



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY CIC

BATTLE OF MASERFIELD

THE BATTLE OF MASERFIELD. 5TH AUGUST, 641 (642)

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The Battle of Maserfield. 641 (642)

Introduction

The Battle of Maserfield. 5th of August 641 (642) Northumbria Clashed with Mercia.

The various clashes between the early Kingdoms of Anglo-Saxon England were just as ferocious as those that would be fought against the later Viking incursions which began in the late 8th century.

The Anglo-Saxons

The Anglo-Saxons had fought for and against the Romans in Britain in the final decades of the dying Western Roman Empire. Once they had gained a foothold on British soil they engaged in parochial warfare with the Romano-British and with the Celtic peoples of what is now Wales and Scotland. As various Kings and warlords attempted to carve out Kingdoms and territories they were met with resistance by the indigenous peoples of these Islands over the course of several centuries.

Into the mix was thrown the conversion of some of the Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms to Christianity, which then resulted in endemic warfare which would sometimes see the Anglo-Saxon occupiers fight alongside Christian Celts against pagan kinsmen.

Such was the clash between Northumbria and Mercia in the middle period of the 7th century. Maserfield (Cad Maes Cogwy in Welsh) is an important battle in the history of England. It followed a number of previous clashes between Northumbria and Mercia as each sought to become the dominant power in the land.

The Protagonists

Oswald, King of Northumbria.

Oswald was the son of **Aethelfrith**, King of Northumbria, who had united the two Kingdoms of Bernicia and Deira, which constituted Northumbria.

Bede stated that Oswald was born in 604 AD. His father Aethelfrith was killed at the **battle of the river Idle in 616** by the East Anglians under **King Raedwald** which then allowed an exiled member of the Derian line, one **Edwin**, to seize the Northumbrian throne.

Oswald and his brothers fled the Kingdom and sought sanctuary and protection in the Scottish Kingdom of Dal Riata. Oswald would spend his youth at the Scottish court and whilst in Dal Riata, he converted to Christianity. Little else is known of his time in Dal Riata but as a Prince in Exile, he would have been taught the skills needed by a warrior and a prospective King. It is possible that Oswald saw action in Ireland though this cannot be quantified other than he was named as one of three Saxon princes in an Irish poem which recorded them fighting for Dal Riata. **Oswald** was a member and advocate of the Celtic Church not the Catholic church of Rome. Events elsewhere would lead to **Oswald's** return to Northumbria.

Penda Pagan King of Mercia.

Penda, was a member of the Icling tribe and he claimed direct descent from the god Wodan. Bede, in his 'Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum' (The ecclesiastical history of the English people) states that Penda was the most warlike of men of the Royal race of the Mercians. His subsequent military history proves that without doubt. We know that he defeated Wessex in the battle of Cirencester in 628 AD. It is debated if he was actually King of Mercia at this time but he may have become ruler of the subkingdom of the Anglo-Saxon Hwicci tribe which gave

its allegiance to Mercia. Again, this is debated but when he did eventually become King of Mercia, the Hwicci were his allies and subjects.

Cadwallon ap Cadfan, British King of Gwynedd.

Sometime in the late 620's or 630's, Cadwallon, The British (Welsh) King of Gwynedd went to war with Edwin of Northumbria. Cadwallon was the most powerful King in Britain and whilst the cause of the war is not known he made an alliance with Penda.

In October 663, the armies of Gwynedd and Mercia crushed the Northumbrian army at the battle of Hatfield. Edwin was killed in the battle and his son; Eadfrith was taken hostage by Penda.

Penda would eventually kill Eadfrith.

Cadwallon and Penda are then said to have ravaged Northumbria.

In 664, Oswald returned from exile and raised an army. He was probably supported by Scottish and Pictish warriors.

Just outside of today's village of Chollerford the Northumbrians met Cadwallon and the British army, under the shadow of Hadrian's wall at the battle of Heavenfield. The Britons outnumbered the Northumbrians but somehow, they managed to get themselves into a position between Hadrian's wall and Brady's crag and were unable to outflank the Northumbrians. After fierce fighting, the Britons broke and fled. They were pursued by the victorious Northumbrians. Tradition states that Cadwallon was brought to bay and killed at Denisesburna, today's Rowley burn, which is some 10 miles south of Heavenfield.



The church on the Heavenfield battlefield. Inside is an ancient Roman altar on which it is said, that Oswald placed his banner. It can still be seen today.

Adomnan, Abbot of Iona, claimed that the night before the battle, that Oswald was visited in his sleep by **Saint Columba** who told him that Victory would be his.

Oswald

Oswald now became King of Northumberland.



The wooden cross, a modern monument, recalling the wooden cross that Oswald raised on the battlefield of Heavenfield.

Oswald now began to convert Northumbria into a Christian state. He gifted **Adomnan** the island of Lindisfarne in order that he could found a monastery and he built a relationship with Wessex to counteract the power of Mercia and its King, **Penda**.

Oswald also re-took the ancient Anglian citadel of Edinburgh, from the Britons or 'Goddodin.' In 641/642, Oswald **met Penda in battle at Maserfield**. The Pagan Mercians triumphed and **Oswald was slain**. It is generally believed that the battle was fought at Oswestry (Oswald's tree).

As is invariably always the case, little is known about the battle other than Penda mutilated Oswald's body. Bede states that Oswald's head and limbs were impaled on stakes. This seems to have been a Pagan practice amongst the Saxons mirroring the story of Beowulf who hung Grendel's head and limbs within the great hall of King Hrothgar.

A year after Oswald's death, his brother, **Oswiu**, recovered his remains. **Oswiu**, now king of Northumbria took the remains home. **Oswald** was venerated and would later be named as a saint. His skull is now said to be interred within the tomb of St. Cuthbert in Durham Cathedral.



The earliest known representation of Oswald on a Silver Kentish sceatta coin.