



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY

# CWICHELME'S HLAEW

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# Cwichelme's Hlaew

## Introduction

After the battle of Maldon in 991, an English defeat, the Anglo Saxon chronicles recorded an arrogant English boast that if invading Vikings ever reached ' Cwichelme's Hlaew' , now Cuckhamsley Hill on the Berkshire downs, that they would never, ever make it home again.

### How short memories were!

Cuckhamsley Hill is a point in England that is furthest from the sea. It lies on the ridgeway and was the site of ancient barrow. Today it is also called Scutchamer's knob.

Athelred the second was the English King at this time. He was weak and cowardly and could not impose his authority on the nobles. He preferred to offer Viking raiding parties money in order to buy peace. As a consequence, the raids increased.

### Taking action

After several years of raiding many English people demanded that the King took hostile action against the Vikings. He acted, but not against any Viking army, instead, he ordered the slaughtering of all the Danes living in England. Most of the victims were not warriors and most of them had been integrated into English society and lived alongside the Saxons. This event became known as the Saint Brice's day massacre.

### 13th of November 1002

On the 13th of November 1002, the slaughter commenced. We will never know as to how many people were murdered but historians believe that it was a large scale slaughter. Physical evidence of this has been found in Oxford, where the skeletons of 38 men were found under St. John's collage which was known to have stood upon the site of a church which was burnt to the ground on the day of the massacre. All the bones were charred and DNA testing has identified them as having come from Scandinavia.

It is believed that one Gunhilde was one of the victims of this massacre. Unfortunately, for King Athelred, this high ranking noble woman was the sister of Svien or Sweyn Forkbeard. Revenge would be swift and bloody.

### Sweyn Forkbeard

Sweyn was the King of Denmark, the son of Harold Bluetooth and the father of a future King of England, Cnut. Sweyn, himself, would become the first Danish or Viking King of England in 1013, shortly before he died.

Sweyn led several large scale raids against England over the following years, after the massacre.

### Cuckhamsley hill

Getting back to Cuckhamsley hill, of course such a boast made by the Saxons had to be challenged by any self-respecting Viking and in 1006 the Vikings duly obliged. A Viking army landed in Hampshire and commenced raiding. It moved northwards sacking the towns of Reading and Wallingford before making their way to Cuckhamsley hill, where they camped and waited for a Saxon army to arrive. No Saxon army even deployed to challenge them.

The Vikings then marched South, en-route back to the sea and their ships.

At East Kennett, the host was met by the Wiltshire Fyrd. We know nothing about the battle other than the Vikings won.

After the battle the Viking host was so emboldened that in an act of sheer provocation they marched past the gates of Winchester, proudly showing off all their booty, including slaves and high ranking hostages whilst mocking and shouting abuse at the towns people.

The townsfolk of Winchester watched as they paraded by and one can imagine that they observed with a resigned feeling of demoralisation, that the Vikings were back and that after 50 years of relative peace, further trouble was coming and all because of a weak King. It is not known as to who led the Viking army but it was probably Sweyn.

### **No royal saxon army deployed**

The fact that no Royal Saxon army deployed to impede the Viking host is testimony to the weak leadership displayed by the then current English King, Aethelred the 'Unraed'.

### **1013**

In 1013, Sweyn led a full scale invasion of England. Most of the English nobles submitted to him without fighting which prompted the English King to flee into exile with his family. Sweyn was crowned King on Christmas Day 1013 with considerable support from the Saxon nobility. He died in the following February. His son Cnut succeeded him as King of England.

Centuries of warfare had now resulted in a Viking becoming King of England and mainly because the English preferred Sweyn to Aethelred Unraed.

Alfred, Edward the Elder, Aethelflaed and Athelstan must have been turning in their graves.

### **1014**

In the spring of 1014, the Saxon nobility had a change of heart and gave their support to Athelred Unraed who returned from exile and somehow managed to force Cnut to flee from England.

### **Cnut returned**

Cnut, however, returned with an army in 1015 and fought against Athelred's son, Edmund Ironside. Athelred died in early 1016 and Ironside was crowned King. Between April 1016 and the following October, Cnut and Ironside fought five battles. The war became a stalemate so they decided to share and decide the Kingdom between them, with Cnut taking the traditional lands of the Danelaw whilst Ironside took Wessex, Mercia and the West Country.

Within months Ironside died and Cnut became King of all England. From 1016 until 1042, the kings of England would be Vikings.

The Saxon house of Wessex was restored to the Kingship in 1042 but only lasted until October 1066 and we all know why.

A United Anglo Saxon Kingdom was in fact a short lived thing.

### **Footnote.**

Today's Danish Royal family are direct descendants of Sweyn Forkbeard's daughter, Estrid. A descendant of Estrid married James the third of Scotland in 1469.

James the sixth of Scotland became king James the first of England in 1603 after the death of Queen Elizabeth the first.

Sweyn's bloodline was back on the English throne. We know them as the Stuarts. The Stuarts reigned until 1714, with the exception of the Republican period's short interlude following the Civil wars of the first half of the 17th century.

The last individual who could claim Sweyn's bloodline flowing through his veins was Charles Stuart, the pretender, who was defeated at Culloden in 1746.

Odd how things work out, don't you think?