

THE RIVER LEA CAMPAIGN OF 894-5

by ARTHUR C. JONES

" The Danes riding with their navy through the River of Thames to the entrance of the River Lea with light pinnaces and ships, came by this river to a place where the town of Ware now stands, about twenty miles distant from London, built there a large and strong fort, and fortified it with a wear, which they raised about it by a great bank or dam that penned up the water about the fort; from whence the Danes made their excursions, and sailed thence with their ships riding under the hill near this town, called to this day Porthill and Shipman's-hill, from the safety of the harbour; and during their stay there assailed this town of Hertford, spoil'd the inhabitants, burnt their houses to the ground . . . , insomuch that King Alfred was compelled the same year to levy forces, and build a castle at this town for the security of his subjects, whither a great part of the citizens of London and other people repaired; who modelling themselves into an army, did attempt to destroy the Danish fort; but in this action four of the King's officers were slain, and his army put to flight.

" The next year, when the summer approached, the King encamped with his forces on both sides of the river, viewed the fort which the Danes had fortified, observed the strength of their walls and the order of their ships fenc'd about with stakes; and knowing well that they would command all the corn in the fields for their garrison near the City of Hertford, or within the compass of their army, and would burn or destroy what they should not need, he passed in a vessel down the river, drawn with a horse upon the bank, sounded the depth of the waters, and discovering that in some places the waters might be drawn so low, and the streams so straightened with stakes, that all the skill of the Danes could not tow their ships back again: he divided the river into three currents,¹ and made a large shass at Blackwall to restrain the tides from flowing the level, from whence it was denominated. In short time after the work was begun, the waters sunk at the Danish fort so that the pagans could not draw back their ships; then they immediately conveyed their wives to the East Angles, where they secured them, and made their composition with the English, that they might march to Quatbridge near the Severn, where they built another fort; but the army hastened and followed them to the west, whilst the citizens of London seized their ships, broke those in pieces which they could not hale up to the Thames, and conveyed the other which they could remove, and were worth their pains, to London."

Sir Henry Chauncy, *The historical antiquities of Hertfordshire* (1700).

The Danish expedition up the River Lea in 894-5 was the best known event to have occurred within the bounds of present-day Hertfordshire between the Roman occupation and the Norman Conquest. The bare facts are set out in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, but these have inevitably been supplemented in the course of time by

¹ This is taken from Chauncy's account of the town of Hertford. In the passage about Ware he added that this dividing of the Lea took place at Waltham, and that at that time the river was tidal as far as Hertford.

details of doubtful validity or pure imagination, many of which have been accepted uncritically by later writers. Chauncy's account of the incident, which is quoted above, contains all the known facts and most of the fantasy, and provides a starting point for considering what may actually have taken place. In the margin of Chauncy's text are references to ten earlier works from which he drew material, making it possible to trace these details some way towards their respective sources, and to note in passing the ways in which Chauncy made use of these earlier writings.

The ten works referred to are the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*; the contemporary life of King Alfred by Bishop Asser;⁽²⁾ chronicles by the Norman writers William of Malmesbury, Ethelwerd, Roger of Hovenden and Henry of Huntingdon;⁽³⁾ and four books published within a century or so before Chauncy himself was writing, namely:

The chronicle of England, Scotland and Ireland (with its introductory *Description of Britain*), by Raphael Holinshed. (1577, new edition 1587).

Britannia, by William Camden. (1586, and many subsequent editions).

The history of imbanking and drayning of divers fens and marshes, by Sir William Dugdale. (1662).

Ælfredi Magni vita,⁽⁴⁾ by Sir John Spelman. (1678).

