



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY CIC

THE BATTLES OF ALFRED THE GREAT

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The Battles of Alfred the Great

Introduction

The Great Heathen Viking army (*mycel hæþen here*) arrived in England in 865. This time the Vikings or Danes intended to stay and they were intent of carving out their own Kingdom.

Anglo Saxon England

Anglo-Saxon England held its breath and memories of the great attacks on Canterbury in 851 must have crossed the minds of those who remembered the event or who had heard about the tales of death and destruction. The elders would also have remembered the disaster that had occurred just 5 years before the attack on Canterbury, when Winchester was attacked and sacked. The Vikings had been menacing the British Isles for the last 70 years. Battles had been fought and the Anglo Saxons had seen raids upon many ecclesiastical centres and villages. People had been murdered and enslaved, but this time would be different, now they came to conquer and stay!

Ivarr The Boneless

Ivarr the boneless led this great army of heathens. His initial attacks concentrated on Kent but this was a ruse, his real target was Northumbrian and the city of York. A son of the legendary and possibly mythical Viking Ragnar Lodbrok, he and his brother would bring years of misery and destruction to Britain, Ireland and the western seaboard of Europe.

He attacked the isle of Thanet and then struck East Anglia. Edmund, the East Anglian King was overwhelmed. His army was too small and too weak to consider confronting the Vikings. His Kingdom had been caught totally unprepared. He would yield to Ivarr and become his 'puppet' King.

Ivarr's two brothers Halfdan and Ubba would now join the Viking army and their plan was to enforce their authority over Edmund. They met with him and their demands were for food, money and horses. Edmund acquiesced. He had now become little more than an obedient servant to Ivarr and his brothers.

News spread of Ivarr's accomplishment and Viking armies who had been operating in Francia and other parts of Europe came to England and threw in their lot with the brothers.

Those that came from Francia brought silver with them too and were willing to share it with Ivar. The Frankish King, Charles the Bald had paid them 4000 pounds of silver to withdraw from his lands. Now much of this wealth would finance Ivar's army.

East Anglia was an area famed for breeding horses and the Vikings exploited this. From now on they would be a mounted army and this would change the nature of warfare in England. Whilst they still would fight in the traditional shield wall formations, being mounted allowed them to move quickly against any force but also to avoid any confrontation if it was to their advantage. Being mobile gave them a great advantage when moving rapidly across the country.

The Vikings were also aware of the logistics of keeping a large number of horses and knew that a horse needed about 25 pounds of hay and grain each day, so they had to ensure that there was a ready supply of food available. They overcame this issue and would now be able to out manoeuvre the Anglo-Saxons. It would take the Anglo-Saxons several years to emulate the Vikings mobility. Their elites had always ridden to battle, but the vast majority of their armies marched on foot.

York was their primary target and Northumbria was unprepared. Alle was the usurper King in York. He had forced out the legitimate ruler, Osberht who was still at large with his followers in the wilds of the north. Ivar and his brothers also had another reason for attacking York. Alle, according to legend had killed their father, Ragnar Lodbrok.

1st November 866

On Friday the 1st of November 866, All Saints-day, a highly important religious day for the Anglo-Saxons, Ivarr and his army rode into York. The assault was unexpected and it turned into a rout. Alle fled and managed to escape. The Vikings now held the jewel of the north.

On Palm Sunday, the 23rd of March 867, Alle and Osberht had put aside their feud and a Northumbrian army stormed York. It was a disaster for the Northumbrians who suffered a devastating defeat. Alle was captured and brought before Ivarr. Osberht is believed to have been killed in the assault.

Legend has it that Alle was 'blood eagled' by Ivarr. If true, the Northumbrian usurper suffered an agonising death.

From their new stronghold the Vikings would now start to take out the Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms, one by one. Ivarr placed a 'puppet' King on the throne to ensure that the Northumbrians would do his bidding. Mercia would now be the next target. The Mercian King, Burgred, only knew too well as to what was coming.

