saxon scholar Alcuin, but one can cast forward a thousand years before finding, in late eighteenth-century America, a state in which the literacy of the whole population was encouraged and promulgated by those who governed. Foreign critics might deride Alfred’s aim as unrealistic, since the wisdom of the past, as then understood, was preserved in Latin, and the heroic English verse of the Saxons was retained in the minds of *scalds* (minstrels) but rarely written down. But Alfred had an answer: Let the king gather scholars from all parts and set them to translating the classics into English, and moreover, he would set the example himself.

Asser recalled how, ‘one day, when we were sitting together in the royal chamber discussing all sorts of topics (as we normally did) ... I was reading aloud to him some passage from a certain book.’ This would have been in Latin, which he translated into English and explained as he went along. ‘As he was listening intently with both ears and carefully mulling it over in the depths of his mind, he suddenly showed me a little book which he always carried on his person, in which were written ... some psalms and prayers he had learned in his youth.’ He invited Asser to add the passage to his book, but Asser found it was full already and suggested he could make a little eight-page parchment booklet for any other passages that ought to be treasured and kept separate. The king gladly agreed, and Asser copied out three other passages the same day.

‘Now as soon as that first passage had been copied, he was eager to read it at once and to translate it into English, and *thereupon to instruct many others,*’ to give his ‘one-speech’ people something of the wisdom that he found in the Latin of the scriptures and philosophy. He learnt by the comparative method, and it demanded long, devoted study, when the affairs of state and the defence of the realm, with his chronic sickness, gave him no rest.

He himself would lead the revival of knowledge and literature with his own knowledge of Latin, so painfully acquired. Recalling the sad declension of learning[[102]](#footnote-102) in the past hundred years, as mentioned above, he wrote:

‘I recollected how - before everything was ransacked and burned – the churches throughout England stood filled with treasures and books. Similarly, there was a great multitude of those serving God. And they derived very little benefit from those books, because they could could understand nothing of them, since they were not written in their own language ...

‘Then I recalled that the Law was first composed in Hebrew, and thereafter the Greeks translated it ... into their own language, and the Romans likewise. . Therefore it seems better to me ... that we too should turn into the language that we all understand certain books that are the most necessary for all men to know, and accomplish this, as with God’s help we may very easily do, provided we have peace enough, so *that all the free-born young men now in England who have the means to apply themselves to it may be set to learning ... until the time that they can read English writings properly.***1** (And one may ask, pertinently, who in the Norman Age of ‘Chivalry’ ever thought it necessary or even laudable that a nobleman of knight-at-arms should learn to read or write?)

The Classical works he chose to translate and preserve in English were by Gregory and Augustine, who of course had a unique link with Saxon England, but he also included the first of the Roman Christian philosophers, Boethius: *On the Consolations of Philosophy*. One might say that he was aiming improbably high – but why not? He himself, in his own English writings, moved with a simplicity and clarity which brought out the dignity of the old English.

Whether he instituted the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is uncertain. Its material may have existed in stray annals in monasteries throughout the country, but he can most probably be credited with bringing them together and then actively encouraging that ‘incomparable enterprise’ which enlightens, entertains – and puzzles and frustrates – even now, as it has done ever since Saxon England was rediscovered, very suitably, by the first Elizbethans more than five hundred years ago.

The king welcomed not only scholars and artists but also travellers who would enlarge his knowledge of the world and of the opportunities for him to make his country known and respected and for his fellow-countrymen to trade and prosper. England might be on the edge of the known civilized world, but in its recovered culture and institutions it could not be excelled, and the royal family of Wessex was linked by marriage with both France and the Empire.

A certain Wulfstan told Alfred of a voyage he had made through the Baltic, sailing from Hedeby in Denmark eastward for seven days to ‘Truso’ in Estonia, ‘a country with many cities, and in each city is a king, and there is much honey and fishing; and the king and the most powerful men drink mare’s milk, and the poor men and the thralls drink mead’ – a choice of beverages that must have sorely puzzled the West Saxons.

A prosperous Norwegian trader named Othere said that he dwelt the furthest north of all Norsemen, and that the land beyond, extending very far to the north, was all desolate except for a few places where Lapps lived by hunting and fishing. Once Othere even sailed round North Cape into the White Sea and surprisingly found “greatly cultivated land”. But most of all he went there,’ in addition to exploring the land, for walruses, because they have very fine bones in their tusks (he brought some tusks to King Alfred) and their hides are good for ships’ cables ... . But in his own country is the best whaling’

From Othere’s long and detailed description of his country and her neighbours, their geography and ports and landmarks, the king must have learnt much that would have served his traders and voyagers well – if they could steer clear of pirates and thread their way through a hostile Skager Rak and Kattegat. That was, and long would be, the problem.

Human nature makes it very unlikely that all King Alfred’s reforms and initiatives appealed to all the people of Wessex, whatever their rank; and he had to press on with them in fair weather and foul – the latter predominating. His tenacity in battle won him acceptance, so that no internal revolts marred his rule; but although the threat of the Danes must have been in everyone’s mind, many years were needed before commitment to the defence of one’s “country”, Somerset or Dorset or Devon, was transferred to the country of the whole, Wessex – if indeed it has ever been transferred completely.

But as for the idea of a “benevolent despot”, nothing could be further from the truth. Alfred liked and needed to keep all affairs of state under his personal control, and he had the good fortune to rule a state so small in area and population that this was quite feasible. But always, if possible, he ruled by consideration and persuasion, as when reviewing legal decisions in the interest of justice or demanding that his thegns who acted as magistrates should learn to read. Asser tells of him:

‘He was a painstaking judge in establishing the truth in judicial hearings, and this most of all in cases concerning the care of the poor, on whose behalf he was wonderfully solicitous day and night, amid all the other obligations of this present life. Throughout the entire kingdom the poor had very few supporters or none at all, except for the king himself.’

Wessex was small enough for him to be able to take a personal concern in the administration of justice, courteous in his approach as always, but ruling abruptly with controlled anger when he found corruption or downright stupidity: ‘He would ask the judges politely ... why they had passed so unfair a sentence, whether through ignorance’ or favouritism or even for the sake of a bribe. If the judges confessed they had not known any better, then the king, ‘*admonishing the inexperience and foolishness with discretion and restraint*, would reply as follows: “I am astonished at your arrogance ...You have enjoyed the office and status of wise men, yet you have neglected to study and apply wisdom. For that reason, I command you either to relinquish immediately the offices that you hold, or else to apply yourselves much more attentively to the pursuit of wisdom.” Learn to read and digest, or move off elsewhere.

But he did not ask the impossible. If a judge or magistrate could make no progress in learning to read, either because of age or ‘unpractised intelligence’, the king commanded the man’s son or some relative ... to read out books in English to him by day and night, or whenever he had the opportunity. ‘Sighing deeply from the bottom of their hearts, these men regretted that they had not learned such things in their youth and considered the youth of the present day to be fortunate, who had the luck to be instructed in the liberal arts.

Asser wrote: ‘But I have explained this concern for learning how to read among the young and old in order to give some idea of the character of King Alfred’ – the herald of a perennially delayed Age of Enlightenment. [[103]](#footnote-103)

# HÆSTEN’S WAR

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he Danes whom Alfred had fought since Edington (apart from those from East Anglia in 886) had been the landless pirate hordes, not the settled Danes of East Anglia. Guthrum, under his new name of Athelstan, and maybe in a changed nature, had kept the oath he had sworn at Aller, and the thirty jarls and captains of the host did likewise. In so far as it was in them, they lived peaceably in their habitations, and even the death of Guthrum in 890 and the loss of his controlling wisdom did not tempt the Danes of the Danelaw into the uncertainty of an all-out Wessex war.

For the rest of Alfred’s reign and long afterwards the Danes continued to harass Mercia and take over land in the area of Bedford, Buckingham and Leicester, but they only twice ventured to attack the heartland, Wessex.

The first of these attacks, however, tested to the full the king’s resourcefulness, resilience and rapid, decisive thought, but also, by contrast, his patience, endurance and military cunning in the field, even if, at least to the eye of history, the end result was never in doubt.

The Danes from oversea mustered strong forces, their Viking commander had an international reputation, and their mobility by sea would enable them, they hoped, to take the Saxon sea-watchers by surprise and capture a beachhead before the slumbering militia had been called to arms.

They were, indeed, fighting the campaigns of 871 and 878 again, with the old Viking spirit and in the old Viking way.

Alfred was not. He had understood the military weaknesses that might have brought Wessex to defeat and set himself to remedy them systematically and with determination. He had founded and expanded a navy to intercept and defeat the Danes on the high seas before they ever drew near to Britain –but of course this was only a partial remedy: many longships might still get through.

And once the Danes had landed and set out to ravage, there were no strong fortifications, nothing but the Saxon shield-wall, standing in their way. At Bath, Winchester, Chichester and Exeter the old Roman wall had hindered them very little. Canterbury and London had been taken by storm in 851; Winchester in 860, York in 866, London in 871-2, Cambridge in 875, Exeter in 876 and Gloucester in 877. The reform of this system, or lack of it, demanded all of Alfred’s statecrat and determination, and would not be complete within his lifetime, but the first evidence of its effectiveness came when in 885, when Rochester repelled the Danes and made them sit down to a siege. ‘By the early part of the tenth century no village in Sussex, Surrey and Wessex east of the Tamar was distant more than twenty miles from a fortress which formed a unit in a planned scheme of national defence,’[[104]](#footnote-104) with strengthened walls for the old Roman towns; a rectangular enclosure surrounded by bank and ditch at Wareham, Wallingford and Cricklade; earthworks across a promontory at Lydford, Christchurch and Burpham near Arundel; or a clifftop fortification as at Watchet. “Each fortress was kept in repair, and garrisoned when necessary, by the men of the surrounding country ... and the arrangements for the defence of these fortresses in time of war were based on the principles that four men were needed to hold each perch (5 ½ yards) of wall or earthwork, and that every hide within the local district ought to supply one man for this purpose.[[105]](#footnote-105) The local population did not everywhere take kindly to labour on these fortifications, but the system worked; and the ensuing campaign saw the Danes marching and counter-marching not always in triumph but more to avoid defeat.

One human problem had defied complete solution until now: the fyrd were unwilling to serve outside their own ‘country’ and often turned back home before their term of service was over; and no Saxon king or ealdorman had the power or, one hopes, the wish, to flog them into line. But by spreading the burden of service fairly and equally, by allowing half the men responsible for military service to remain at home while the other half was out against the Danes, and then change and change about, Alfred was able to keep his army in the field for a longer time and for wider movement than ever before, and since he now had the duty of supporting Mercia also, the improvement was beyond price.

Alfred had, in fact, by taking thought, by study, by instinct or by sheer necessity, found a new approach to the art of generalship: to achieve victory not by the wanton hazard of pitched battle against a professional and disciplined army, nor with the ruinous cost in Saxon life of a Pyrrhic victory such as Malplaquet or Antietam. Luring the Danes away from their firm base, he would follow their line of march and prevent other Danes coming to join them while Wessex received reinforcements from Mercia, Sussex and the other sub-kingdoms. He would avoid a pitched battle but subject the Danes to guerrilla warfare, siege and hunger until they were weakened by casualties or starving, and then either defeat them in battle or take their surrender and oaths and pack them off out of the kingdom.

This determination not to waste the lives of his men in mass frontal attacks has been rare among the famous commanders: none springs readily to mind except General Slim, who dismissed his lesser generals for ordering impossible and costly attacks, and taught that the task of an army was not merely to wreak material havoc on the enemy but to destroy his morale, his determination to fight on, and even his willingness to do so.

Alfred may or may not have known about the PunicWars, but his conduct of the campaign had more than a touch of the Fabian (though not the Delayer ...) A quick reading gives the impression that the Danes were dictating the speed and directions, and Alfred and his Saxons were toiling along a day or two in their wake; but in point of fact the Danes were being steadily tempted, and then propelled, to defeat.

Wessex and its king commander and martial sons, with Mercia and its experienced ealdorman Æthelred, would undoubtedly present an invader in 894 with different problems from those of 870 and 877. But these Danes were a powerful, well-organised army, with a leader in the cast of the earlier invaders-in-chief, perhaps of the same dangerous family line.

Ivar son of Ragnar – Halfdan son of Ragnar – and now Hæsten or Hæstan or Hastin: not listed among Ragnar’s brood, but almost certainly belonging there, and a Viking strong in reputation, for he had sailed with Bjørn Járnsída’s two-year raiding voyage to the North African coast and the South of France and Italy in 859-862, and the account makes it pretty clear that he went as second-in-command, a post that his captain, for pride of kin, would not have willingly given to any man but a Ragnarsson.

Since those happy days he and his followers had fought with the Bretons against the French, and gone on to attack Bourges and Orleans, until in 872 they captured Angers, where the Frankish king Charles the Bald besieged them and forced them to make peace. They remained in the Loire country until 882, when the king expelled them and they went back to the favourite raiding-grounds in Picardy and on the Seine. But in 885 they, and many thousand other Vikings, overreached themselves in an attempt to capture Paris. They used sophisticated siege engines and unsophisticated frightfulness against a small garrison, but could not break them. At length a new king of the Franks, Charles the Fat, raised the siege but let the Vikngs leave and raid elsewhere – in fact, paid them. Nevertheless, they retired discomfited. Their Cockayne in Picardy was under threat, and they turned their minds to an old but neglected source of wealth and comfort, England.

The size of the fleet and army they assembled, however, make it clear that this was meant to be more than a widespread raid: it would be a conquest of the whole land, or at least a campaign to win land permanently and make Danish homes for themselves, as some of the survivors of the Great Heathen Host had done. Haesten and other jarls and leaders had brought their wives and children, whom they would have left at home when merely raiding.

By 893 they were ready, and their movements in the early stages bear the mark of imaginative, ambitious planning and strategic venture – and perhaps of too little respect for the skill and intelligence of their enemy. They had made preliminary contact with discontented Danes in East Anglia, where in 890 Guthrum-Athelstan had died, and it seems that Haestan built an extemporary stronghold at Benfleet, in the extreme south of Essex where the Thames flows out to the sea. When Hæstan’s assault had made progress, these Danes and others from Northumbria would join in.

In 893 the watchers in Kent saw the first of the invasion force. A ‘great host’ – from Flanders, not Hæstan’s – had also gone to Boulogne ‘and were there provided with ships so that they crossed in one voyage, *horses and all*:’ a provision for going straight ahead with the invasion and not waiting till they had commandeered English mounts.

This large fleet sailed into the estuary of the River Lym or Lymne[[106]](#footnote-106) (later the Rother) which flowed out of the great forest of Anderida, and the crews then hauled their ships four miles upstream and there captured a fort. (Ironically, it was one of those which the local defenders had been reluctant to spend time on, and the half-dozen villeins who lived in it offered no resistance). The Danes ‘demolished it and built for themselves a stronger one at a place called Apletreo (Appledore)’. Soon after this, Hæstan with a smaller fleet of eighty ‘light barks’, (2000 - 3000 men?), sailed into the estuary of the Thames and along the Swale, the south channel of the Isle of Sheppey, to the royal vill of Milton, (now Milton Regis), and there he built a fort.[[107]](#footnote-107) (The commander of the larger fleet is not named. Could it have been Bjørn Járnsída? )

Earlier Vikings had devastated Sheppey in 832 and wintered there in 855. Ten years later they had, as recorded earlier, squatted in Thanet until paid by the islanders to go away and ravage elsewhere in East Kent. The ‘army’ of 893 may have contained a cadre of greybeards from those days, but it seems improbable that they would waste time and energy on a piecemeal conquest of this sub-kingdom. It is far more likely that while retaining bases whose fortifications they would improve in their customary manner and install a garrison, and with a fleet ready for advance (or, if defeated, safe retreat), they would try to advance on parallel lines up the Thames Valley and along the Sussex and Hampshire coasts. The position, however, had a grave weakness. The two armies were mutually ‘incommunicable’ Some twenty miles of Kent separated them, with the eastern part of the great forest of Anderida, which altogether measured 120 miles by 30 and rose to 800 feet above sea level. It was not the ‘dark, impenetrable wood’ of poetry: King Harold brought his army through it on the way to Hastings; but Danish messengers, unless in force, would either lose themselves or fall to Saxons on the prowl. Haesten, like Hubba fifteen years before, had ‘acted on a mistaken assumption’, and in due time he would pay.

And thus began the four campaigns which sent Haestan and his army careering, often ’at full stretch’, across the Midlands,down into Wales, up to the North, down again, across to East Anglia, for most of four years, sometimes besieged, starved and beaten, but never down for long, and resurgent to march or ride and fight again.

Hæstan cannot have been much less than 60 years old, but he had lost none of his ferocious energy, and his reputation was still formidable. Besides that, the Danes in Northumbria and East Anglia, who had sworn lasting peace with Alfred, broke out into open support for the invaders and joined with them for plundering. Any delay in response could be fatal to the English, and King Alfred counter-attacked straightway. He had already reorganised his forces, ‘dividing the levies into two sections, so that there was always half at home and half on active service’ to ensure that the vital work of ploughing and harvesting would always be done. Now he ‘gathered his levies and marched into Kent and ‘encamped between the two heathen armies, in a place of great natural strength, inasmuch as it was surrounded on all sides by streams, whose waves ran high, and whose banks were steep, and woods jutted out on all sides: so that if the enemy took the field for the purpose of plundering or fighting, he might engage them without delay.’[[108]](#footnote-108)

As in the Sedgemoor campaign many years before, ‘almost every day other of the king’s troops, both from the levies and also from the fort, went to attack them (either by day or by night’); and not only Alfred’s army, but ‘nearly everyone’ in Kent, whether Saxon or Jute, in the king’s army or in the cities, ‘let no opportunity slip of killing (Danes) when they were off their guard.’

Soon the Danes in Milton, with no prospect of easy pickings, had had enough, and Alfred, with the worry of the larger host and the Northumbrian Danes on his mind, was content to reach an agreement with Hæsten, allowing him to vacate the fort and take his warriors to their ships in Essex to the base he had previously established in Benfleet. Hæsten gave Alfred ‘very many’ hostages, including two of his sons, for the king, too often disappointed by the Vikings’ oatcake oaths, knew that only the safety of the family would hold Hæsten to his word. At Alfred’s request Hæstan also allowed his sons to be baptized – a provision that he must have thought pointless, but it worked out in his favour in the end.

The larger army in Appledore was not so quickly disposed of. Relying on their numbers to carry them through, they left Appledore, perhaps under cover of night, and ‘went about in bands, sometimes on horse, sometimes on foot ... ravaging wherever they were certain there were none of the king’s forces’. They plundered heavily and wide in Hampshire and took a ‘larger and richer booty’, and then made north for the Thames to cross into Essex, presumably because the ox-carts with their tons of plunder could not possibly be taken on the longships. But greed undid them.

The king had detached his son Edward, who was in his early twenties, with an independent command to deal with the raiders, and the prince straightway gave proof of a military ability equal to his father’s – and in due time, beyond. Rallying the Hampshire levies he caught up with the raiders at Farnham, many miles short of a crossing-place, recovered the plunder and put them to flight. The survivors struggled across the Thames somehow, (‘fled across the Thames without using any ford,’ says the Chronicle,) ‘and still hard pressed by levies’, for by an extraordinary coincidence that would strain any fiction, just on the north bank of the Thames they found themselves in a second Farnham,[[109]](#footnote-109) in which, a thousand years later, legend still told of a battle between Saxons and Danes). They fled on up the River Colne and took refuge on Thornige[[110]](#footnote-110) (Thorney),an island in Iver, Bucks. There the Saxons hemmed them in, but the siege took so long that the levies came to the end of their tour of duty and their provisions, and the king with the relieving division met them as they were straggling away. The Danes made no attempt to break out, as their king (still unnamed) had been grievously wounded at Farnham and was too ill to be carried away, .

Unseen allies came to the rescue. Alfred learnt that another force of Danes, from Northumbria and East Anglia, seizing their first real chance in fifteen years, had collected about forty ships which sailed ‘north about’ - which was not rounding Cape Wrath but sailing from a harbour in the north-west - and besieged ‘a fort in Devon by the north sea’ (perhaps Pilton, near Barnstaple); and another hundred had sailed round to the south coast and up the estuary of the Exe and were besieging Exeter. ‘When he heard this, the king was moved, not to fear by reason of the audacity of the enemy, but to fury***[[111]](#footnote-111)*** by reason of his subjects being besieged.’ Fury may be, but faced with the triple threat, Alfred reacted with calculated, cool daring. He detached a small part of his army to deal with the current Danes and keep track of them when they eventually left Iver, and himself detached all the ‘cavalry’ and took this mounted force at speed to the heartland and Exeter.