THE BACKGROUND

The first great Danish invasion of England had occurred in 865, after seventy years of sporadic raids. This army eventually divided into three parts which settled respectively in Yorkshire, the East Midlands and East Anglia, and in about 886 King Alfred made a formal treaty with Guthrum, leader of the Danes in East Anglia, defining the boundary between their territories. Guthrum's authority was recognised in the area bounded on the south by the River Thames as far west as the Lea, then by the River Lea from mouth to source, then by a straight line to Bedford, by the River Ouse as far as Watling Street, and by Watling Street to the north. The northern boundary was not defined, but Danish territory beyond Guthrum's

2 Chauncy's two marginal references, both without page numbers, read "Asser Mineuensis" and "Asser Minnen". In fact the narrative by Bishop Asser of Menevia (i.e., St. David's) ends in 888, and so contains no information about the events of 894-5. Chauncy may perhaps have used it for general background information about Alfred, but it seems likely that he was misled by Camden, who wrongly attributed to "Asserius" a description of this area.

3 It is apparent from the page references that Chauncy used the texts of these four writers which were published by Sir Henry Saville in his *Rerum Anglicarum scriptores post Bedam* (1596, new edition 1601).

4 Wrongly referred to by Chauncy as *Vita Alfreði*, but clearly identified by the page and section numbers quoted.

kingdom probably extended as far north as the Tees. Thus the River Lea, which bisects Hertfordshire, became the recognised frontier between Danish and English territories.

In 892 another powerful Danish force landed in Kent. It had been campaigning on the continent for many years, and had been reinforced by a body of Guthrum's men who had refused to settle down with him in East Anglia in 878. One of the leaders of this army, and possibly the overall leader, was a Viking called Haesten, about whose previous exploits a great deal is known. He is first recorded as the leader of a Viking expedition to the Mediterranean in 859, and by 892 must have been nearing sixty, a legendary but not particularly successful warrior. It seems likely that Haesten was the leader of the force which came up the River Lea two years later.

The Danish army of 892 suffered a number of defeats by the English. Haesten established a fort at Benfleet in Essex, well within Danish territory, but when in 893 it became apparent that this was being used as a base for raids into English Mercia it was attacked and destroyed, and Haesten, who was away with a raiding party at the time, was obliged on his return to establish a new base at Shoebury. His ships lay in the shelter of Mersea Island, off the Essex coast, and it was from there that the River Lea expedition set out in the autumn of 894.

THE ANGLO SAXON CHRONICLE

The main, and the only contemporary, record of the events of 894-5 is that contained in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and there is no good reason to doubt the story which is there outlined:

"894 In early winter the Danes who were encamped on Mersea rowed their ships up the Thames and up the Lea. That was two years after they came hither across the sea.

"895. And in the same year the aforesaid army made a fortress by the Lea, twenty miles above London. Then afterwards in the summer a great part of the citizens and also of other people marched till they arrived at the fortress of the Danes, and there they were put to flight and four king's thegns were slain. Then later, in the autumn, the king encamped in the vicinity of the borough⁽⁵⁾ while they were reaping their corn, so that the Danes could not deny them that harvest. Then one day the king rode

5 The reference to London a few lines earlier appears in the original as "*xx mila bujan Lunden byrig*." The repetition at this point of the word *byrig* (borough) leaves little doubt that the reference is to the vicinity of London. The fact that London was twenty miles away presents some difficulty, however, since it is obvious that Alfred's camp was very close to the Danish fort. This has led Chauncy and some other writers to assume that the city or borough of Hertford was meant, though the borough of Hertford was not created until 913.

up along the river, and examined where the river could be obstructed, so that they could not bring the ships out. And then this was carried out: two fortresses were made on the two sides of the river. When they had just begun that work, and had encamped for that purpose, the enemy perceived that they could not bring the ships out. Then they abandoned the ships and went overland till they reached Bridgnorth on the Severn and built that fortress. Then the English rode after the enemy, and the men of London fetched the ships, and broke all which they could not bring away, and brought to London those which were serviceable. And the Danes had placed their women in safety in East Anglia before they left that fortress.”⁽⁶⁾

