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Enquiries re articles can be sent to saffronwaldenhistory@gmail.com

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The Site of the Battle of Assandun, 1016

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Hadstock Church

The Battle of Assandun was the event which eventually gave Cnut the Crown of England. For many years the argument has raged over whether it took place at Ashingdon in south Essex, or near Ashdon in the north-west corner of the county.

In 1586 Camden was the first to think Ashingdon was the place. P.H. Reaney in *The Place- Names of Essex* gives *Nesenduna* as the Domesday name of Ashingdon and takes the other early forms from the accounts of the battle. The Victorian historian Freeman was quite sure Ashingdon was the place. Since then all too often writers have simply said 'the battle of

Ashingdon', but there are many reasons why the north-west corner of Essex seems a more likely site. Freeman took Florence of Worcester as his main authority, translating '*ad naviculam*' as 'reaching his ships', but the Latin *ad* means 'movement towards' and not 'arrival at'. Cnut was a good general and whenever possible got his men back to his ships and escaped. Ashingdon is to the south of the River Crouch and the Danes were apparently returning from Mercia laden with plunder. It seems unlikely that Cnut would have gone round to the south of the river and then stopped to fight. Surely, he would have boarded his ships and escaped if he could, rather than face the English army.

Freeman also accepts Florence's definition of Assandun as meaning the 'hill of the asses' and dismisses the author of the *Encomium Emmae Reginae* as a foreigner who did not know the language. (He then takes a lot of details of the battle from the Encomiast!) The Encomiast was a priest in the household of Queen Emma, who was married first to the English King Ethelred and then to Cnut himself. He must have been able to speak to men who had fought at Assandun. The Encomiast spells the name *Aescenduna* (i.e. hill of the Ash Trees) and even goes on to define this as '*mons fraxinorum*', again 'the hill of the Ash Trees'. The hill between Ashdon and Hadstock is very much the hill of the ash trees. The ash is a native of chalky soils and the pH there is around 7.6. Ashingdon is on the acid London Clay and the ash is not native to that area.

Accounts of the battle suggest that Cnut was returning from Mercia laden with plunder. From the hill above Hadstock, there is a good view up the Granta valley to the Gog/Magog hills - an ideal place to watch for the returning Danes. Edmund had collected an army from London and came to intercept Cnut. Several old tracks lead up to this area. Also, the men of Mercia and East Anglia were heavily involved in the battle. It has been argued that the area was too densely wooded for anyone to see Cnut and his men coming, but any countryman would be able to note the passage of an army by the disturbance of the birds. A fairly narrow valley runs from Cambridge between hills to Linton. There was a ford in the Granta which leads up into Red Field - a name often associated with a battle - in the parish of Hadstock where the land levels out into an area level enough for a battle site. From here there are river valley routes that lead to the estuaries of the Stour, Blackwater or Crouch rivers. There has been argument as to where Cnut left his ships but here is a good place to cut him off from any of the estuaries.

The men of East Anglia suffered heavily in the battle. The *Liber Eliensis* describes how the monks of Ely bore holy relics into battle and afterwards carried back to Ely that night the bodies of the Abbot of Thorney and Eadnoth, Bishop of Lincoln, who had the misfortune to be slain. Ely is some 25 miles away and a Survey of the Manor of Hadstock in 1248-49 lists a customary cottager's duties as including carrying work on foot to

Ely twice a year. Ashingdon is another 40 miles away: carrying from there that night seems unlikely. Also, Barking Abbey would have been nearer than Ely.

A study of the Ordnance Survey Map of Britain in the Dark Ages, confirms that this area of north-west Essex would be a good place to intercept the Danish raiders. After the Battle, The English fled and, according to the *Liber Eliensis*, the Danes camped that night as they did not know the country. The next day they buried the dead and set off in pursuit. They caught up with the English at Deerhurst in Gloucestershire. The same map shows a simple route down the Icknield Way, turn right for Aylesbury and old tracks lead straight to Cirencester, Gloucester and then to Deerhurst. From Ashingdon, the routes are not nearly so straightforward. London gets in the way.