Arriving there, he found that the Danes had retired to their ships, but the fort on the north coast remained under threat. It must not be left in enemy hands, and the retaking must not be left to a subordinate, even the capable ealdorman. The plan of the burgh, at once the stronghold and the refuge of a threatened people, was the king’s creation, and he responsibility rested with him. Strangely, no detailed account of his North Devon campaign survives, but it must have involved a seaborne attack on the Vikings’ ships and then a siege and their eventual withdrawal; an affair of weeks, if not the whole summer.

When the Danes who had besieged Exeter sailed for home they put in at Chichester to harry the neighbourhood, but the garrison gave them a rough reception, slaying ‘many hundreds’ - or at least a sizeable number - and capturing some of their ships

In the meantime the work that Alfred had left to the watchers at Iver prospered in the hands of prince Edward, who was joined by ealdorman Aethelred of Mercia with reinforcements from London. The island could not be taken without considerable loss of life, and so, to break the stalemate, Edward offered terms to the Danes, stipulating that they should leave English territory, but leaving them free to join their allies in the east’. A compromise? No doubt, but the mark of a wise general, for Wessex was never in a position to waste resources, whether human or material, and his farmer-soldiers would willingly live a little longer. More to the military point, it led to greater profit in the end than any bloodbath.

The Danes’ destination was unknown, but it seems that as soon as they moved off the Saxons broke camp and followed at a discreet distance, posting scouts far enough ahead to observe the Danes’ movements and yet keeping them unaware of the pursuit. This went on for some days, until the Danes skirted the north of London and went on east and were clearly heading for Hæstan’s fort at Benfleet.

Here the Saxons must have taken a pause, for they did not know the strength of the enemy at Benfleet. It was formidable, because Hæstan’s army and the ships fom Appledore and Milton had been brought here, and now the survivors from Iver. But Hæstan rashly weakened it by taking a large contingent raiding in Mercia. Naturally the news of his depredatons reached London within days, and the garrison joined up with the reinforcements from the west on a cautious approach to Benfleet, concealed by the marsh and woodland to the north of London, and captured the fort. ‘A severe battle was fought with the pagans, and the Christians put them to flight at the first onset, demolished their works, took whatever they found there, carried their wives and children to London, sank some of their ships, burned others, and transported some to London and Rochester. They took Hæsten’s wife and two sons before he came back to Benfleet from his raiding, and brought them to king Alfred’, who had returned from Devon. He treated them well and restored them to Hæstan, because one of them was his godson and the other was Æthelred’s; ‘but, again making peace and receiving hostages, he not only restored to the father his wife and children, but presented him with a large sum of money.’

Haestan, in fact, had soon returned to the defeated army and together they had moved a few miles further east and built a new fort at Shoebury, as far away from the Saxon army as dry feet would carry them into the furthest corner of the Dane-friendly land **–** (the desolate South Essex of marsh and creek where Richard Sharpe and Patrick Harper stirred up nearly as much trouble as Hæstan, if in a better cause). Hæstan quickly found that the immediate neighbourhood offered no prospect of recouping his losses, and presumably Alfred’s ‘large sum of money’ was meant to persuade him to keep to his self-constructed cage for a while and put off his inevitable prowl outside until the Wessex defenders were refreshed and strong.

The king’s relinquishment of Hæstan’s wife and sons, his refusal to profit by their position as hostages, might be paralleled in other wars between armies observing a mutually agreed code, but in the teeth of the Vikings it was an extraordinary gesture. His strong compassion must have been the deep wellspring, but above that, his pledged word and, as he interpreted it, solemn duty to guard the godson committed to his spiritual care, those were the conditions that left him no choice. And it is doubtful that his hard-set soldiers, knowing the reason, would have disapproved.

In this way closed Hæstan’s first campaign.

Humiliated by failure and Alfred’s magnanimity, he must have revenge, and as soon as reinforcements had joined him he set out on a great raid, plundering first on the banks of the Thames and then up along the Severn. But the various regions of Saxon England, ‘not being able to endure any longer this terrible annoyance,’[[112]](#footnote-112) had at last learnt to put aside their particular interests and work and fight together for Wessex and Mercia. Ealdorman Æthelred followed upon the invaders’ heels with the men of Mercia; the ealdormen of Somerset and Wilts brought their contingents; the king’s thanes, to whom he had entrusted the defence of different forts, towns and cities ‘both eastward of Pedreda (the River Parret) and westward of Selwood’, (that is, most of Saxon Somerset), ‘collected a great army against the enemy;’ and as well as this mighty host, the Welsh, although they justifiably had no love for Wessex or Mercia, decided that the devils they knew were less deadly than the new demonic horde, and sent auxiliaries to the allies. They all stepped it out in pursuit of the Danes and caught up with them at Buttington,[[113]](#footnote-113) on the banks of the Severn near Welshpool, and besieged from both sides of the river the island fortress into which the Danes had retreated. There they sat for several weeks. Some of the Danes starved to death. Others, having been reduced to eating their horses, broke out of the fort and engaged in battle on the east bank. Their privations had worn them down and ‘very great slaughter was made of them’, but not without Saxon cost, for the king’s thane Ordheh was slain, along with many others of that rank and an uncounted number of unnamed working-day warriors. In the end the surviving Danes were chased off to find their way back to Shoebury, their wives, their ships, and more trouble.

Hæstan is not mentioned in this second campaign, but the planning and responsibility were his, and he and his Vikings were no nearer achieving their ambition. The victory, as before, rested with the king’s ealdormen and their stolid, part-time infantry.

Two lost battles, a dozen useless skirmishes and the loss of some hundreds if not thousands of skilled fighters did not tempt the Danes to withdraw or even ease up; but they had outworn their welcome in Essex, even among the settled Danes, and they can have left little worth plundering. They needed to move before winter, and decided to aim for Chester, where they might get reinforcement from Scandinavian Ireland, and raid a part of Mercia which had escaped them till now. Besides, the district adjoined that peninsula between the River Dee and the Mersey where Norwegians were beginning to settle : the Wirral.

They again collected a ‘great army from East Anglia and Northumbria’, ‘left their wives, their wealth and their ships’, and made one of those forced marches in which they excelled, through Mercia, pausing only to pillage, and reached Chester before the lieutenants of the pursuing army of king Alfred and Aethelred could overtake them. (The king had by now returned from North Devon and was almost certainly involved). But the hoped-for stronghold of Chester became a death-trap. The Saxons won back the herds and flocks that the Danes had pillaged, burnt some of the cornfields and turned their horses loose in others. The starving Danes would have no chance in a battle in this ‘scorched earth’. They turned away into Wales and remained there from the autumn of 893 to the summer of 894, devastating the country down through Brecon, Gwent and Glamorgan to the southern shore. Then, with none of the familiar ships to escape in, they retraced their steps, and made their way back to Essex. But with unwonted caution, they chose not to go across Mercia, for fear of the Mercians, but up through Northumbria and round to the east, and so down to Essex and their wives and ships. Then all together ‘they betook themselves to a little island in the sea, called *Meresig* (Mersea)’. Verdict on the third campaign: courage and hardihood manifest, but very few silver pennies and not one yard of Wessex earth.

Despite this, they did not linger around, and in the autumn of 894 they mounted yet another attack. They drew – or rowed – their ships up the Thames and then turned north some twenty miles up the River Lea. Here they built a fort and resisted an attack by the garrison and militia of London, but apart from this they seem to have been left undisturbed until the king personally took the matter in hand. In the late sumnmer or autumn of 895 he came and camped near the fortress while the corn was being reaped, so that the Danes could not interfere with the harvest. ‘One day, as he was riding along the banks he looked out for a spot where he could block up the bed of the river.’[[114]](#footnote-114) He found this below the Danish emplacement and there built an obstacle or weir (Whence the name Ware?), and so prevented the Danes from taking out their ships The Danes realised their peril, but surrender was far from their minds. This time they did not venture to test the defences of Wessex. They sent their wives back to East Anglia, abandoned their ships, and set off on yet another forced march – or ride on commandeered horses - across Mercia to the familiar Severn valley, to a place near the site of Bridgnorth called Quattford, where they built a fort and spent the winter.

The Londoners took away some of the ships and broke up others, but the Danes of the Lea valley had lived to raid and ravage another day.

In the spring the Danes at Quattford went their separate ways, some to Northumbria, some to East Anglia, and ‘those that were penniless’ and to whom the war had brought only disillusion, ‘got themselves ships and went south over sea to the Seine.’

Thus, after three years, ended the enterprise of Hæstan and the second Great Heathen Army, in failure and withdrawal from Wessex soil.

They had always had the advantage of initiating action and of being able to retire to Danish areas if that action failed, and for the latter reason the English could not crush them utterly and expel them without a wider war.

They seem to have learnt respect for Wessex and turned instead to Mercia. But time and again their ventures took them beyond the safety line to reach their goal, and Alfred and his army turned it into a prison. ‘Alfred’s opponents in this war were as vicious as any others he had faced but the old fox had become quite wily, and so the invaders were, it seemed, foredoomed to fail’[[115]](#footnote-115) – but hindsight in advance is in chronically short supply. .

Any Dane who cared to review those three years would have found little to be sung by the harpers, and much to forget: the expulsion from Kent, the loss of battle and booty at Farnham, the defeats in Devon, the humiliation of the capture of families at Benfleet, the entrapment and starvation at Buttington, the ‘scorched earth’ at Chester, the weary sojourn in Wales, the long, toilsome march back to East Anglia and the care to avoid the Saxon enemy – how hurtful to their pride! **–** their debacle on the River Lea when outwitted by the king of Wessex, and lastly, the safe but undemanding squat at Quat. Battles that they should have won in the old style had been lost to the Saxons; and of the Saxon land that they coveted, they had, as the second Great Heathen Army, won none to keep.

Haestan now vanished from history. If he had derived any satisfaction from his war it can only have been the vicarious one of knowing the suffering he had inflicted on Wessex. The chronicler wrote in 897, ‘The enemy had not, thank God, entirely destroyed the English nation; but they were much more weakened in these three years by the disease of cattle, and most of all of men; so that many of the mightiest of the king’s thanes, that were in the land, died within the three years’ – (and those of lower rank no doubt by thousands, including the Danes at Repton). ‘Florence’ of Worcester, two hundred years later, wrote this lament:‘ Oh! with what incessant troubles, with what grievous trials, in what dreadful and lamentable ways was all England harassed, not only by the Danes who held possession of different parts of her, but also by these children of Satan.’ The Saxons prayed fervently for some relief, a breathing space to recover from war and regain strength for the daily toil of peace.

# THE CLOSE OF ALFRED’S REIGN

A

lmost as if they had heard the prayers of Wessex, the ‘heathens’ in East Anglia and Northumbria answered violently in the same year. They came and harassed the south coast, mainly with long, swift ships they had built many years before. But again the king out-generalled them, or rather, out-admiralled, for he ordered new warships to be built to meet the Danish ones, ‘of twice the length and twice as deep, which were swifer and did not heel so much, so that by their weight they might destroy the enemy’s ships.’[[116]](#footnote-116)

A Viking flotilla of six ships came to the Isle of Wight, did much harm there and also made a series of raids in Devon and several places along the coast, ending up in Poole harbour. The king then ordered nine of the new ships to put out and they blockaded the entrance from the open sea. Three of the Viking ships had been beached at the upper end of the harbour, probably drawn up on rollers, and the crews had gone ashore, but the other three sailed out.

At the entrance to the estuary the English engaged them in a fierce battle, seized two of the ships and slew the men. (The third escaped and eventually reached East Anglia, though the few members of her crew who survived were badly wounded).

By this time, however, the ebb of the tide had left the English fleet dangerously grounded, for three of the ships were on the same side of the channel as the Danish ones, but the other six were all on the opposite side, so that none of them could reach the others.

Now the situation at Combwich many years before was repeated, but in reverse, for this time the Danes who had gone ashore went to the three ships to put them out of action before attempting to run for the open sea.

The fight was short but fierce. The English lost sixty men, but the Danes lost twice as many, and they hastened to get away, launching over the rollers and rowing out to sea while the crews of the other six English vessels could only wait for the next tide to float them off.

The Danes, though, were so badly crippled in the fight that they could not row past Sussex. A high sea cast them ashore, they were captured, brought to the king alive at Winchester and there hanged on gibbets, for as pirates and freebooters they forfeited all the politic, creative clemency offered to Guthrum and his army twenty years before.

With that, for the few years remaining to him, Alfred enjoyed freedom from the onslaughts of the Northmen and, infinitely more important to him, the freedom and time, though all too brief, to fulfil his supreme triune ambition: to ‘secure peace, good government and education for his people.’ Something has been written in earlier pages concerning his methods, but one cannot leave King Alfred without again recalling the compound of moral qualities with which he was endowed and which he continually sought to improve. They were, in war, his high courage and decision in battle, mastery of strategy won by experience, readiness to endure and wait in patience; in government, his prime concern and planning for a stronger system of defence both on land and at sea, and protection for his people against the Vikings and also against oppression, misrule and maladministration of the law; and in his vision for the future of Wessex, to restore the culture that the Vikings’ destruction of monasteries, its storehouses, had sent into decline; to invite scholars, artists and craftsmen from every nation to come and teach the English to love the ways of wisdom, beauty and art; and to provide schooling and education not merely for the sons of nobles and officials but for ‘all the free-born young men in England who have the means to apply it, that they may be set to learning ... until the time that they can read English writing properly.’

The first and never-ending duty of a monarch is defence of the realm, but Alfred saw it as more than military, as defence in depth. Wessex must be saved in war, agreed, but it bears reiterating that he desired to move far beyond and create a Wessex living at peace with herself, a kingdom in which Wisdom (to sum up all virtue in one word) was treasured and re-created by her people to hand on the rest of the world. Prizing as he did the Classical learning which embodied the literature of Rome and the Scriptures and other Christian writings, he himself translated some of them into ‘the language that we can all understand’as examples of that ‘essential wisdom.’ But something unforeseeable emerged: the English language. It existed already, of course, in daily use in various dialects by all men and women, and the poems that have survived show its vigour, its fitness to speak the courage of the warrior or the sorrow of the wanderer, the exile: classic themes of poetry in nearly every age. But for all matters of state and church, the men of learning held by Latin, and held the Saxon speech as of little account. But Alfred, seeing with unique vision the nature and needs of his beleaguered people, took this Saxon word-chest with its content of rich but untreated gold and rare but uncut jewels, and with the logic and measured elegance of the Latin Classics to guide him, created an English prose capable of clearly and logically expressing both the mater of everyday life and, in the fullness of time, the most abstract thought. As noted earlier, ‘in his own writings he moved with a simplicity and clarity that did justice to the dignity of the old Saxon speech.’

He may fairly be named the first English writer, and it is thanks to his example and encouragement that the Chroniclers went on writing in (Old) English long after the Saxon state had been engulfed in the Norman night.

Strangely, when Alfred died, on Wednesday 20 October 901, the chroniclers made little of it, but two hundred years later, with vision enhanced by time, ‘Florence’ of Worcester wrote this paean that it would be shame to omit:

Renowned, warlike and virtuous,

A careful provider for the needs of widows, wards, orphans and the poor;

The most skilful of Saxon poets;

Adored by his subjects, and affable and most liberal to all;

A man of prudence, fortitude, justice and temperance;

Most patient under the infirmity which troubled him;

Most discreet and persevering in enforcing the judgments of his courts of law;

Most watchful and devout in the service of God.

The beliefs and ideals that inspired and impelled the king to defend and rebuild the soul of Wessex, prudence, fortitude, temperance and the service of God, do not find a universal echo to-day, but at least one of his virtues remains: the desire for justice and fair play.

# THE DANES ATTACK YET AGAIN

Wessex and Mercia join forces

K

ing Alfred, when he died, could lay down his burden with an easier mind than at any time in his life, for he and his wife and consort Ealswith had produced and reared a young family of remarkable distinction, the foremost being his son Edward and his daughter Æthelfleð or Æthelfled (‘noble beauty’), whom he entrusted in marriage to Æthelred, ealdorman of Mercia, a valiant and wholly dependable ally against the Danes. Both children inherited his devotion to his little country and his courage and prowess in combat; and now they would show their fitness to rule Wessex, defend her and spread her influence throughout England and abroad. Edward inherited in full measure his father’s dedicationto Wessex, his skill and courage in battle, his military leadership, his statecraft, his readiness to put past injuries behind him for the sake of a secure peace – but added to this more than a touch of ruthlessness when there was no other way.

Before that, and as soon as he came to the throne, it became obvious that the respite from the Danes enjoyed by his father in his last years could not last, for Edward had to defend his throne from a danger and a rival within. Æthelwold, son of King Alfred’s brother and predecessor Athelstan and therefore Edward’s cousin, seems to have felt that the witan had passed him over unjustly in acknowledging Edward as the rightful successor to Alfred. Whatever the reason, he forcibly seized royal estates in east Dorset, and declared himself ready to stand a siege in Wimborne. Edward occupied the pre-Roman earthwork Badbury Rings, and Æthelwold fled by night and joined the Danes, who ‘accepted him as king’ – surely only of Wessex, not of themselves. In 902 he appeared in Essex with a fleet he had got together overseas to undertake a great raid in Mercia and northern Wessex, and ‘seduced the host in East Anglia to begin hostilities, with the result that they harried across Mercia and came to Cricklade and there crossed the Thames -­­­­­- into Wessex territory. They seized all that they could, both in Braydon Forest[[117]](#footnote-117) and in the country around.’ In reprisal, King Edward ravaged a part of East Anglia as far north as the fens and then (903), at the Holme, an island on the southern edge of the great fens, joined battle with Æthelwold and his Danes.

The sequence of events thereafter is not certain, but beyond doubt this was more than a clash of arms: it was slaughter on both sides, leading to a Danish victory, though the contemporary Chronicle does not say so,[[118]](#footnote-118) and Edward had to order a general retirement. His Kentish contingent, however, refused to follow, although he sent seven messengers to them, and the Danes, though sore stricken, mounted a sudden attack and ‘cut them to pieces’ and made a monstrous slaughter of the leading men of Kent. The victory, however, was even more costly for them than for the Saxons, and both sides drew apart for a while. Æthelwold had been killed in the battle, and the rebellion subsided, but the Saxon army had suffered severe losses and needed at least a truce to recover, and at *Ittingaford*, near Buckingham, Edward made peace with the Danes of East Anglia, with the conditions that they should give up heathenism and respect the right of sanctuary, and that offences across the borders should be judged and atoned for by the court of the offender – a move to limit the danger of a small raid becoming a casus belli.

## **The Making of England**

For the 24 years of King Edward’s reign, the slow march of the English people toward unity moved on from the defence of Wessex, for the king, acting generally on the principle that the most effective form of defence is attack, took an army into Kent to clear out the Danes, and nearly every summer into Mercia, once to expel a Northumbrian army but generally to recapture towns that had fallen to the Danes and rebuild them. It was said of King Edward, ‘He was inferior to his father in the cultivation of literature, but his equal in dignity and power, and his superior in glory’ - military fame. His behaviour, though, was not that of a conqueror but, making due allowance, of a liberator, for ‘he built many cities and towns, and rebuilt some which had been destroyed,[[119]](#footnote-119) and he wrested from the hands of the Danes all East Saxony (Essex), East Anglia, Northumbria, and several Mercian provinces, which they had long possessed’. In 910 a combined Wessex and Mercian army defeated a powerful Northumbrian Danish invasion at Tettenhall, near Wednesbury; and in the end ‘all the population turned to him, that was settled in Mercia, both Danish and English.’[[120]](#footnote-120) But in the long meantime the labour of defence and reclamation was eased on Edward’s shoulders by a partnership for which it is hard to find an equal in all of England’s military history.

Chroniclers speak of ‘the invincible King Edward’ and ‘the most invincible king of the English’, and our acceptance of his displacement from the status of Edward I by Norman historians is shameful, but the credit for the results in Mercia was not wholly his, and it is a pleasure and duty to pay a especial tribute to the incomparable lady, his royal sister Æthelflæd, the Lady of Mercia.

# The Lady of Mercia

T

he dynastic marriage of King Alfred’s daughter Æthelflæd with Æthelred, ealdorman and virtual king of Mercia, in the early 790s, became, one might say, a resounding success, a partnership of equal minds and equal devotion to the affairs of Mercia in partnership with Wessex. Æthelflæd enjoyed all the personal and educational advantages of her father’s court, and she and her brothers were treated as equals as far as the alarms and excursions allowed – and indeed, they were bound to one another by strong mutual affection. As well as these social advantages which taught her the arts of persuasion and command, she inherited the heroic mettle of her father, and all these qualities she displayed in her husband’s court in Mercia. Besides, although the title of queen had never been used in Wessex, here in Mercia she undoubtedly stood on terms of equality with her husband and supported him actively in government and the defence of the realm.