THE LATER ADDITIONS

The site of the Danish fort. This is not identified in the *Chronicle*, and all the Norman writers repeat the *Chronicle's* vague phrase, “by the Lea, twenty miles above London”. Holinshed, in 1577, did likewise. Camden, writing in 1586, was apparently the first to go further and name “the town of Ware, unto which the Danes being come with their light pinnaces and shallops” Dugdale, in 1662, reverted to the phrase in the *Chronicle*, but explained, reasonably enough, that this was “at or near Hertford”. Spelman agreed that it was “about the place where Hertford now stands”. Chauncy took from Camden not only the name of Ware, but also the description of the Danish vessels, slightly amended to “light pinnaces and ships”. The speculation about Shipman’s Hill he found in Dugdale. Ware has had the popular vote ever since, and many have thought, like Chauncy, that its name must be derived from a weir built at the time of the Danes; though Cussans⁽⁷⁾ was quick to point out that “this is the popular account, unsupported by any positive evidence”.

The site of the fort has never in fact been determined. Salmon’s⁽⁸⁾ candidate was the area between Haven End and Rennesley, which spans Ermine Street at Wadesmill, though he also listed the claims of Porthill above Hertford, Widbury Hill east of Ware, and Barrow Field and Amwell Hill on the south side of the Lea. Cussans put forward no candidate of his own, but threw a little cold water on Salmon’s Haven End, pointing out that the two barrows there which Salmon had attributed to the Danes had been opened in 1788 and found to be of Roman origin. Leland⁽⁹⁾ recorded

6 From *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: a revised translation*, edited by Dorothy Whitelock, D. C. Douglas and Susie I. Tucker. (Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1961).

7 Cussans. *History of Hertfordshire*. (1870-73).

8 Salmon. *History of Hertfordshire*. (1728).

9 Leland. *Itinerary* (1710-12).

the finding of fragments of ships in the bed of the Lea when a new bridge was being built at Stanstead Abbots early in the seventeenth century, and Stanstead Abbots must certainly have a claim to consideration. Eliot Howard⁽¹⁰⁾ favoured the junction of the Lea and the Stort, in the vicinity of Rye House.

The fact that the Danes were obliged to withdraw in some haste without their main means of transport, hence probably abandoning some equipment and utensils as well as their boats, offers some hope that archaeological evidence as to this site may yet be discovered. Until that happens we can only conclude that it was situated somewhere between Hertford and Hoddesdon, almost certainly on the north (Danelaw) side of the river.

The behaviour of the Danes. The *Chronicle* is silent on this point also, though implying that the English attacked not because of anything that the Danes had done but for fear of what they might do, a theme which is well developed by Spelman. Matthew Paris was the first to justify the English attack by charges that the Danes were "robbing and plundering". Holinshed, who used as one of his sources a text by Matthew of Westminster, identical with that of Matthew Paris, changed this to "killing and slaying", and Chauncy — on no ascertainable authority — claimed that they attacked and burnt the town of Hertford.⁽¹¹⁾ There is indeed no evidence of any offensive action by the Danes, though it seems likely enough that they had designs on the harvest, as the English feared.

King Alfred's reconnaissance. Chauncy introduced two curious details which are not present in any other narrative. Firstly, he said that the King's original camp was "on both sides of the river", having apparently confused this with the work camps which the *Chronicle* says were built later, when "two fortresses were made on the two sides of the river". Secondly, he says that the king "passed in a vessel down the river, drawn with a horse upon the bank". The *Chronicle*, Florence of Worcester and Sir John Spelman all mention this reconnaissance, but all agree that Alfred *rode along the river bank*. Chauncy's version seems to have its origin in a mistranslation of Spelman's "equo secundum ripas vehabatur" as "he was drawn (instead of borne) by a horse along the bank",⁽¹²⁾ the

10 Eliot Howard, King Alfred and the Lea. (In *Essex Arch. Soc. Trans.*, n.s., v.X, 1909, 82-3).

11 See note 5 above. Although the name of Hertford is associated with Archbishop Theodore's Synod of 673, there is no evidence of any sizeable community there at this time.

12 When Chauncy was writing Spelman's Latin text was the only one available to him. But Spelman himself published an English translation a few years later, in which he adhered to the conventional story.

result of Chauncy's conviction that Alfred's purpose was to sound the depth of the water.

