

## Æthandune.

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OF all the battles fought on English soil before the Norman Conquest there is not one of more importance than the battle of Æthandun. Here the Danes, who had but one narrow strip of Wessex to conquer, and the whole of England would be theirs, received such a defeat at the hands of Alfred, so deservedly named the *Great*, that their formidable power was broken, and thenceforth they became his vassals.

The Saxon historian, Asser, who may be certainly regarded as a contemporary recorder of this occurrence, and the Saxon Chronicle, inform us that it took place at Æthandune. The chroniclers and their early readers knew the place well, and so thought it unnecessary to tell us where it was situated in Wessex, but this appellation however is not to be discovered in the map of modern England; and hence various conjectures, founded chiefly on etymological data, have been hazarded as to the situation and present name of the spot thus designated.

Among the existing names of places, Edington, or Heddington, has usually been regarded as bearing a greater similarity than others to the term in question; and five different localities in Berkshire, Wiltshire and Somerset thus denominated have had their respective advocates, and been made the subject of much ingenious speculation.

But before referring to the various opinions of antiquaries relative to the site of the Battle of Æthandun, it may be proper to adduce the testimony of the ancient authorities

already referred to, concerning the circumstances which preceded and followed this engagement. The following is the statement given in the Saxon Chronicle:—

“878. Then in the seventh week after Easter, he [Alfred] rode to Ecgbyrhtes-stone (Brixton), by the eastern side of Selwood; and there came out to meet him, all the people of Somersetshire and Wiltshire, and that portion of the men of Hampshire which was on this side of the sea, and they rejoiced to see him. Then, within one night, he went from this retreat to Iglea, (Iley Mead, Eglea); and after one night more he proceeded to Æthandun (Handune, Ethendune), and there fought against the whole army and put them to flight, riding after them as far as the fortress, where he remained a fortnight.”

Asser's account of the battle, and the events connected with it, is more circumstantial; and it appears to have formed the basis of the preceding narrative, as well as of the chronicles of later historians. It is therefore necessary to give Asser's version in full.

Removing from Æthelingay, where he had erected a fortress and assembled his followers: “In the seventh week after Easter, he rode to Egricht-stone, on the eastern part of the forest called Selwood, but in Latin the Great Wood; and there came to meet him all the inhabitants of Hampshire who had not sailed beyond the sea for fear of the Pagans, and seeing the King, as if raised from the dead after so many tribulations, as was becoming, they were inspired with great delight; and there they encamped for one night. At daylight the following morning, the King, removing his camp, came to the place which is called Iglea, and there he encamped one night. That night, while he was asleep, there appeared to him a certain figure in the likeness of St. Neot, formerly his familiar friend and relation, who admonished him that he should cast away all terror and fear of the barbarians, and that he should not fall into despair on account of their multitude, because the Lord on

the morrow was about to visit him and his people, and because it was on account of his pride, which he had in his youth, that all these adversities had come upon him. And he added :—

“‘To-morrow I will go the whole day before thy standard, that thou mayest more securely fight against thy enemies, nothing fearing, and that thou mayest know that the Lord Almighty will fight for thee and for thy people.’

“And immediately the King, roused from sleep, was made joyful by the angelic vision. In the dawn of the morning, moving his standards thence, he came to the place which is called Ethandun ; and against the whole army of the Pagans, fiercely fighting in a dense body, and struggling boldly for a long while, at length by the Divine assistance, he obtained a victory, having overthrown the Pagans with a great slaughter ; and as they fled towards their fort, he pursued, smiting them ; and all that he found without the fort, namely men, and horses, and cattle, immediately killing the men he took the latter ; and before the gates of the Pagan fort with all his army he boldly encamped. And when he had remained there fourteen days, the Pagans through hunger, cold and fear, and last of all by despair, asked for peace, on condition that they should give him as many hostages as he pleased, but should receive none from him in return ; in which form they had never before made a treaty with anyone.” The sequel, including the baptism of Guthrum, about three weeks after, at Aller, and the Frith of Wedmore, needs only to be alluded to here.