Mercia Attacked And Wessex Answers King Burgred's Plea For Assistance.

The Seige Of Nottingham.

Nottingham was Ivarr's first target. He came like a thief in the night and occupied the town without any real resistance. If the Mercian's had any form of intelligence system, it failed miserably.

When the Mercian army arrived, it found the Vikings entrenched behind a well-fortified position. Not only that, Ivarr had ensured that they were so well supplied, that the Saxons would not be able to starve them into submission.

Wessex arrived at Nottingham, King Aethelred and his brother Alfred, were both married to Royal Mercian women and they were obliged to answer Burgred's call for help. This would be the first occasion when the combined forces of Mercia and Wessex would, together, face what was to become their most deadly foe. Details of what happened are sparse. It appears that the Anglo-Saxons tried to breach the fortifications but that they were easily repulsed. The Anglo-Saxon chronicle records that there was little heavy fighting at Nottingham.

The Saxons realised that the Viking's position was too strong and they made a deal with them. Ivarr returned to York. He had tested the Saxons and they had failed that test. He had extracted tribute from the Mercians and now he would spring his plan.

869

In 869, Ivarr and his army entered eastern Mercia heading for East Anglia. Several monasteries were looted and Peterborough suffered a severe attack, resulting in much destruction. The Vikings made their winter camp at Thetford. King Edmund was told in no uncertain terms that he was now Ivarr's vassal and that he would dance to the Viking warlord's tune.

Edmund had no effective way to counter Ivarr's demands but he supposedly delivered an ultimatum to Ivarr stating that he would only consent to his demands if Ivarr was baptised and became a Christian.

Ivarr balked at the suggestion and Edmund had guaranteed his own death.

Asser stated that the Vikings and Edmund's forces met in battle on the 26th of November 869. Nothing is known of this battle not even its name. Many Saxons were slain according to Asser and Edmund met his end. It appears that his death was brutal. Tortured, beaten and humiliated, the East Anglian King was used for target practice and died several arrows embedded in his body. He was decapitated and his head was thrown into bushes in a wood. Legend has it that some of his followers found the head, guarded by a huge wolf. The head was then reunited with the body which then became whole again and a number of miracles are then said to have taken place. He was buried in a place that was soon to be called 'Bury St. Edmund's'. It appears that the Great Heathen Army may have split following this event with Strathclyde, namely Dumbarton being attacked by Ivarr who then inflicted great suffering on the Scots and Picts.

Ivarr was forming a Scandinavian Viking Empire in the north which stretched from Dublin to York, and on into the west and north of today's Scotland, also including the Orkneys and Shetland. He was opening up a corridor from Ireland stretching through Scotland and into Northumbria. Easy access for his armies and avoiding Anglo-Saxon lands.

These areas would in the future cause Alfred the Great's son, Athelstan a great deal of trouble. Back in East Anglia, Halfdan led the Great Heathen Army and he now firmly focused his attention on Wessex.

It was in the autumn of 870 that Halfdan made his move. The Great Heathen army made directly for Reading, a Royal estate which contained several wealthy monastic centres. Reading was captured and then heavily fortified by the Vikings. Wessex had been invaded.

The Battle Of Englefield.

Wessex's retaliated immediately and on the Sunday of the 31st of December 870 a defeat was inflicted on the Vikings at the battle of **Englefield**.

A Danish Jarl named Sidroc and his band of warriors were attacked by Earl Aethelwulf the ealdorman of Berkshire and soundly defeated. Sidroc and another unnamed Jarl perished and the Viking army suffered heavy casualties. The few survivors fled back to Reading where news of the defeat was received with some shock. For the first time since arriving in England, the Great Heathen army had suffered a tactical and strategic defeat on the battlefield.

