



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY

# BATTLE OF ETHANDUN

ALFRED THE GREAT'S LAST STAND

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# The Battle of Ethandun

## Introduction

The battle of Ethandun or Eddington was fought in the year of 878 AD, between the 6th and 12th of May. I have referred to it as Alfred's the Great's last stand because defeat would have led to the last bastion of Anglo Saxon rule, the Kingdom of Wessex, being destroyed and would have left the whole of what is now England under the control of the Vikings.

An exceptional victory for Alfred and Wessex would lead to the treaty of Wedmore and the beginning of an Anglo Saxon renaissance by both Alfred and the dynasty of his Royal house.

Events prior to Ethandun have become almost legendary in English history and the rise from the ashes of despair to the triumph of the Kingdom of Wessex is a story of critical importance.

## The Vikings

The Vikings, both Danes and the Norse had progressively attacked the nations of Western Europe since 973 AD and over the following decades these attacks had become more frequent and destructive and then developed into occupation and attempted conquest.

The Anglo Saxon Kingdoms were unable or unwilling to unify in the face of this coming storm and one by one, Kingdom by Kingdom the heathen men of the north began to dismantle Anglo Saxon England.

## April 871

Alfred was crowned as King of Wessex in April 871 upon the death of his brother, Aethelred. Wessex was already under attack from the Danes and whilst Alfred was preparing his brother's funeral an Anglo Saxon army was defeated at an unnamed place within Wessex.

In May, that year, Alfred took the field with an army but was defeated at the battle of Wilton.

Alfred realised that he needed to buy time in order to raise and train an effective army and to organise the defence of Wessex. He sought terms with the Danes. No details of any conditions or agreements are known but the inference must be, is that Alfred brought them off and that he paid a large sum in exchange for them withdrawing from his realm.

The Danes left Wessex alone for some five years but in 876 they attacked and occupied Wareham in Dorset. Their leaders were Guthrum, Anwend and Osetel.

Alfred penned them up in the town but did not have the means to attack and overcome them. He negotiated another treaty and handed over a number of hostages. What was agreed is unknown, however the Danes broke their oath and executed the hostages then evacuated Wareham and escaped to Exeter, which they occupied. It appears that Alfred did not have the strength to attack them whilst they took to their ships and left for Exeter.

Alfred did manage to blockaded Exeter from the sea which eventually forced the Danes to submit. Alfred allowed them to return to Mercia.

## January 878

In January 878, Alfred was at his Royal villa at Chippingham. His family, including his daughter Aethelflaed and his son, Edward were with him. Just after 12th night, the Danes attacked the Royal compound and overwhelmed it.

Most of Alfred's retinue were killed or captured, but the King and his family managed to escape and together with a small band of followers they managed to flee to the island of Athelney in the Somerset marshes.

There amongst the swamp and reed beds a small band of survivors hid from the Danes and began the process of preparing to resist the invaders.

Wessex had all but fallen as had all the other Anglo Saxon Kingdoms.

The legend of Alfred burning the cakes originated during this period but as to whether there is any truth to it, we'll never know.

Whilst at Athelney Alfred began to lay plans for a formal resistance and began to build an army. Messages were sent out to those still loyal to him and by May 878, Alfred summonsed all available warriors and men of fighting age to assemble at Egbert's Stone, near to the town of Selwood in Somerset.

The survivors of the Wiltshire, Hampshire and Somerset Fyrd (Shire levys) assembled at Egbert's Stone. The surviving reeves, Thegns and Ealdormen mustered their fighting men and then followed their King firstly to meet with other forces at Iley Oak and then onto Ethandun. This battle would decide if Wessex and England would either triumph and have a chance to survive or if the lights would go out for ever on the Anglo Saxon world.

We know very little about the battle. It's not even certain as to where it was fought, though somewhere in the vicinity of Westbury in Wiltshire is likely.

It proved to be a decisive victory for Alfred though we do not know the size of the armies or their dispositions.

Asser records in the life of King Alfred that:-

"Fighting ferociously, forming a dense shield-wall against the whole army of the Pagans, and striving long and bravely...at last he [Alfred] gained the victory. He overthrew the Pagans with great slaughter, and smiting the fugitives, he pursued them as far as the fortress.

**And that, above, is all that we have about this pivotal battle.**

The surviving Danes fled to their fortress at Chippingham where Alfred besieged them. After two weeks the Danes surrendered.

Alfred had the Danish leader agree to the treaty in which Guthrum was baptised and that the territories of their realms were decided upon. This is known as the treaty or peace of Wedmore, but no known document exists and this may have just been a verbal agreement. A few years later, a formal treaty, known as the treaty of Alfred and Guthrum was signed. This defined their territorial borders, the wereguild values of their people and trade agreements. In effect this was the recognising of the area that would become to be known as the Danelaw.

A few months after the battle of Ethandun, another Viking army was defeated at the battle of Cynwit. The site of the battle is disputed. It may have been at Countisbury Hill in Devon or at Cannington Hill in Somerset.

The Saxon leader was the Ealdorman, Odda, whilst the Viking leader was Ubba, brother of Ivor the boneless and the son of Ragnar Lodbrok.

Ubba was killed and the Vikings were defeated.

The Anglo Saxon chronicle only gives passing attention to this battle but it does mention that the Saxons captured the 'Hrefn' or raven banner was captured. The chronicle never mentions this again nor does it ever allude to other Viking trophies being captured during the course of the many defeats that were inflicted upon the Vikings.

These victories were the catalysts that ensured that the Nation of England would emerge from the chaos of the Viking wars and that the successors of Alfred, namely his son Edward, daughter Aethelflaed and his grandson Athelstan would pave the road to the the great battle of Brunanburh in 937AD.