In 912, ‘after a well-spent life, her husband Æthered (sic), a most honourable man, ealdorman and patrician, lord and subregulus of the Mercians, died ;’[[121]](#footnote-121) but Æthelflæd did not retire into sedate widowhood. Her brother King Edward took over London and Oxford ‘and all the lands which belonged thereto’, but he trusted enough in her capability and determination to confirm her in her husband’s vice-regal role – a rare, perhaps unique, distinction.[[122]](#footnote-122)

At this point, before going into detail, one may simply tabulate the names of the towns and forts that Edward and his sister founded or strengthened or confirmed in command in their few years together:

EDWARD ÆTHELFLÆD

(with Æthelred): fortified Worcester

**907** rebuilt ruined walls of Chester

garrisoned Hereford;

rebuilt Gloucester;

**913** Hertford North; Maldon *Scergeat*; Bridgnorth; Tamworth; Stafford;

**914** Hertford South; (Severn shore) Eddisbury; Warwick;

**915** Buckingham Chirbury; *Weardburh*; Runcorn

**916** *Wigingamere[[123]](#footnote-123)* ; Thelwall;[[124]](#footnote-124) Brecon

**917**  Derby; *Bremesburh* (not yet identified)

**918** Leicester

**919** Bedford

**920** Maldon

**921** (Tempsford); Passenham; Towcester

Colchester; (Cambridge);

Cledemutha (Rhuddlan)

**922** Stamford; Tamworth; Nottingham;

(Welsh allegiance);

**923** Bakewell

(Wednesbury, the scene of an Anglian battle with the British and Welsh in the days of conquest, was probably already fortified before King Edward’s time).

These are their approximate positions:

o Thelwall o *Weardbyrig* o Runcorn

o Cledemutha o Eddisbury

o Chester

o Chirbury

o Scergeat

X Brecon: Llangorse oWiningham

oWigingamere

Æthelflæd, on taking command, wasted no time and began to accomplish at least one major work each year for the joint kingdoms, strengthening defences and fortifications and building or restoring a ring of cities near the borders of Mercia to serve much as the ‘burhs’ that Alfred had begun to build in Wessex.

‘In 912 she came to *Scergeat* and built a fortress there, and the same year that at Bridgnorth.’[[125]](#footnote-125)

*Scergeat*, according to the Oxford History of England, has not been positively identified, but this is rather strange, since Symeon of Durham (13th C) explained it thus: A: ‘Domina ad locum qui Sceargate dicitur, venit, idemque munitam exstruisit; dehinc in occidentali plaga Sabrinae fluninis in loco qui Bridge dicitur, aliam aedificavit’ (ed Twysden,153): that is, she demolished the twenty-year (old) Danish fort at Quatt or Quatford and built a new one on the west bank, thus founding the town of Bridgnorth.’ Roger of Wendover says much the same: ‘Anno Domini Dcccxiii Eodem tempore Alfleda Merciorum domina cum exercitu magno apud **Strengate** veniens aedificavit ibi arcem munitam, et in plaga occidentali Sabrinae fluminis, in loco qui Brecges dicitur, aliam restauravit:’ – ‘built there a new citadel, and on the west bank of the Severn, in the place called Brecges, restored the other.’

Perhaps some of the difficulties have been self-created. Some have seen in *Scergeat* a strange clash of Saxon and Dane, with an Abingdon scribe attempting to render the unfamiliar ska- followed by a mis-spelling of the word ‘*gate*’, that is, ‘vertical road’, leading to a fort at the top of the Bridgnorth cliff; and two other fortifications from the same period show evidence of this*: 1*: Scargate Lane, a little to the west of Lincoln: no fortifications now visible, but it is possible that she ordered the construction of a manned advance work in preparation for a move against the Danish borough which was Edward’s next, or very near, objective; and *2*:Scargate, in Chelmsford, was part of the Roman wall, defended unsuccessfully by the Danes in 920 but rebuilt by Edward in the same year.

But more simply, Scergeat seems to be straightforward Anglo Saxon, with ‘scer’: ‘precipitous’ and ‘geat’ (pronounced ye-at’), or ‘gateway’, as in ‘hlidgeat’: ‘swing gate’, or as in Symond’s Yat on the Wye, and nothing could be truer to the narrow gorge and precipitous cliff at Bridgnorth. A folk memory, if no more than that, has persisted that Aethelfleda built her fortress in a site known as Panpuding Hill, and that this could be the village which it protected.

But more than that, its commanding position not only blocked the way in from Wales but also imposed a head of navigation for Danish ships in either direction, for only the sturdiest craft could survive the deluge of boulders, arrows and fire poured down on them from above.

In 913, turning from west to east, ‘by the grace of God, the Lady of the Mercians went with all the Mercians to Tamworth and built the fortress there early in the summer, and afterwards, before Lammas, the one at Stafford ‘on the north side of the river Sowe.’ Tamworth had in fact been the chief town of Mercia in the previous century but had been sacked by the Danes in 874 and had fallen into ruin. She now made it her principal residence.

Her main concern in the next year seems to have been the incursion by a Danish brigade riding out from Northampton and Leicester and slaying many men at Hook Norton, and soon after this, a second troop of marauders riding out toward Luton. Whether Æthelflæd sent out a rallying-call is not known, but ‘when the people of the country became aware (of the raiders) they fought against them and routed them completely, recovering all that they had taken and also a great part of their horses and weapons.’

# On The Western Front, 914

But as soon as that was dealt with, in 914 another attack developed in the Welsh Marches. Seven years before this a new Viking leader, Rolf or Rollo, had established himself on the lower Seine by an agreement with the King of France and become Count of Normandy. He quickly enlarged his territory at the expense of Brittany, and from here in 914 a fleet under two jarls, Ohtor and Hroald, came over and sailed ‘west about’ up to the Severn estuary. They then harried at will along the coast of South Wales and into the Severn, ‘and utterly destroyed everything at the river’s side that they could lay hands on.’[[126]](#footnote-126)

In the Forest of Dean they captured the bishop of Llandaff who was residing in Archenfield, took him ‘in great triumph’ to their ships and demanded forty pounds ransom for him from King Edward.

Archenfield may not be well known outside Herefordshire, but it needs more than a mention. It occupies a few square miles between the Monnow and the River Wye, immediately south of Ross. In the British days it was a small Cymric kingdom, Ergyng or Ercic, but by the 9th century the Saxons of Mercia had gained control and the British became foreigners **–** ‘Welsh’ **–** in their own country, though for centuries more it remained semi-autonomous, ‘neither English nor Welsh’, and its people retained certain rights and privileges.

At any rate, its fame had reached the Vikings, and although the king paid the ransom, to aid relations with the Welsh, the easy success had whetted the Vikings’ appetite and they pressed inland toward Archenfield to try their luck again.

This time they overreached themselves. The men of Hereford and Gloucester, and ‘very many from the neighbouring cities, came out suddenly to meet the pirates and fought them’ long and hard. They slew Jarl Hroald and Ohtor's brother and many others and drove the survivors into an enclosed field (perhaps Kill Dane, near Weston Under Penyard), where they were ‘long and closely beset’ until they gave hostages and promised to leave King Edward's domain.

The repulse of the Danes from Archenfield, did not, however, put an end to their depredations, and it was most probably now that the two battles were fought near Porlock and Williton which left the deepest mark in the folk memory of West Somerset.

The defeated warriors withdrew from the Forest of Dean, but Wessex was not rid of them yet, and the Vikings’ promise was worth no more than the lives of the hostages they had given. King Edward had ordered the coast to be guarded all along the southern shore of the Severn estuary and from Cornwall to Portishead; but despite this the raiders twice in 914 landed and *left their ships on the strand* and plundered *stealthily by night*, east of Watchet and at Porlock”[[127]](#footnote-127) Most probably by this time they had divided into two separate parties, both of which eventually suffered defeat and loss of ships.

The fight near Watchet may have been a sizeable skirmish rather than a pitched battle, but that has not lessened its importance for local people. It is said to have taken place in a flat, marshy field at the foot of the hill which shuts off Williton from the sea. The triangular shape of the field and the memory of the fighting have given it the name of Battlegore, but the antiquity of the name is uncertain, and ‘battle’, a word of French origin, is an unlikely component for an old English place name. Besides, it is hard to believe that the purely local defenders had been able to muster strongly enough to put to flight several hundred Vikings spurred by greed for plunder.[[128]](#footnote-128)

A likelier site may be found in Nettlecombe parish near Huish Barton (formerly Lud or Lod Huish), three miles inland: a high rounded field called Danes’ Knap or Knap Dane and two nearby fields, Brick Dane and Furze Dane, where large quantities of human bones ‘were dug up in the seventeenth century.’[[129]](#footnote-129) The place-name Dane is, of course, not an infallible sign of a Danish connection: more often than not it means ‘(ancient) woodland’; but the triple occurence is persuasive and the legend of a battle here has been preserved to the present day.

It was now, two or three days after the landing, that the defence measures ordered by King Edward proved their worth. The Vikings avoided the positions of strength in Watchet and Willliton and sought out cattle and slaves. Marshy ground gave infantry no great trouble, and they seem to have marched upstream from Doniford, skirting Williton, and still following the watercourse, to Stream and Yarde and then to Huish, where the king’s army together with the garrison of Daw’s Castle, caught them, killed many, and sent the rest scuttling back to where they had left their ships. And a fight, whether at ‘Battlegore’ or at Doniford, was the last stand of the Vikings before the Wessex defence force, joined by some of the garrison of the fort on Cleeve hill (later known as Daw’s Castle), ‘struck them so hard that the only ones to escape were those who fled like cowards to their ships.[[130]](#footnote-130).

**MIKEY TO ADD PHOTO OF BATTLEGORE**

The raid on the vale of Porlock turned out no better for them. They seem to have penetrated two or three miles inland, raiding Porlock village on the way, but onward from Selworthy and a[[131]](#footnote-131) little below Tivington, they were brought to battle and defeated by the local fyrd. Such at least is the evidence of certain place-names: Higher Burrow – the Saxon burh; the field names Earl Cock and Dane How.[[132]](#footnote-132)

Both and east of Watchet and near Porlock, then, the sea-pirates were driven off. The former escaped by swimming out to their ships and took refuge out on Flatholm[[133]](#footnote-133)- the name is said to mean ‘river-island of the fleet’ - and sat there until the food ran out and many died of hunger. The rest went over to South Wales and thence to Ireland. Wessex breathed again.

For the next 40 years the homeland territory of Wessex enjoyed freedom from internal warfare, freedom from threat of invasion, and freedom from Viking raids, and lived the domestic tranquility, more or less, that the old historians never thought worthy to record; and it seems likely that the only military duty incumbent on the men of Wessex was to garrison the forts and places of refuge and be ready to serve if otherwise called. But if sober West Saxons welcomed peace and hoped for more, Wessex could also provide adventure afield for young men as eager for wealth and plunder as any Viking, if something less barbarous, for Wessex’s defence and tranquility were bought by their king’s determination to bring Danish East Anglia back under English control. Understanding the determination of Mercia not to yield independence while they had a chosen and trusted leader, he accepted it realistically, and he and he and his sister planned campaigns, led armies, built fortresses, fought battles, made peace and received Danish submission, each in their own right but for the greater good of the kingdom.

The Archenfield affair did not delay Æthelflæd’s work, and in the next year, 915, ‘at the beginning of summer she built the city called *Eadesbyrig* (Eddisbury)*,* Cheshire, adapting an Iron Age ‘camp’ to form a burh),and at the end of the summer another at *Werwick* (Warwick). Some years earlier she had invited Norwegians to settle in the north of the Wirral, presumably to forestall a larger incursion by the Irish Danes; but her guests had overstepped their boundary somewhat and made nuisances of themselves around Chester. The people of Chester had repelled them, but clearly the old Iron Age ‘camp’ at Eddisbury must be strengthened to discourage marauders.[[134]](#footnote-134) As for Chester, the ruined Roman city, it had to be restored both for the peace of the region and to encourage its development as a major centre for trade with Ireland.

In the same year, closing a gap on the Welsh border, she built a fort at Chirbury, on the English side of Offa’s Dyke to guard the approach from Powys. (The twin town, Trefaldwyn / Montgomery, did not yet exist). But in 916, Welsh raiders made an incursion into roughly the same area as the Vikings and killed an abbot in Mercia. Æthelflæd led an army into Wales, and at Llangorse Lake, near Brecon, ‘captured the wife of the king (of Brecheiniog) and thirty-three other persons’. Nothing is said of the king, who was presumably elsewhere, perhaps Aberhonddu. Llangorse seems to have been his ‘llys’, his ‘country residence’, a ‘crannog’ or artificial island of about a quarter of an acre in the lake, with royal residence and huts for attendants and servants.12 The sequel to the battle was not recorded, but no doubt the lady was restored when the king had made amends and pledged peace.

In the next year, 917, successfully but not without trouble, she ‘won the (Danish) borough of Derby with God’s help, together with all the region that it controlled ; (but) four of her thanes, who were dear to her, were slain there within the gates.’[[135]](#footnote-135)

Nothing is recorded for 918, but it was most probably then that she built Weardbyrig (reputedly unidentified but most likely Warburton, Cheshire, on the Mersey a few miles east of Warrington, and very much a frontier post in line with Thelwall. It must be said that no traces of a burh have been found, but ‘Weardburh’ appears, like Hertford, Maldon, Stafford and Tamworth, as a place where coins were struck only a few years after King Edward’s death. Why it did not develop into a town is unknown.

In 919, ‘at the beginning of the year, ‘by God’s help, (she) peaceably got possession of Leogereceastre (Leicester). At Runcorn she received the submission of nearly all the Danish army which was stationed there. Moreover, the Danes stationed at York, some with promises, and the rest with oaths, engaged that they would in all things act according to her pleasure and by her direction.’

**Her reign was a remarkable achievement**, and after only six or seven years she could look back with pride and satisfaction at having given Mercia - and thus her homeland Wessex – the protection of a ring of fortresses along the borders with Northumbria and the Danelaw, and in the Severn and Thames or border valleys : *Scargeat* (912) and Bridgnorth (913); [Stafford](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stafford)(913); [Eddisbury](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eddisbury_hill_fort) (914); [Warwick](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Warwick) (914); [Chirbury](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chirbury) (915); [Runcorn](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Runcorn) (915) *Weardburh* (918) and *Wigingameere*.[[136]](#footnote-136)

She died later in the year, and one might have hoped that the chroniclers would have awarded her a panegyric as they did to Edmund and Edgar, but no: apart from a brief commendation in an Irish chronicle, there is virtually nothing. Perhaps the monastic mind found a woman’s mastery of the rank and duties reserved for men altogether too much.[[137]](#footnote-137)

Two centuries later, however, Florence of Worcester, with access to information that has not come down to us, wrote : ‘On the 19th of the kalends of June (14th May) 919 the king’s sister Æthelflæd, Lady of the Mercians, died : in the eighth year from the year when she commenced ***her firm but moderate undivided sway over the Mercians. She was a very virtuous woman, and renowned for her prudence and justice.’***

# EDWARD I, ‘THE INVINCIBLE’

K

ing Edward, the Invincible, and Ealdorman Ethelred and the Lady of Mercia had won back much of the land lost to the Danes and fortified it and made it firmly part of Saxon England; but Edward’s hold on the North was much less secure. In the 920s, when ‘on the verge of old age, ‘he was responsible for the good order of a composite state twice as large as the kingdom he had inherited from his father.’ When Æthelfled died she nominated her twenty-year old daughter Ælfwina as her successor, and the witan were content and accepted her. Her uncle did not – perhaps he feared that his niece, though trained by her mother, might not be able to hold Mercia to the union. He removed Ælfwina from government and sent her south to the Wessex court. There is no suggestion of other ill-treatment, and Aelfwina may indeed have exercised a lesser but queenly role as the wife of a “Danish prince”, Earl Leofric II of Mercia. If so, she would have been the great-grandmother of the magnate and rival of the Godwins in the 11th century, and husband of Lady Godiva – but there is no certainty of this, and Ælfwina as probably spent the rest of her life in a nunnery, like her elder sister, who was Abbess of Sherborne.

The Mercians did not take kindly to this, for they could see themselves relegated to the status of ‘junior partners’ in an enlarged Wessex. For the time being they shared in Edward’s campaigns, but revolt was brewing, and it is all the more remarkable a tribute to Edward’s military genius that he achieved victory and subsequent peace-making against this rumbling discontent. One is reminded of Wellington in the Peninsula, infinitely patient, planning, inspiring, and leading always to victory, while ill-served and traduced by enemies at home.

The story has moved on from, strictly speaking, the Defence ofWessex, but Edward’s campaigns were so decisive for the future of Anglo-Saxo-Danish English that they should not be skimmed over. His last’burh’, in the north-west corner of Mercia, reinforced the ‘burh’ at Runcorn, guarded the approach by way of the Mersey and warded off the Northumbrians.The Chronicle says: ‘AD 923. This year went King Edward with an army, late in the harvest, to Thelwæl, and ordered the burh to be repaired, and inhabited, and manned. And he ordered another army also from the population of Mercia, while he sat there, to go to [Manchester](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manchester) in [Northumbria](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northumbria) to repair and to man it.’**7 (missing footnote)**

But now the Mercians’ discontent at the removal of Ælfwina erupted into rebellion, and in the early summer of 924 the men of Chester made common cause with their hereditary Welsh enemies and rose against Edward. He suppressed the rising in a battle near Chester and placed a new garrison in the town, but a few days later, perhaps mortally wounded, he died at Farndon-on-Dee, Cheshire.

Discontent took time to subside, for a strict succession told against the ‘heir apparent’, Edward’s gifted son Athelstan. Edward had been married, in a manner of speaking, five times, and the eldest son of his first marriage, Ælfweard, had, like Æthelweard before him, no mind to stand down. But only twelve days after his father, he too died – (perhaps ‘no comment’ is the only feasible one) - and the witan accepted Athelstan.

# KING ATHELSTAN

E

dward’s son had been greatly favoured by nature and family without being spoilt by it. When as a youth he visited his grandfather’s court, Alfred, impressed by his manifold qualities and fitness for leadership, presented him with a jewelled sword and emblems of kingship and named him as eventual successor to his father Eadweard.

Athelstan was in fact a handsome youth, tall, fair-haired, courageous and proficient in all the ‘accomplishments’ of a young Saxon noble, and he began his reign with the decisive advantage of having been brought up at his aunt Æthelflaed’s court and knowing the leaders of Mercia. (Indeed, the Wessex chroniclers seem to have withheld their full admiration until his massive victory over a combined army of Scots, Cumbrians and Irish Danes).

Ever since Edward’s victory over Æthelwold and the Danes the defence of Wessex had been subsumed in the larger affairs of the confederation of Wessex and Mercia, and so it continued. And thereafter, to sum up his campaigns, he worked and engineered and fought on, with all the brilliance and courage of his father and grandfather, to bring the kingdoms of England under the sway of Wessex, and they all yielded and in a good measure complied. The Five Boroughs, outposts of the Danelaw, were taken back under Saxon control, but with that, a new spirit arose between the contending peoples. Quiet, peaceable Danes who had lived half of their lives in Mercia and put down roots there were not expelled. One may perhaps see in this new attitude of tolerance and acceptance the first outward sign of the birth of a nation, and thus the claim that Athelstan was the first king of All England takes on a more than territorial significance and lustre – and Wessex, too, may enjoy a little of the reflected glory.

Some years later, though, the king of (the east of) Scotland, Constantine, gave refuge to a Viking chief and king whom Athelstan had expelled from Northumbria. Athelstan took this as a *casus belli*, led his army from Wessex up to York and on into Strathclyde, where he ‘put to flight the king of Cumbria, Owain, and marched through Constantine’s country as far as Kirriemuir, while his fleet ravaged the coast as far as the Norse settlement of Caithness.’

Constantine wanted revenge and he organised it on a grand scale. In 938 the triple alliance, Constantine, Owain of Cumbria and Anlaf (Olaf), the heathen king of the Irish Danes, bought a powerful fleet to the mouth of one of the rivers, (‘Florence’ of Worcester says the Humberand he may have had knowledge that has since been lost, but more likely for a joint fleet coming from Ireland and Galloway is the Dee or the Mersey, leading to a landfall on the Wirrall with its newly settled Norwegians. Athelstan and his brother, Eadmund the atheling met them at the head of an army drawn from both Wessex and Mercia and fought the invaders from daybreak till evening at *Brunanburh*.[[138]](#footnote-138) The battle was probably more bloody and costly for the enemy than any other in the century, and it was decisive for Wessex: the kings Constantine and Anlaf ‘took to their ships, terribly cast down by the destruction of their army, and returned to their country with a very few followers.’[[139]](#footnote-139)

One can only admire the strength and resilience of King Alfred’s race, but Athelstan, though ‘the brave and glorious king of the English’, had much more than physical courage and warcraft to his credit. ‘In the brilliance and culture of his reign he stands comparison with his grandfather’.

