

THE BATTLE OF ASHDOWN, A. D. 871.*

ONE of the most memorable conflicts which occurred in the severe struggle between the Saxons and the Danes, towards the latter part of the ninth century, was the engagement on Ashdown. The Saxon Chronicle has preserved the following account of this battle.

"A. D. 871.—This year came the army (namely the Danes) to Reading, in Wessex; and in the course of three nights, rode two earls up, who were met by Alderman Ethelwulf, at Englefield; where he fought with them, and obtained the victory. There one of them was slain, whose name was Sidrac. About four nights after this, King Ethered and Alfred, his brother, led their main army to Reading, where they fought with the enemy; and there was much slaughter on either hand, Alderman Ethelwulf being among the slain; but the Danes kept possession of the field. And about four nights after this, King Ethered and Alfred, his brother, fought with all the army on Ashdown (on Æcesdune, Sax.) and the Danes were overcome. They had two heathen kings, Bagsac and Healfden, and many earls; and they were in two divisions, in one of which were Bagsac and Healfden, the heathen kings, and in the other were the earls. King Ethered, therefore, fought with the troops of the kings, and there was King Bagsac slain; and Alfred, his brother, fought with the troops of the earls, and there were slain Earl Sidrac the elder, Earl Sidrac the younger, Earl Osbern, Earl Frene, and Earl Harold. They put both the troops to flight; there were many thousands of the slain, and they continued fighting till night."¹

Various places have been fixed upon by different writers, as the site of this battle, but two only possess any claims, and in favour of one of these the preponderance of evidence

* The author of these cursory remarks desires to have it mentioned, that they were written 25 years ago, when he was engaged in compiling materials for a history of Berkshire, and were noted down just as the thoughts occurred to himself,

rather as hints for a discussion than a finished article; and as he did not expect that any one but himself would peruse them, he hopes that any crudity of style or argument will be excused.

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¹ Saxon Chron., translated by the Rev. J. Ingram, p. 100.

is very great. It is clear that it took place somewhere in West Saxony, at no great distance from Reading, in a hilly and likewise open country. All these characteristics, added to a correspondence of name, are to be found united in that place. A word, however, first, on the opinion of Bishop Gibson, who fixes upon Aston, now called Aston Tiroid, a village near Wallingford, as the scene of action. The only reason adduced in support of this opinion, is a sort of collateral argument drawn from another passage in the Saxon Chronicle (under the year 1006,) wherein it is said, that the Danes marched from Wallingford, along *Æcesdune* to *Cwicchelmslawe*. By the latter he understands Cuckhamsley Hill, between which and Wallingford, Aston lies in a tolerably direct line.

To give probability to this conjecture, it would be necessary, first to identify the *Æcesdune* of the Saxon Chronicle, *Anno* 871, with the *Æcesdune*, mentioned in the same, *Anno* 1006, a point by no means certain: and, secondly, the ancient *Cwicchelmslawe* with the tumulus now called Cuckhamsley Hill, both of which points will be hereafter discussed: but on the present occasion it is not necessary, as the variance in etymology between the names of Aston and Ashdown is completely fatal to the hypothesis.

Aston, anciently written *Estone*, signifies the East Town, that is, in reference probably to a principal Township. The names of Easton and Weston are very common, and are generally hamlets situated in that part of parishes to which their name refers.

Ashdown, anciently written *Æcesdune*, (pronounced *Æschesdune*, from whence the corruption to Ashesdown and Ashdown is very slight,) signifies a hill of ashes, or abounding in Ash trees, a species of wood still very common on the Berkshire Downs.

The first person who paid any close attention to the subject, was Mr. Francis Wise, to whom the above-named concurrent testimonies, together with local peculiarities, pointed out the apparently true site. Mr. Wise, in 1738, published a pamphlet in which he fixes on this Ashdown, of which we are now treating.

