

KING ALFRED, THE DANES

AND

THE RIVER LEA

BY

STUART MOYE

A conflict between King Alfred and the Danes occurred in the Lea Valley in 894 & 895 AD and is thought by some to have occurred close to Stanstead Abbots . The Lea at the time was the agreed boundary between the Saxon held territory and the area of Danelaw. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is really the only early source of information concerning the incursion of the Danes up the River Lea. Many later writers have retold the story adding considerably to the original account. As it was noted in the Chronicle that the conflict took place 20 miles north of London the location of the Danish Camp has usually been thought of as being located somewhere between Hertford and Hoddesdon. The later additions to the story include various sites for the Danish encampment, the cutting of additional channels to make the river too shallow for boats to navigate and the completion of two substantial fortresses by the Saxons on either side of the river. Of particular interest to those who live in Stanstead Abbots is the fact that Widbury Hill has been identified as a possible site for the Danish encampment.

The first major invasion of the Danes into England took place in 865 after some 70 years of violent raiding parties. After 865 the conflict saw the Danes gaining some notable early successes against the Saxons. However, the key battle which is particularly relevant to the Danish incursion up the Lea took place at Ethendun between the 6th and the 12th of May 878. This saw King Alfred decisively defeat Guthrum the King of those Danes settled in East Anglia. Ethendun is widely accepted to be at the modern place known as Edington near Westbury in Wiltshire. This led to the formal written Treaty of Alfred and Guthrum dated to between 878 and 890. [*Often confused with a probably verbal agreement referred to as the Treaty of Wedmore made shortly after the battle at Edington.*] The written treaty set out among other things the boundary between the Danelaw and the land controlled by the West Saxons, which ran the length of the River Lea from the Thames to its source. Danelaw being to the east and north of the border and Saxon control to the west. Following the treaty Guthrum settled in East Anglia and by and large stuck to the agreement until his death in 890.

After Guthrum's death Danes who had been fighting on the continent arrived in Kent in considerable numbers during 892 and were joined by some of Guthrum's former followers. This new group of Danes did not honour the treaty between Alfred and Guthrum and began to raid deep into West Saxon territory from their fortified base at Benfleet in Essex. Alfred's forces attacked and destroyed the base at Benfleet in 893, while the main force of the Danes was away on a raid. The Danes subsequently created a new fortified base in Essex at Shoebury with their ships anchored in the shelter of Mersey Island. It was from here that the Danes set forth on their incursion up the River Lea in 894. One of the leaders of this group of Danes from the continent was Haesten who was possibly the leader of the group that ventured up the Lea. Although the Vikings are normally associated with longships with many oars and a sail those that came up the Lea in 894 are likely to have been smaller more manoeuvrable ships like the Karve. These were shorter and broader beamed multi-purpose sailing ships used for trade, raiding and long journeys across the sea. The shallow draft and manoeuvrability of this type and other similar vessels would have made them well suited for navigating rivers like the Lea. [*It is worth noting that 600 years later an attempt to improve the navigation of the natural course of the River Lea struggled to maintain, by frequent dredging, a water depth of 2 feet / 60 cms. between Ware and the Thames*]

The group of Danes that made the journey up the Lea in 894 were a group of warriors accompanied by their families. This does not appear to be a raiding party and more likely a group looking to find somewhere to settle down. If Haesten was the leader of this group he would have been around 60 years of age and perhaps quite weary of the constant fighting. However, this raises a question as to why they would choose to sail up the Lea along the very boundary between the West Saxons and the Danelaw. Much safer one would have thought to sail north along the coast of East Anglia and settle with the Danes already established in East Anglia. Maybe those in the party who had so recently left their homes there did not wish to return. Nothing in the Chronicle suggests this group actually stole food from the fields or raided any settlement. They took up arms only to defend themselves when their camp was attacked by the Saxons in the spring of 895.