If the English had not already assigned the title of ‘Great’ to King Alfred, then assuredly his grandson could have carried it with honour. ‘Brave and glorious,’ wrote John of Worcester; and for the author of *Anglo Saxon England*, ‘In character and cast of mind he is the one West Saxon king who will bear comparison with Alfred ...He possessed the physical energy without which no early king could govern well. More remarkable is (his) mixture of devotion and intellectual curiosity ... and (the latter) found a vent in the entertainment of foreign scholars and in the intercourse he maintained with foreign monasteries. More unusual is the touch of humanity shown in the pardon which he granted to criminals willing to make amends, and in his revulsion against the execution of young offenders. In character and cast of mind he is the one West Saxon king who will bear comparison with Alfred.’[[140]](#footnote-140)

When Athelstan died in 937, the chronicler paid him this tribute:

In this year king Athelstan, lord of warriors,

Ring-giver of men, with his brother prince Edmund,

Won undying glory with the edges of swords ...

As was their instinct, from their ancestry,

To defend their land, their treasures and their homes,

In frequent battle against every enemy ...

Footnote missing in-text reference: A new possible location, reported in the press, 29.4.2014, is near Lanchester, Co. Durham, near the Roman fort Longovicium, but this still awaits proof.

# “PEACE, LOVELY PEACE”

T

o sum up the achievements of the royal family of Wessex: for more than a century, from 870 to 97 , they gave their land an almost unbroken line of able, courageous and far-sighted kings, from father to son: Alfred to Edward, to Edward’s sons Athelstan (r.925-940), and Edmund (r.940–946) ‘guardian of kinsmen, doer of deeds, protector of warriors’, who won back the Five Boroughs (Leicester, Lincoln, Nottingham, Derby and Stamford)1 from the Danes. When his brother Eadred succeeded him in 946, Viking and Danish attacks on Wessex had been suspended, and Eadred’s chief concern was a rebellious Northumbria. Here he re-established control and also invaded Strathclyde, extracting from the Scots a promise ‘to do his will in all things!’ He died at Frome in 956 and was buried in Winchester.

With fear of Viking raids in abeyance, young King Eadwig or Edwy, Edmund’s younger son, straightway set out to enjoy himself and improve the shining hour, and his fame, such as it is, rests on a quarrel with the statesman-bishop Dunstan. ‘According to one legend, the feud with Dunstan began on the day of Eadwig's consecration, when he failed to attend a meeting of nobles. When Dunstan eventually found the young monarch, he was *cavorting* with a noblewoman named Ælgifu and her mother Æthelgifu and refused to return with the bishop. Infuriated by this, Dunstan dragged Eadwig back and forced him to renounce the girl as a **‘**[strumpet](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prostitute)**’**.2 Later realizing that he had provoked the king, Dunstan fled to the apparent sanctuary of his cloister, but Eadwig, incited by Ælgifu, followed him and plundered the monastery. Though Dunstan managed to escape abroad, he refused to return to England until after Eadwig's death.’ But as for ‘cavorting’**,** Eadwig was sixteen, unusually handsome, knew it, and was feeling his feet; and one can hardly wonder that the noble ladies should have set their sights on so desirable a prize. Besides, he married Ælgifu, but her triumph was short-lived, for the king lost all Wessex-beyond-the-Thames to his brother Edgar, and died, still barely of age, in October 959.

## King Edgar

The supremacy of Wessex from Cornwall to the Firth of Forth was so firmly established that when Edgar became king it heralded a reign of both external and internal peace such as Wessex had never known, a just reward for the hundred years’defence of the homeland, the liberation of Mercia and the vision of a greater England.

. Edgar did not disappoint them. With the aid and advice of Dunstan and other men of ability and good will he codified the laws, encouraged literature, religion and arts, and established the supremacy of Wessex from Cornwall to the Firth of Forth.

At last King Alfred’s vision of a redeemed and rejuvenated Wessex could become real. For year after year the Chronicle could find no slaughter or massacre to report, and instead recorded Edgar’s virtues and deeds in language verging on the ecstatic;

His reign was prosperous, and God granted him

To live his days in peace; he did his duty,

And laboured zealously in its performance.

Far and wide he exalted God’s praise

And delighted in his law, improving the security

Of his people more than all the kings

Who were before him in the memory of man.

At Bath (*Akemanceaster*) on Whit Sunday 973 King Edgar was anointed or crowned as ‘ruler of the English’, not of Wessex alone. After his coronation he sailed with his fleet to Chester, where ‘six kings came to him and promised to serve him by sea and by land’ and afterwards rowed him on the Dee ... while he held the rudder.’[[141]](#footnote-141) But Edgar died two years later, and the chronicler took up the praise of his hero and mourned him in verse:

Kings honoured the son of Edmund

Far and wide over the gannet’s bath,

And submitted to the sovereign,

As was his birthright.

No fleet however proud,

No host however strong,

Could win booty for itself

In England, while that noble king

Occupied the royal throne.

But when the boy Æthelred came to the throne in 979 and Dunstan withdrew to die, and although the Saxons, when brought to battle, fought with all the death-defying courage of their forefathers, the unity created by the great royal line dissolved at length in rivalry, and for want of a strong leader the national defence crumbled in fear.

Footnote missing in-text reference (The real Ælgifu was very different from this caricature. In a record of the New Minster she appears as one of the ‘illustrious women who, choosing this holy place for the love of God, have commended themselves to the community by the gift of alms’, and churchmen of the highest merit were willing to come to court when both the ladies were present. Most probably Dunstan feared the influence of a Capable Woman on a vain and immature king.)

# THE LONG TWILIGHT OF WESSEX

W

essex had in fact paid a ruinous price for the years of mastery. The cost of the wars in life and treasure can never be told, nor the loss in human dignity as the communities of poor but free farmers gradually sank to the status of units in a developing feudal system, and as chieftains commanding local loyalty were supplanted by nominees of the court. The security dearly bought was dubious and brief, and when, in the 960’s , a new threat appeared in the army and fleet of the expanding kingdom of Denmark,[[142]](#footnote-142) the Danes' blood-brothers in Northumbria and the Danelaw joined in the attack, and eventually much of Wessex was overrun.

Now England’s tribulations began all over again.

Edgar, who had married twice, had died leaving two young sons, Edward, fifteen years old, and his half-brother Æthelred, not more than ten. Edward, the natural heir, succeeded to the throne, and then, not by his particular fault, year by year things went wrong. In the autumn of his coronation year there appeared ‘that star known as ‘comet’ which always raised foreboding and fear. Next year brought ‘a great famine and disturbances throughout England,’ and in 978 ‘the leading councillors of England fell down from an upper story at Calne, (all except archbishop Dunstan, who alone remained standing on a beam): some were severely injured, and some lost their lives.’

So far the Danes had kept their distance, restrained by the great famine and perhaps also by a need to see whether this young king would re-incarnate the kingly and military qualities of his line, as well he might. But a faction had formed among people of influence to support Ethelred, and in 979, when Edward was paying an informal visit to his brother and stepmother in Corfe, Dorset, he was murdered ‘in circumstances of abominable treachery which shocked men who were ready to tolerate any crime of frank violence.’1A (footnote missing) For the chroniclers:

No worse deed for the English was ever done than this

Since first they came to the land of Britain.

Men murdered him, but God exalted him;

In life he was an earthly king,

But after death he is now a heavenly saint;’

and as early as 1001 the murdered king was officially styled ‘Edward the Martyr’.

Thus Ethelred, though most probably innocent of the murder and only thirteen years of age, began his reign under a cloud of suspicion which never entirely dispersed. In the very year of his crowning, 979, much as for Edward, a strange phenomenon in the skies filled people with dread of disasters to come: a blood-red cloud, usually appearing about midnight, took the form of rays of light in various colours, until at the first streak of dawn it faded away - evidently the Aurora Borealis, as no doubt a Viking could have told them.

# The Danes Return to the Attack

The very next year their fears were justified. One pirate-army sacked Southampton and slew most of the people or carried them off into slavery, and the Isle of Thanet, the old pirat-haunt, was again overrun and Cheshire plundered by another army from the North: a disastrous start to a catastrophic reign.

Ethelred was no more than a youth at the time, unversed in government and inexperienced in war, and the blame for the failure to respond to these early attacks must fall not on him but on the rival factions seeking to control him. The epithet ‘Unready’ attached to his name is a mistranslation of the Saxon ‘unræd’(‘ill-advised’) and tells only half the story; it reflects not on him but on the advisers, the witan and others, who so signally failed to give good counsel and put aside petty interests. Ethelred the ‘Ill-advised’ did not wholly lack the salient characteristics of the royal family of Wessex. Florence of Worcester said he was ‘a youth of graceful manners, handsome countenance, and fine person,’ and the Gunnlaugr Saga of Gunnlaugr the Scald added that he was ‘a tall, handsome man, elegant in manners, beautiful in countenance, and interesting in his deportment.’ (He may have left the impression of incompetence, but it needed another Alfred or Athelstan to cope with, let alone repel, the concerted Danish attacks of his later years. On the credit side, in the years of peace he reformed the coinage, issued new laws, and even attempted to improvise a naval force to guard the Thames – typically without successs, due to the desertion of the arch-traitor and favourite adviser, the ealdorman Aelfric. But the years of peacc were not truly so, merely a suspension of Danish attacks bought by the Danegeld, a ruinous burden on the people and increasing at every demand.

From now onward the Danes, with the tacit support of their fellow-Scandinavians in Normandy, descended on England time and time again, to plunder, burn, rape and slay, so that even a mere recital of their visits reads like the threnody of a nation. Indeed, the Chronicle's matter-of-factness may serve to make more vivid the ever-present fear under which the people of Wessex must have lived for all thirty-seven years of Ethelred's unhappy reign:

**981** – For the first time seven ships came and ravaged Southampton and most of the citizens were killed or taken prisoner. Other Danes laid waste Padstow and caused destruction all along the coast of Devon and Cornwall;

**982** - three pirate crews ravaged Portland;

1. Watchet was again attacked and ravaged and Goda, the Devonshire thegn,[[143]](#footnote-143) was

slain and many others with him. For the king’s representative to have defended the little town, and at the cost of his life, hints at its importance. King Alfred had given it the dignity of a “burh”, a fortress in which the people could take refuge in time of danger. The dimensions were carefully calculated for the number of defenders the town could provide, and the remains of this stronghold on the hill immediately west of the town correspond perfectly with the foundation document known as the Burghal Hidage. It was also, with Bath, Taunton and eight other principal towns, the site of a royal mint – and this no doubt explains the enigmatic name of a nearby hamlet: Golsoncott **–** in the Domesday Book *Goldsmithcote* **–** for a goldsmith worked in silver as well. The coinage was the silver penny, and Watchet pennies have been found in Jutland and Sweden. Whether they came from such a raid as this or with danegeld, is unknown, but ‘Vikings turned bourgeois were fair game’[[144]](#footnote-144) For sure, silver was a magnet for the Vikings, and for the Saxons, wealth not to be lightly given away.

In 991 Olaf Trygvasson (later King of Norway) came to Folkestone, nearly the easternmost place in Ethelred’s kingdom south of the Thames, with 93 ships – 2700 men. They harried outside, then sailed to Sandwich and on to Ipswich, plundering the town and overrunning all the countryside. Returning to their boats, they sailed south and put in at Maldon, and then occurred one of those ‘battles long ago’ which, if one of the ‘old, unhappy, far-off things’, can still arouse our wondering admiration.

The ancestors of the people of Essex (East Saxons) had been among the first of the Saxon invaders,[[145]](#footnote-145)probably before the legendary Hengist and Horsa, but their small kingdom had been vulnerable, and when King Egbert defeated the Mercians in 825 they were not unwilling to accept the Wessex overlordship and protection. They had suffered badly in the great onslaught of the Danes in 869, when their king Edmund was killed.’ (Legend has it that they killed Edmund at one of their feasts by pelting him with ox bones, a less excruciating death than some they devised for their captives). Now, 120 years later, the martial tradition was not lost to these farmers and fishermen, and they confronted the Danes as their forefathers had done, with shouts of scorn and derision.

The Danes landed on a small island (thought to be Northey) just off the marshy coast, but here they were halted by the rising tide which covered a causeway to the mainland. The Essex ealdorman, ‘Ethelred’s earl’ Byrhtnoth, brought his Essex troops down to the water’s edge and on to the causeway. At the turn of the tide one of the Danes shouted across to them, “The brave seafarers have sent me to say that they will be so good as to let you give them gold rings in return for peace” – and much more. “We’ll take to the sea with the tribute you pay, and keep our promise of peace.”

Then Byrhtnoth spoke. He grasped his shield

and brandished his slender ashen spear,

resentful and resolute he shouted reply,

“Can you hear, pirate, what these people say?

They will pay you a tribute of whistling spears,

of deadly darts and proven swords,

weapons to pay you, to pierce, to slit

and slay you in the storm of battle.”

When the tide had ebbed it uncovered a ford, which two of Byrhtnoth’s best warriors defended so fiercely that the Danes drew back. Then Byhrtnoth, no doubt confident of the outcome and pouring scorn on the enemy, called out,

‘Now the way is clear for you. Come over to us quickly,

warriors to the slaughter. God alone can say

who will control the field of battle.’

The ‘slaughter-wolves’ waded across, the men of Essex formed a shield wall, they joined battle. The Danes at length prevailed. Many of the defenders fled the field, and the core of the defence dwindled to Byrhtnoth and his retainers and comrades of many years. They fought fiercely until Byrhtnoth was struck down.

Still they fought on, till few were left, and an old comrade, Byrhtwold, grasped his shield and spoke these words which ring deep and clear over a thousand years:

Hige sceal the heardra, heorte the cenre,

Mod sceal the mare, the ure mægen lytladh.

Her lidh ure ealdor eall forheawen,

god on greote; a mæg genornian

se dhe nu fram this wi gplegan wendan thenceth.

Ic eom frod feores: fram ic ne wille,

ac ic me be healfe minum hlaforde

be swa leofan menn liegan thence.

Will shall be the harder, heart the keener

Courage the greater, as our strength lessens.

Here lies our leader, hewn down,

A hero laid in the dust; let grief befall

Any man who thinks to flee from this battle.

I am old. I will not go from here;

But I mean to lie by the side of my lord,

By the man I loved so dearly.

This high t rode far and wide as they pleased, destroying and laying waste almost the whole of west Kent. Then the king and his councillors decided to advance against them with both naval and land levies; but when the ships were ready there was delay from day to day, which was very galling for the unhappy sailors manning the vessels. Time after time the more urgent a thing was the greater was the delay from one hour to the next, and all the while they were allowing the strength of their enemies to increase; and as they kept retreating from the sea, so the enemy followed close on their heels. So in the end these naval and land preparations were a complete failure, and succeeded only in adding to the distress of the people, wasting money, and encouraging their enemy.’

In the year 1000, when most of Wessex – or at least those who knew the year-date – expected their world to come to an end, the Danes unexpectedly gave them relief, sailing away to Normandy, where they were more welcome than elsewhere. Ethelred used this respite to ravage Cumberland. In this instance, at least, he followed Wessex royal tradition in consolidating and extending the realm, for Cumberland was not part of England and an area of friction with the Scottish kingdom of Strathclyde. Besides this, the Vikings from Ireland had become troublesome in the Irish Sea and must be driven off. ‘The king’s fleet went round by Chester’, but unfortunately could not make contact with him as planned, and harried the Isle of Man as a warning to the Vikings there.

All too soon, in 1001, when the world was drawing breath again, the Danes were back from Normandy, no doubt refreshed and reinvigorated at the Normans’ expense and avid for plunder; and now the men of Wessex were called to its defence again. The Danes invaded as far as Alton, where the people of Hampshire joined battle with them. The Danes lost more men than the Saxons but ‘remained masters of the field’ and moved on westward into Devon, where they were joined by the Danish jarl Pallig with the ships he had collected.3 They burnt Kingsteignton and other ‘goodly manors’ and then marched on toward the mouth of the Exe, attacked Exmouth but met with strong resistance, and then marched up to Pinhoe, near Exeter. Here they were engaged in battle by the king's high-reeve and reeve with the troops they had been able to put together, but the Danes put them to flight and burnt Pinhoe, Broadclyst and other villages. Then they marched (or rode) east again until they came to the Isle of Wight, where ‘they went about at will, encountering no resistance. In every way it was a hard time, for they never ceased from their evil deeds.’

This ravaging of Devon was, however, the Danes' last incursion into the West, apart from an attack in 1003, when Exeter was destroyed ‘because of a French fellow called Hugh’, whom the king's wife had appointed as reeve. The Danish army ‘utterly laid waste the borough’, and ‘the ealdorman who should have led the levies contracted a diplomatic illness when the two armies were close enough to see each other, and left his men in the lurch.

It seems that when Swein, commanding in person, saw his enemies' lack of resolution he turned his back on them, perhaps in contempt, marched his army up into Wiltshire, burnt Wilton, went on to Salisbury and from there back to the sea.

# DENMARK IN SOMERSET AND DEVON

Travelling in hope

A

ttacks and subsequent withdrawals such as this may explain some strange anomalies in the place-names of the Devon-Somerset border along the Brendon Hills. A large-scale map of the West Country will show that while place-names indicating Danish or Norse settlements are scattered quite liberally along the coast of South Wales,[[146]](#footnote-146) Somerset and Devon have barely a handful, since the Norsemen came to raid but not to settle. But in the hill country of West Somerset and East Devon there is a small group or string of places whose names raise an interesting question:

South of Upton and close to the Devon border is Skilgate; four miles east, in Chipstable parish, are East and West Skirdle; three miles on again, in Wiveliscombe parish, are Screedy Farm and Screedy Lane; and two miles north of Wiveliscombe is the hamlet of Scarr.[[147]](#footnote-147)

Place-names beginning with Sc- or Sk- are not rare in the United Kingdom: the Ordnance Survey Gazetteer gives some 450; but they are virtually confined to the old Danelaw in the east and the Celtic lands in the west. Only fifteen or twenty at most are to be found elsewhere, but half of these are in the one county of Somerset and five in this unique concentration on the Brendon Hills.

Ekwall's *Dictionary of English Place-names* mentions only two of these twenty, but his dozens of other examples make it clear that English initial sk**-** sound (whether written thus or as sc-) always derives from Scandinavian speech. (The initial **sound** in Old English, even though written sc- , was pronounced before ’e’ or ‘i’ as sh- as in “ship” - cf. modern Norwegian) ‘Skirdle’ might perhaps be a form of Skirdale, the valley of the Skirbrook (from Old Norse or Old Icelandic *skirr*: bright (water), rather than the Celtic *sker*: swift (for linguistic reasons). But quite as likely is *skir*: shire, as in Skirmet, Bucks, in a Chiltern valley immediately west of the Danelaw and a ‘meeting-place of the shires’. It is not on the border itself but a mile or two on the ‘safe’ side, as the Saxons saw it; (and one local pronunciation recorded in the 1861 Census and showing Saxon persistence was ‘Shermit’).[[148]](#footnote-148)

A group of three small estates, manors or parishes - Chipstable, Chubworty, Raddington and Bathealton - around Skirdle all abut on to Devon, and Skirdle is only two miles from the border, and its valley runs down to the Tone at Waterrow. It is worth noting that the county boundary, which runs up the Tone from a point near Greenham to Tracebridge and then turns west along an old track, would be expected more logically to follow the stream up to Waterrow, or a little short of it, and then turn west. If that was the primitive boundary, then Skirdle would be precisely the ‘shire valley’. All in all, then, one might well look on Skirdle, Skilgate and their companions as Norsemen's longships stranded on skerries in hostile seas, or at least as Northern settlements in the alien South; (and while the name of Appley, near Milverton, is English, the lord in 1066 was Norman, that is, Northman).

Of particular interest is Bathealton, ‘heretofore Badialton,’ says Thomas Gerard of Trent, ‘where I have seen a strong fort or rampier of earth such as in those dayes were called Castles, the work I think of Danes; and the more induced to believe it I am by the name, for in an old evidence (document) without date of Reinold Lord of Badialton it is written *Hethenby****r***, that is the fort or Burgh of the heathen people : and such were the Danes ...This in the deed of Olive widow of Hillaria de Badialton dated 17 E 2 ‘ – (error for 7 E 2 : 1321 ?) – ‘is called the Castle, and in another ... dated first of Edward the third (1327), Castrum de *Hethenber*i in parochial de Badialton.[[149]](#footnote-149)

The ‘Danish’ origin of this and other ‘castles’ is of course discounted by some historians as the fashion of an uninformed age, and the ‘camp’ has been dated back to the Iron Age. Yet the name Hæðenbyr or Hethenbyr cannot be easily dismissed. ‘Heathen’, as we have seen, was the name given to the Viking invaders, and their having settled down did not obliterate the tribal memory of their transgressions. In some places ‘Dane’ remained a term of suspicion or reproach. When village people, as I remember, spoke of the works of their far-off ancestors who erected the barrows and the longstones, it was not of the ‘heathens’ or the ‘pagans’ but ‘the old people’. And if a party of wandering Danes found this place, it would give them shelter – and not them alone but other Danes in this little enclave of Denmark in Somerset.