“Here, then,” says he, “I was persuaded to look for the field of battle, and was agreeably surprised to find my expectation answered in every respect. Here my imagination

painted the two armies extended over the wide plain, and engaged about the single Thorn tree, there being here and there to be seen one of this kind. Upon the highest hill of these parts north-eastward, is a large Roman entrenchment, called Uffington Castle, from overlooking the town of Uffington in the vale, where I suppose the Danes lay encamped; for as their marches were generally hasty, and more like that of plunderers than of a regular army, they had not time to throw up fortifications; nor, indeed, was there occasion where they found enough of them ready made to their hands. This place I choose for the Danes, because Asser says, they had got the upper ground. About half a mile lower westward, on the brow of the hill, nearer to Ashbury, overlooking a farm-house called Hardwell, is a camp, fortified, seemingly, after the Saxon manner, with two ditches, but not near so strong as the former, which has only one. This is called Hardwell Camp, and here, I suppose, King Ethelred lay the night before the engagement. About a mile or more from hence, behind the Wood of Ashdown Park, is a slight roundish entrenchment, which seems to be thrown up in haste, and which, as I have been informed, is called both Ashbury Camp, and King Alfred's Castle. Mr. Aubrey's account of this (for he did not know of Hardwell Camp) is, From hence we came to White Horse Hill, the head of the river Ock, above which, by Ashbury Park, is a camp of a figure as near round as square, the diameter above 100 paces, and the works single, which seem to prove it Danish. But the works are now almost quite spoiled by digging for the Sarsden stones, as they call them, to build my Lord Craven's house in the park. Besides these camps we may add the Barrows, scattered over the Downs in great plenty, sufficient to convince any man, that this part of the country must have been formerly the scene of war and bloodshed."²

To sum up the evidence in favour of this position, it may be observed, that the name corresponds exactly; that the appearance of the surrounding country agrees with the description given by Asser³ (who afterwards saw the field of battle) in the expression "campestrem *Æcesdun* latitudinem," which clearly alludes to an open district; that the

² Wise's letter to Dr. Mead, pp. 22, 23.

³ See the extract from Asser, appended to this memoir.

“locus editor” and “locus inferior,” (though it is true, as Mr. Lysons observes, that they might be applied to any spot in a hilly country,) are well exemplified by the relative situation of the two camps, now known by the names of Uffington Castle and Hardwell Camp : and, lastly, as Mr. Wise observes, that these camps and the various tumuli scattered over the Downs thereabouts, may suffice to prove that they must have been the scene of some great conflict.

With regard to the distance of Ashdown from Reading, from which town the Danes advanced, and to which, it is presumed, they fled after their defeat, it may be at first sight objected, that it was too great for a direct pursuit. Supposing, however, that the Saxons did pursue them to the walls of Reading, let us try how far this objection will hold good.

The distance is about twenty-eight miles at farthest : the whole of which space, excepting the immediate vicinity of Reading, consisted of open downs, a species of country most favourable for such performances. The Danes were flying during the whole latter part of the day on which the battle was fought, and the subsequent night ; and it appears that the fate of the day was decided early, for Alfred first attacked the enemy in the morning, while King Ethelred was engaged in hearing divine service ; and upon the conclusion of this ceremony, the appearance of the latter in the field, with the sacred ensign of the cross, restored confidence to his own troops, who were somewhat oppressed, disheartened the enemy, and decided the battle.

When, in addition to the time stated to have been consumed in the flight, we consider the bitter hatred which the Saxons must have felt against their ruthless enemies, which they would gladly indulge on so favourable an occasion of victory, we cannot deem the distance to which the pursuit was carried, extraordinary. But the fact is, that no such pursuit, as far as we are informed, did take place. Mr. Wise misconstrued the passage in the narrative of Asser, which merely says, that the Danes betook themselves to flight till nightfall, and even till the following day, till they reached their fortress, and that the Christians followed them till night, *i.e.* the night of the battle, as before the next day they were out of their reach.