The obstruction of the River Lea. The most persistent discrepancy between the accounts of later writers and the story in the *Chronicle* concerns the manner in which King Alfred obstructed the passage of the river. The *Chronicle* refers simply and plausibly to the building of two fortresses on opposite banks of the river. Florence of Worcester, not named as one of Chauncy's sources, adhered to that version, but seemed to imply that an obstruction was built out into the river from either bank.¹³

Henry of Huntingdon was the first to put forward, baldly and without explanation, the alternative version which has gained considerable credence: that Alfred "caused the waters of the River Lea to divide into three branches, so that the Danes were unable to bring out their ships." Holinshed used Henry's account to explain the branching of the Lea at Stratford, which he said "dyd so mightely weaken the mayne chanell that there was nothing so much water left as the ships did draw". Camden also favoured the "three several chanel", which "turned aside the waters of the Lea" so that it was no longer navigable. Spelman referred to the account of Florence of Worcester, by which the river was "straightened (i.e., constricted) with dams and peires", but inclined to Henry's story of the three branches. Dugdale did not discuss the point at all, but mentioned in passing that the Lea was at one time tidal to beyond Ware, until at some unspecified date a large shass was made at Stratford to prevent the tide from entering the Lea and "to keep the level above it from drowning".

These three methods of obstructing, or reducing the water level in, the River Lea were confused together by Chauncy, who gave Alfred the credit for them all — the stream straightened by stakes, the river divided into three currents (but at Waltham, not Stratford), a large shass built at Blackwall. Clutterbuck¹⁴ rightly dismissed this tale of Chauncy's together with his account of the Dane's own weir, as "too improbable to deserve serious attention".

Henry of Huntingdon, who seems to have originated the story of the division of the river into three branches, is generally considered to have derived some of his information from local oral traditions, and possibly this story had some such source. Eliot Howard claimed¹⁵ that such a tradition still survived in 1909, but weakened his argument by quoting two instances of it — one at

13 ". . . ex utraque amnis parte obstructuram fieri mandat."

14 Clutterbuck. *The history and antiquities of the County of Hertford*. (1827).

15 Eliot Howard. *Op. cit.*

Stratford and one at Waltham! It is true that in each of these places the river does divide into a number of streams — in each case apparently a natural phenomenon known as “braiding”, due to a sudden decrease in the gradient. There can surely be no doubt that the story, whatever its origin, was an attempt to explain these features, in the same way that the story of the Danes’ “bank or dam” was suggested by the name Ware or “weir”. The “traditions” referred to by Howard have obviously derived from the popular story, and are not the origin of it.

An engineering work of the kind described would not have been a reasonable expenditure of effort when a simple barrier could obviously achieve the same effect. But the clinching argument against it is contained in the *Chronicle* itself, which states quite explicitly that “the enemy perceived that they could not bring the ships out . . . when they had just begun that work”. In other words, Alfred’s engineers were working within sight of the enemy fort, not eight (or eighteen) miles away downstream.

A THEORY

Why did the English react so strongly to a Danish presence on the Lea in 895? If their settlement was on the north side of the river it was within territory over which Danish control had already been recognised, and the legality of any English interference seems open to question. In this the situation is similar to that in 893 when the English had attacked Haesten’s fort at Benfleet, and it seems to have been Alfred’s policy to allow no potential military bases near the frontier of the Danelaw. The *Chronicle* indicates however that in 895 his immediate concern was to save the harvest.

From the early winter of 894 till the summer of 895 the Danes remained un-molested. There then occurred the abortive attack in which four of Alfred’s thegns were killed, and in the autumn, when harvest-time approached, Alfred himself camped in the area “so that the Danes could not deny them that harvest”. This in itself is puzzling. It suggests that the harvest in this area may have been of more than local significance; even that the vicinity of Ware was already an important source of grain for London. But the country on the south-west, or English, side of the Lea was still heavily wooded at this time,¹⁶ and the reference must therefore be to the corn-growing country on the north side of the river, within the Danelaw.