To return to Skirdle, however, the second part of the name yields another provocative idea. “Dale” in the form of *dæl* is Old English but ‘reinforced’, says the dictionary, by Old Norse *dalr,* and in fact its use as an English place-name is confined almost entirely to the Danelaw, the North, East Anglia and Jutish Kent. The Ordnance Survey Gazetteer lists 180 places named simply Dale, the Dale or having Dal- as the first syllable, but only twelve are outside the areas mentioned above.[[150]](#footnote-150) But to these, significantly, may be added the East Devon Dalwood (wood in a valley – instead of the more common Woodcombe). It is a mere 20 miles south of Skirdle.

As for the local landowners or tenants of the estates before 1066, named Brictric (a Saxon magnate) at Pixton is clearly English, and Goda at Skilgate probably so, but distinctively Danish names are few:

Thorgils at Brompton Ralph, Ulf at Hawkwell and Manworthy,5 and probably

Asger at Ashbrittle; and Appley, near Milverton,

But again this holds true for the rest of Somerset apart from:

Ketel (at Ansford), Gunni the Dane at Walton in Gordano,

John the Dane (at Yatton), Swein (at Claverton and Cucklington),

Tovi, a former sheriff, (at Copland and Discove), Thori (at Chelwood),

Thorkel (at Backwell, Clewer and Clutton),Thorkel ‘the Dane’, (at Chelvey) ,

Thurstan at South Petherton and (Abbots) Leigh, probably the same as

Thurstan son of Rolf (Nordic Hroald) at Blackford, Dunkerton and Knowle Park,

Ulf at Woolston,[[151]](#footnote-151) Hawkwell and Manworthy (and perhaps Thormund at Stowell),

Ingulf at Cathanger, another boundary estate, and Toki at Sock (Mudford).

Luxborough and Runnington were each owned by ‘two (unnamed) thanes’. Some sixty of the 450 Somerset manors (including Bathealton mentioned above) were held in this way, most of them by two or three thanes, while Leigh, near Taunton, was held by a thane who ‘could go to whichever lord he would’.6B There seems no geographical pattern, nor is it known whether the system was long standing or had been set up, more recently, in the days of Canute and his sons; but it suggests something of the enchorial and predial freedom maintained by the men of the Danelaw, and noted in the Domesday Book concerning land in Danish Lincolnshire:

‘The men of the Wapentake of Candleshoe ... testify that in the time of King Edward, Siwate, Almod, Fenchel and Aschil divided their father’s land among them equally and share and share alike, and held it in such wise that if there were a call to the king’s army, and Siwate could go, the other brothers assisted him. After Siwate, a second went, and Siwate and the rest assisted him; and thus with respect to them all.’[[152]](#footnote-152).

The Domesday Books for Devon gave about ten possibly Danish names, but most of them doubled with larger landowners in Somerset: Goda, Asgar, Ingvar, Ketel, Thorkell,Toki, Ulf (twenty, scattered over Devon), and one must conclude that they were not Vikings who had settled and made the land their own but soldiers and servants of King Canute to whom he had given these overlordships and revenues for ‘services rendered’.

There is a special and different interest, however, in one group of eleven estates in one fairly small area and all in one overlordship: Exminster, Whipton, Peamore, Heavitree, Matford (on the right bank of the Exe near Exeter), *Hewise* (pobably near Tedburn), Awliscombe, Clyst (St George), Weycroft and, away in the east, Axminster. The name of the owner is given as ***Wichin***. The learned editor interprets this as *Viking*, and who could disagree?

With that, however, one may notice in the same part of the world, though not necessarily connected ethnically, the names of a small cluster of South Devon villages a few miles east of Exeter: Aylesbeare, Kentisbeare, Rockbeare and Larkbeare. Devon has some twenty ‘beer’ or ‘bear’ names, generally deriving from AS ‘bearu’ signifying ‘wood’ or ‘grove’ as in Shebbear, (supposedly a grove where shafts were obtained). (The Somerset and Dorset names, however, “seem rather to derive from AS *bearu*: pasture or swine pasture.’8 )

One should of course not read too much into orthographic variation, but it should not be ignored, and the concentration of this exceptional spelling in a very small area, and the unusual forms in which it is written in the earliest sources, may prompt the thought that while ‘–by’, as in hundreds of Lincolnshire and Yorkshire place-names, invariably indicates Danish origin, there is an alternative to ‘-by’ suggested long ago by the pioneer philologist Isaac Taylor[[153]](#footnote-153) ‘byr’, also found in the Old Icelandic býra’ – a dwelling or homestead.

The earliest written forms known of these names are :

Aylesbeare Eilesber**g**e (Is this like the -rg in Mod Danish?) 10

Kigbeare Cacheberge do do do do

Kentisbeare Chentesbere (‘held by a Northman T R E’)

Rockbeare Rocebera, Rochbear, Rochebere

Larkbeare Lauber**ie** (Is this – ie = - **g**e? or jod?)

Houndbeare Hunteberi(e) (1219) or Houndsbeare (hune : boar)

Woodbeare

Treasbeare Treasbear (1244)

As well as that, immediately to the north of Kentisbeare, between Plymtree and Aylesbeare, are Normans (that is, Northmen’s) Green and Danes Mill. Near Treasbeare a stretch of the Roman road is, uniquely for Devon, named with the Danish word for ‘road , as Strait***gate***, while a few miles to the west, near the hamlet of Beare, is the ancient woodland known as Danes Wood. And Kentisbeare before 1066 was ‘held by a Northman’

(One may add a place to the north of Honiton, on the county border, No Man’s Land (Northmen’s Land), though that can take a different interpretation).

A

To return briefly to the spelling, the suffix –berge is very peculiar and not fully explained by OE ‘*beorge*’: hill or mound, but it does correspond to the O Scand *ber*g or *biorg*. Perhaps, then, we may see here a Norman clerk’s rendering of something like the intervocalic (or final) silent or breathed ‘g’ also found in modern Danish, and in the ‘-ie’ of Lanberie and Hunteberie a disyllable distinct from the usual ‘e’.[[154]](#footnote-154) Likewise the ‘-es-’ in Eilesberge and Chentesbere reflects the Old Norse genitive singular:’-is’ rather than Anglo Saxon ‘-s’.

The question remains: How came these and other settlements to be there in the first place? An answer may be found in the crushing defeat of the Devon Saxons at Pinhoe, for when the Danes turned east again, certain groups may well have either strayed from the line of march or straggled behind in sufficient numbers to establish themselves in these quiet corners, while the local Saxons lay in bleak defeat. If these Danes ‘walked and talked softly but carried a big’ sword, the Saxons had neither cause not force to eject them.

This, however, only explains the ‘-beare’ enclave. The settlements in the Brendon Hill, along the present county boundary, lie too far from Sweyn’s probable line of march, and one must look elsewhere. The most likely reason is to be found a century earlier, in the closing years of King Alfred’s reign, when ‘the Danes dwelling in Northumbria assembled forty ships and besieged a fort in Devon by the north sea’, the fortress of Pilton. But Pilton resisted and proved its worth, and perhaps some of the foiled besiegers still hoped to plunder inland or to join up with a Danish army that had advanced up the Thames to the Severn. Their route, avoiding Alfred, would have taken them through or near South Molton and on to Bampton, and then up the southern slopes of the Brendon Hills, lightly populated then as now. Here, given time, they could have established themselves securely.[[155]](#footnote-155)

(Further on, a few miles south of Wincanton, in the parish of Combe Abbas or Abbas Combe, is the hamlet of Throop. ‘Thorpe’ is often thought as Danish as rye bread, but in fact Old English had a similar word, though it was used much less frequently, and ‘thrope’ and ‘trop’, as in Adlestrop, prove nothing.[[156]](#footnote-156) But against this, the manor of (Abbas) Combe had this Throop listed as ‘3 virgates of land in Thorent; and in the neighbouring parish of Horsington is the hamlet of Wilkinthroop: Wilkin or Wikin as in Wichin (at Axminster), interpreted by scholars as Viking, (see above).[[157]](#footnote-157)

This eastward movement is admittedly conjectural, but besides that, another set of statistics goes some way to point to a Danish settlement in the borderlands.

According to the Domesday Book, the county of Somerset, twenty years after the Norman conquest, was divided into about 630 estates or ‘manors’, though the term was not yet in use. For each of these the taxable value, based on property and livestock, was stated for the end of the reign of King Edward, followed by an estimate of the current value. Most had maintained the level of 1066 or even increased it, some more than doubling, but a minority of 70, or 11 per cent, had considerably diminished. (Some 90 per cent of the 200 in West Somerset had maintained or increased the value, but for some 18, or 9 per cent, the value had fallen by a quarter or more.[[158]](#footnote-158) (The figures in the following table show the 1088 value as a percentage of that of 1066):

**List A**:

Aller (Sampford Brett) 75%, Combwich (part) 80%, Doverhay80%, *Durborough* (near Bridgwater) 75%, Gothelney 66%, *Pignes* (near Bridgwater) 75%, Plainsfield 50%, Porlock 21%, East Quantoxhead 73%, Stogursey 80%;

**List B**

Brushford 50%, *Milton* (Middleton in Upton) 66%, Skilgate 75%: Quarme 50%; (to which may be added the nearby Devon manors of Clayhanger 66%, *Alwinestone* 37% and perhaps Bampton 88%)

Most of the A estates are coastal or within a few hours’ march of the sea, and their depreciation, with as great a ravaging in North Devon round the estuaries of the Torridge and Taw, may fairly be ascribed to the attacks they suffered in 1068 and 1069 when Harold’s sons came back from Ireland with a host, probably of Dano-Irish adventurers, and raided all the coastland from Porlock to Bristol, looting and destroying ravaging so mercilessly that twenty years did not suffice to restore the damage. (In the following years they raided the estuary of the Exe but seem not to have gone far inland).

The estates in List B, in the Brendon Hills and Devon, are, however, far away from the Godwinssons’ depredations (though perhaps some of their kerns and galloglasses reached as far as Quarme); and unless Robert of Gatemore, landlord of both Milton and Skilgate, was quite exceptionally unlucky or inept as a farmer, the cause of the decline must lie elsewhere. Most probably it was in King William’s punitive expedition to capture Exeter and crush resistance in the West Country early in 1068. In east and south Somerset there is line of ruined manors following the road from Bath to Bruton, and thereafter a stretch of country ten miles by eight containing twenty-two manors, only one of which was not affected.[[159]](#footnote-159) This district near Selwood was the scene of bitter fighting, for its broken, hilly nature was ‘particularly well suited to the undisciplined English forces against the horsemen and regular soldiers of the Normans’,14 but the Normans attacked from both north and east, and here the English had to stand and were overwhelmed. Yet some must have escaped to carry on the struggle, and it is tempting to think there were freedom-loving Saxons with a nucleus of Anglo-Danes in the remote parishes of Skilgate, Upton and Clayhanger, and that they emulated the deeds of their blood-brothers up in Lincolnshire who held firm against William when all the rest had given way – and suffered the same fate.

There are in fact a dozen more ‘diminished’ manors between Bampton and Exeter, and perhaps they mark the line of his approach to the city. There is no evidence that once William had captured Exeter he laid waste the surrounding countryside as might have been expected. He went further on into Cornwall, to assert his power.

# NIGHTFALL

T

he ravaging of mid-Devon marked a decisive change in Danish actions. In the year 1003 the raiders became conquerors and empire-builders, but Ethelred’s royal redelessness forced the pace.

In 1002, possibly with the idea of a standing army, he had Danish mercenaries in his service, commanded by Pallig,[[160]](#footnote-160) the husband of King Swein’s sister, Gunnhilde, but they could not settled to garrison duty while easy-going England offered plunder. The king sent ealdorman Leofsige to arrange a truce and buy them off. They accepted and were paid 24,000 pounds, and in the midst of this Ethelred committed, in the words of Johannes Brøndsted, ‘a tactical error which has been described as a political crime and was certainly a political betise’: he ordered the massacre of all Danes in his country,’[[161]](#footnote-161) at least, of all those in Pallig’s command. It took place on 13 November 1002, St Brice's Day, and the Saxons slaughtered not only the offending but pacified soldiery but also women and children, with a cruelty as vile as almost any practised by the Viking themselves. At Oxford they burnt a church with all the Danes who had sought sanctuary within it. ‘They beheaded Gunnhild, a royal princess, a Christian, and a hostage, after both her husband, jarl Pallig, and her son had been killed before her eyes.’

How widespread was this wanton killing, and who carried it out, is not known, but it kindled shame and horror even among the English,[[162]](#footnote-162) and among the Danes abroad, fury and a demand for retribution and revenge. Swein, from Denmark, launched two punitive expeditions in 1003, to the West of England, as described above, and in 1004 into Wessex and East Anglia.

England's agony dragged on for another twelve years in a murk of slaughter, pillage and rape by the Danes, with nature adding famine, pestilence and floods, and misgovernment, irresolution, treachery and misdirected musters of the levies by the English leaders.

From time to time the darkness was lightened by courageous deeds such as the Londoners' defence of their city, and the resistance that Ulfketyl and the men of East Anglia - Anglo-Danish by now – offered to the invaders. But that fighting went on outside western Wessex. Swein knew that he must capture and hold southern England and Mercia and that the west could be taken in due course, when all else was in his hands. So for those years Somerset and Devon were spared the heat of battle, though even the baggage-train, so to speak, must have felt the effect of the heavy demands of the rival armies on the simple economy of the land.

By 1011 the Danes under Thurkyll the Tall had overrun most of England east of Wiltshire and the western shires of Mercia. They besieged Canterbury for three weeks, were let in by a traitor, looted the city and carried off the archbishop, and next year ‘pelted him to death with bones and the heads of cattle.’(Thurkyll was said to be away at the time). Then Thurkyll changed sides,[[163]](#footnote-163) transferring his allegiance and forty-five ships to the king on condition that he fed and clothed them.

Swein, in Denmark, reacted decisively, as ever. He got together a fleet and army and sailed over to England, first to Sandwich, a favourite port for provisioning, and then up the east coast to the Humber and south again up the Trent as far as Gainsborough. The Northumbrians and the people of Lindsey submitted along with the five boroughs, the new ‘county’ towns, of Leicester, Lincoln, Stamford, Nottingham and Derby. He got provisions and horses for his army, they crossed Watling Street and took Oxford, rode south to Winchester and took that also, and then made for London. But the city was defended by Thurkyll, and Ethelred was with him and ‘the citizens would not submit, but held out with the utmost valour.’ Swein wasted no time in besieging London. He turned on Wallingford, a ‘burh’ town, to secure his hold on Wessex, and then marched west to Bath, and for the first time in ten years Wessex saw the hated enemy again. All the western thanes submitted, Ethelred took refuge in Normandy with his brother-in-law Duke Richard, London submitted also and Swein was effectively king of all England.

He seems to have then taken his army out of Wessex and back to base at Gainsborough, and there, before winter was out, he suddenly died.

# THE DANISH DAWN

E

nglish resistance flared up again. The nobles turned to Ethelred and offered to have him back as ‘their rightful lord, if only he would govern his kingdom more justly than he had done in the past.’ Ethelred agreed, ‘came home to his own people and,’ it is said, ‘was received with joy by them all’ **–** a signal triumph of hope over experience.

And now occurred one of those incidents which have remained in in the lore of childhood for centuries: ‘*London Bridge has fallen down ­­­- fallen down* ***–*** *fallen down*.”

There are two versions. In the first, the Danes had taken the bridge and were throwing down stones, mud and dung on to Saxons in the river below; but in the second the roles changed, and the characters, for Norwegians in 1014 were serving as mercenaries in support of Ethelred and against the Danes.[[164]](#footnote-164)

The young hero, Olaf Haraldsson was descended from a Norwegian king, Harald the Fairhaired, and himself became king of Norway as Olaf II (r.1015-1028).1Faced with the challenge of London Bridge, he brought all his longships up river at high tide and anchored as many as he could under the bridge; then he made his men fasten their strongest ropes and hawsers to the timber props that supported the bridge. Down came the ebb tide, away with it went the ships, driven by strong Nordic arms and thighs to the speed of a galloping horse, wrenching away the timber props, and London Bridge had fallen down.[[165]](#footnote-165) Meanwhile the Danes had chosen Swein's son Knut as king. He was still in his teens, but reigned in Denmark.

Besides that, Knut, shrewd beyond his years, espied the destructive weakness of the English in the rivalry of Wessex, East Anglia, Northumbria and what remained of Mercia. He made a pact with the people of Lindsey that ‘they should supply him with horses and then set out together and harry’ – presumably the east part of Mercia. King Ethelred then came up into Lindsey with levies at full strength and set about raiding, burning and slaughtering on all sides, whereupon Knut put to sea with his fleet and left his allies to fend for themselves.

# EDMUND ISEN-HEALF - IRONSIDE

In 1015 Knut had inherited a kingdom and an army to hold it, but only great ability as a commander would keep them both. That ability he had, but he also acquired an enemy worthy of it in Ethelred's son. Edmund was a few years older, about twenty-five,[[166]](#footnote-166) but it seemed almost that the military genius of Alfred - if not the other qualities - had been reborn in him. His name first appears in this year, his career as England's champion - "meteoric" is for once the perfect word - lasted only a few months, yet they were enough to win him the title Ironside.

Knut also knew, however, that one traitor of high rank was worth an army, and in Eadric, ealdorman of Mercia and brother-in-law to Edmund, the Saxons produced one whose name, if we were better acquainted with our origins, would live in infamy. The idea of England as a nation had, of course, not yet taken root, but even so, Eadric changed sides - in effect, betrayed Wessex - so many times that Edmund's military organisation and plans to defeat the Danish army decisively were brought to naught.

While Knut went from Lindsey down to Sandwich, Eadric, at the great council in Oxford, brought an accusation against Sigferth and Morcar, chief thanes of the Boroughs, and had them murdered. Edmund was sent up to confiscate their property and all the people of that part submitted to him; but by this time Knut had sailed round Kent and along the south coast as far as the River Frome. He followed it up and harried in Dorset, Wiltshire and Somerset - precisely where is not known - while Ethelred was lying sick at Cosham, on Portsmouth Harbour, unable to challenge him. The alarm was raised, Eadric gathered levies and Edmund gathered others in the north, but when they were all assembled Eadric refused to support Edmund in battle and left the field clear for the enemy. Worse still, he won over forty ships from their allegiance to the king and did homage to Knut. Faced with this betrayal, the Saxons capitulated and supplied the Danes with horses, but they stayed as unwelcome guests till Christmas.

They did not withdraw far. Next summer Knut came with 160 ships, perhaps 5000 men, and with him the inglorious Eadric. They crossed the Thames into Mercia at Cricklade and turned in Warwickshire, where they burned and slew all they found. Edmund began to gather levies, but when they assembled, nothing would satisfy them but the presence of the king and the support of the citizens of London. Denied these and disgruntled, they gave up the expedition and went home for Christmas.

Edmund, at this massed parade of English awkwardness, resolved not to give way. After Christmas all the levies were called to report for duty on penalty of the full fine; and the king, who was now in London, was asked to bring whatever reinforcements he could find. When they were all met, it still came to nothing, and the king, warned of possible betrayal - by Eadric, no doubt - gave up and went back to London. The Danes stayed on.

Then, on St George's Day 1016, ‘after a life of much hardship and many difficulties’, not a few of them self-inflicted, Ethelred died. All the counsellors of England chose Edmund as their king, and for a short while, breathing some of his own fire into his troops, he ‘defended his kingdom,’ says the Chronicle, ‘valiantly.’

All over southern England he harried Knut, fighting him at Pen Selwood, near Wincanton and Gillingham, and at Scearston (Sherston), near Malmesbury, with ‘great slaughter on both sides,’ and it was not the leaders but the armies themselves who broke off the fight. (Eadric was assisting Knut, who presumably had the bigger battalions). Edmund assembled a third levy, marched to London, which the Danes were besieging, drove them to their ships, crossed the river at Brentford and defeated them again. Then he went home to Wessex, called up more levies, and still they came. Back to Brentford and across the Thames again and into Kent, where he fought the Danes at Otford, near Sevenoaks (?????) and defeated them. He then drove them toward Aylesford and toward Sheppey and would no doubt have destroyed their army but at Aylesford the treacherous but Eadric turned over to the king’s side, and Edmund, generous to his own harm, took him back.