The only near contemporary account of these events is to be found in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. However, there are seven surviving manuscript versions some of which show considerable commonality but others not so much. The following extract comes from an interpretation published in 1847. It reflects a composite interpretation of the existing manuscripts. In some manuscripts of the Chronicle the years 894 & 895 are shown as 895 & 896. To avoid any misunderstanding the years 894 and 895 will be used throughout in this article

894

..... Then that same year, before winter, the Danish-men who had sat down in Mersey, towed their ships up the Thames, and thence up the Lea. This was about two years after they had come hither over sea.

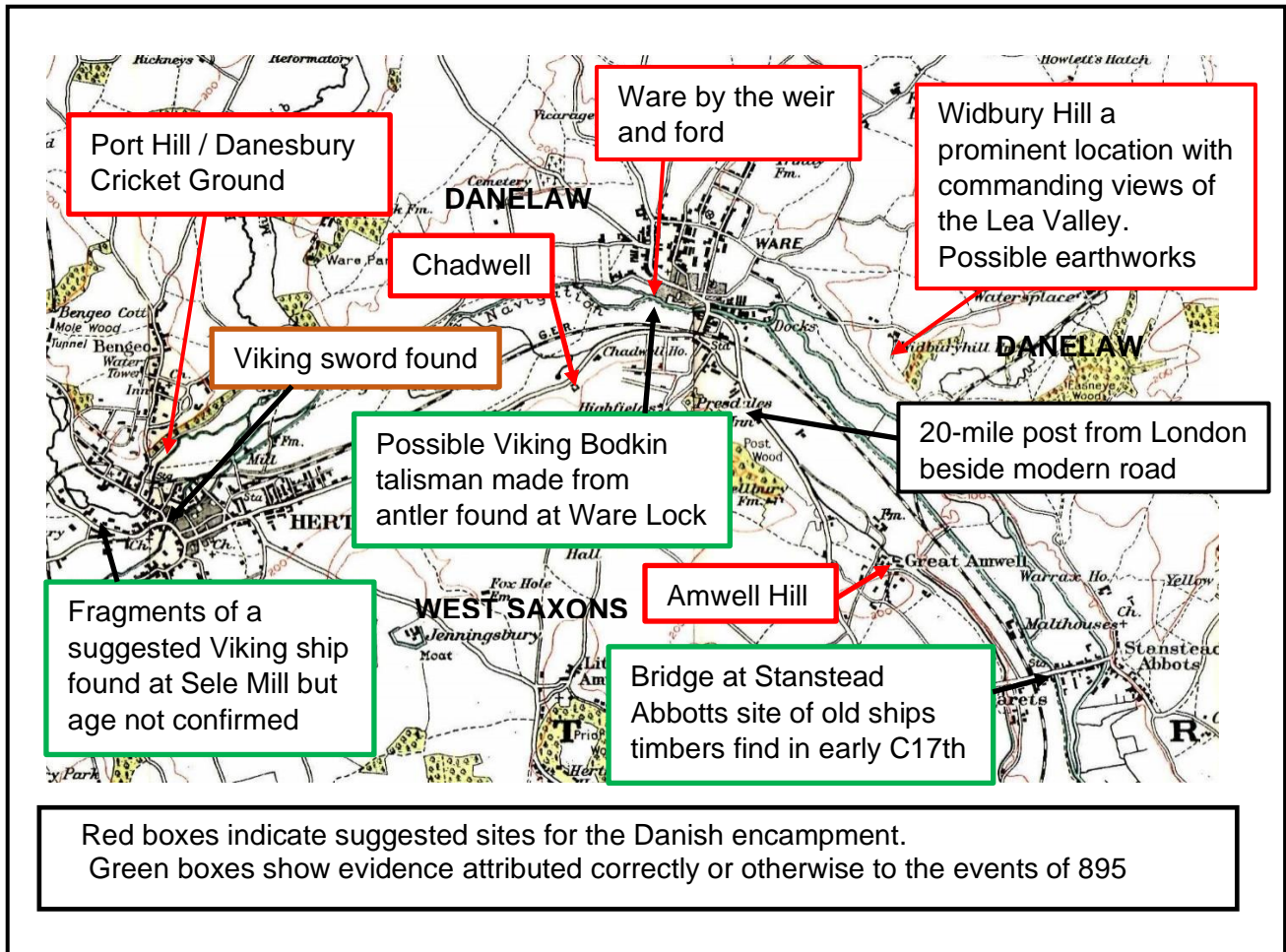
895

In that same year the fore-mentioned army constructed a fortress on the Lea, twenty miles above London. After this, in summer, a great body of the townsmen, and also of other people, went onwards until they arrived at the Danish fortress; and there they were put to flight, and some four king's thanes were slain. Then after this, during harvest, the king encamped near to the town, while the people reaped the corn, so that the Danish-men might not deprive them of the crop. Then on a certain day the king rode up along the river, and observed where the river might be obstructed, so that they would be unable to bring out their ships. And they then did thus: they constructed two fortresses on the two sides of the river. When they had already begun the work, and had encamped before it, then perceived the army that they should not be able to bring out their ships. They then abandoned them, and went across the country till they arrived at Bridgenorth by the Severn; and there they constructed a fortress. Then the forces rode westwards after the army: and the men of London took possession of the ships; but all which they could not bring away, they broke up, and those which were worthy of capture they brought to London: more over the Danish-men had committed their wives to the keeping of the East-Angles before they went out from their fortress. Then sat they down for the winter at Bridgenorth

Having made their way some 20 miles up the River Lea the Danes set up camp and saw through the winter, before creating defences in the early spring of the following year. The lack of a specific place name in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for this camp is perhaps not surprising as neither Hertford nor Ware at this time were settlements of any size or particular significance. Or maybe the Danes may have chosen an easily defended site on top of a prominent hill away from existing Saxon settlements. The richly soiled land to the north could well by that date have already been an important food producing area for London. In which case the Lea would have provided the Danes with access to an abundant food supply. The Saxons on the other hand would have wanted to prevent the Danes from interfering with the harvest. During the spring of 895 the citizens of London attacked this fortified encampment. Their failure in this battle no doubt raised concerns that a long-term settlement of Danes in the area might be a real possibility. The rapid removal of the Danes from the area would have undoubtedly become an urgent priority.