Mr. Lysons has also, in some degree, followed Mr. Wise's error ; and this point of distance has been noticed more particularly, inasmuch as the former seems to consider, that his Ashdown (subsequently mentioned) has the advantage in point of situation, though he does not mention the distance of the other from Reading as militating against its claims.

If we suppose the Saxons to have contented themselves with chasing the enemy for a few miles only, and that the battle was not decided till a late hour of the day, the remaining distance from their stronghold at Reading would perfectly accord with the time mentioned by Asser, who states that they arrived there at the commencement of the following day.

We have therefore in favour of this place, the corresponding testimonies of name, local situation, distance, and local monuments. An hypothesis, so decidedly probable, has, of course, been generally admitted ; but it is pleasant to overturn the theory of a preceding writer, and erect another.

Accordingly, Mr. Lysons, in the introduction to his account of Berkshire in the *Magna Britannia*, informs us, that there are strong reasons⁴ for supposing that the battle was not fought at the place described, and raises up another Ashdown, or rather the ghost of an Ashdown (for the name is unknown there at present), to contend for the palm.

The summary of Mr. Lysons' strong reasons is as follows : "There was a manor in or near⁵ the parish of Ashampstead, known by the name of Ashdown, and described by the name of Assedone in the Norman Survey, and in several subsequent records, which sufficiently agrees, both in name and situation with the little which is to be gathered from our historians on the subject."

In what respect, however, has it any advantage ? Clearly not in name, for the name of Ashdown *justa* Ashbury can be traced from an early Saxon period to the present day ; and the omission of it in the Norman Survey proves nothing, as it might have been included, being monastic property, under the head of Eissesberie, the principal estate belonging to the Abbey of Glastonbury.

Nor is the situation more probable, as it would by no

⁴ I suspect, though it is not avowed, that Dr. Beeke was the real author of this hypothesis. It much resembles others broached by that gentleman.

⁵ It was in the parish of Hampstead Norris.

means so well agree with the description of the historian, and is quite deficient in local testimonies.

Mr. Lysons adds, that Brompton's manner of spelling the name (Asschedon) approaches very near to that of the Norman Survey; but as Brompton, who was a monk of Jervaux Abbey, in the reign of Edward III., wrote above 450 years after the battle, and above 250 years after the Survey, his testimony on a point of orthography is not of much value.

The strong arguments falling rather short, Mr. Lysons adduces as a collateral corroboration, the passage of the Saxon Chronicle, recording a march of the Danes from Wallingford, along *Æcesdune* to *Cwicchelslawe*, which Bishop Gibson had cited in support of his own hypothesis. But it is remarkable, that each quotes the passage in a sense diametrically opposite to the other. Bishop Gibson, naturally enough, supposes, that it assists in identifying *Æcesdune* with *Aston*, because *Aston* lies in a direct line between *Wallingford* and the tumulus now called *Cuckhamsley Hill*.

Mr. Lysons, on the other hand, also placing *Cwicchelslawe* at *Cuckhamsley Hill*, fixes *Æcesdune* near *Ashampstead*; but, being obliged to admit, that the aforesaid route would in this case be rather circuitous, discovers in the expression "along *Æcesdune*," which he translates "by way of *Ashdown*," an implication that it was circuitous.

On the map, if straight lines be drawn between *Wallingford*, *Cuckhamsley Hill*, and *Ashampstead*, they would form nearly an equilateral triangle.

In fact, both these writers seem to admit too hastily the identity of the places mentioned in the Saxon Chronicle (*sub annis* 871 *et* 1006) under the name of *Æcesdune*, a point which, as well as the identity of *Cwicchelslawe* with the tumulus now called *Cuckhamsley Hill*, requires to be established, before the passage can be adduced as an evidence.