Off went the Danes into Essex, and Edmund, with a fresh, fifth levy, gave chase and brought them to battle at a hill called Ashingdon; and then Ealdorman Eadric ‘did as he had so often done before: he and the Magesæte’ (men from Herefordshire and south Shropshire) ‘set the example of flight, and thus he betrayed his royal lord and the whole nation.’ Among the slain were four ealdormen and ‘all the flower of England.’

Still Ironside would have fought on. He returned to Gloucestershire, and Knut brought his army in pursuit. But Eadric and other counsellors advised that the kings should come to terms, and they did. They met at Alney, a meadow and island[[167]](#footnote-167) in the Severn marshes west of Gloucester and south of Deerhurst,[[168]](#footnote-168) and became - hard though it may be to credit - comrades and sworn brothers, and made a compact and fixed the amount of money to be paid to the Danish army, and then dispersed, King Edmund to hold Wessex and Knut the country to the north, and Eadric to the gallows5.

The saga of the Vikings in the West Country had left indelible memories over ten generations but it had at last come to an end. Barely two months after Alney, King Edmund died. Murdered? No one knows. Knut (henceforward King Canute) became king of all England[[169]](#footnote-169) and the atheling Eadwi, brother of Edmund, was exiled and later ‘unjustly killed at Canute’s command.’ (F W 269).[[170]](#footnote-170)

It seemed that the valour of Wessex, which Canute took for his own peculiar appanage, had gone down in defeat to oblivion. But after the blood-letting of his first years in power, the conqueror was very rapidly transformed by something in the life of his new people, and he learnt and cultivated the wisdom of his distant forerunner Alfred, at least in government and statecraft. One cannot reasonably doubt that his conversion to Christianity was genuine, and that his attempts to make reparation for the slaughter at *Assundun* and the massacre in Canterbury were more than gestures.

The wisdom, justice, far-sightedness and mercy of Canute became the matter of legend, and the English forgave him the ‘enormous sums of money he exacted’ because ‘he gave justice, peace and well-being such as England had not known for a generation.’7 (In fact, the chroniclers found almost nothing of sensational English interest to report for the remaining sixteen years of Canute’s reign). Sadly, his sons Harold and Harthacanute quickly proved their unfitness to reign, and on the death of the latter in 1042 the *witan*, or by this time the influential nobles at the heart of government, restored the Saxon line by summoning back from Normandy Ethelred II’s son Edward.

Whatever their intention, they sealed the fate of Wessex. Edward had spent too long in Normandy, and imbibed too much of the Norman culture, to esteem the strengths and virtues of the land of his birth, and his promotion of Norman prelates over Englishmen aroused resentment among clerics and laymen alike. His intensity of religious devotion and outpouring of wealth to the monastic orders and churchbuilders might not have been too deeply resented in that age, but his ambition, if that is the word, to achieve a life of meditation and retirement spoke clearly of his unwillingness to rule. Even so, he did not lack courage and backbone in defending Wessex against invaders from Flanders5 and Ireland, but the devotion and self-sacrifice of the noble ealdormen who had who had protected Wessex and Mercia in the days of Alfred and Edward I and Athelstan found no echo in Earl Godwin of Wessex, whose killings and machinations for his family, especially his combative offspring, threatened Edward’s authority.

With the long eye of history, however, one may pardon his misdeeds in gratitude for his having engendered the last of the Saxon kings, Harold, who, though betrayed by the ambition of others, ruled generously and fought to the very end, so that the children of Saxon England, even in defeat, could take pride in the memory of her last hour.

The tyranny and brutality of the Norman conqueror clamped down on the English people before the conquest was even half complete. In 1067/’68, ‘the king imposed a heavy tax upon the unhappy people of the country, yet notwithstanding, he allowed his men to harry wherever they came. He marched to Exeter, and besieged the borough for eighteen days.’[[171]](#footnote-171) (ASC p.200)

Thus ended the resistance and defence of Wessex. But away in the north and east of that other England, the Danes and Vikings, like the Men of Kent, showed in the darkness of the Norman Conquest that they had in their turn become truly English; for when the south and the west6 had fallen to William's ruthless might, they fought on in the fens of the old Danelaw to preserve the freedom their Saxon adversaries had defended for so long.

# ANGLO-SAXON TERMS AND MEASURES OF LAND

Some of these definitions could be prefixed with the words “Very likely”!

**Atheling**: A royal prince

**Bookland**: An estate secured to its holder by a royal charter or “book”; (frequently the origin of the place-name Buckland).

**Bordar**\*: A villein who held his hut at his lord’s pleasure

**Bovate**\* (or Oxgang): One eighth of a carucate or ploughland, the share attributed to each ox in a team of eight (averaging about 13 acres)

**Burh**: A fortified place, a town.

**Carucate**: As much land as a team of oxen could plough in a season. (But how many oxen in the team?)

**Ceorl**: A free peasant, whose wealth and legal status varied from one kingdom to another; owing service in the militia, contributing food rents to support the king.

**Ealdorman**: A member of the king’s household set in charge of a shire. (Later replaced by the Scandinavian word Jarl).

**Feorm**: A food rent sufficient to maintain the king and his retinue for 24 hours, due from a particular estate; the origin of the word “farm”.

**Folkland**: Land from which the king drew food-rents and customary services.

**Furlong**: As now, 40 rods, poles or perches, that is, 220 yards or “one course for the plough, found to be the most convenient in practice and the most humane for the beasts employed in ploughing, which required breathing-time at the end of each furrow”. (One furlong square = 10 acres, possibly it is sometimes used in this sense. One acre is one tenth of a square furlong, 220 x 22 yards.

**Fyrd**: Militia, in which all able-bodied men were expected to serve; called out for a fixed term of duty.

**Gesith**: King’s companions, of aristocratic birth.

**Huscarl** : A member of the king’s bodyguard

**Hide** (*hida:* connected with *hyd:* a house or habitation): “A homestead and its adjacent land, sufficient to maintain a family of some importance (a lower-class tiller of the soil would not and could not form a family to himself; he and his wife and children and property were items in the *familia* of the lord, who defended him from enemies.” (W de G Birch). The measure varied greatly from shire to shire, and according to Sir Frank Stenton: Anglo-Saxon England, it could be any free family, with “the existence of a normal hide of 120 arable acres in Cambridgeshire ... . . But the normal hide of central Wessex was far smaller ... . 40 acres in Wiltshire, and at least approximate to this acreage in Dorset.

**Thegn**: A noble

**Port**: A trading-centre, whether coastal or inland, e.g.Bridport.

**Portreeve**: Chief magistrate of a *port*

**Villein**\*: A free villager; (after 13th century, a serf, free in relation to all but his lord, and not absolutely a slave)

**Virgate**:\* Anything from 15 to 60 acres. (The word comes from *virga*: rod, but the connection is not clear).

Wergild: The fine for homicide payable to the kin of the deceased. The sums varied according to the social status of the victim.

Witan: Witena gemot: The king’s council or body of advisers

\* This word is not Saxon but represents the word used by William’s tax men.

Many of the sums of silver money in the Domesday Book are in multiples of 23, e.g. 46s, £23. Remembering that there are 24 grains to one silver penny and that coin-clipping was a capital offence, the difference gives food for thought..

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# Index

**The publisher will be able to organise the Index, do not worry about this**

INDEX - PERSONAL NAMES

Ælfweard, s Edward I

Æthelbald K Wx 850-862 15

Æthelbert, K Wx 862-866 15

Æthelflæd, dr Alfred, Lady of Mercia 31, 55

Æthelhelm, Dorset ealdorman 9

Æthelm, Wilts ealdorman 34

Æthelnoth, Somerset ealdorman 34

Æthelred I, K Wx 866-871 15

Æthelred, husb Aethelflaed 49

“ ealdorman of Mercia 31

Æthelstan, K’s son 8, later k of Wx 9

Æthelweard, chronicler 2

Æthelwulf, K Wx 839-860 8, 15

Aller, Sir John of 13

Angles 1

Alfred,King of Wessex 871-899 2, 15 ff,

Arthur, King 11

Asgar, D thane, Som

Asser 1, 16

Bagsecg, D chief 15

Bazell, C, local hist 22

Beauduheard, king’s officer 5

Bertric, King 5

Brictric, thane, Pixton, Som

Brønsted, J, historian 8, 44

Burton S H, writer 28

Byrhtnoth, Essex ealdorman 39

Cadmus, Greek hero 14

Caradog, Welsh saint 11

Carantoc v Caradog

Ceorl, Devon ealdorman 8

Cerdic, founder of Wsx 11, 51

Charles (the Fat) 32

“ (the Simple) 36

Chirbury, burh

Coleridge, S.T., poet 12

Constantine, k Scotland

Cuthbert, Saint 25

Danish thanes in Devon and Somerset

Decuman, Saint 10

Dromund, Thorsteinn 6

Dunstan, statesman 37

Eadred, K Wsx 61 and note

Eadric, ealdorman, traitor 45 - 47

Eadwi, br Edmund Ironside

Ealhstand, bp Sherborne 9

Eanwulf, Somerset ealdorman 9

Ecgbert, k. of Wsx 5, 7. 39

Edgar, 1st K of the English, cr Bath 38

Edmund, K E Anglia and saint 39

Edmund II Ironside 45 - 48

Edsige, reeve, Exeter 58

Edward, K, s Alfred 31, 38

Edwy, K Wx 61 and note

Ekwell, E, philologist 42

Elchere, ealdorman 11

Ethelred II 38, 41ff

Fitzwarin, Fouke 13

Florence of Worcester, chronicler 1

Galbraith, V H 53

Gerard (Th) of Trent

Goda, Devon thane 37

Godwin, C11, Earl of Wessex

Godwinssons 21

Green, J.R., historian 30

Grinsell, L.V.,historian 48

Gunnhilde, s Swein, w Pallig

Gunni, D thane,Som

Guthrum, D chief 22 – 31

Haesten, D chief 48- 53

Halfdan, Vk, s of Ragnar 15

Harald, s of Sweyn 44

Harald Hardrada, k Norway

Harthacanute, s Canute

Harold I, s Canute

Harold II, k England

Hearne, Thos, antiquary 31

Henry of Huntingdon 2

Hereward the Wake 3, 51

Hingvar, Vk chieftain 24

Hoskins, W.G., historian 34

Hroald, jarl 35

Hubba, bro Halfdan, D chief 18 - 22

Hugh, “French fellow”, Exeter 40

Ingvar, D thane

Ivar the Boneless, Viking 51

Jarnsida,Bjorn, Vleader

John the Dane, thane, Yatton

Kingsley, Charles 3

Kole, high reeve, Exeter 58

Knut, K Dk & England 45 -47

Leofsige, ealdorman, envoy

Lodbrog, Ragnar, Viking 23

Major, Albany, historian 8, 29

Morcar, chief thane 45

Neot, Saint 25, 32

Odda, Devon ealdorman 35

Ohtor, jarl 35

Olaf Trygvasson, K Norway 3, 37

Osric, Dorset ealdorman 29

Pallig, Dahish chief

Pendragon, Uther 11

Rahtz, Ph, archeologist 52

Reid, Howard, author 15

Richard, Duke Normandy 64

Ridler, J.K, local hist 48

Robert of Gatemore, landowner 42

Sigferth, chief thane 45

Sweyn, K Denmark 41 - 44

Slim, Wm, general 35

Taylor, Canon I, philologist 32, 55

Thorkell, D thane

Thormund, D thane, Stowell

Thurkill the Tall, D leader 44

Thurstan, D thane, Som

Tongue, Ruth, folklorist 12

Ubbe, v Hubbe

Ulf, D thane, Woolstone,Som

Ulfketyl, E Anglian leader 44

Vidal, R.S., antiquarian 48

Whybrow,W, writer 50

William of Malmesbury, chronicler 1, 52

William I, usurper, K England 43

Wordsworth, William, poet 14

Whybrow, Chas, archaeologist, writer 5

Wulfere, K Mercia 49

**INDEX – PLACES**

Italics indicate a “diminished” manor in Domesday, see p.61

Abbotsham, N. Devon

Aller, Sampford Brett

Aller, Sedgemoor 13, 30

Ashcott 45??

Alney, Severn island, treaty with Ds

Alton, Hants 40

**Alwinestone, Devon 421**

Anderida, forest, Weald

Appledore, Kent,,occupied by Ds 32

Archenfield, S Herefs, raided by Ds 34

Ashdown, battle 15

Ashington, Essex, battle 45

Athelney 18ff,40, 40

Aylesbeare,Devon, D settlement?

Axe, R 9, 20

**Badhedun, see Bathealton**

**Bampton, Devon 42**

Barnstaple 26

Bath, K Edgar crowned; 37, 42

Bathealton, “heathen castle”?

Battlegore, Williton, skirmish 36

Benfleet, Essex, D fort 32

Berkshire 15

Bicknoller 14

Biddlegore, i.e.Battlegore

Blackdown Hills, 9,51

Bleadon, nr Uphill, D contingent? 32 ?

Blue Anchor 11

Bratton Camp, D refuge 27

Braydon, raided by Ds,nr Cricklade

Brecon, kingdom

Bremesburh, unidentified

Brendon Hills 9, 25, 41

Brentford , Thames crossing 45

Bridgnorth, founded by Aethelfled33

Bridgwater 33

Bristol 25

Brittany, V stronghold 5, 55

Broadclyst 40

**Brue, R 9**

**Brushford 40**

Burrow Mump, observation post24

Burrow, High 48, 53

Buttington, D siege 33

**C**allington 7

Calne

Cambridge 27???

Cannington, with Cynuit 9, 21ff

Canterbury 63???

Carhampton,first V attack in force 7, 50

Carrum , see Carampton 10 ???

Charford, early battle 50

Charmouth , poss V attack50

Cheshire & Chester 33, 37

Chelmsford, D stronghold

Chichester 33

Chippenham 18, 44?, 50?

Chipstable, Som, border village41

Chirbury, Mercian fort

Chubworthy, Som border village 41

**Clayhanger, Devon 41**

Cleeve Hill, Watchet

Cirencester 31

Cockerills field, Selworthy 56

Colchester, D stronghold

Colne, R 51???

Combwich , port, battle 21ff, 42f, 46, 61

Cornwall & Cornish 5, 25, 40

Corfe, Dorset 36

Cothelstone 13

Countisbury, hilltop fort 21, 48

Cirencester 31

Cricklade, head of navig’n, Thames 44

Crowcombe,dragon 13

Cumberland 7

Cynuit, battle 21ff, 47ff

**D**ale names 41ff

Dalwood 42

Danelaw 3, 10, 50 ???

Danesborough, Quantocks 14

Danes Cross 52

Danesford

Danes Field 42

Daw’s Castle,Watchet

Denmark 3, 5, expanding kdom,64

Derby, captured from Danes

Devon 5, 33, 40

Doniford, Som, D landing and raid

Dorset 11, 12, 40, 44

Doverhay, Porlock 42

Downend, Poldens, D refuge 28

Dowsborough,Quantocks

Dow’s Castle, Watchet, burh

Dragon’s Hill 16

Dumnonii, Kdom of 9

Dunster 11

**Durborougn 42**

Dyfaint 3 ??

Dyfed 7, 17, 21

Earl’s Coc, field, Selworthy 36

East Anglia 43, & o’r ??

East Lyng and Athelney 9, 18

**East Quantoxhead 48**

Edgarley see Egley

Ecgbryhtstan, assembly at 24, 25, 52

Eddisbury, burh, Ches

Edington Som battle 26 ??

“ Wilts battle ??

Egerley see Egley

Egley, Som, Saxons halt on march 27

Ellesdun, Ches, old ‘work’ converted to burh

Englefield, Saxons defend 24 ???

Essex 45

Ethandune (see Edington)

Exe, R 40

Exeter 17, 32? , 40

Exford 25

Exmoor 34 ??

Exmouth 5 ??

**F**aeroes 5

Fair Cross, Nettlecombe 36

Farnham, Pr Edward defeats Ds 51

Farnham Common, ,Bucks

Fire Beacon, Quantocks 24??

Flatholm, defeated Ds escape to 35

Folkestone 37

Forest of Dean 35

Friesland 3

Frome, R 17, 44

Fulham 531

Furze Dane , field,Nettlecombe

Gainsborough 63

Ghent 50

Glamorgan 7

Glastonbury 8

Gloucester 17, 25, 42??

Gloucestershire 45

**Gothelney 42**

Grabburrows, or Battlegore 56 ??

**H**ampshire 24, 40

Heddington, Devizes 46??

Hengiston Hill, battle 7

Henniborough 34

Hereford and -shire 35 etc

Herepath 25 ff

Hertford, forts ; coins

Hobb’s Boat, nr Uphill 20

Holford 12,

Hook Norton, D raid

Howe’s Close, Selworthy 21, 52

Hoxne 23

Hubbastone 51

Huish Barton

Humber, R 57

**I**celand 3; Icelandic

Iglea (v Egley)43

Iley Oak 43

Ipswich 57

Ireland 5, 24, 27, 56

Iver, Bucks, Ds take refuge on island 32

**K**ent 5, 8, 15, 40

Kentisbeare, Devon, D settlement?

Kenwith Castle 50

Ker Moor, Carhampton 11

Kingsbury 53

Kingsteignton 40

Kingston (St Mary) 13

Knap Dane, Nettlecombe

**L**anchester, Co.Durham

Land’s End 58 ??

Lea, R 53, D fleet stranded ??

Lechlade 24, 27 ??

Leicester, submits to Æthelflaed

Lindsay 57, 64, 65 ???

Llangorse lake,,victory of Æthelflaed

London 40, 43, 45

Low Ham 21

Lydford, Saxon mint; burnt by Ds40

**M**aldon, battle; celebrated in poem 6, 37

Manors “diminished” 51ff ?

Manchester, fort, Northumbria

Manworthy, Som, 60 ??

Medway, R 58 ??

Mercia 9, 15, 35, 43

Mersea, Essex ,D fortific’n

Milton (Regis), Kent 32

Milton, Upton , Som 42

Minehead, raided by Vs; local custom 11, 50

Monkwearmouh 5

Muchelney 8

Nettlecombe, Som.

Nomans Land, Som – Devon border

**N**ormandy, V stronghold

Northumbria 5, 6 , 15

Norton Fitzwarren 13

Norway 3, 6, 9,

**O**ak Lea 43

Ockley, Surrey, Saxon victory

Oxford 43

**P**adstow, raided by Vs; local custom 11??, 37

Paris, besieged by Ds

Parrett, R 9, 12, 28, 46

Pawlett 25

Pen Selwood 44 CHK

Pignes, Bridgwater 42

Pinhoe 40

Plainsfield 27

Polden Hills 28, 45??

Poole 33

Porlock 42, 48 & os?

Portishead 55 ??

Portland 5, 8, 37

Priddy, Mendips 31 ??

**Q**uantock Hills 9, 51

Quarme 42

Quat, Bridgnorth, D camp 33

Rackley, head of navig’n on Axe

**R**addington, Som, village on Devon border 41

Reading, capt by Ds, battle 15, 24

Repton, residence, Ks Mercia ; large D camp

Ridgeway 15

Righton’s Grave, Poldens, battle? 45??

Rochester 32, 40

Rockbeare, S Devon, D settlement?

Ross, Herefs. 35

Runcorn, burh on Mersey

**S**andwich, port 8, 43

Sarum 31 ??

Scarr, Brendon Hills 41, 3

Scergeat, burh

Scorriton, Dartmoor

Screedy, Som, nr Wellingon 41

Sedgemoor 18

Selwood 9, 24

Selworthy 21, 49

Severn, R 8, 33

Sheppey, occupied by Ds 7, 45

Sherborne 11, 12 CHK

Sherston, nr Malmesbury 44

Shervage Wood, Som, dragon legend 12 ff

Shoebury, D fort, Essex

Simmensbarrow farm 51

Simonsbath, Exmoor, on herepath 25

Skilgate 41,2

Skenfrith not an Sk- name

Skirdle, Som, Devon border; 42

Skirmet, Bucks; on border of Danelaw; 40

Somerset 44, 50 & o’r

Somerton, first capital of Wessex 8

Southampton, burnt by Ds 37, 40

South Petherton 11

Sowe, R, Staffs

Stafford, burh

Steart, peninsula, later island at mouth of Parrett22

Stolford, nr Stogursey, mooring-place 22

Stogumber 14

Stogursey, Som; legendary battle 9, 42

Stour, R 53 ???

