



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY

# BATTLE OF MALDON

AN ACT OF HEROIC HONOUR OR GROSS STUPIDITY?

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# The Battle of Maldon

## Introduction

**An act of heroic honour or gross stupidity?**

**The battle of Maldon, August the 10th or 11th, 991**

**Athelstan's victory in 937 at Brunanburh, did not remove the Viking threat and after the king's death, his successors, Edmund the 1st and Eadred had to deal with several Viking attempts to re-establish their rule in York and Northumberland. Anglo Saxon England did not become reunified until 954 when Eadred finally established full control.**

## Eadred

Eadred's successor, his nephew, Edgar the 1st. (known as Edgar the peaceable) consolidated the unification and under his rule, there was very little Viking activity in England. Some historians state that the first Viking age ended under Edgar's rule.

Edgar, though referred to as the peaceable, obviously wielded great power and influence as during his reign, the Kings of Northern Britain and the Viking leaders of the regions that bordered the Irish sea, all submitted him and swore fealty.

England, under Edgar, was becoming extremely rich, probably because of the growing wool trade, and this wealth, together from the lessons learnt from the past, enabled the King to maintain a powerful army and navy.

Upon Edgar's death, his son, Edward the Martyr succeeded to the throne, but was murdered and replaced by his second son, Aethelred the 2nd. He would become known as Aethelred Unraed. 'Unraed' means 'lacking counsel, not unready'.

## Aethelred

Aethelred was only a boy when he became King and there is some suggestions that he was complicit in the murder of his brother Edward. This is doubtful because of his age but his reign was one of political instability due to the fractious relationships with various ealdormen, who had favoured Edward. Aethelred was unable to re-establish the loyalty and control that his father, Edgar had exercised over the ealdormen and this led to a break down in the King's central authority, with many of the ealdormen, who were the Royal officials in the Shires, effectively becoming independent rulers in their own region. Such political discord would hardly have gone un-noticed in the Viking homelands. The disunity and the wealth of England was too good an opportunity to ignore and the potential rewards were too tempting to resist and so the second Viking age began.

## 980

In 980, seven Viking ships raided Southampton. Booty and slaves were taken.

Over the course of the following years, small scale raiding increased because Aethelred could not enforce the authority on his ealdormen in order to deal with this rising threat.

## 991

In 991 a large Viking Force landed near the town of Maldon which lies on the river Blackwater in Essex. The Viking fleet was said to have numbered 93 ships.

The Viking leader was Olaf (Anlaf) Tryggvasson, a future King of Norway. Another possible leader, though this cannot be verified, was one Svien Forkbeard, who would become a future King of England. Svien was Danish, which, if he was present suggests that this Viking force was a combination of Danes and Norse and that other Viking factions from the western isles, Orkneys and the Isle of Man may also have been present. The Essex Fyrd under the ealdorman Byrhtnoth deployed to meet the threat.

## The Battle of Maldon

As with Brunanburh, the battle of Maldon is commemorated in a Great War poem, but unfortunately, its beginning and end have not survived. What can be assumed is that this battle was deemed so significant that it had to be recorded in poetic form, but was it designed to honour a loyal ealdorman and composed in order to shame those ealdormen who did not recognise or obey the King's authority?

The Vikings were camped on Northey Island. A causeway, which still remains today, connected the island to the mainland at low tide. The Vikings were safe on the island as it was easy to defend against any land based threat who could only gain the island via the causeway. Had the Vikings faced an overwhelming force, they need only to have held the causeway until high tide and then sailed off.

Byrthnoth arrived with the Essex Fyrd and his own personal hearth troops. He immediately set up his shield wall on the causeway's landward side. The Vikings offered to negotiate and indicated that they would leave if tribute or 'geld' was paid. Byrthnoth refused and offered battle.

When the tide is in, the distance between the island and the mainland is some 450 yards. Too far for an exchange of archery. When the tide went out Byrthnoth deployed across the causeway. The battle line would have only stretched for a mere 90 yards. This meant that the battle line was very deep and that its sheer weight would be difficult to push back. The set shield wall made the threat of arrows virtually redundant. The Vikings had to march across the causeway on a narrow front which they did. Their attacks on the Saxon shield wall were repeatedly repulsed.

There was no possibility of the Vikings being able to overcome the Saxon shield wall and they suffering heavy casualties.

### Byrthnoth's folly

The Vikings then demanded to fight on more equal terms and asked Byrthnoth to fall back and allow them to cross onto the mainland in order that the fight became fair and honourable. Byrthnoth agreed to the request.

Subsequently, once the battle resumed the Vikings eventually gained the advantage.

Byrthnoth was said to have been wounded twice by spears before being killed. The Fyrd retreated but Byrthnoth's household troops remained and died to a man as honour demanded that they did so. Byrthnoth was supposedly decapitated by a Viking after the battle.

There is an old English word called 'ofermod' It means excessive pride. The Maldon poem uses this word. Was Byrthnoth guilty of such pride?

The reality is, is that we do not know what happened or as to why Byrthnoth took the decision to allow the Vikings to cross the causeway.

He may have believed that to allow the Vikings to sail away at high tide would have only resulted in them raiding and attacking other coastal settlements and that it was better to fight a pitched battle in order to either defeat them totally or even to inflict such serious casualties on them that they became an impotent threat.

With hindsight, Byrthnoth made a serious tactical error. He and thousands of men lost their lives. In the aftermath, the Viking force was unable to attack the town of Maldon because they had suffered serious casualties themselves.

The remaining force sailed away in order to gather more men before returning to raid the east and south coasts again.

Aethelred responded by paying a 'geld' of £10,000 which only encouraged further raiding.

Ely cathedral contains the probable tomb of Byrthnoth. When opened a headless skeleton was found. It was estimated that the man had been about 6'6" tall, a veritable giant for a 10th century human being. A ball of solidified wax had been placed as a substitute for his head.

His tomb lies in the Chantry chapel of Bishop West. It was opened in 1769.