The Battle Of Reading

Within 4 days of this battle King Aethelred and his brother appeared with their army before the fortress at **Reading**. Dozens of Vikings were caught outside of the gates and were mercilessly cut down but their comrades sallied out of the gates and a battle ensued. Aethelwulf, the victor at Englefield was killed in a battle that raged for several hours but this time, it was the Vikings that won the day and the men of Wessex were forced to retreat having suffered considerable casualties.

The Battle Of Ashdown

A week later the two armies clashed again, on the 8th of January 871 at **Ashdown**.

This famous battle resulted in an Anglo-Saxon victory. The Vikings suffered a great number of casualties and amongst their elite dead were Jarl Sidroc the old, King Bagsecg, Jarl Sidroc the younger, Jarl Harold, Jarl Osborn and Jarl Fraena. The Great Heathen army was now realising that Wessex was a formidable and dangerous foe.

The Battle Of Basing.

On or about the 22nd of January 871, the armies met in battle again, for the 4th time in a month. The battle of **Basing** was a hard-fought battle which lasted for many hours. The result was inconclusive and technically it can be deemed to have been a draw. The Vikings remained in possession of the field but they were haemorrhaging men at a rate that was unsustainable and they had been weakened to the point where they could not pursue the withdrawing Saxons.

THE BATTLE OF MERETUN.

On Thursday the 22nd of March 871 the two armies came to blows for the 5th time in less than 3 months. This battle followed the usual pattern, long and bloody. Both sides fought with fury but neither could deliver the knock out blow. It appears that the Saxons withdrew from the battle late in the day. An exhausted Viking army, once again, retained possession of the field but no explanation is given for the Saxon withdrawal. A possible clue though is that within a month of this battle, King Aethelred was dead and Alfred was King. Had the Saxons withdrawn because Aethelred was wounded?

The Battle Of Wilton

We don't know the actual date of this battle other than it was fought in 871 somewhere in Wiltshire. It likely took place in May because Alfred would have followed the Anglo-Saxon tradition of mourning a dead King for a month.

This would be Alfred's first battle as the King of Wessex. Alfred would now have to fight a numerically larger Viking army. The Great Heathen Army had been reinforced by a great number of warriors from the so-called summer army that arrived to assist Halfdan. Their leaders were Guthrum, Anwend and Oscetyl.

Alfred's small army held a hill and as the Vikings scaled it the Saxons charged. Their ferocity shocked their enemy who buckled under the pressure. The Viking casualties were so heavy, that they broke and fled down the hill. Alfred knew that his army had to stay on the hill and that it was too small to pursue the enemy. Nonetheless part of his army did follow the retreating Vikings and after a chase, the tables turned and the Vikings turned and faced the much smaller force of Saxons. Certain victory for Alfred was now swept away and defeat loomed. Alfred and the remains of his army were forced to retreat. Wilton was ultimately a disaster, caused by a lack of military discipline.



ALFRED'S STATUE AT WINCHESTER.

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Author Odegea.**

By now both sides knew that the fighting could not continue. Neither side seemed to have the capacity to achieve a final crushing victory. Peace would have to be agreed, a peace that would in reality give each side time to recover its losses and then to resume the war. Alfred decided to pay the Vikings tribute. He was playing for time and many of his followers were furious, but the tribute was paid in silver. Halfdan and Guthrum became very wealthy men.

What next for the Vikings?

What next for the Vikings? Well, they had riches and they now had time to rebuild their losses. They accepted the peace with Wessex and now turned their attention to Mercia. They knew that Burgred was weak so they sailed down the Thames and took London, a Mercian city, from where they demanded tribute from Burgred, knowing that he would pay to keep his throne intact. Wessex had hung on by the skin of its teeth, at least for the time being.