Both are doubtful: the name of *Ashdown* is common to many places, and of course, the etymology of all is the same. From the expression, "andlang *Æcesdune*," which implies traversing a length of country,⁶ rather than a circuitous

⁶ It is peculiarly applicable to the long narrow ridge of Downs, on the summit of which runs the ancient Roman or British track, called the *Ridgeway*.

route, between two points, I am induced to believe, that the range of hills extending from Compton or Ilsley westward to Ashbury, might have borne the name. On the hills, a little to the south of East Ilsley, is a wood called Ashridge, which is nearly synonymous with Ashdown; and between the two extreme points above mentioned are several places, the names of which have the same initial syllable.

The name of Cwicchelmslawe yet survives in Cuckhamsley, and is now limited solely to a large tumulus on the downs in the parish of East Hendred, and from this circumstance it has been supposed erroneously to have borne reference to a hill. The late Dr. Ingram, in his edition of the Saxon Chronicle, translated Cwicchelmslawe by Cuckhamsley Hill, thus assuming the point required to be proved, but the original gave him no such authority. The word implies the territory or extensive tract of land belonging to Cwicchelm, has no reference to a hill, and is entirely modernised in the word Cuckhamsley. Nearly all the names of places in England, excepting some very ancient towns or cities, have a Saxon origin, and are derived from two sources, either the name or rank of the proprietor, as Uffington, Uffa's or Uffing's town, Aldermanston, the Alderman's town; or the peculiar character of the locality, as Combe, a hollow between hills; and the various names terminating in ford, from the situation on a fordable river or brook, or in burn, as lying on the banks of a brook, as Winterburne, Lambourne, Shalbourne, &c. Sometimes they partake of both. In this instance we have specific information from ancient historians.

Cynegils, King of the West Saxons, had two sons, Kenwal and Cwicchelm, who reigned jointly in that kingdom. The latter was baptised at Dorchester, in Oxfordshire, in 636, but died in the same year, whereupon Kenwal became sole monarch. He was vanquished and deprived of his crown by Penda, King of Mercia, but recovered it after the lapse of a few years, with the assistance of Cuthred, son of his brother Cwicchelm. In gratitude for this assistance, or perhaps as a measure of justice due to his nephew, he gave him 3000 hides of land in the vicinity of Ashdown.⁷ By the way, it may be observed, that Ashdown must have been of considerable note or extent, as identifying so large a territory. William of Malmesbury, alluding to this donation,

⁷ "Be Æseesdune."—Sax. Chron., ad ann. 646.

states, that it comprised almost a third part of his whole kingdom ;⁸ and Dr. Milner,⁹ remarking on the transaction, adds, that the principality appears to be the same which his father Quilchelm (or Cwicchelm) had formerly held, consisting of Berkshire and part of Oxfordshire.¹

In fact, it seems the most probable supposition, that Kenwal, being restored to his kingdom, and having acquired, as the old historians relate, while in a state of adversity, a due sense of his former iniquities, was anxious on his restoration to prosperity, to make restitution, and accordingly, among other acts of justice, gave Cuthred the patrimony of his father Cwicchelm, comprising the domain called from him, Cwicchelslawe, or Cwicchelm's territory.

The name, it is probable, centered subsequently in a town or village situated somewhere on or near the Berkshire Hills, and not far from the tumulus before mentioned. It is said, that the Danes went to Cwicchelslawe, evidently as to an inhabited place, and there awaited better cheer.²

There is a record of a court or judicial assembly being held there, in the time of King Ethelred, and we learn from Dugdale³ that these courts were held in a church or church-yard. Wherever it was situated, all traces have long been lost, for it does not appear in the Norman Survey, or in any subsequent record ; having perhaps been destroyed in some of the plundering excursions of the Danes.

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EXTRACT FROM ASSER'S HISTORY OF ALFRED.

GIVING THE DESCRIPTION OF THE BATTLE OF ASHDOWN, A.D. 871.

