

THE DANES VISIT THE NEIGHBOURHOOD — THEIR INITIAL VICTORY, BUT ULTIMATE DEFEAT — SANGUINARY BATTLE AT CANNINGTON PARK — KING ALFRED AT ATHELNEY — THE STORY OF THE CAKES — THE BATTLE OF IETHANDUNE — PAYMENT OF DANE-GELD — MASSACRE OF THE DANES — POPULATION, &c., OF SOMERSET IN ANGLO-SAXON DAYS.

EGBERT had not possessed the sovereignty of England many years before the Danes began to direct their attacks against the country, and they seem to have paid frequent depredatory visits to Wessex, *via* the Parret. They entered into an alliance with the Britons of Cornwall for this purpose. The first battle of any consequence in this neighbourhood of which we have record, took place in 832, when the marauders obtained a great victory. Two years afterwards, however, the tables were turned and they were put to flight with great slaughter. They paid another visit to this neighbourhood a few years later, and in 845 (or 847) they were again defeated, at some point, the actual vicinity of which is not exactly clear, between Bridgwater and Stogursey. The reference to it in Leland's *Collectanea Curiosa*, translated, reads thus:— "*Eanulph, with the men of Somerset, and Bishop Aelhstan, of Sherborne, and Duke Osric, with the men of Dorset, fighting with the Danish army, and making no little slaughter of them, obtained the palm of victory at the mouth of the river Pedridan*" (Parret).

In other parts of the country the Danes experienced successes, and during the first few years of the reign of Alfred the Great (A.D. 871) he was continually worsted by them until they over-ran the country—barbarity, ruin and desolation marking their progress. Utter despair took possession of the heart of the nation, and while many concealed themselves or fled from the country, and others submitted to the invaders, none could be found to go forth and make head against them. King Alfred himself was obliged to leave his palace and to take refuge in disguise with one of the keepers of his cattle. The place of his retreat was a spot on the junction of the Parret with the Tone, afterwards, on account of its connection, called Athelney — *Ethelinga-aeg* — "Noble Isle" — a little island surrounded by a wide waste of marsh and waters, and therefore secure against invaders.\*

Athelney of the present day bears no resemblance to what it was a thousand years ago. In those days there was no Baltmoor wall, the great Sedgmoor drain had no existence, the Carey emptied itself into the Parret

above Boroughbridge (now diverted), and the bed of the river Parret was the only outlet for all the rivers and marshes and floods of the valley. To-day science has been called in to keep nature in check, and the land having been drained, thousands of pounds are spent annually to keep the country free from the encroaching tides.

The most striking of the events which led to the retirement of Alfred is thus described by Asser

*"That same year [878] a brother of Halfden and Inguar [named Ubba] with three and twenty ships, leaving the region of Demetia [Wales] where he had wintered, after he had made great slaughter of the Christians of those parts, set sail for Devon, and there, with twelve hundred men, rashly doing, he was in the end defeated and slain by the King's officers before the Castle Cynwit. For within the enclosure of this same castle many of the King's officers, with their men, had taken refuge together. Now when the Pagans saw that the castle was destitute of provisions and without means of defence of any kind, save that it had walls after our fashion, they did not attempt to carry it by assault; but as the nature of the ground rendered it very safe on all sides except towards the east, they began to lay siege to it, thinking that those men, driven by hunger and thirst, would soon be compelled to surrender, for there was no water nigh to the castle. The Christians waited not to be reduced to such extremities, but, inspired by Heaven, and deeming it far preferable to earn either death or victory, suddenly rushed down upon the Pagans, and, assailing their enemies like wild boars, put to the sword the greater part of them, together with their King."*

The victors took no small amount of spoil, and among other things, got possession of the flag called "the Raven."† It has been generally supposed that the Danes under Ubba landed at Appledore, but of recent years it has been thought that Cannington Park, near Bridgwater, is the spot in question.

There are numerous reasons for this supposition, as the character and situation of the place agree with all the statements of the old chroniclers. As the Parret was the boundary of the two shires, it was quite in keeping to describe the Danes as landing in Devonshire. On the western bank of the Parret, a few miles below Bridgwater, stands the little seaport of Combwich, and Cynwich is the name by which Richard de Hoveden designates the place where Ubba, the Danish leader, was laid in the ground. "*They raised over his remains a large pile of stones, and the place is called Ubbalowe to this day,*" says the chronicler. It has been pointed out that a circular mound is still to be seen in a field near Combwich,

while at some distance is "Upper Cock Farm," which is probably a corruption of "Ubba-coc" — the mound of Ubba. It is only right to say, however, that many archaeologists decline to accept this theory. A battle had taken place on the day previous to the above, in which Alfred is known to have taken part, but had to resort to flight. But on the following day, hearing of the great success of the smaller body of his countrymen (which seemed to have resulted through the larger body of the Danes being on the opposite side of the river, and unable to cross over and assist their brethren because of the thick mud of the Parret, the tide being then low)\*\*, "he was greatly cheered," and conceived the idea, the carrying out of which tended to overthrow the Danes.

