

THE DANES IN BUCKINGHAMSHIRE.

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UNDER the general name of Danes are included all those hordes of fierce Northmen from Jutland and Scandinavia who, from the eighth to the eleventh century, were continually invading and devastating Anglo-Saxon Britain. There is much confusion in the chronology of those troublous times, and in the following account of the Danes in Buckinghamshire, I have followed the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*,* which is usually considered the most trustworthy authority.

The first landing of the Danes took place in the year 787; but for some time their operations were confined to the districts lying near the coast, or adjacent to the mouths of navigable rivers; and it does not appear that they extended their ravages as far inland as Buckinghamshire until about a century and a half after their first

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arrival in this country. In 893 they made a raid up the Thames valley under Hasten, when, according to Langley,* they threw up the horseshoe entrenchments near Danesfield House, at Medmenham, which are still locally known as the Danes' Ditches. After that they frequently passed through this district during their pillaging expeditions into Mercia and Wessex.

In 906 they passed this way from East Anglia, but finding King Edward invincible, they made peace with him at Ickford † in this county. According to Higden the Danes fortified both sides of the Ouse at Buckingham in 913; and these defences were further strengthened by Edward the Elder in 918.

After their repulse at Towcester in 921,‡ the Danes came southward, and made night attacks in the province of Buckingham on those who were off their guard, carrying away men as well as cattle, and butchered many of the inhabitants between Birnwood § and Aylesbury. Ethelfleda, Lady of the Mercians, and daughter of King Alfred, is said to have prevailed upon her brother, Edward the Elder, to repair Eldsbury after it had been laid waste by those ferocious invaders.

It is thought by some that the White Leaf Cross at Monks Risborough commemorates a victory gained by the Saxons at this time over the pagan Danes at Bledlow (*Bledelawe*—the bloody hill). In this latter parish there is another but smaller cross cut on the slope of Winhill (*win*—the battle field). But the fact that there are two crosses so close together, and of different shape, the Risborough cross being of the Latin form, and the Bledlow cross Greek, somewhat detracts from the probability of the truth of this conjecture. It must further be remarked that, although the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Florence of Worcester, and other early authorities, mention this incursion, there is not a word in any of them which could be construed as indicating a victory of the Saxons over the Danes at that time; but quite the reverse.

* "The Hundred of Desborough," p. 336.

† Ang.-Sax. Chronicle, where it is called "Hitchingford"; Flor. Wigorn calls it "Yttingaford," and fixes the date in 901.

‡ Flor. Wigorn gives this event under the year 918.

§ The Ang.-Sax. Chronicle calls it "Burnham Wood."

I am inclined to think that the battle at Bledlow took place on an earlier occasion, and was that engagement in which the chronicler tells us the Danes found Edward the Elder invincible. As they came from East Anglia it is highly probable that they marched along the old Ickniel Street, which passes through Bledlow and directly under Winhill; where, being defeated by Edward, they marched westward under the hills; but being closely pursued by the victorious Saxons, they were obliged to submit to terms of peace, which were ratified at Ickford, a village on the Thame, a few miles north-west from Bledlow. Near the banks of the river, and at a short distance from the bridge, which connects Ickford with Draycott, are the remains of some earthworks, which were probably thrown up on this occasion.

It is to be noted that there are several hamlets in that part of the Vale of Aylesbury which borders on Bernwood Forest, bearing names of Danish origin. Among others I may mention four which have an undoubted Danish terminal, viz., Tythorpe, Eythorpe, Bixthorpe, and Southorpe. It is curious to notice, too, that the variations in two of these names, Edrop and Sedrup, have followed the identical modification of the same suffix which may be found in Denmark in the present day, where *thorpe* has passed into *trup*, *drup*, or *rup*.

From this circumstance, I think we may infer that the Danes settled in that district in considerable numbers, probably after the Treaty of Ickford. The camp at Chilton is thought to have had its origin about this time. At Dinton, in the same neighbourhood, there is a tradition that the so-called dwarf alder, which has red buds and bears red berries, was germinated from the blood of the fallen Danes: hence its name of Daneswort. To the same period have been referred the Camps at Cholsbury and Velvet Lawn, and some of the other entrenchments which are found upon the Chilterns. A Danish battle axe was discovered in 1858 at Benhill Field, in the hamlet of Walton, doubtless a relic of the period just mentioned, when the barbarian Northmen sacked Aylesbury. From the quantity of human remains found at the same spot it is conjectured that an engagement had taken place there, and that the men and horses slain in the contest had been buried in the trenches where they lay.