“ Christiani—post⁴ quatuor dies contra præfatum exercitum in loco, qui dicitur *Æscesdun*, quod Latine Mons fraxini interpretatur, totis viribus et plena voluntate ad prælium prodeunt ; sed Pagani in duas se turmas dividentes æquali lance testudines parant (habebant enim tunc duos Reges, et multos Comites) concedentes mediam partem exercitus duobus Regibus, et alteram omnibus Comitibus ; quod Christiani cernentes, et etiam ipsi exercitum in duas turmas similiter dividentes, testudines non segnius

⁸ “ Quippe qui filio fratris pene tertiam regni partem magnanimâ liberalitate communicaret.”—Will. Malmsh. lib. i., cap. 2.

⁹ History of Winchester, vol. i., p. 93.

¹ Bp. Kennett says, that it consisted of all that part of Kenwal's kingdom, which lay south of the Thames, and that it was

granted as a province or principality, to be held under himself.

² Saxon Chron., ann. 1006.

³ Orig. Jurid. Lond. 1671, pp. 31, 32.

⁴ That is, after the battle of Reading, in which Ethelwulf was slain.

construunt. Sed Ælfred citius et promptius cum suis (sicut ab his qui viderunt, veridicis referentibus, audivimus) ad locum prælii advenit; nimirum erat enim adhuc suus frater Æthered rex in tentorio in oratione positus, audiens Missam; et nimium affirmans se inde vivum non discesurum, antequam sacerdos Missam finiret: et divinum pro humano nolle deserere servitum; et ita fecit. Quæ Regis Christiani fides multum apud Dominum valuit; sicut in sequentibus apertius declarabitur.

Decreverant ergo Christiani, ut Æthered Rex cum suis copiis contra duos Paganos Reges sumeret prælium; Ælfred vero suus frater cum suis cohortibus contra omnes Paganorum duces belli sortem sumere debere sciret. Quibus ita firmiter ab utraque parte dispositis, cum Rex in oratione diutius moraretur, et Pagani parati ad locum certaminis citius advenissent, Ælfred tunc secundarius, cum diutius hostiles acies ferre non posset, nisi aut bello retrorsum recederet, aut contra hostiles copias ante fratris adventum in bellum prorumperet, demum viriliter aprino more Christianas copias contra hostiles exercitus (ut ante proposuerant, tamen quamvis Rex adhuc non venerat,) dirigens, divino fretus consilio, et adjutorio fultus, testudine ordinabiliter condensata, confestim contra hostes vexilla movet.

Sed hoc in loco nescientibus intimandum est, quod ille locus certaminis belligerantibus inæqualis erat, nam Pagani editiorem locum præoccupaverant, Christiani ab inferiori loco aciem dirigebant. Erat quoque in eodem loco unica spinosa arbor, brevis admodum, (quam nos ipsi nostris propriis oculis vidimus,) circa quam ergo hostiles inter se acies cum ingenti omnium clamore, illi perperam agentes, isti pro vita et dilectis atque patria pugnaturi, hostiliter conveniunt. Cumque aliquandiu animose et nimium atrociter hinc inde utrique pugnarent, Pagani divino judicio Christianorum impetum diutius non ferentes, maxima suarum copiarum parte occisa, opprobriosam fugam cepere: quo in loco alter de duobus Paganorum Regibus, et quinque comites occisi occubuerunt, et multa millia Paganæ partis in eodem loco, et insuper per totam campestem Æscendun latitudinem ubique dispersa, longe lateque occisa corruerunt.

Cecidit ergo illic Bægseeg rex, et Sidroc ille senex comes, et Sidroc junior comes, et Obsbern comes, et Fræna comes, et Hareld comes; et totus Paganorum exercitus in fugam usque ad noctem, et etiam usque ad diem sequentem (quousque ad arcem qui evaserant pervenerunt) versus est; quos Christiani usque ad noctem persecuti sunt, et ubique prosternentes."—*Asserius de Rebus Gestis Ælfredi*. Oxon. 1722, 8vo. p. 21.