Alfred was not idle during the eleven weeks he remained at Athelney, and in the course of concerting measures for the defeat of his enemies he raised a work on the island which is described by the chronicler Asser as "a fort of great strength and beautiful construction," which not only served as a watch-tower but as an entrance to the island. He further connected two other marshy islands which existed in the waste of waters, now Middlezoy (*i. e.*, "centre island") and Chedzoy. He threw a bridge across the river at Boroughbridge, and created another fort on the Height now known as "Borough Mump," and where the ruins of a church are now seen. The Danes are supposed to have been encamped at Bridgwater or in "the neighbourhood, and in the surrounding country were the flocks and herds which formed their support, and were the result of their pillage. Their numbers were vastly superior to the small band of the men of the West country which Alfred had gathered round him or were waiting for his call. One of our ancient writers asserts that while in the neighbourhood of his retreat he was one day met by a pilgrim or beggar, and on sharing with him his loaf St. Cuthbert appeared to him and assured him of his speedy deliverance. The story of his allowing the dame's cakes to burn has frequently been celebrated in verse.

"Attend the cakes till I come back  
And keep 'em turned or they'll be black."  
The monarch smiled, but sullen care  
Had laid his throbbing bosom bare,  
Transfixed he stood in deep despair.  
When he called his wandering senses back,  
The smoke had curled, the cakes were black!  
He heard a footstep hastening nigher,

Ere he could snatch them from the fire,  
Græcia returned in furious ire,  
"Gadzooks, you loon, you lazy loon,  
You did not think I'd come so soon,  
The blackest cake shall be thy boon!"

In this secure retreat he matured his plans, to be ready for a suitable time to strike a decisive blow against his enemies. He was also enabled to shelter the nobles he had around him, and on the island he had room to store the cattle and corn which he obtained from occasional raids on the Danes at Bridgwater. In order to make himself acquainted with the exact position and circumstances of the Danes he disguised himself as a harper, and visited their tents —

The warriors all lay down their arms,  
To hear the sound of music's charms —  
The harper vanished their alarms.  
He played with skill — such skill had he,  
He seemed a very prodigy,  
In the divine art of minstrelsy.  
The noblest chiefs of Danish sway,  
Charmed by his harp, would pass the day,  
And banish night to hear him play. — *George*

*Parker.*

At length, when all preparations were made, Alfred sent forth his call from Athelney, and all the West, where his message had for some time been expected, obeyed his summons. The Quantocks sent forth the sturdy weather-beaten shepherds, and Mendip her rough, hardy miners, while from the low dank meres and tawny undergrowth as well as the warm sunny slopes and rich and cultured vales, men of strength and courage went to swell the army of the King and repel the invader. By Whit-Sunday Alfred was informed that the English army east of Selwood forest was ready to take the field. Alfred, with the nobles and men who had accompanied him in his retreat, thereupon proceeded to Selwood forest, on the borders of Somerset and Wilts, "and there all the inhabitants of Somerset and Wilton, and all those of the county of Ham tun, who had not gone beyond the sea through fear of the Pagans, came to meet him, and were duly filled with an immense joy, and welcomed him as one who had come to life again after so many tribulations. Early at dawn on the following day, the King, moving his camp, came to a place called Hlthandune, and bravely waging war against the whole Pagan army, protected by a dense covering of shields, he with Divine assistance gained the victory." \*\*\*

This battle of Æthandune may be regarded as one of the most important events in our national history, the existence of the English

as a nation being decided on that day. There is much uncertainty as to the exact locality of the terrific struggle, and until recently the balance of opinion has been in favour of Bratton Hill, near Westbury, Wilts. Somersetshire, however, has a very strong claim to the distinction, and at the annual gathering of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society, at Frome, in 1875, an interesting discussion took place with reference thereto. The Hon. and Right Rev. Wm. Clifford, Bishop of Clifton, read a most exhaustive paper on the subject, and propounded arguments, founded on the authority of the Saxon Chronicles and the statements of early historians, which went far to prove that the battle was fought near the village of *Edington*, at the foot of the Pol-den Hills nearest to Bridgwater.

Many interesting incidents of the battle have been recorded by various writers. It began at noon and lasted several consecutive hours. It was not confined to one spot, but ranged for a great distance along the ridge of hills, the cries of the combatants being heard for miles around. Alfred, who to his followers seemed more than mortal, was everywhere present, restoring confidence and inspiring fresh courage in his men. At length Guthrum, the Danish leader, led in person a vigorous attack on the high promontory which formed the key of Alfred's position. As they neared the heights the English soldiers charged down on them with their spears. A hand-to-hand fight ensued, and the Danes broke and fled. Guthrum, unable to rally them, hastened to take refuge in flight, and got to a "neighbouring walled place," followed by numbers of his army. Fearing that the victors would enter with the fugitives, however, he caused the gates of the fortress to be closed, "wvin" many of his own men outside, at the mercy of their Aemies. Alfred followed them to the fortress (which was very probably Bridgwater — see Bishop Clifford's paper), and sieged them for 14 days, when the Pagans, overcome by hunger and fear and driven to despair, sued for peace. The King graciously listened to their message, and the Danes made oath that they would depart from Alfred's kingdom, and Guthrum, their King, agreed to become a Christian, as did also 30 of the principal men of his army.