In January, 1010,* the army of the Danes sallied from their ships, and traversing the wood called Chiltern, marched to Oxford, which they plundered and burned, pillaging the country on both sides of the River Thames as they returned to their ships. This expedition is often assigned to the year 1009, from its being mentioned under that date in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle; but it is there expressly stated to have occurred after midwinter. In the summer of the same year they again ravaged northern Buckinghamshire on their way from Oxfordshire to Bedford, passing along the Ouse, burning the towns and butchering men and animals as they went, and afterwards retreating to their ships with much plunder. During this incursion they attacked both Buckingham and Newport.

The course of the Great Ouse through Buckinghamshire to Bedford is considered by some to have been the southern boundary of the Danish territory in the midland district, and many persons, even now, profess to be able to detect a marked difference in the dialect of the people living on the left bank of the stream, from those on the right, the former exhibiting several peculiarities of speech, attributable to the influence of the Danes, which are not met with in the central and southern portions of the county.

In 1011 we are told that Buckinghamshire and the adjacent districts had been ruined with fire and sword by the Danes; and that in spite of truce and tribute, they plundered the miserable people and slew them.

In 1013 Sweyn marched through this county to Oxford. Having passed the Watling Street, he published an order to his troops to the effect that they should lay waste the fields, burn the villages, plunder the churches, slay without mercy all the men who fell into their hands, reserving the women to satisfy their lusts, and, in short, to do all the mischief they could. This account, from one of our early historians, gives us a pretty accurate idea of what the inhabitants of this and other parts of England had to suffer whenever the Danes honoured them with a visit, although we must allow that the massacre of S. Brice (1002) may be taken as a set-off

* Flor. Wigorn.

against the cruelties of Sweyn in avenging his sister's death.

In 1016 Cnut, son of Sŵeyn, and Edric Streon overran Mercia, passing through Buckinghamshire into Bedford. In the same year Ethelred the Unready died, and Edmund Ironsides was proclaimed his successor in London, and acknowledged king by the Saxons of the south; while the Danes and Angles of the north and east submitted to the rule of Cnut who, after the assassination of Edmund, became sole King of England.

According to some authorities, two battles were fought at Ashendon between the English and the Danes, in 871 and 1016; but there can be little doubt that the first of these engagements took place in Berkshire, and the other in Essex.

The permanent settlement of a people in any particular portion of a country is generally attested by remains of their language being incorporated in the local nomenclature of the district. In some parts of England the names of towns, villages, and hamlets which are of undoubted Danish origin, occur very frequently, and are met with in every direction, indicating the settled occupation of those places by a race speaking the language whence their names were derived. Now, although in Buckinghamshire the Danes have, comparatively speaking, left but few traces of their presence in the matter of local names, there are still sufficient evidences to prove that they had considerable influence here, especially in the north-east part of the county, and the other districts already mentioned.

We must carefully distinguish between those local names which were associated with the Danes by the English, such, for instance, as Danesfield, Deadman Dane Bottom, and those which are in themselves of direct Danish origin, and which, we may reasonably conjecture, were imposed by the Danes themselves.

It is probable that the Danes did not settle here generally in any great numbers, but that they were interspersed as landowners throughout the whole county, more especially in that portion of the north cut off by the Watling Street, which it is well known was the line of demarcation between the Saxon and the Danish districts. Local names are the beacon lights of primeval

history; they are not merely arbitrary sounds devoid of meaning, but are full of historical and physical import. A study of the ancient names of Bucks will greatly assist us in wading through the avenues of a distant and uncertain past; and enable us to gain an approximate estimate of the extent of the power of the Northmen in this county.

Worsaae in his *Danes and Northmen* enumerates but three local names in Bucks which have a common Danish terminal. One of these is "by" which I do not think occurs; the other two "thorpe," while in Yorkshire he has accounted for above 400. This indicates the relative influence of the Danes in the two counties. His calculation as regards this county is certainly much below the number, but the Danish and Anglian dialects were so nearly akin that it is extremely difficult sometimes to determine from which source a name is derived.

At Newport, which is situated eastward of Watling Street, they seem to have had a settlement of some importance. It is very probable that Ulf, who was the owner of the manor *temp.* Edward the Confessor, as recorded in Domesday Book, was a Dane. According to the same invaluable record, Haversham belonged to Gunhilda, sister of Sweyn, King of Denmark, and mother of King Harold, slain at Hastings. Haversham itself is, apparently, derived from the Danish *Hafr*. The name of Swanbourne is traceable to another Dane, Suen or Swan, Earl of Essex, who held the manor in early times, and was standard-bearer to Edward the Confessor. Indeed, the arms not only of Wycombe and Buckingham, but also of the county itself are derived by some from a personal device of this Danish chieftain. Simpson, another village in this part of the county, was anciently called Suenstone, a name derived from the same Danish patronymic, *Svend*. Lathbury is another Danish name, (*Lade* = barn), and so is Lavendon (*Lund* = grove), Olney (*oe* = isle), Woolston (the town of Ulf) and Ravenstone, (Ravn's-town or station). Ravenstone* is situated just within the Danish district, and may have acquired its designation from the standard of the Raven, the war flag of the Northmen, erected there, as an indication of their