It was the normal pattern of Viking aggression for a period of violence and pillaging to be followed by permanent and relatively

¹⁶ See, for example, L. M. Munby. The landscape of Hertfordshire. (In *Hertfordshire Past and Present*, 8, 1968, especially pp. 4-6).

peaceful settlement. In this way the Great Army of 865 eventually settled in eastern England, the Scandinavian invaders of northern France became the Normans, and the army of 892 — Haesten's army — was to settle down in 896 in East Anglia and Northumbria, while "those that were moneyless got themselves ships and went south across the sea to the Seine".⁽¹⁷⁾ The period of pillaging was merely a prelude to settlement when sufficient wealth had been acquired.⁽¹⁸⁾

By 894 Haesten — if indeed he was still alive then — had been campaigning for some thirty-five years. Some of his men had joined him in 878 after previous service with Guthrum, others had been with him before that on the continent. There and in England they had had little success till the previous year, when their raid into North Wales had produced so much booty that they had returned to Mersea by a circuitous route through the Danelaw rather than risk an encounter with English forces.

This then was a time when Haesten's dwindling band might have been expected to settle, and the evidence of place-names points to the fact that North Hertfordshire and West Essex were the most sparsely settled parts of the Danelaw.⁽¹⁹⁾ Here then was an obvious vacuum to be filled, and if Haesten was to settle down this is where he might have been expected to do it. His route back to Benfleet from Mercia in 893 would probably have passed through the area, with which he might therefore be supposed to have been familiar.

The fact that the women were taken along distinguishes the River Lea expedition from any previous raids, and again points to a settlement rather than an advance base like the one at Bridgnorth. In spite of the embroideries of later writers, there is no evidence of any acts of aggression by the Danes, between their arrival on the Lea late in 894 and the English attack in the following summer. This is not to argue that they did not have designs on the harvest. After nine months or so in which they can have produced very little food of their own, they must indeed have been awaiting it eagerly, and if the crops were indeed on the north side of the Lea a Danish settlement in this area would probably have denied them permanently to the English.

There can be no doubt that Alfred's obstruction of the River Lea was intended to prevent the Danes from bringing their ships out. But Alfred must have realized that it was no part of their plan to return down the river with the crop when it had been seized.

17 *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.

18 P. H. Sawyer. *The age of the Vikings*. (Arnold, 1962), pp. 98-9.

19 *Ibid*, p. 157.

If the expedition had had the sole object of seizing and carrying off the harvest it would not have taken place in the previous winter.

The theory that the obstruction of the river was decisive in driving the Danes out is therefore a fallacy — *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. It was not the obstruction of the river which was decisive, but the forceful action by the English in defending the harvest, and their repetition of the lesson of Benfleet that the settlement of such a large and menacing body so close to London would not be tolerated. It was Alfred's policy to harrass the Danes and wear down their remaining strength. When he had made their position on the Lea untenable he prevented them from withdrawing as a unit by obstructing the river to the south, so that they were obliged to abandon their boats and flee overland to the north-west, after first sending their women to safety in East Anglia.

Very shortly after this incident the reconquest of the Danelaw was begun by Alfred's son Edward. His main line of advance was through Hertfordshire, and Hertford Castle was built in 913 to provide a strong base. This plan might already have been formulated in 895, and might have been an additional reason for opposing any strengthening of the Danish forces in this area. Alternatively, the action on the Lea in 895 might perhaps have been the means of turning Alfred's thoughts in this direction, and thus have given rise to the plan so successfully carried through by his son.

Mr. Lionel M. Munby, who edits the recently published *East Anglian Studies* (Cambridge: Heffer, 35s.), also contributes a paper on "Politics and Religion in Hertfordshire 1660-1740." All contributors to the volume are or have been tutors for the University of Cambridge Board of Extra-Mural Studies; among them, those whose names will be familiar to Hertfordshire classes are Dr. R. E. Pahl and Mr. J. A. Alexander.