The actual site of the Danish encampment has raised much speculation over the centuries although no conclusive evidence has ever been found. Suggested sites for the Danish camp, about 20 miles north of London, include Port Hill at Bengeo, Hertford, by the river at Ware, and Widbury Hill [between Stanstead Abbots and Ware].

LOCATIONS ASSOCIATED WITH THE DANISH INCURSION UP THE LEA



Ware as a site for the Danes encampment was first mentioned by Camden writing in 1586 suggesting in addition that the Danes had constructed the weir at Ware as part of their defences. Dymdale in 1662 suggested Hertford with a reference to the high ground near Port Hill in Bengeo which overlooks the valley. Other locations suggested by writers over the years include Wadesmill to the north of Ware, Amwell Hill and near Chadwell. It was Eliot Howard in 1909 who put forward the site at Widbury as the most likely site of the Danish encampment. In truth there is no conclusive proof for any of these sites but Widbury has captured the attention of many as it seems to be the sort of place the Danes might well have chosen. In addition, earthworks are present but have not convinced others as proof of the Danes camp. Archaeological finds of a sword at Hertford and a bodkin at Ware remain isolated finds and as such not evidence of the events of 895. Leland writing in 1710-12 mentioned that when the bridge at Stanstead Abbots was being rebuilt in the early 17th century fragments of wooden ships were found. The age of the wooden remains and hence the ships was never determined and thus cannot be attributed to the Danes. This has not however deterred suggestions that Stanstead Abbots was the location of the site where the unwanted captured Danish ships were dismantled and the wood repurposed.

Once the Danes had been unsuccessfully attacked by the Saxons in the spring of 895, King Alfred arrived in the Valley of the Lea with his standing army. Apart from preventing the Danes from helping themselves to some of the harvest it was also Alfred's intention to ensure they left the area and to deter them from further raids into West Saxon territory. Instead of immediately attacking the Danes in their fortified camp Alfred bided his time knowing that the presence of his forces would prevent attempts to steal the harvest from the fields. Neither side would have wanted to have an all-out battle as the unnecessary loss of fighters on both sides was something to be avoided. Alfred instead chose a spot downstream of the Dane's location obstructed the channel and made a start on building fortifications on either side of the river. This was done to prevent the Danes returning to the Thames down the River Lea. The following two versions of this action by Alfred can be found within the various interpretations of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.