Having therefore well cleared the ground, I now come to the main purpose of my paper, which is to suggest a totally new site for this important battle (in Somerset), and which so far as I am aware has never before been thought of in this connexion.

In a recent number of *The Athenæum* there appeared the following passage : “It is now hopeless to expect to recover any new facts connected with Alfred and his reign.” That assertion certainly has to be proved, and in adopting a contrary view, I would quote the late Canon Taylor, who, on the first

page of his "Words and Places," has these sentences: "Local names . . . . . may always be regarded as records of the past, inviting and rewarding a careful, historical interpretation . . . . the name of a district or of a town may speak to us of events which written history has failed to commemorate. A local name may often be adduced as evidence determinative of controversies that otherwise could never be brought to a conclusion."

In connexion with the memorable campaign of Alfred from Athelney, four names of places stand out most prominently. They are (1) Ecgbright's Stone, (2) Æcglea, (3) Ethandune, and (4) Burh or Burg.

Of these four, it may be confidently affirmed that not one, after the lapse of a thousand years, has been definitely identified. Let us take them in their order.

(1.) Ecgbright's Stone. This was first identified with Brixton Deverill, I believe, by Sir Henry Spelman, and adopted by Sir Richard Colt Hoare in "Modern Wilts," subsequent authorities, for the most part acquiescing in this conclusion. But Mr. Stevenson, the very latest editor of Asser's "Life of Alfred," (1904) is inclined to impugn this location. He is of opinion that it was the boundary stone of the three counties. It certainly is by no means clear how Ecgbright's Stone could have developed into Brixton. Canon Taylor, whose "Words and Places" is recognised as a standard work, knew nothing of it. In every case he derives Brixton from *Bricg* or *Brig* and *tun*. (vide pp. 170, 260, 332). It is certain that Brixton, in Wilts, is a contraction of "Brictric's-tun," Brictric being the name of the lord of the manor in the time of Edward the Confessor (Domesday for Wiltshire; edit. W. H. Jones). But wherever it was situate it seems probable that the Ecgbright of the Chronicle has been lost. To account for this, there is no reason why *Ecgbright* should not have developed into *King* in later times, when his name was locally lost, and have become simply the King's

stone, in the same way as "King's Cross" at present represents "King Edward's Cross." If that be allowed we have a choice of *Kingstons*, each one on the east of Selwood—*e.g.* Kingston Deverill or Kingston Magna, the latter being considerably nearer Athelney than Brixton.

(2.) *Æglea* or *Iglea*. We now come to the camping-place of Alfred on the night preceding the great battle. Many attempts have been made to identify this place, but two only need be alluded to here. Bishop Gibson suggested Leigh, co. Wilts, whilst Bishop Clifford placed it at Edgarley near Glastonbury. Mr. Stevenson has a note on this place in his edition of the "Life of Alfred." (c. 55, 17). "The spelling in the Cottonian MS. of the Life suggests a form in *ecg*, but it is probably miswritten for the *Æglea* of Chronicle D and E. From this we should expect a modern Eiley or Ailey . . . . The form *Æglea* may be merely a misreading for *Ieglēa*, which would be a more regular West Saxon spelling for Alfred's time than *Iglea*, if the first part of the compound is derived from *īeg*, later *ig*, *island*, *watery land*. The balance of evidence is certainly in favour of the form *Iglea*." This certainly substantiates Ingram's translation of the original into Iley Mead.

I have no hesitation in locating this place at Elleigh or Illeigh, a spot on the upper waters of the Ile, one mile from Chard, on the Ilminster road, noted to this day for its water meadows. This place exactly answers to the description as found in the "Life of St. Neot": it was "protected in front by marshy ground." Below it was a marsh, even then perchance, or not long after, known as Peasemars. Behind it rises Hornsbeorh or Hornsbury Hill, on the summit of which, indications of earthworks may still be traced. It was likewise an ancient manor recorded in Domesday Book under the name of Illegh or Ilega (Collinson i. 27.)

