



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY

# BATTLE OF BUTTINGTON

ANGLO SAXONS ATTACK A VIKING ARMY OUTSIDE OF WELSHPOOL

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# The Battle of Buttington

## Introduction

**Anglo Saxons attack a Viking army outside of Welshpool**

Today, Buttington, or Tal y Bont, is a small village on the outskirts of Welshpool in mid Wales on the border with Shropshire. The tranquil fields and beautiful surrounding countryside give no hint that a once deadly battle took place here, between the Anglo Saxons, led by three Ealdormen, namely Ethelred, Aethelhelm and Aethelnoth and a force of Vikings, part of a much larger army led by the legendary Viking warrior, Hastain.

## The Anglo Saxon Chronicle

The Anglo Saxon Chronicle states that in 893AD, that a fleet of 140 Danish ships had landed near Exeter. Alfred the great took an army to Devon in order to repel them.

At the same time two Danish armies had occupied Shoebury in Essex. This army was reinforced by Danes from East Anglia and Northumberland. This army sailed along the Thames passing London and sailed to Gloucestershire. They then transported their ships across the countryside to the river Severn.

## The 9th Century

In the 9th Century, the Severn was navigable to Poolquay, just two miles to the North East of Welshpool. In the Roman period, ships had been able to reach Wroxeter, just 5 miles east of Shrewsbury.

The Danes rowed northwards, raiding as they went. They were pursued by the Ealdormen and the West Country Fyrd. The English had appealed to the Welsh and informed them of the Viking army and they also deployed an army from the region of Powys.

It is believed that there had been very heavy rains at this time which had caused flooding and the Danes inadvertently rowed onto what was normally a flood plain to the east of the river Severn.

Today, the A438 runs eastwards from the A483, as you cross the small bridge over the river Severn, the Viking ships would have been grounded in the field to your immediate right. The Viking encampment was here too, on the mound where the church of 'All saints' stands today.

In the field to the immediate left, a solitary oak stands today. This is the battlefield. The Anglo Saxon army deployed some 100 yards or so, to the east of where the oak tree stands today.

The Welsh army duly arrived but were unable to cross the river due to the floods. They positioned themselves on the western side of the river in the field to the south of what is now the junction of the A438 and A483 and were positioned, just behind today's bridge.

The Danes were encamped within a fortification. It may have been the remains of a much older fort, but they had refortified it. It is recorded that they were short of food and in a desperate state. Knowing that the flooding was subsiding they were forced to make a decision. Fight against a numerically superior Anglo Saxon army and force their way eastwards or risk being attacked from both sides and being inevitably slaughtered.

They chose to attack the Saxon army and battle commenced whilst the Welsh watched from the western side of the river Severn.

## The Battle

We don't have much detail of the battle other than a short description from the Anglo Saxon Chronicle. It states that the Danes had eaten most of their horses and that they had no food left. They went up against the Saxons and were slaughtered. A few Danes managed to escape. An Anglo Saxon king's thegn called Ordheah was killed as were several unnamed others.

The size of the Danish army cannot be accurately assessed though it probably numbered in the hundreds rather than thousands. Maybe 500 to 600 men, which means that they may have had about 15 ships with them. They were essentially a raiding party whose aim was to cause disruption whilst bigger events were taking place outside of Exeter and at Shoebury Ness. A raiding party would draw resources away from the main Saxon field armies and Alfred was not the type of King who would allow any raiding party to be left unmolested.

## **Buttington**

Buttington is one of the few ancient battlefields where we can actually pinpoint as to where the fighting took place.

However, as the area floods frequently, even today, it has never been scientifically examined. Over a 1000 years of such flooding will have likely washed any evidence away but there may be some artefacts lying in hidden beneath the mud and silt near the river banks.

## **1838**

In 1838, a new schoolroom was being constructed in the south west corner of the churchyard, and the then reverend, Richard Dawkins, recorded that three pits were discovered and that they contained some 400 skulls and other bones. The bones were recorded as having signs of violent injury. It is also stated that several horse bones were also recovered from the pit.

The workmen removed the teeth which were in good condition as they could fetch a shilling each for the making of dentures and also, sold to people who had the bizarre belief that a deadman's tooth offered protection against toothache.

A point of interest. A yew tree that stands in the churchyard has been dated to around 893 AD. Just 5 miles south of Welshpool, lies the site of a later battlefield, that of Rhys y Groes, where in 1039, a Welsh army ambushed a Mercian army and routed it. Just one of the many battlefields that lie within this area.