. Then on a certain day the king rode up along the river, and observed where the river might be obstructed, so that they would be unable to bring out their ships. And they then did thus: they constructed two fortresses on the two sides of the river. When they had already begun the work, and had encamped before it, then perceived the army that they should not be able to bring out their ships

Then, one day, rode the king up by the river; and observed a place where the river might be obstructed, so that they could not bring out their ships. And they did so. They wrought two works on the two sides of the river. And when they had begun the work, and encamped before it, then understood the army that they could not bring out their ships.

Both indicate the obstruction of the river and just the beginning of the construction of two defensible positions on opposite sides of the river with the Saxon Army encamped in front of the works. The obstruction of the river could easily and quickly be achieved by driving a few large stakes into the river bed at intervals across the river between the two bankside fortifications. The Chronicle strongly indicates that the Danes realised, when the Saxon fortifications were barely begun, that their ships could not be used to escape downstream. As the Lea became even more difficult to navigate upstream it meant that Alfred forced the Danes into deciding to leave the area overland, without it appears any further violent conflict. Before departing the Danes sent their wives and presumably their children into the safety of Danish controlled East Anglia. Having set off overland they were followed by the Saxons thus deterring them from any further raiding activities. This group of Danes were eventually to travel to East Anglia and it appears some settled down as farmers there. Meanwhile the abandoned ships were captured by the Saxons and those in poor condition being scrapped and the better ones taken to London.

Alfred was to die in 901 and it was his son King Edward the Elder who was to set about the reconquest of the Danelaw territory. Interestingly one of his first acts in this endeavour was to create two fortified burghs either side of the ford at Hertford. The northern Burgh was constructed in 912 and the southern one in 913. This provided a safe location for a market, storage of food, commerce and trade in the local area. It also made it much more difficult for the Danes to raid an area in which such a defended town was located. The inhabitants of this new settlement were all required to provide service as soldiers to defend the town against attack. This was the first step towards this area becoming more peaceful and economically successful, rather than being an area on the contested border between the Saxon and Danish controlled areas of the country.

That might have been the end of the story of the Danes and their incursion up the River Lea in 895. However, the story itself took on a life of its own in the form of the additions of later writers which had no historical basis from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. That has not prevented this added material becoming considered by many as part of the historically correct account.

The extract below taken from “The Historical Antiquities of Hertfordshire” by Sir Henry Chauncy written in 1700 shows how the story of the Danes on the Lea became distorted over time . Those parts underlined in **bold** represent Chauncy’s possible misinterpretations of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and those in **red** are ideas introduced by later writers and Chauncy himself. A large part of this account therefore has no firm basis in historical fact and tells a story significantly different from that in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.

*The Danes riding with their navy through the River of the Thames to the entrance of the River Lea with light pinnaces and ships, came by this river to a place where the town of Ware now stands about twenty miles distant from London, and built there a strong fort **and fortified it with a weir, which they raised about it a great bank or dam that penned in the water about the fort**; from whence the Danes made their excursions, and sailed thence their ships riding under this, called to this day Porthill and Shipman’s-Hill, from the safety of the harbour; **and during their stay there assailed this town of Hertford, spoil’d the inhabitants, burnt their houses to the ground....., in so much that King Alfred was compelled the same year to levy forces and build a castle at this town for the security of his subjects, whither a great part of the citizens of London and other people repaired; who modelled themselves into an army, did attempt to destroy the Danish fort; but in this action four of the King’s Officers were slain, and his army put to flight.***