(3.) We now come to Ethandune, which, after all, is the crux of the whole question of Alfred's operations against the

Danes. Hitherto I think sufficient stress has not been laid on the fact, that neither in the Chronicle nor in the "Life," does the context make it imperative that the site of the battle must be looked for on the east of Selwood. That is the position of Ecgbyrht's stone only, and having collected his forces there, Alfred might march in any direction till he came "ad locum qui dicitur Ethandune." If therefore we can fix upon a spot not too far from Athelney, which would have afforded both accommodation and protection for Guthrum and his host, and which will answer to the name as it has come down to us, without conflicting with the name of any other place, then we have the key which will explain the whole campaign of Alfred and his army. Such a place I believe I have found, and I will at once proceed to give my reasons for such a conclusion. The first syllable of the name is *æt* or *et*, which is the A.S. preposition answering to M.E. *at*. The Saxons often prefixed prepositions to the names of places, which in time became an integral part of the designation, dropping off again as the tendency to abbreviation increased. Attwood and Atwell are common examples.

If I may be pardoned the digression, I am not so sure but that Athelney itself may be a name of this class. Its original form, Æthelinga-ig, may mean "isle of the princes," but Stevenson says "it is a very unlikely O.E. local name." It will be admitted, I think, that the name *Lynq* of the parish is incorporated in this extended form of Athelney, which probably means nothing more than "at the liny isle," ling = heath, as in Lingholm, Cumberland.

If the objection be raised that *ling* is a Scandinavian word, and therefore unlikely to be found so far south, my reply is—so likewise is *holm*, yet we find the Steep and Flat Holms in the Severn Sea. In early times Athelney would be equally accessible for the incursions of the Northmen.

In the support of this argument I can adduce a cognate example from Vol. XIV of the S.R.S., p. 39, where one of the

boundaries mentioned in a reputed charter of Æthelstan, at Curi, is "from the Parrett to Athlongabig," meaning "at the long bend or corner."

In Domesday Book the manor of Chilhampton, Wilts, is written "Etchilhampton," and in the same record the entry for Ilton reads thus, "The church holds Atiltone," or, in the Exeter Domesday, Atiltona. It was this last instance which gave me the clue for the unravelling of Ethandune.

As it is certain the 'at' has been dropped in the cases just cited; why not also in the case of Ethandune, which would leave Handune and Hamdon? The change from *m* to *n* is quite regular, and offers no difficulty. Thus the *Hantuna* of Domesday has developed into Southampton, and Wimborne is found as Winburne in the Saxon Chronicle for the years 718 and 901. (A.S. Britain, p. 217.)

Many years ago I found the name Handune, but I have unfortunately lost the reference. However, in 1234 it was written Hanedon. (S.R.S., Vol. v, p. 231.) As early as the reign of Edward IV it was written Hampden; in the days of Henry VIII it is changed to Hamdon, and only in a court roll of the reign of James I do we find the modern designation of Hamdon Hill.

Unfortunately, Hamdon is not mentioned in Domesday, as the hill is situated in the three parishes of Montacute, Norton and Stoke-sub-Hamdon.

In the light of this reasoning, it is hard to understand how Edington could have been taken to represent Ethandune; the former meaning the *tun* or enclosure of the Edings—a common enough patronymic, derived from *Ed* or *head*, "of the family," understood, for we find both Edington and Hedington.

Stevenson, in his note on Ethandune, says (*Asser's Life of Alfred*, 1904, p. 273), "In 957 King Eadwig executed a charter, of which the original is still in existence, at Ethandun. So far there is nothing to prove the identity of this

Ethandun with Edington, but as it was a Royal possession, and as Edington was granted to the Abbey of Romsey by King Edgar in 968, there can be little reason for questioning it."