872 AD

Another factor that occurred in 872 helped the cause of Wessex. There was rebellion in York against Viking rule. Halfdan would have to deal with the Northumbrians. This brought Wessex nearly 2 years of respite. The Great Heathen army would move to Torksey in the heart of Mercia from where it would resolve the issue in York. This was done quickly and Viking rule was re-established. Burgred was under increasing pressure. He was forced to pay tribute and Mercia was becoming increasingly impoverished. In 873, the Great Heathen Army made its way to Repton in Derbyshire. Repton had been the capital of Mercia since the 7th century and several Mercian Kings and Queens were buried in the Royal Mausoleum there.

Halfdan had sent Burgred a message, namely that he was only the nominal King of Mercia and that he kept his position by the grace of Halfdan only. Burgred would have to keep paying tribute. The Vikings buried many of their own dead at Repton and it may even be the final resting place of Ivarr the Boneless who died sometime around 872. Burgred wasn't strong enough to take on the Great Heathen army and so he fled the Kingdom with his wife and went into exile abroad.

Mercia had fallen without fighting any battles. A new Mercian 'puppet' King was placed on the throne by Halfdan, namely one Ceolwulf II. This placated the Mercians but he reigned at Halfdan's pleasure and Ceolwulf knew it.

874 AD

In 874, the Great Heathen army split into two factions with Halfdan and his army heading to Northumbria where they would conduct a war against Strathclyde and the northern Kingdoms of the Scots and Picts. Control of Ireland and especially Dublin was a goal too. This expedition would eventually see Halfdan killed in an ambush by his political enemies on Strangford lough.

Guthrum, though, resented having been forced out of Wessex and was intent on dealing with Alfred. War with Wessex was about to begin again.

In 875, a group of Viking ships were spotted off the Wessex coast. A contingent of Anglo-Saxon ships sailed out to challenge them. King Alfred was aboard one of them. The Vikings were defeated and one of their ships was captured. Alfred had not yet learnt the craft that he would later become renowned for, namely forward thinking, but the capture of a Viking Longship may have been the catalyst for his forming of a navy which could and did match the Vikings at sea in the not to distant future.

Guthrum and his army left Cambridge and made their way to Wareham on the Dorset coast in eastern Wessex. This was a strategic position that, if held, could enhance Guthrum's chances of conquering Wessex.

The Saxon laid siege to Warham and when doing so, received news that a large war fleet of some 120 ships had been spotted off the coast of Kent.

Alfred now had to get Guthrum to leave Wareham. Talks were arranged and hostages exchanged. Guthrum, knowing that he was in a dangerous position agreed to swear an oath to leave Wessex. He was obviously unaware of the war fleet heading towards Poole. Alfred made him swear the oath over Viking relics rather than Christian ones, which any pagan would not care to honour. However, Guthrum had no intention of keeping any oath and in the night, he had the Saxon hostages murdered and the Viking army rode out of Wareham and headed for Exeter with the intention of forming an alliance with the Britons of Cornwall. Alfred set off after Guthrum and was soon delighted to know that the Viking fleet had been destroyed in a great storm off the coast near Swanage and that nearly 4000 Vikings had drowned. Alfred followed Guthrum and besieged him in Exeter. Desperate to escape, the Vikings agreed to all the terms that Alfred offered and were allowed to make their way back to their own lands.

You have to ask as to why Alfred kept to the terms. Attacking and destroying them would have made sense but he was a devout Christian and breaking an oath was considered to be a heinous sin. Alfred may have thought that he had brought himself more time but he should have been more ruthless. It all went very wrong on the 6th of January 875. Twelfth night. Alfred and his family were at the Royal Manor of Chippenham.

Saxon conspirators in Guthrum's pay informed the King that he was to be replaced. It's unclear as to what exactly happened but Alfred and his family and those loyal to him managed to get out of the Manor and from there, they made their way to Athelney, where they hid amongst the Somerset marshes. Amongst Alfred's family who took refuge in the fens were his son Edward, later to be known as King Edward the Elder, and his daughter Aethelflaed.