Seven weeks later the Pagan King and his 30 followers came to Aire (Aller), and in the little church there Guthrum was baptised, King Alfred himself standing sponsor for him, and "his chrysom-leasing took place on the 8th day at the royal villa called Wedmore." Un-

der the terms of this celebrated "*Peace of Wedmore*," the Danes were allowed to hold some parts of the country, as vassals of Wessex, and they departed from Wedmore the recipients of various favours at the hands of the good natured King.

Alfred, in thankfulness to God for his victory, marked the spot of his retirement by founding a Church and Abbey at Athelney. William of Malmesbury gives some particulars of it as it appeared in later days, remarking that the monks were few in number, and indigent. There are now no traces left of the interesting structure, but numerous relics have from time to time been taken from the soil.

The country now enjoyed a long peace, and under the wise rule of Alfred the people improved in learning, and in the arts of civilization. He executed laws with such stern impartiality that crime became rare. He also remodelled the division of the land.

During the next hundred years the Danes appear to have been very troublesome. Lupus, an Anglo-Saxon bishop of that time, preached a sermon to his unhappy countrymen, which has fortunately been preserved. Speaking of the Danes, he says *Soldiers, famine, flames, and confusion of blood abound on every side. Theft and murder, plague and pestilence, mortality and disease, ignominy, hatred, rapine, and the ferocity of our enemies dreadfully afflict us. They (the Danes) ravage us daily. They devastate and they burn, they spoil they plunder and they carry off our property to their ships.*"

In the reign of Ethelred II., A.D. 998, the King gave the Danes £66,000 to satisfy them, which he levied by a tax of one shilling on every hide of land (100 acres), called Dane-geld, and which was the first land tax in England. Of this vast sum Bridgwater was called upon to pay 5s, Wembdon, 3s, Broomfield, 3s, Enmore, 1s; Goathurst, 1s, Woolavington, 4s; Stogursey, 4s 6d, Stawel, 2s 6d, Otterhampton, 6d, Middlezoy, 12s; Grienton, 2s 6d; Cosington, 3s, Ashcot, 2s; Durleigh, 6d, Stockland, 3s, Spaxton, 2s 6d, Shapwick (paid by the Church), 30s, Puriton, 5s, Nether Stowey, 6d, Huntspill, 1s, Eiddington, 4s, and Charlinch, 6d. North Petherton and Cannington for some reason escaped. The rapacious Danes were not satisfied, and the King ultimately issued a secret order for the massacre of all the Danes within his dominions. Secret letters were dispatched by him to every city and town, commanding the people, on the day of the festival of St. Brice (13th November, 1002), when the Danes usually bathed

themselves, to fall upon them suddenly and either destroy them with the sword or consume them with fire. This command, horrible as it was, met with a ready obedience, and the Danes, with their wives and children, were butchered without mercy. Neither age nor sex were spared, or even those who had inter-married with the English. No record is extant of the action of Bridgwater in regard to this command, but seeing the continued indignities suffered by the West-country men at the hands of the Danes, there can be but little doubt that the sanguinary edict was duly carried into effect.

To revenge this massacre, Swegn, King of Denmark, came to England and carried on a desolating war for ten years, compelling the King to leave the country, Swegn mounting the throne in his stead.

The last occasion of which we have record of the Danes disturbances in the neighbourhood of Bridgwater, was in 1010, "at or about Cannington," where they practised their old cruelties by burning and plundering, under their captains, Turkill, Henning and Anlaffe.

The population, &c., of Somersetshire, in these latter Anglo-Saxon days, are thus recorded in the Domesday Book: — Chief proprietors, 46 ; King's Thanes, 17 ; other proprietors, 11 ; villanes, 4,947 ; borderers, 4,377 ; slaves, 1565 ; cottagers, 299 ; coliberts, 156 ; coscez, 43 ; fishermen, 21 ; swineherds, 57 ; mills, 323 ; pastures, 156 ; woods, 206.



\* *Cunningham's English Nation*

† This banner, according to Sir Thomas Spelman, had on it the image of a raven, "magically wrought" in a single noon-tide by the three sisters of Inguar and Ubba. The Danes regarded it with much superstition, and its capture was a crushing blow.

\*\* "A good hour before the rising tide could float the Danish ships, the Saxons made good their retreat to the Quantocks" — *The Vita S. Neot.*

\*\*\* *Asser*

#### Editorial note

The verse on page 2 about King Alfred and the cakes was written by George Parker, 1796-1888, a Bridgwater customs officer, and published in the Athelney section of George Parker: *The ancient history of Bridgwater and its neighbourhood: also poems connected therewith.* 1st edit. 8vo., Bridgwater, 1877. 2nd edit., corrected. With photo, of St. Mary's Church. 8vo., Bridgwater, 1877

Digitised and edited by Tony & Jane Woolrich, 15/01/20