Streatley 15

Stretcholt, near mouth of Parrett 25

Surrey 6, 8

Sussex 6, 33, 40

Swanage 17

**T**amar, R 7, 8 & O’rs?

Tamworth, ‘capital’ of Mercia

Tarrant, R 17

Tavistock, monastery burnt by Ds 40

Tempsford, battle

Thames, R 7 & ??

Thanet, Isle of 37

Thelwall, fort on Mersey

Thorige, island at Iver, Bucks37

Timberscombe 48

Tone, R 41

Trent, R

**U**ffington, white horse 50

Upper Cock, farm 22

Uphill, R Axe 19, 20

Upton, Som (with Skilgate)

Vikings’ Pill, on Parrett, foot of Poldens

Wales and Welsh 6, 11, 40

Wallingford, large burh 43

Waltham, brial of K Harold I

Ware, Herts‚ K Alfred dams R Lea, 33

Wareham 17, 18

Warwick, burh

Warwickshire 44

Watchet, Saxon mint; raided and birnt by Vs 8, 10, 3, 38, 40

Waterrow, Som village on Devon border 41

Weardburh, burh,

Wedmore, K Alfred, peace with Guthrum;

“ Frith of Wedmore, treaty 30

Wells 8

Welshpool, defeat of Welsh 52 ??

Wembury, Sax victory 50

Wibblestone 51?

Wick, Som, poss D settlement 22

Wigborough 8

Welshpool, defeat of Welsh 52 ??

Wigingamere, burh

Wight, Isle 33, 40

Williton, Som, origin of name35

Wilton, Wilts, burnt by Ds 16, 40

Wiltshire 26, 40, 43

Winchester, cap of Wessex; 24, 43

Winingham, burh,

Wirral, settled by Norse 52

Wiveliscombe 59

Wootton Courtney 21 ??, 48

Yarde, nr Williton

York

Illustrations: 36

Viking ship

Saxon spearman

Viking with sword and shield

Line map – sea routes of Saxons, Jutes, Danes, Vikings

Somerset wyvern

England, showing kingdoms and Danelaw

Wessex, boundaries 9th century, with names

Wessex heartland, with rivers

W Somerset coast with manors

Line map – Edington Campaign 10

Line map – Danes to Buttington

Line map – Alfred in Kent

Line map – possible Danish settlements

Line map – Parrett with Vikings pill

Line map – “wasted” lands

N Devon and Somerset coast (line drawing)

Kings of Wessex – succession 17

# Photos

Photos: half-page each ?

St Decuman’s well

Carhampton marsh 20

Shervage Wood

Uphill: a village near Weston supermare

Combwich:

Cannington Fort

Sedgemoor in flood

Athelney and Burrow Mump

East Lyng

Polden Hills

Righton’s Grave

Downend 30

Bratton Down

Watchet – Daw’s Castle

Battlegore

Bench ends – Crowcombe

Screen – Norton Fitzwarren

Aller – font and spear

Estuary of Parrett 37

Englefield

Ashington

Wilton 40

Cricklade

Buttington, nr Welshpool , river island fortress

Quat and Quatford

Baydon ,

Llangorse Lake

Eddisbury ‘camp’

Brunnanburh

Rye Bay

Appledore, Kent aerial

The Swale

Thames crossing at Farnham 47

1. Most often, from the rape of Lindisfarne onwards, the chroniclers refer to the aggressors not as Danes but as ‘the heathen’ attacking ‘the Christians’. Christianity was first preached to the West Saxons in 634 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ingram, J : p ii; 2A. Stenton, F: Anglo Saxon England, 35 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Whitelock, 217 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Tribute by contemporary, John of Worcester [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Kingsley’s Hereward sings as an enthusiastic improviser, careless of the alliterative pattern required in Anglo Saxon heroic verse. A Saxon harp would not have taken such free-hand treatment. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Brøndsted, J, 38 – 42 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. do 316-‘7 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Kingsley, Charles: 77 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Kingsley, Charles: 77 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Collingwood : 59 ff [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The recorded arrival of the Saxons under Hengist and Horsa in the south-east in 450 obscures the fact, unrecorded but archaeologically proven, that Germanic tribes, notably the Angles from Schleswig-Holstein, had been long settled in the coastland of Essex, (probably occupying the area devastated by the Romans after the revolt of Boudicca.) For this, and much on the Saxon Shore, see Miles,J.N.L: *The English Settlement,* 82 *ff)* [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Stenton: 99 – 102 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Collingwood, 129 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Collingwood, 63 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Collingwood, 85 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Weymouth, perhaps in the interest of tourism, has claimed the landing-place. The reeve would have had to gallop over to Dorchester to inform the king. More tellingly, in 2010 excavations for the building of a relief road revealed a mass burial of Vikings: 51 skulls and 54 skeletons. There had undoubtedly been a mass execution: perhaps these were pirates cast ashore by a storm, and as pirates, they received no mercy. (Or they may, less probably, have been victims of the St Brice’s Day massacre). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Florence, 206 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Collingwood, 70 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Heroic poem. *Waldere*. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Heroic poem, *The Battle of Maldon*. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Cox, T, 821. Other Cymric dedications in this coastland are to Petrock, Dubricius and Carantoc. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Most recently rendered into Modern English by Seamus Heaney, and with distinctive originality by Thomas Meier : Beowulf (Brooklyn, N Y, 2012) [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Wright, Brian, Somerset Dragons, treats of them expertly and comprehensively [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Reid, Howard: Arthur the Dragon King. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. It seems, however, that Artorius died in the land that is now Croatia. (Halsall, Guy: Worlds of Arthur: Facts and Fictions of the Dark Ages (OUP, 2012), reviewed in The Times Magazine, 10.2.2013 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. For lack of definition, the role of the 4th century military Count of the Saxon Shore has been given two contrasting definitions: either he guarded the south-eastern shores against Saxon invaders or guarded Saxons who had already settled there long before Hengist and Horsa. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Across the Straits in northern Gaul or ‘Frankland’, Saxon immigrants from southern Britain settled in an area some 30 miles deep radiating from Boulogne. Their origin as an overflow from the settlements in south-east Britain is evinced by the fact that nearly all the place-names are patronymics cognate with ‘-*ing*’ place-names which derive from family or clan names, e.g. Bazinghen – Basings – Basing(Hants); Bouquinghen – Bocings – Bockin g (Essex) and Buckingham; Garlinghem – Garlings – Garlinge (Kent); Guslinghem – Gystlings – Guestling (Sussex); Hallinghen – Hallings – Halling (Kent); Pelincthun – Pællings – Pallingham (Sussex), and nearly sixty more. These settlements were documented by Isaac Taylor as long ago as 1865, (Taylor, I: *Words and Places*, Appendix B). Why later historians have taken little note of this is something of a mystery. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. The Romans recruited many German tribesmen into the legions in Britain. (Scott, Bryan, 248-252) [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Goodrich, N. L: *King Arthur*, 41; and Geoffrey of Monmouth: *The Kings of Britain,* 151) [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. The Britons did not ignore the symbolic value of the horse, and he appears on coins of the pre-Saxon king Cunobelinus. (Shakespeare’s Cymbeline is not historical). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. The emblem of the Saxons, at least in early times, was a horse, and perhaps the names Hengist and Horsa denote tribes rather than individuals. The Somerset villages Henstridge and Horsington stand almost astride the old tribal boundary with Dorset. Hengistbury in Devon may, however, have a different origin. (Yet while Hengist and Horsa are integral to the Saxons’ account of their origin, they were said to have landed in Kent, which – or at least the eastern half – was settled by the Jutes. (Some mingling of tribal beliefs?)

    The Hanoverian horse (galloping *ventre à terre)* appeared on the royal standard of the Four Georges and William IV and in the badge of certain British regiments. The most notable, however, is the Jutish white horse of Kent, Invicta, worn by the Queen’s Own Royal West Kent Regiment, honoured, among much else, for their desperate defence of Kohima in June 1944 and the defeat of the Japanese invasion of India. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. A confusion of conflicts, surely. Cerdic's victory was more probably at Charford, near Fordingbridge, in 519, and the battle near Uffington between Saxons and Danes took place 350 years later. Danish weapons have been found at the bottom of the valley at Uffington. Whether the White Horse commemorates this Saxon victory or is older, is a matter for conjecture. Current opinion favours an earlier date, as the style is reminiscent of certain abstract patterns of Celtic art; but Dragon's Hill near Uffington is identified in local lore as ‘the place where St George slew the dragon’ - an interesting mingling of national history and international myth. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. In 1906 Somerset County Council informally adopted the Red Dragon as its heraldic crest, very fittingly, since Somerset is the only county of Wessex to have kept something of the racial distinctions of its founding days: the Saxon heartland of Wessex to the east of the Parret, and to the west the conquered Cymric people, their difference still shown after a thousand years in physiognomy and accent of speech. (The heraldic beast is sometimes denominated a wyvern, but is actually a four-legged dragon, holding a mace. The ‘true’ wyvern has two front legs and supports its rear on its tail). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. In the splendid and sonorous Old French, which makes the modern tongue seem sadly anaemic: ‘Le dragoun est fier e fort, e plus ayme humayne chair qe nul autre,’ and his aspect was fearsome: ‘Si gitta de sa bouche, qe chaut ert, fumee e flambe molt oryble, si fust trop lede beste: si avoit grosse teste, dentz quarreez, fers les powes, long la cowe.’(O Fr si = and). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Dowsborough: Danesborough: popular etymology at its most fancifully creative. Dowsborough is most probably ‘the hill of the signal beacon’ (more specifically the one warning the folk of the coastal plane from Kilve eastward). (O E *dow* or *daw*: beacon). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Karr’ in the Scandinavian North is ‘moor which was once wood, perhaps copse’: (Icelandic *kjarr*). (Collingwood, 128). The remains of submarine forests still exist along this coast. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Oral reminiscence, 1890s [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. An archaeological curiosity of Exmoor is the Caractacus Stone, inscribed in Roman letters CARATACI NEPVS: Kinsman of Caratacus. The inscription is accepted as genuine. The connection with the eighth-century serpent-tamer is of course only nominal: centuries divide them; but Caradog is a recurrent and perhaps generic name in ancient Welsh legend and history [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Tongue, Ruth, *Somerset Folk Lore*, 130 [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. This derivation of the name is, however, far from certain, and probably influenced by the name ‘Will’s Neck’, the highest point on the Quantocks and supposedly a marker of the border between the Dumnonii in the west and the Saxons advancing from the east. The origin is more probably ‘tun on the Willet’, a stream rising at Willet, about four miles inland, and flowing through Williton to Doniford and the sea. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Wedlake 72 [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Collingwood 106. One of the hundreds in Suffolk was divided into twelve leets, strictly according to the practical duodecimal system of the Scandinavians [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. do.**108** [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Early printed editions of the Chronicle identified this ‘Carrum’ as Charmouth, but it is now accepted as Carhampton. The original entry reads:

    *Her gefeaht Ecgbryht* [*cyning*](http://asc.jebbo.co.uk/a/#nn833.1) *wiþ.xxxv. sciphlæsta æt Carrum 7 þær wearþ micel węl geslægen, 7 þa Denescan ahton węlstowe gewald*

    ‘In this year king Egbert fought against thirty-five ships’ companies *at Carrum*, and many were slain there; and the Danes kept the battlefield’.

    In the will of King Alfred the name appears in the recognisable form of Carhamtune (Savage: *History of the Hunded of Carhampton*, 296) and it has changed little since then. (The Carentone in the Domesday Book may only be a Norman attempt to ‘rationalise’ a Saxon name no longer understood).

    The name has been interpreted (Ekwall) as ‘Farm at the place by the rocks’ (Old English *carr*: rock; dative plural *carrum*), but surely more suited to Ker Moor, the Danes’ landing place, is the *carr* from Old Norse: 1: land recovered from marsh or swamp, or 2: land covered with rough undergrowth and brier, as in the Decuman legend told later.

    ’*Carenton*e’ and (later) ‘Carhampton’ may be Norman attempts to ‘rationalise’ a name no longer understood. There seems no reason to equate this marshy ‘Carrum’ with the Carham in Northumberland, which is based on O E carr: rock. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Although Danes eventually settled in their thousands in East Anglia and made it the base for forays, neither they nor the seasonal reinforcements from Denmark ever established a permanent presence, as evinced by Danish place-names, in more than a dozen places west of the line drawn after their defeat by Alfred. In the Danelaw the Viking at length became ‘brother to the ox’. In Wessex, he was nearly everywhere a bird of passage, and a predatory one at that. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Old tribal hostilities may have entered into it. By and large, East Kent had been settled by the Jutes, West Kent taken over by the Saxons. The Men of Kent claimed to have resisted invaders more firmly than their Saxon neighbours, and their defiance of the Normans led to King William allowing them special semi-autonomous status. For example, the old Jutish custom of gavelkind (property inherited not by eldest son only but by all) continued into the twentieth century. . [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. He almost certainly suffered from osteogenesis imperfecta, an inherited form of brittle-bone disease.’ But so many explanations have been offered for the contradiction between has physical incapacity and his prowess in battle that one may question whether ‘boneless’ really is the only possible translation of the original: *inn beinlausi*: internally boneless. *Lausi* in Old Icelandic also means ‘loose’, therefore perhaps ‘loose-limbed’ or ‘agile’, which is more fitting for a Viking leader. (On the other hand, other European languages render him as ‘Ivar Sans Os’, ‘Der Knochenlose’ and ‘Il Disossato’, and ‘they can’t all be wrong, can they?’). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. These men were legendary, but there is no reason to doubt their existence. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. The ASC only says ‘the brother of Ivar and Halfdan’, but later tradition identified him as Ubbe (or Hubba) (*ASC* (Penguin Classics) 248, note 99). Ubba also appears as a Danish ‘king’ in the mediaeval romance, *Havelock the Dane*. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Taylor, I : *Words and Places* (Everyman), 202 [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. F W 215 [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. F W 215 [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Known for its wealth and splendour as the Golden Borough, it was again sacked in 1069 during Hereward’s resistance to the Normans. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. This dignity was recognised by their Saxon enemies and chroniclers. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Asser [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. There is no general agreement on the location, except that it was toward the western end of the Ridgeway, perhaps above Ashton. But see Note [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. F W 216 [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. A simile familiar to Asser from Welsh heroic poetry [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. The form in the ASC for 757 is Meradun, but the ‘castle’ was a royal residence, or at least a place of visit, as King Cynewulf found to his mortal cost: ASC 753 [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. As most of the fighting had been near the Berkshire-Wiltshire border, one might expect this to be the village about ten miles south-west of Hungerford, but the Danes were obviously drawn by the wealth of the southerly Wilton, the ‘capital’ and administrative centre of Wiltunscire. (Salisbury did not yet exist). [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. He used to affirm that among all the difficulties and burdens of his present life this had become the greatest, namely, that at the time when he was of the right age and had the leisure and capacity for learning, he did not have the teachers. When he was older, (he was) incessantly . . . harassed by all kinds of illnesses unknown to the physicians of this island.’ Asser, ch. 42. It is possible that Asser stressed Alfred’s suffering (incessant?) in his desire to portray him as a pattern of “submission to the will of God”, but it was genuine, and his prowess all the more remarkable. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. He had learnt to read rather earlier than this. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. King Alfred: Translation of Gregory’s Pastoral Care, 125) [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. ‘Objects brought in by metal-detector users … focused attention on six fields on the east bank of the Trent and north of the present village of Torksey, where excavations have now taken place . . . The camp . . . stood on a natural rise with good drainage and visibility, with an estimated area of some 26 hectares (65 acres). The river bank and marshes around obviated the need for a defensive ditch.’ (Report in *The Times Register*, 3.8.2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Excavations carried out over twenty years by Professor and Mrs Martin Biddle revealed that the Danes had chosen a site on the river and enclosed it with a ditch and bank and incorporating the existing Anglian church in the defence line. Ships could anchor here with supplies and reinforcements. (Silver pennies of the 870s gave convincing evidence of the Danes’ presence). Viking internments were found near the church, the most significant the skeleton of a 35-45 year old man, nearly six feet tall, a man of obvious importance who had died from a blow to the skull, probably in a skirmish with local Mercians. He was buried in pagan fashion, with a thong round his neck holding two glass beads and Thor’s hammer. The Biddles suggested that this might have been Ivar himself, for he disappears from English history and the army was then divided into two bodies led by Halfdan and Guthrum respectively. (But in fact Ivar re-appeared in Ireland) (Marsden, Barry M: *The Vikings in Derbyshire*: *Derbyshire Life and Countryside*, March & April 2007)

    The singular monument lies on a crest above the River Trent, not only a great natural divide, but the historic boundary between north and south. Its placingt within a former Mercian mausoleum, with a mass of contemporary human remains, is also significant, and it does seem that a convincing claim can be established as to the identity of the man in the mound. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Exeter, as the chief town of the Dumnonii, was far from wholehearted in support of the Wessex kings; but that did not ease matters with the Danes. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. The marshes, though unhealthy by reason of the flooding, provided a living for a population of fishers and fowlers. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. And in West Somerset Free Press, 16.3.1932 [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Now the site of the Kings of Wessex School [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. It has been suggested **–** rather fancifully **–** that the name could even mean ‘Hubba's pill’, apparently from the idea that since hundreds of Anglo-Saxon village leaders are commemorated in place names from Abberley to Youlton, the Viking may have been accorded the same honour; but the English, though great celebrators of their defeats, have never taken self-mortification quite so far as that. The origin is more prosaic: ‘(place) above the pill’. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Recorded in the 17th century (ca 1670) by the Rev. Thomas Hearne, Rector of Bleadon, and in *West Somerset Free Press*, 16.3.1932 [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Bush, Robin: *Somerset Stories*, 16 [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. The detailed argument was made by J. K. Ridler in *Selworthy Notebook*, based on observations made by J. Ll. Page in *An Exploration of Exmoor*, 72 . He wrote, ‘Toward the west of Timberscombe, adjoining Wootton and on a commanding open site, is Higher Burrow. The name probably derives from the Saxon ‘burh’, a fortification. Its residents are called ‘de Burgh’ in early documents. This may well have been a main centre of King Alfred’s operations against the Danes in the area. It could be provisioned by venison from the Forest of Exmoor to the west and by corn from a detached portion of the royal manor of Carhampton close by. Although it is not in sight of the Danish camp, there is a tract of land in Wootton where the fields are still named Kingsbury . The field-names Houseclose and Cockerills may indicate the burial-place (of the Danish chieftain), pointing to the site of the ‘Earl’sCoc’ at a spot in Howe’s Close where a patch-mark was recorded in the dry summer of 1976 (taking a burial mound as ‘howe’ in Saxon and ‘coc’ in Danish. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. ‘Familiar’, that is, at the time, but the coastline has changed and is still changing very considerably. Much of the Steart peninsula has been washed away, islands have been formed by the tide and human agency, and the course of the river and direction of the estuary have also changed: the river may have cut through to the north-west instead of flowing north past Burnham, and a little distance to the west, on a promontory near Stoford, was a ‘botestal’, evidently a mooring place to wait for the tide. (The whole area, however, has now been designated a Nature Reserve of national importance.) [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Major, A: *The Early Wars of Wessex*. Vikings’ Pill was a long meander, the easternmost stretch of the river and nearest the Poldens. Between 1677 and 1678, Sir John Moulton cut a new channel to remove this large meander. The old river bed soon silted up providing 120 acres (49 ha) of new land. (Williams, M: *River Diversions of the Parrett* (*q.v)* [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. In 1962 Philip (later Professor) Rahtz excavated what remained of this ‘cemetery’, and estimated that before the quarrying it must have held up to 5,000 bodies. Those (100+) which remained, however, were from the sub-Roman period, that is, up to the end of the seventh century; the burials were orderly, most of them in the Christian recumbent and west-east tradition, and only one skeleton showed signs of a violent end. (Journal of the Axbridge Caving Group and Archaeological Society, 1963) But the gashes on the skulls that were dug up in 1875 must surely indicate a war grave, and the intensive quarrying destroyed not only the mass burials but also nine-tenths of the Christian graveyard. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. ‘Stolford’: not proven, but possible. As well as the obvious meaning,‘ford’ can mean ‘inlet’ or ‘creek’, as in fjord’, and although the ford is there for all to see, mediaeval documents tell of ships sailing or rowing in to Stolford. ‘Steart’, meaning ‘end (of land)’, describes it perfectly (cf. Dutch ‘staart’: ‘tail’), but the only Old Norse parallel, ‘stjarna’: ‘stern (of a boat)’, seems to derive not from the position at the far end but from the idea of steering. The Wick Barrow, however, suggested in the 1870s as the burial-place of Hubba, has since been excavated and shown as dating from a much earlier time. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. As a further point: the only remaining mediaeval copy of Asser was destroyed by fire in 1729, and so we have to depend on a transcript made in the sixteenth century, and who knows how accurately this may have been done? In Old English script the letters i, m. n and u consist of vertical straight lines and ‘nui’ appears as five of these; or perhaps – if no more than that – the mediaeval copier wrote, in black letter script, not five but four, thus: CyIII I t , (CYMIT), would be a very reasonable Welsh attempt at ‘Combwich’

    And finally, most pertinently, the name is actually written as Comwiz in 1178 (Pipe Rolls of Henry II), as Cunyz (in Placita of 27 Henry III (1243), as Comyz in (9 of Edward I (1281) and as Comwyz and Cumwyz (ibid) (Diocese of Wells)

    Why historians consistently ignore or discount this is difficult to explain. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Part of Ragnar’s legend was that when captured and taken to the king of Northumbria, he was thrown into a pit of poisonous snakes, and died laughing. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. The story of Alfred and the cakes was not written down until the 12th century, when it appeared in a Life of St Neot (*Vita S. Neoti*). The legend of Alfred visiting the Danish camp disguised as a harper has parallels in other countries, but the story of the cakes, even though it did not appear till centuries later, is unique and its un-heroic portrayal of the hero and the record of the words of the farmer’s wife give it a compelling ring of truth. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Neot’s visitation is first recorded in a tenth century *Life* of the saint, and in the 1120s William of Malmesbury, in his *History of the Kings of England*, (Ed. Stevenson, Rev. J. 1854) enlisted St Cuthbert among Alfred’s happy few, coming in the guise of a pilgrim and asking for food. The king responded generously, setting aside half of all that he had.The saint later appeared in a dream, advising him how to defeat the Danes. . . and promising him victory and prosperity. (P.100) [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. *Sumorsæte* originally meant ‘the Somerset people’ and later became the name of the district. It is elliptical for *Sumortun-sæte*: the dwellers at, or dependent on, Somerton. The name supposedly derives from the practice of grazing cattle on high ground – such as Somerton – when the moors and levels were flooded; but some doubt remains on this.