* Cf. Ravenspur, in Yorkshire.

rule over that part of the country. The Raven was Odin's sacred bird, and he is sometimes called "Ravne-gud," (the raven-god). The ravens Hugin and Mumin sat on his shoulders, and only flew away to bring him intelligence of what happened in the world. The Standard of the Raven is first mentioned in English history in 898, when the Danes, under the sons of Regner Lodbrog, were defeated in the south of England. It is said that the flag was cunningly woven by the daughters of Regner, and from it the Danes took auguries of victory or defeat. If the raven fluttered its wings, Odin gave them a sign of conquest; if its wings hung down, it portended defeat.

I have by no means exhausted the list of Danish names to be found in this county; but those I have mentioned, all lying in the north-eastern district, may be taken as examples indicating the extent and character of their influence in Buckinghamshire, rather than furnishing a complete survey of the subject. A careful examination of the local names in other parts of the county would doubtless yield similar results.*

Having said thus much in reference to the Danes in Buckinghamshire generally, it is time now to speak more particularly of that locality so intimately connected with them which, if time had permitted, you would have visited to-day—Deadman Dane Bottom.

Deadman Dane Bottom is the name applied to a deep ravine near Hazlemere running at right angles to the high road from Wycombe to Amersham. It is bounded on either side by abrupt clay-covered chalk hills. The spot has a wild and romantic outline, and is exactly such a position as we might imagine would be seized upon by the Saxons wherein to make an effort to retard the further progress of the Danes through their territory. The locality presented in those early times a very different aspect from that which it wears to-day. The cleared spaces and cultivated fields which we now see were then part of a wild moorland covering the tract still known as Wycombe Heath. This heath, or common,

* The hamlet of Denham, N.E. of Quainton, in Central Bucks, probably obtained its name from an eminence near, by tradition reputed to have been occupied by the Danes. On the hill there are traces of military earthworks, and many human bones have been found at various times.

was of considerable extent, portions of it stretching away into adjacent parishes. It is now enclosed. The higher portion of the country was covered with woods, forming part of that extensive forest which formerly occupied the whole of the Chiltern district, and of which King's Wood, Penn Wood, etc., are remains. There were two hamlets here—Hazlemoor, Hazlemere, or Hazel Hatch on the borders of the Heath, and Grendon, nearer Wycombe. The character of the district in former times is plainly indicated by the occurrence of such local names as Sladmere, Hazelmere, Widmere, Holmere, etc., all of which, probably, at first, ended in "moor." The modern terminal syllable in these names is not, I think, as often supposed, *mere*, a small lake; but *mære* or *gemære*, which occurs so frequently in Anglo-Saxon Charters, and signifies the boundary between two estates.

This valley has been from time immemorial associated with the Danes, both by the name it bears and by traditions preserved and handed down for many generations, which make it the scene of a terrible battle between them and the English. Now, as regards the name of the place, I must remark that it has been urged that it might have been obtained without any connection with the Danes. It is frequently called Deadman *Dean* Bottom, and sometimes simply Dean Bottom, an appellation which might have been suggested by the physical conformation of the locality—a narrow valley, bounded by wooded eminences. Within a short distance to the north-west there are three other places similarly named, viz, Upper North Dean, Lower North Dean, and Small Dean. Against this view, it may be objected that the two terms "dean" (den or dene) and "bottom" are so nearly allied to each other in signification, as to render it improbable that they would both be used in the construction of the same name, and that it utterly ignores the first part of the name as invariably applied to the place. Taking the name and the traditions together, we may look upon one as confirming the other, and consider "Deadman" as supporting the legend of the battle, and "Dane" as confirmatory of the tradition which associates the Danes with the locality, the tradition giving us the occasion and the *dramatis personæ*, the name preserving both, and lending additional probability to the truth of the tradition.

An account of the traditions connecting this spot with the Danes, and of the remains of antiquity which have been discovered here at various times, will be found in the "History of Hughenden," *Records of Buckinghamshire*, Vol. V., No. iv. p. 193 *et seq.*, and, therefore, need not be repeated here.

It appears to me that those discoveries plainly and unmistakably show that the locality was an important place in British and Roman times, whilst the warlike implements and human remains which have been found do certainly seem to give material support to the tradition of a battle being fought there with the Danes. Assuming, then, from the threefold evidence of tradition, name, and remains, almost incontestible proof of the fact that a battle did indeed take place there, I will now proceed to inquire if there be anything in authentic history which will furnish us with a clue to the time when this battle was fought.