Alfred and his followers spent some time in the marshes. The Vikings knew that they were hiding there and for several months may have tried to discover his exact whereabouts, however the marshes were difficult to move through and boats were needed to cross most of it. By the Easter of 875, Alfred had fortified Athelney and more refugees made their way to the island in order to support the King.

Over the course of the next few years Alfred mounted raids on the Vikings from Athelney but he knew that his warband was too small to face them in open battle. He prepared a plan. He intended to re-take his Kingdom and he was going to defeat Guthrum.



Alfred's monument at Athelney.

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Simon Burchell -Author.**

The Battle Of Aryx Cynwit

Alfred was not beyond hope yet. He knew that there was resistance to the Vikings and he must have been heartened when he heard that in the early Spring of 878, Odda, the Ealdorman of Devon defeated Ubba at the battle of Cynwit (Countisbury Hill). Ubba, Ivarr's brother was slain and the Odda's men captured Ubba's famed Raven Banner'.

Later in the Spring of 878, Alfred sent out a message to all the loyal men of Wessex, that their King was alive and that it was time to face the enemy. The message was delivered by messengers, maybe monks and it demanded that all who were loyal to Wessex and the King were to meet at Egbert's stone.

On or about the 4th of May, Alfred and his band from Athelney waited at Egbert's stone. Would a sufficient number of warriors come? If they didn't, then it was all over and he would have to flee into exile or return to the wilds of the marshes. Wessex, as would all of England, would then be ruled by Vikings. The stakes were high.

Alfred must have had a lump in his throat as some 4000 warriors, the men of Hampshire and Wiltshire emerged from the forest. Wessex had a new army and that new army had a King.



Egbert's stone. Now in the village of Kingston Deverill. Wiltshire.

The Battle Of Edington (Ethandun)

The battle of Edington was fought sometime between the 6th and 12th of May, Alfred's army faced the host of Guthrum's army at Edington.

Edington, was fought in Wiltshire, near the village of Westbury. Other places are claimed but this is the most likely location. The core of the battle probably took place around the ancient Iron Age hill fort, now known as Bratton Castle.

It must be noted, that no archaeological evidence has ever been recovered from any of the battlefield's which Alfred fought in. It is for this reason, that we cannot say, with absolute certainty as to where any of his battles actually took place.

Alfred's army inflicted a total defeat on the Vikings. They knew that they had to win this battle and they knew that they had to destroy Guthrum's force and inflict such casualties on them that they would never be a

viable fighting force again. The Anglo-Saxon attack was furious and no mercy was shown. When Guthrum's forces broke, they began to flee northward, back towards their fortress at Chippenham. The Saxons were on their tails for the whole retreat. It was some 12 miles back to the fortress and the terrified Vikings were cut down as they fled. Many of the English were mounted and though not used to fight in the style associated with traditional cavalry, their mobility made them highly effective and fleeing men on foot are easily cut down by horsemen.



Modern monument to the battle of Edington at Bratton Castle.

By Trish Steel, CC BY-SA 2.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=10386608>

The survivors staggered back into their fortress in Chippenham. Alfred's army arrived soon after and surrounded it. The Vikings held out for nearly two weeks. Alfred did not attack; he didn't need to lose any valuable men. He would starve them out.

Guthrum surrendered. Alfred had broken both the man and his will to carry on the fight. Guthrum agreed to become a Christian and was baptized at Aller in Somerset. He took the Saxon name Athelstan and signed peace treaties with Alfred, namely the treaty of Wedmore. Alfred became Guthrum's adoptive father. A further Treaty was also signed. Called the treaty of Alfred and Guthrum, but would it be honoured? Guthrum was allowed to return to East Anglia, where he ruled as a Christian King for 10 years.

He would die in 890 and would be buried in in Hadleigh in Suffolk. However, before his death, this treacherous individual would cause Alfred further problems.

Alfred's throne was secure for the time being and Wessex was now an independent Anglo-Saxon Kingdom, once again. The only one of the English Kingdoms that was.