***The next year**, when the summer approached , **the King encamped with his forces on both sides of the river**, viewed the fort which the Danes had fortified, observed the strength of their walls and the order of their **ships fenced in with stakes**; and knowing well that they would command all the corn in the fields for their garrison near the City of Hertford, or within the compass of their army and would burn or destroy what they should not need. **He passed in a vessel down the river , drawn with a horse upon the bank**, sounded the depth of the waters, and discovering that in **some places the water might be drawn so low and the stream so straightened with stakes that all the skill of the Danes could not tow their ships back again. He divided the river into three currents and made a large shass at Blackwall to restrain the tide from flowing the level from which it was denominated. In short time after the work was begun, the water sank at the Danish Fort so that the Pagans could not draw back their ships**; then they immediately conveyed their wives to the East Angles, where they secured them and then made their composition with the English that they might march to Qautbridge near the Severn where they built another fort; but the army hastened and followed after them and followed them to the west, whilst the citizens of London seized their ships, broke those into pieces they could not haul up to London and conveyed the others they could remove and were worth their pains to London”*

In the first section above Chauncy is repeating an idea from an earlier historian that the weir at Ware was constructed by the Danes, doing so to protect their encampment by the river at Ware. The mention of Hertford being destroyed in 895 by the Danes is problematic as it is unlikely a town existed there in 895. It is then stated that a castle / fortified town was built there with the residents formed into a militia This suggests that Chauncy was confusing the events of 895 with the building of two fortified Burghs at Hertford, on either side of the ford, in 912 and 913 by Alfred’s son King Edward.

In the second part of the extract Chauncy picks up on the idea of lowering the level of water in the river first mentioned by Henry of Huntingdon in 1129. Henry gave a means of achieving this in his writing with; “*caused the waters of the river Lea to be divided into three channels so that the Danes were unable to bring out their ships*”. This idea has been picked up by many later writers and the existence of multiple natural channels [braiding] in the Lea at Stratford, Waltham Abbey and Rye House have led these to be suggested as suitable locations. Chauncy also includes the building of a tidal dam at Blackwall to hold back the tide and lower river levels. The locals of Waltham Abbey rather taken by the idea that Alfred dug the local multiple channels has resulted in articles on the topic appearing in local history books and periodically in local newspapers.

Not surprisingly the residents of Stanstead Abbots, St Margarets and Great Amwell have been much enamoured with the idea of Widbury Hill being the location for the Danish Camp. The name Widbury, [*Witteberwe and Whiteborough Hill in earlier times*], is by some thought to refer to the hill appearing to be white, caused by the exposure of the underlying chalk in the ramparts of the Danish Camp or Burgh. In addition, the finding of ships timbers during the rebuilding of the river bridge at Stanstead in the early C17th led to the idea that this was where those captured Danish ships of lower value were broken up. Historically the section of the River Lea through the village was shallow enough for a ford to exist. This has encouraged the view that this is where King Alfred obstructed the river and started to build the two fortified structures either side of the river. An obvious choice of location would have been at or near the ford across the river. On the ground the landscape has the right feel for Widbury to be a likely site for the Danish Camp. From Widbury Hill there is a commanding view of the Lea Valley down to London in the south and westward almost to Hertford. Very much the type of site on one of the highest hills in the area that one would choose for a more easily defended camp in a potentially hostile area. The fact that Widbury is about 20 miles north of London as mentioned in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle has been seen as a key point to favour Widbury as being the most likely location. A further supporting argument is that the Danes would need to be able to see Alfred's obstruction of the river and construction works being started. This would have been possible if the Danes were looking down from the top of Widbury Hill and Alfred's army were encamped near the ford at Stanstead.

Persuasive ideas maybe, but other possible sites between Hertford and Hoddesdon [20 miles north of London] can also be supported by similar conjectures. In the end insufficient archaeological evidence has been found to locate the Danish Encampment of 895 with any certainty. The site at Widbury Hill does remain a popular contender despite the visible earthworks not being particularly convincing as remains of a fortified camp. Perhaps in the future some significant archaeological finds will provide a greater degree of certainty concerning the Danish incursion up the Lea in 894-5. Until that time one suspects an abundance of differing stories will continue to be told. Undoubtedly with each possible site for the Danes camp and King Alfred's works continuing to be particularly favoured by those who live near each suggested location

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Further information concerning the Earthworks at Widbury can be found in an article on this website titled ' Earthworks at Amwell and Widbury '

Stuart Moya December 2021