    There is an interesting confusion, or rather, conflation of identities and dates here. Alfred is supposed to have meditated on Neot on that saint’s feast day while in Athelney and, as it were, received a vision in recompense; but the feast of St Neot was in fact 31 July; Cuthbert’s was 20 March, which accords much better with the timing. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Simmonsbarrow Farm, on the Blackdown Hills, also contained a cairn said to commemorate the stand made by Simon, the “Lord of Exmoor”, and to cover his bones. But it was all “scat abroad” by a road contractor and carted away. (Matthews, F.W. *Tales of the Blackdown Borderland* (Somerset Folk Series No 13, 1923) p.31 [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Such strange, inexplicable happenings may be rare, even in the West Country, but it would be foolish to dismiss as merely subjective impressions these visions which draw aside the curtain of the dark [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Ordnance Survey 1 inch ma [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. This place has not been positively identified. One suggestion is Brixton in Wiltshire, and this would be possible if the subsequent events also took place in that country, but it seems rather far east for an important boundary stone. A stronger possibility is White Sheet or Kingston Down (Cynges-stane-dun) to the west of Kingston Deverill, 800 feet high and near the junction of two tracks that were old even in King Alfred’s time. The Alfred Tower, built by Henry Hoare of Stourhead in the 18th century, is probably nearer than the old benefactor is often given credit for. But the vivid ‘on the spot’ television presentation by Dr Michael Wood leaves little room for doubt. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. If it was Chippenham, why did not Asser name it? [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. ‘The identification of Ethandun with Edington, on the Polden Hills in Somerset makes much more sense . . . As a loyal Wiltshireman, I deplore having to pass to a neighbouring county the honour of being the scene of one of the great decisive battles of the world, but, as an honest chronicler, I cannot help it.’ (Whitlock, Ralph: Wiltshire, 22). [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Bazell; for Downend, Greswell, W, in *Saga-Book of the Viking Club*, 242. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. do [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. *Thirteenth Annual Report of the Somerset River Board* (1963), 53-55 [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Major, A: op cit [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Later incorporated into the Great Western. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. The probable location has been most tellingly illustrated by Dr Michael Wood in his television programme The Dark Ages [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Green, J L: *History of the English People*, 89 ?? [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Trevelyan, G M : History of England [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. Woodruff: op.cit.73 [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Taylor, op.cit. 125 [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. FW224 [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Asser , sec.67 [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Frith: peace (or treaty of peace). The treaty may have been a revision of the agreement made with Guthrum at Aller or Wedmore in 878 because of the violation not by Guthrum himself but by ‘wild men’ from his kingdom. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Looking back to the eighth century as a golden age of learning, he may have understandably overstated the decline and fall. At least six of the scholars invited to his court were Mercians. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Asser’s text abridged here [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. Stenton, F. 264 [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. These specifications are known only from a document in Edward’s reign known as the Burghal Hidage [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. The scene has changed out of all recognition. The ample mouth of the river is now Rye Bay. The alluvium of a thousand years has pushed the shoreline some three miles out to sea and created a wide marsh; and the upper reach of the river was converted into the Royal Military Canal in the Napoleonic wars. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. The town has a fascinating history. Fullerton’s Parliamentary Gazetteer (*ca* 1847) tells us: ‘The town, which is of great antiquity, is situated at the head of a creek which opens into the channel between the Isle of Sheppey and the coast of Kent. It possesses a port for barges; but the inhabitants are chiefly employed in the oyster fishery, which gives employment to over a hundred dredgers. The Milton oysters are considered the finest in England, and are in great demand in London, whence they are sent to all parts of the kingdom and the continent . . .

     ‘Milton was anciently the residence of the kings of Kent, who had a castellated palace here. At Kemsley Down, in the marshes, the site of a Danish fortress, erected about the year 895, is still perceptible : it was destroyed, in 1052, at the request of Earl Godwin.’

     ‘Far out on the flats the land on which a paper-mill stands is said to be the last bit of land held by the Danes. (Mee, A: *Kent* (King’s England series, 1936) [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. Possibly north-west of Ashford, but uncertain [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. There was some skirmishing here, but the main battle took place *before* they crossed the Thames, not here. But history fairly bristles with such coincidences. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. Not in ASC, but identified by Æthelweard. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. We owe this graphic detail to ‘Florence’ of Worcester [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. FW 229 [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Gazetteer ibid: (Early 1840s) ‘Several Danish forts are visible in the vicinity. Nearly the last of the sanguinary struggles of the Welsh for national independence was made on this spot. Of these, or perhaps earlier contests, an immense number of skulls and human bones recently discovered in digging the foundations for a school-house near the church, were the probable relics.’ Fieldworks were still visible in the 1870s but have since disappeared.

     There is a Danesford about a mile upstream, and a Shropshire website suggests that they may have set up a camp at Panpudding Hill (see town map of Bridgnorth). [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. W 232 [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. Morgan, Trevor: *A Darkened Soul. The Saga of Alfred and Haestan* (Rockwell Green 1988) [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. Wheredid the crews come from? Very probably Viking or Norse mercenaries**.** [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. Braydon, hamlet in the parish of Purton, four miles south-south-west of Cricklade. This town was doubly important to Wessex, as the head of navigation on the Thames for all but the shallowest drafts, and as a fort on the frontier, facing Mercia on the north bank. The remains of the defensive earthworks are in a field by the main road between Cirencester and Swindon. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. Florence of Worcester added this (FW234) [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. Including Chester in 907 [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. FW 233. All but one of the Five Boroughs that were recovered from the Danes (Stamford) became administrative centres when Mercia was divided into counties or shires (dates uncertain). In principle the ‘county town’ should not be more than a day’s ride from the furthest part of the county [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. FW 236 [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. Not to forget Gwenllian, princess consort of Gruffydd ap Rhys, prince of Deuheubarth, In the revolt of 1139 against the Normans she led the army to defend her homeland from a merciless enemy, fought, was defeated and executed by beheading. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. *Wigingamere*: located by Jeremy Haslam (1988) at Newton (Castle), north Essex, but revised by him (1997) as Old Linslade, near Wing, Bucks. (and see Note 8 of On the Western Front). [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. Thelwall: According to[Sir Peter Leycester](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sir_Peter_Leycester,_1st_Baronet), the 17th century historian of Cheshire, it was ‘so called from the stakes and stumps, cut from the trees, wherewith it was environed about as a wall’. More probably the original meaning of Thelwall was "pool by a plank bridge" (the earliest record of the name is in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for 923 as Thelwæl; in 1241 it occurs as ‘Thelewell’). Earthworks remain of an embankment, possibly part of these fortifications, found in the grounds of Chaigley School. These remains are a designated [English Heritage](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_Heritage) National [Monument](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monument)**.** [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. *Scergeat*: This site, according to the *Oxford History of England*, has not been positively identified, which is rather strange, since Symeon of Durham (13th C) explained it thus: A: ‘Domina ad locum qui Sceargate dicitur, venit, idemque munitam exstruisit ; dehinc in occidentali plaga Sabrinae fluninis in loco qui Bridge dicitur, aliam aedificavit’ (ed Twysden,153): that is, she demolished the (old) Danish fort at Quatt or Quatford and built a new one on the west bank, thus founding the town of Bridgnorth.’ (This was of course the fortification at Quattford built by the Danes twenty years before).

     There are two other possibilities, but less likely: B: Scargate Lane, a little to the west of Lincoln: no fortifications now visible, but it is possible that she ordered the construction of a manned advance work in preparation for a move against the Danish borough which was Edward’s next, or very near, objective. C: Scargate, in Chelmsford, was part of the Roman wall, defended unsuccessfully by the Danes in 920 but rebuilt by Edward in the same year.

     A folk memory, if no more than that, has persisted that Aethelfled built her fortress in a site known as Panpudding Hill, and that this could be the village which it protected.

     Bridgnorth is not just the town, however. On the west side of the river there is Oldbury, an attractive, mature village, apart from a new housing estate, now separated from the town by a bypass. Some claim that this is the site of the original village which supported Ethelfleda's castle on Panpudding Hill. It is said to be a pleasant and rewarding walk from the town, as the church contains a wealth of fine woodwork carved by people of the village.

     The Danish encampment and fort at Quattford is four miles downstream and on the east bank. Further downstream and on the other bank is Quatford, another place which on occasion is said to have been the site of Æthelflæda's castle [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. They did not attempt the southern coast until later./ [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. FW 237. When the folk song collector Cecil Sharpe visited Porlock in or about 1904 he found a song telling of such a raid and the abduction of a Porlock maiden. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
128. Cox, Thomas ,(*q.v*.) [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
129. A Wyndham estate map of about 1800 names it ‘Biddlegore’ and ‘Buddlegore’ – the rather colourless ‘dwelling field’ – and adjoining it is ‘Leechfield’ – ‘leech’ being connected the German ‘Leiche’ – but this may simply mean that the bearers of a coffin halted for a rest at this half-way post between Williton and the churchyard of St Decumans. An extension of Biddlegore has been called Grabburrows from the tumuli it contains. Excavations of the burrows have yielded no identifiably Danish or Saxon remains,nor can the adjoining ‘Danesfield’ be taken as evidence. [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. Not quite a fair judgement of them, surely. [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. The field names Earl Cock and Dane Cock (Ridler, J*: Selworthy Notebook*). [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
133. Some copies of the Chronicle say Steepholm. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
134. Plan of Eddisbury by Dr George Ormerod (1819; reprinted 1881) in his *History of the City and County Palatine of Chester.* [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
135. A rare record of the personal suffering of a humane commander [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
136. *Wigingamere*: most recently defined as ‘boundary (*-mere*) of the (Saxon clan group) Wigingas’, from which the place-name name Wing is the evolved and abbreviated form (with Winfield and Wingrave). The site is further identified as Old Linslade , three miles north-east of Wing, on the river Ousel. (Dodgson, John: *Saga Book of the Viking Society,* 1988). (Further presented by Haslam, Jeremy: *The Location of the Burh of Wigingamere – A Reappraisal*). The foundation of the burh must be vitally connected with King Edward’s campaign against the south-midland Danes and the battles for control of Tempsford in 917. Wigingamere is actually on the border of the Danelaw near Leighton (Buzzard). [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
137. There had been some recognition of Æthelflæd’s excellence in Mercian records, but she received more generous reatment in Irish ones. [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
138. 1. It is generally agreed that it was in the Wirral, the natural converging point of the different interests, and most probably at Bromborough. Unfortunately, it has been covered by a golf course.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
139. The Icelandic Viking Egil with his brother Thorolf and 300 followers took service with King Athelstan in his campaign to hold Northumbria, and *Egil’s Saga* supplements the account in the A S C, describing at length Athelstan’s mastership and skill in assembling an army and out-manoeuvering the enemy. Particularly interesting are the measures taken by the enemy for setting out the battlefield. Although written at least 300 years after the event, the retelling of the tradition holds one’s attention and carries conviction. [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
140. Stenton, 356 [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
141. Stamford was the only one of these not to become a ‘county town’ [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
142. Stenton: 374 and 1A: 373 [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
143. It may seem strange that as late as the year 987 a Devon thane could be taking part in a battle near Watchet, but in view of the comment on p.7 the fact should be noted. [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
144. Lydford, like Watchet, was a mint producing silver pennies (over a million in the long run) and an obvious target for the raiders. They are said to have retired after the battle, but the neighbourhood contains several settlements with names apparently of Danish origin: Beardon, Beara and Dingwell. The remains of the ‘burh’ are just to the west of the A386 [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
145. Although written history dates Saxon England from the coming of Hengist and Horsa in 449, the Saxons must really have been here in numbers long before this. The land of the Iceni in what became East Anglia had been laid waste after the revolt of Boadicea in the year 60, but one cannot accept that it remained unoccupied for the four centuries that followed. [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
146. ‘The sea rovers, with infallible instinct, seem to have detected the best harbour in the kingdom, and to have found shelter for their vessels in the fjords of the Pembrokeshire coast – the deep land-bound channels of Milford, Haverford (Haventfjord : there is a Hafnafjord in Iceland), Whiteford and Skerryford, and the neighbouring creeks of Wathwick, Little Wick, Oxwich, Halwick, Gellyswick, Mousselwick, Wick Haven and Muggleswick Bay . . . Most of the names on the mainland are Celtic, but the neighbouring islands bear the names of Caldy (Cold Island), Barry (Bare Island), Lundy (Puffin Island), Skokholm (Wooded Island), Denney (Danes’ Island), Skomer, Gateholm, Grassholm, Flatholm and Steepholm.’ (Taylor, I. 239) [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
147. Scar: ‘crag’ (an accurate description). – Screedy or Screed hay: possibly ‘rough rocks’ + ‘enclosure’, (Ekwall), though the ground nowadays does not give evidence of this; - or from a Danish personal name, Skrea or similar.

     In the Lucott area of the hills above Porlock, West Somerset, is the intriguing name Nut**sc**ale Farm (abandoned) and, from 1942, reservoir. One might derive the name from Norse ‘skáli’: hut, but this pattern of ‘natural feature + abode’ does not occur in Danelaw names. The same applies to ‘skál’: bowl, even though it makes a fair description of the scene. As for ‘scale’; ladder, this could denote the steep hillsides, but ‘scale’ is only found twice outside areas of Danish influence. Too much remains uncertain. [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
148. Census entry for 1861. Skirmett’s neighbour is the Saxon equivalent, Fingest (i.e.*Thinghurst*: meeting-place on a wooded hill), written historically as ‘Tinghest’. (The change of initial ‘th’ to ‘f’ is, however, most unusual, and does not appear till 1660, but it is paralleled by Finedon (Tingdene 1086) in Northants. (When and why did ‘Cockneys’ first say ‘free’ for ‘three’, ‘froo’ for ‘through’ and so on, is uncertain). [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
149. Bathealton: The older form is Baddleton: Bad- as in Badbury Rings seems to be associated with a prehistoric camp, and Bathealton is dominated by a fortification, supposedly Danish, as indeed it might be, since the older name is Haethenbur.

     In Gerard of Trent, fortification at Bathealton, ‘formerly known as Haethenbyr’.

     In Ekwall, Bathealton originally Badeheltone (DB), Badialton (1196).

     (Note also Badbury (Dorset) Baddanbyri, Badeberi, and (Wilts) Baddeburim, Baddeburi: Baddas burg. Both are at prehistoric camps).

     Badbury Hill, Berks, is a hill with a ‘Danish’ camp.

     Badby (Northants) originally Baddanburg is near an ancient earthwork.

     The fact that Baddenburg refers at least in three cases to prehistoric camps is remarkable and may suggest that Badda was a legendary hero, who was associated with ancient camps; but nothing certain is known.

     Somerset also has an Iron Age Bat’s Castle, near Dunster, and a Bat Aller lane near Roadwater, but whether this Bat and the Bad are identical is not clear. [↑](#footnote-ref-149)
150. They are two apiece in Shropshire, Warwicks and Staffs, and one each in Cheshire, Kent and Notts, and Dawley in Middx [↑](#footnote-ref-150)
151. The English form of the name would be Wulf. Ekwall, xxiii. ‘Initial *w* before *u* was lost early in Scandinavian. Old Norse *ulfr* corresponds to Old English *wulf*.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-151)
152. Extracted from Domesday Book. [↑](#footnote-ref-152)
153. 1. Taylor, Isaac: *Words and Places*, 109. The idea may seem fanciful but merits consideration.

     [↑](#footnote-ref-153)
154. Very unusual for D B. Perhaps *jod*? [↑](#footnote-ref-154)
155. It may of course be a mere coincidence, but in the local speech of this area and also of Watchet (reputedly part-Danish), a long vowel sometimes emerges as a diphthong: e.g. at Upton: “Sorry I be lay-ut”, “They ‘on’t do nort thik gay-ut” (that way); and from Watchet this exchange between father and son: “Git out o’ the bwo-ut, bwoy”. - “I bain’t een the bwo-ut, feyther.” – “Wull, git out of un, whether thee’rt in un or not”. [↑](#footnote-ref-155)
156. Thorp or thorpe: farm: The O S Gazetteer gives 140 examples of Thorp or Thorpe, but few have largely outgrown their origin, and none is with 150 miles of Wessex. [↑](#footnote-ref-156)
157. See also : Smith, A.H.,M A: in *Danish and Norse Names in Yorkshire* (Saga Book of the Viking Club, 1925, p.198, remarks on its comparative rarity. [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
158. Extracted from DB. For geographical disposition, see Plates 566 ,567, 568. [↑](#footnote-ref-158)
159. It may be added that “quantities of Saxon and Danish weapons have been found” in the neighbourhood of another border village, Buckland St Mary. (*Somersetshire* Kelly: 1875). 14: SANHS, 1875, 1, 25 [↑](#footnote-ref-159)
160. Brøndsted, J: 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-160)
161. [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
162. The deed ‘struck the English themselves with horror and shame. Henry of Huntingdon records that in his boyhood, eighty years later, the event was still remembered in common talk.’ (Collingwood, 152) [↑](#footnote-ref-162)
163. The betrayal of allegiance to a lord was his real villainy. The idea of unswerving loyalty to a country hardly entered into it. [↑](#footnote-ref-163)
164. At other times also the Norwegian and Danish Vikings did not prove natural allies [↑](#footnote-ref-164)
165. The nursery rhyme is thought to refer, however, to the fall of **part** of London Bridge in the fourteenth century due to lack of repair funds. The revenue had been entrusted to Queen Eleanor, but she is said to have diverted it to her own use. There are other explanations. [↑](#footnote-ref-165)
166. Footnote needed [↑](#footnote-ref-166)
167. Now a Site of Special Scientific Interest. [↑](#footnote-ref-167)
168. Deerhurst rewards a visit with King Offa’s chapel and the Saxon church with its carved memorial to George Butterworth. [↑](#footnote-ref-168)
169. Agreed that he would take the Danelaw and Mercia, and Edmund would hold Wessex until his death. Whether by ill luck or foul play, Edmund died within the year. Canute gave Eadric the due reward of his sins and ordered him to be hanged him on the city walls, thrown down and left unburied (and see Collingwood, 159). [↑](#footnote-ref-169)
170. ‘Edric advised (Canute) to slay the little ethelings, Eadward and Eadmund, the sons of king Eadmund. But thinking that his reputation would suffer if they were made away with in England, he sent them to the king of the Swedes to be put to death; who, although he was in league with him, would not comply with his request, but sent them to Salomon, king of the Hungarians, in order that they might be educated and their lives preserved.’ (F W 269) [↑](#footnote-ref-170)
171. This expedition, like the ‘harrowing’ of the North which followed, was savagely punitive, and William’s march through Somerset can be traced on the map in a swathe of Saxon estates running almost the whole length of the eastern border. (See illustrations : maps of north, south and east of Somerset and west of the Parrett.)

     The Somerset revolt against the incoming Norman usurpers at Montacute in 1068 was a small but separate affair but should not be forgotten. [↑](#footnote-ref-171)