Alfred would now fortify Wessex by setting up a number of Burhs. Military reforms would make the armies of Wessex both formidable and effective. He began to build a navy, one that could intercept the Vikings at sea and one that could beat them.

The Viking threat was still very real but Wessex was now a militarised Kingdom and it would be a very hard nut to crack.

The Vikings, for the moment, had switched their attention to the Kingdom of the Franks but a military defeat led to them returning to England in 885. They attacked Rochester in Kent in 885.

The Battle Of Rochester

The Viking attack on Rochester failed. To their surprise, they found that the city's Roman walls had been repaired and that it was strongly garrisoned. The Vikings attempted to storm the walls, but were easily repulsed.

Encamped outside the city, the Viking force were forced to give battle when Alfred and the army of Wessex suddenly appeared. The Saxons easily defeated them. Many of the survivors were allowed to sail back to France but many more submitted to Alfred. The new militarised Kingdom of Wessex had proved that it was now a very different state to what the old one had been.

Alfred learnt that amongst these new invaders, that there were many East Anglian Danes, Guthrum's men! It is not clear as to whether or not Guthrum was complicit with regards to the presence of the East Anglian Danes but a lesson would have to be administered!

Alfred permitted a fleet of mainly Kentish men to conduct a raid on Guthrum's Kingdom.

The Battles In The Mouth Of The River Stour

The Vikings saw the English fleet approaching and sent 16 warships out to meet it. Likely confident that they were superior on the sea, they were about to be taught a salutary lesson. Every ship in the Viking fleet was either captured or destroyed. Every member of their crews were killed.

However, this was not over, as the Kentish men prepared to sail home Guthrum sent another fleet against them. This time the Danes had the victory but little detail of this second encounter is unknown. Several of the English ships did escape though, so Guthrum's victory was limited.

Alfred Attacks London.

London had long been a Mercian trading port. Following the treaty after Edington, London, which had previously been occupied by the Vikings was given back to Alfred. Alfred's attack was probably instigated to drive out the Vikings who had remained settled there. Alfred would then rebuild London, on top of the ancient Roman city and it became a Burh. Another Burh was built at Southwark. New Lundenwic would now present any prospective invader with formidable defences.

The loyal Ealdorman who would hold London was one Mercian Lord called Aethelred. Alfred married his daughter, Aethelflaed to Aethelred and London was her dowery.

Guthrum was now forced to agree to a revised version of the Treaty of Wedmore, one that in reality, emasculated his power. By 990, Guthrum was dead. A treacherous and untrustworthy individual, one wonders as to why Alfred didn't execute him after Edington.

For a few years, Wessex did not suffer any serious Viking incursions. The Kingdom's defences and Alfred's military organisation made it a dangerous target and one that would retaliate with ferocity. Viking armies were now occupied in the Kingdom of the Franks but in late 891, the Franks slaughtered a Viking army at Louvain. This battle was a veritable bloodbath, at least it was for the Vikings and it put the Franks back on the front foot.

The Vikings would head back to England and one of their main leaders was Haesten. A true Viking, this crafty and clever warlord had ranged far and wide raiding as far as Italy and throughout the Mediterranean. He was a dangerous foe.

892 AD

In 892 a Viking fleet appeared at the mouth of the river Rother with 250 ships. This army disembarked and made its way across the weald through the forest of Anderida.

They attacked a Saxon Burh that was under construction namely that of Eorpburnan. It was being constructed and guarded by a small band of peasants. This was the only Anglo-Saxon Burh of Alfred's that was ever taken by the Vikings.

The Vikings then made their way to present day Appledore where they built a fortress of their own.

Alfred, warned of their presence, prepared to march but was then informed that another Viking fleet of 80 ships had entered the Thames Estuary. This army was led by Haesten.

Alfred's Kingdom was under serious threat. The presence of two Viking armies at the opposite ends of Wessex posed a threat but their presence could attract support from Danish Mercia and even Northumbria. He could not afford to let them join up.