But all this is based on the assumption that none of the sites suggested "satisfy the first requirement of having borne the name of Ethandune." I maintain that if the preposition *at* is placed before Hamdon, we are nearer the original than is the case with Edington, but by changing the *m* to *n*, we get the name itself as it stands unremoved and unremovable in the pages of the *Chronicle* and of the *Life*.

(4.) Burh or Burgh. We come next to the *burh*, or fortress, to which the Danes retreated before the victorious advance of the English. If, as I have endeavoured to show, Hamdon was the site of the battle, then we have not far to seek for this stronghold. To the east of Hamdon rises that far-famed mount, now known as St. Michael's Hill, but in the Saxon period it was a *burh*, known as Logaresburgh. Leland, who visited the place, writes thus, "Sum thynk that ther was a great castel and foretresse at this toune yn the Saxon's tyme." (Leland, II, 52.)

In Clark's *Mediæval Military Architecture*, which is the greatest work on the subject, particulars are given of the construction of the early burhs, Montacute being mentioned as thrown up by the Northmen in the ninth and tenth centuries. (Vol. I, pp. 16, 17.)

The centre of the village is still called "The Borough."

It is a significant fact that Montacute was one of the earliest possessions of the Abbey of Athelney, founded by Alfred only ten years after the battle, and continued its property till the Norman Conquest, when it was given up to the Earl of Mortain, in exchange for the manor of Purse Caundle. It is a reasonable supposition, also, that Alfred made this endowment because it was the place where his victory was completed by the final capitulation of the Danes. Moreover, it is extremely



probable that a religious cell or chapel was erected there soon after, and when, in 883, Alfred received from Pope Martin the signal gift of a portion of the Holy Cross, in return for his offering, given in gratitude for success against his enemies, who shall say that it found not enshrinement there, eventually affording a substratum of truth on which the Legend of the Holy Rood of Montacute was based, the *fons et origo* of the Church of the Holy Cross at Waltham?

We are now, I think, in a better position than before, to understand the whole of Alfred's campaign from Athelney. First of all, it is evident the Danes could not possibly have been in Wiltshire, for we find in the Chronicle, under the year 878, "And the Easter after, Alfred, with a little band, wrought a fortress at Athelney, and from that work warred on the army." (*A.S. Chron.* Thorpe, 1861, Vol. II, p. 64). His objective, the army of the Danes, must have been within a reasonable distance from Athelney.

On Hamdon height, then, overlooking the fastness of Athelney, at the extreme western limit of his march, Guthrum was entrenched, while

"Broad on the left before him lay  
For many a league the Roman way."

Alfred, having well matured his plans, suddenly leaves Athelney for Ecgbryht's stone, to meet the men of Hampshire and Wilts, leaving Odda with a fairly strong force to reconnoitre the Danish camp. With his probably large reinforcement he hastens to Illeigh, executing a march of from thirty to forty miles, to meet the men of Devon. At that time I feel certain the Ile served as a boundary for Devon, and marked a wave of Saxon settlement from the East.

Having chosen his camping-place with evident care, and guarding it against all possible surprise on the part of the Danes, of which there was not much fear, on account of the great secrecy of his movements, Alfred, retiring to rest, is favoured by Heaven with the vision of St. Neot, which was,

doubtless, nothing more than a dream of victory, narrated by Alfred to his forces as an encouragement for the task before them. From Illeigh, then, to Hamdon, Alfred and his united levies marched,—an easy march of not more than eleven miles, and one which would enable him to rest his forces before the battle began. He had a choice of routes. He might ascend to the top of Whitedown, from whence a Roman road led directly over Chillington Down, through Dinnington, to Stratton, crossing the Parret by the old ford.

When we remember that the manor of Chillington was Alfred's personal property, and is mentioned in his will, we can conceive how well this part of the country was known to him. Or he might have marched along the other line of the Fosse, through West Dowlish, Kingstone and Seavington, to the Parrett. Doubtless scouting parties had previously been sent to all the eminences along the route as a precautionary measure. In fact, William of Malmesbury records that such was the case.