Thurkil was appointed earl of East Anglia and he helped Cnut build a minster of stone and lime to commemorate the fallen of both sides. Ashingdon was never in East Anglia but Hadstock and Ashdon probably were, the county boundary being rather fluid at times and the Saffron Walden forest separating them to a certain extent. Hadstock has a very large church probably rebuilt in the first quarter of the 11th century, according to Dr. Harold Taylor.

Warwick Rodwell found the present nave to be a rebuild on the site of an earlier church, one of which had been burnt down in the late 9th Century. Hadstock has always been a royal church and manor, the revenues of which were granted to the monastery of Ely. Cnut granted four days' food rent from his manor of *Cadenho*. The church has strong connections with St. Botolph, to whom it is dedicated. This would mean a lot to Cnut as St. Botolph was the patron saint of seamen and travellers, and still is in Scandinavia according to the late Dean Borg Rosen of Aalborg (its cathedral is dedicated to St. Budolfi), and to Mr Botolf Botolfson of Oslo. All churches dedicated to St. Botolph are associated with main travel routes, city gates or ports.

Cadenho, or variants of it, was the name for Hadstock for only about 100 years, from about the time of Cnut until the 1120s when it became Hadstock. It occurs in Domesday Book as *Cadenhou*. There are two anomalies to this, a reference to Hadstock at the time of Edward the Confessor and to *Cadenho* in a charter of Ethelred but these are copies in the later *Liber Eliensis*. This name has always been interpreted as 'the end of a ridge or spur of land belonging to someone called *Cada*'. Hadstock is certainly on a -ho at the end of a ridge, but the personal name *Cada* does not seem to be recorded. Hybrid names are unusual but not unknown and there is an old church Latin word 'cadent' meaning 'the fallen', i.e. killed in battle. Names were often written down from the spoken word. Would local Saxon people have carefully enunciated

'*Cadent-ho*? It is more likely to have been pronounced '*Caden'o*'. For example, the 'natives of Bristol to this day pronounce it 'Bristle'. Although Cnut meant his Church to commemorate the dead of both sides, it would be quite understandable if the English did not want to be reminded of a major defeat. The village has been Hadstock for over 800 years. By the time William of Malmesbury wrote his chronicle, the Church at Assandun had become an ordinary church with a parish priest.

Archaeology has not yet revealed signs of a major battle at Ashingdon, although some weapons were found, as one might expect almost anywhere in East Anglia after all the Viking raids. However, a local county history of Cambridgeshire (Ennion), and local folk memories in Linton and Hadstock, relate to the finding of a very large number of skeletons in Red Field in the 1860s when the railway cutting was dug; Ennion perhaps spoke to the descendants of those who dug the cutting. No records remain.

Cnut installed Stigand as the first priest of his church at Assandun. Stigand later became Bishop of Elmham and then Archbishop of Canterbury. Both he and Cnut were great benefactors of Ely. Stigand was certainly active in this area and held lands in West Suffolk and Cambridgeshire. He also was Abbot of Ely for a short time and may have taken refuge there temporarily after the Conquest. Stigand also witnessed the will of his friend Thurstan of Wimbish and Ashdon and was left a large sum of money. He witnessed a charter concerning land at Wimbish.

There used to be a small pasture on the corner of the Bartlow Road at the junction with Chalky Lane. According to the late Ernie and Joe Freeman, this was called Traitors' Field, and it was unlucky to plough it because it was where Eadric Streona and his men held back from the battle and betrayed Edmund and the English. The Freeman family had a tradition that they had been here since before the Conquest: there was certainly a Freeman in the 1248/9 Survey of the Manor of Hadstock. A will listed at the Essex Record Office dates from the early 1400s.

Conclusion

There are therefore strong reasons to place the Battle of Assandun in this part of Essex. The matter will probably only be finally settled when a mass grave is found and can be dated to the appropriate time.

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Dr. Cyril Hart, the late Borg Rosen (Dean of St. Budolfi Cathedral, Aalborg, Denmark), and Mr. Botolf Botolfson of Oslo (pers. comm.)