Alfred's last war against the Vikings started with his mounted units intercepting and destroying Viking raiding parties. The pressure seems to have worked as both Viking armies were immobilised. The attrition rate must have been sufficiently serious enough to bring the Vikings to the negotiating table.

Alfred then made terms with Haesten who agreed to have his two sons baptised. He was then allowed to remove his army to Essex.

The Viking army that had landed on the river Rother was now raiding in Hampshire and Berkshire and Haesten, ignoring his agreement with Alfred was making every effort to get them to unite with his army in Essex. He was now at Benfleet and had fortified his position. He had also appealed for assistance from the Vikings of East Anglia and Northumbria. He never wanted peace.

The Battle Of Farnham

The Viking army that had arrived in 250 ships now sought to reach Benfleet and combine with Haesten's forces. As they headed for Essex, they were intercepted by a mounted Anglo-Saxon army led by Edward the Elder. Little is known about this battle other than it was fought sometime in 892 and that it was a resounding Anglo-Saxon victory. Edward recovered huge amounts of booty from the defeated Vikings but, more importantly, he had seriously weakened Haesten's position too.

Haesten would soon be delivered another major blow. He left Benfleet with most of his army on a raiding expedition. He left behind a small defensive contingent but the camp was full of women and children, the families of the warriors.

The Battle Of Benfleet. (Beamfleet)

The Eastern Wessex fyrd launched an attack on the Viking camp at Benfleet. They overcame the defences and slaughtered the defenders. They captured hundreds of women and children, including Haesten's wife and two male children. They then burnt the Viking fleet.

In the 19th century, workmen building a railway through the remains of the Viking camp discovered the remains of the burnt ships. Unfortunately, they were destroyed during the construction and nothing now remains of them.



BENFLEET CREEK. THE AREA WHERE THE VIKINGS BEACHED THEIR SHIPS.

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Attribution: *Benfleet Creek* by Robin Webster

Haesten built a new fortress at Shoebury Ness and then negotiated with Alfred. His family was returned to him, but no further progress seems to have been made.

Haesten then set out again on a raiding expedition. He moved through the Thames Valley and headed west towards the River Severn. An army from Wessex set out after him.

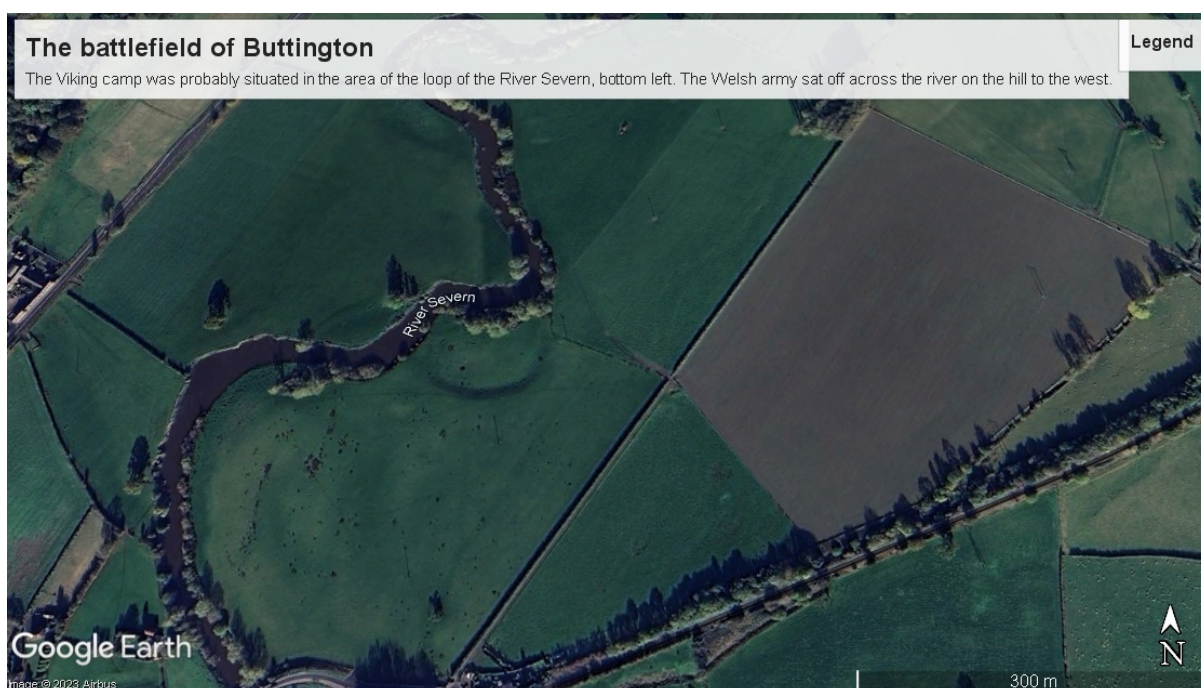
Haesten was finally cornered at Buttington, just outside of today's modern Welshpool.