We may now pause for a moment to appreciate the tactics of Alfred in executing this flanking movement. He knew a direct frontal attack, straight up the valley of the Parrett, would have been of no avail, on account of the precipitous escarpment of Hamdon on its north and north-west sides. He could find no cover there to screen him from the scrutiny of Guthrum's sentinels. From the Norton side, the gradually ascending ground would favour his forces in gaining the summit of the hill. It is certain the Danes did not expect an attack from a force led by Alfred, but from one which was probably Odda's, operating in accordance with a preconcerted plan in an opposite direction.

In that opposite direction lies Odcombe, and the question may be asked whether in this name we have an echo of Odda. I think it very likely, for the Domesday form *Odecuma*, strongly indicates the genitive of a personal name, which is confirmed by the occurrence of Odescombe in an Inquisition Post Mortem of the 49th of Edward III (1374). Be that as

it may, the Danes were off their guard, as may be proved from the two following Chronicle extracts :—

“Forming in line of battle, they (*i.e.*, Alfred’s men) previously took the nearest promontory, whence they watched the movements of the enemy.”—(Vit. S. Neot.)

“He previously took a mount, fit enough for the enemy if they had been on their guard.”—(Wallingford).

Now the hill of Chiselborough or Balham Hill answers very well to the description of the “mount,” or if “promontory” be the more correct term, as it is the earlier one, then it may have been the lofty spur known as Gawler’s Hill, which extends in the direction of West Chinnock.

In any case there is a ravine at Little Norton, which would suit Alfred’s purpose of a surprise, and by which he and his forces could reach stealthily and surely the ridge above.

But though Guthrum was taken by surprise, he rallied his men and cheered them to the battle with frequent exhortations, and advanced in line to the place of contest. It is recorded, “The two nations fought during a long period of the day, and their voices and the clash of arms were heard throughout long lengths of country.”

We may now inquire as to there being any corroborative evidence on Hamdon itself of such a battle as this. On this side of the hill is a place called Bedmore, and the word Bed in A.S. invariably meant a grave; thus Bedmore would denote the “moor of the graves.”

The late Dr. W. W. Walter, whose memory I shall ever hold in esteem, possessed a couple of spear-heads from this spot which were considered to be Saxon, and there are two bosses of Saxon shields from Hamdon in the Walter Collection.

In conclusion, I am indebted to the Rev. C. W. Whistler, vicar of Stockland Bristol, for the following data, being some conditions which the true site must fulfil, which are all applicable to Hamdon in a greater degree than to any other site hitherto suggested.

(1.) The hill position must render frequent, if not daily, attacks on the Danes possible from Athelney.

(2.) Must not be beyond possible marches of a day and a half from Brixton.

(3.) Must account for the continued occupation of Athelney.

(4.) And for the massing of the Danes at that special point.

(5.) Should have a sufficient fortress or trace of ancient fortress in the vicinity.

To these we may add that the true site should explain—

(6.) The rear attack and surprise.

(7.) The choice of Aller and Wedmore as the final scenes of the surrender.

(8.) What passes could be blocked against Danish retreat.

(9.) What hope of retreat remained for Alfred if defeated.

Apart from the testimony of the name, when we take into consideration its position as regards the Fosse, its proximity to the Parrett, as well as to Aller, with probably the fortress of Taunton as their next objective, the Danish concentration at Hamdon is inevitable. Well might the old chroniclers have thought that vast and mighty camp upon the mountain height needed no description, and could never be mistaken. To them Hamdon was not a "haunt of ancient peace," for "in those times there was no peace to him that went out, nor to him that came in." Close to its base at Wigborough the Briton and the Saxon had fought in the year 710, and in 851 there was a great battle between the Saxons and the Danes in the same locality.