The most likely occasion on which this engagement might have taken place was in January, 1010, when, as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle says, the Danes took their way up through Chiltern to Oxford. They had been wintering in London, and after the severe weather broke they set out on their journey westward. When the Danes sallied forth on these pillaging expeditions, they did not always proceed in one body, but frequently divided into two parties, which took different routes, meeting again at a given centre for future operations. Now, it happens that there are three notable places in this district connected with each other by an old road, and all associated with the Danes—Deadman Dane Bottom, Castle Hill, Wycombe, and Desborough; and is there anything more reasonable than to suppose that, when they passed through Chiltern, they took their way past these localities, which have ever since been associated with them by tradition, and where Danish remains have frequently been found?

The courses of some of the old roads in this district have been changed from their original direction, and others have been entirely superseded by more modern ones. There are, however, remains of an ancient road called Green Street existing in this neighbourhood, to which I should like to call your attention. The portion

still remaining runs from Hazlemere towards the site of ancient Desborough, and forms part of one of the oldest roads in this county, and is, without doubt, of British origin.

It commences near the roadside inn, the Three Horse-shoes, and runs as a narrow lane about a quarter of a mile, when it loses its character as a road ; but its course may be traced across a narrow field and meadow until it comes out into the road from Totteridge to Kingshill. Crossing this road, the course of the old trackway is easily traceable down to the Green, where it joins the road from Wycombe to Hughenden. Here it loses its name, although the present road doubtless lies directly in the line of the old one. Following the Hughenden road, then, into Wycombe, it conducts us to the spot now known as Frogmoor Gardens, but in ancient times "The Green." It then ran down Bull Lane and Newland, both these thoroughfares retaining the characteristic narrowness of an ancient road. It next bends westward at the point where it was formerly met by another old road called the Windsor Way, which passed between the camp on Keep Hill and the Roman station in the Rye, crossing the old Wycombe and Marlow road near where the Abbey now stands. From the point of junction of these two old ways, the road I am tracing ran along what is now called Water Lane, which is succeeded by a wider piece of straight road still preserving the name of Green Street, which terminates at Desborough Field.

Assuming my conjecture as to the occasion when the battle of Deadman Dane Bottom took place to be correct, it is probable that the Danes, after their victory, followed the direction of this ancient road towards Desborough. There is a tradition of a battle being fought there between the English and the Danes. The latter are said to have been posted on the heights bounding the Wye valley on the north, while the English occupied the stronghold called Desborough Castle, and that a terrible struggle took place near the banks of the stream between that encampment and Castle Hill. Warlike remains, supposed to be of Danish origin, have been discovered in both those localities. The military character of Desborough Castle is quite evident, and in the field below the encampment an ancient sword was turned up some

years ago, and human bones have been found in the adjacent meadows. In 1820, warlike implements and human remains were discovered on Castle Hill, but nothing of a decided Danish character, except the giant-like proportions of the bones of some of the skeletons dug up.

The road which the Danes followed after leaving Desborough and passing through West Wycombe, was not the present high road direct to Stokenchurch, but the narrow way by Chorley Farm (near which it is accompanied by a bank, still visible), along Post Lane, across the Common and through the village of Radnage, whence it takes a sudden bend by Bennet's End into Collyer's Lane to Stokenchurch, and so on to Oxford. On the left of this lane there are two tumuli in a field called Banky Barrowfield, which are probably the place of interment of persons who fell there in conflict with the Danes.

The period of which I have been treating is one of bloodshed, anarchy, and violence; yet out of those calamities a wise, over-ruling Providence decreed that good should spring, not only to our own land, but also, it is not too much to say, to the whole world. By their repeated attacks, the Danes at length extirpated those rival dynasties whose incessant feuds had been so baneful to the prosperity of the Anglo-Saxons. The Northmen annihilated the remnants of the Heptarchy, by forcing our forefathers, in self-defence, into a national confederacy. Cruel as the process was by which that desirable result was brought about, yet upon the ruins of the chaotic Saxon and Anglian states was destined to arise that England, one and undivided, of which we are all so justly proud; and the vanquished and demoralized Anglo-Saxon, now invigorated with fresh energy from the North, bursts forth into all the might and dignity of the Englishman.

Looking upon that distant past with the knowledge and experience of the present, I think it must be conceded that, notwithstanding all the disasters and troubles which afflicted our country then, our prosperity and happiness of to day would not be what it is had there never been occasion to write a paper upon "The Danes in Buckinghamshire."