The Battle Of Buttington

Fought in 893, this was an unusual event. The Anglo-Saxons laid siege to Haesten's camp. Running short of food, the Vikings were in a precarious position. To add to their woes, a Welsh army appeared on the Welsh side of the river and sat off. Alfred had not been at war with the Welsh so there is no reason to assume that they would have interfered with the Saxons. It is likely that they intended to attack the Vikings if the Saxons appeared to be losing the battle as they would not have wanted any Viking raiding party on their border.

Haesten knew too, that he had to force his way out of this position. His only hope was to launch an attack on the Saxons and hope that he could break through their lines and head off towards the east.

The majority of the Viking army was cut to bits but Haesten and a few of his followers managed to escape. They made it back to Shoebury but by mid- 893, Haesten's army left Shoebury and made their way to Chester where they intended to repair the defences.



THE BATTLEFIELD AT BUTTINGTON 893 AD.

They were besieged by a Mercian army for several months who attempted to starve them out. By the end of the year Haesten's army managed to leave Chester. They went to Wales and raided for a number of months before making their way back to Chester, however their stay there was short and they soon left and made their way back to Mersea Island in East Anglia.

In 894, Haesten had removed his forces to the river Lee where he built yet another fortress. The following year Alfred arrived with a Wessex army. They built two forts either side of the river blocking access to the River Thames and the sea.

A desperate Haesten then took his army west across the Midlands followed by a Saxon army. Haesten built a camp where the town of Bridgenorth now stands. He seems to have remained there until early 895. We have little detail of what happened there. Was he besieged or forced to surrender? Whatever occurred, by early 896 his army just seems to have disintegrated.

As for Haesten, he simply disappeared from history. A Frankish source records this about him.

This was a man accursed: fierce, mightily cruel, and savage, pestilent, hostile, sombre, truculent, given to outrage, pestilent and untrustworthy, insolent, fickle and lawless. Death-dealing, uncouth, fertile in ruses, warmonger-general, traitor, fomenter of evil, and double-dyed dissimulator.

A whole era had come to an end. Alfred sat on the throne of Wessex; the Kingdom had successfully resisted the Vikings. For the King, his wars were now over. He would never fight another battle.

Alfred died on the 26th of October 899. He was either 50-51 years old. He had suffered ill health for much of his life. His life had been one of extreme hardship, yet he saved the last Anglo-Saxon Kingdom and England from Viking domination. He introduced reforms of the military, education, religion, taxation and foreign relations. He introduced the Burghal system, introduced legal reform and built a navy. He implemented the necessary tools to enable Wessex to become a functioning state. It would lay the foundations for the future of the whole of England.

Alfred's race was run but the fight would go on. His son Edward the Elder, his daughter Aethelflaed and his grandson, Athelstan would all face future Viking armies.