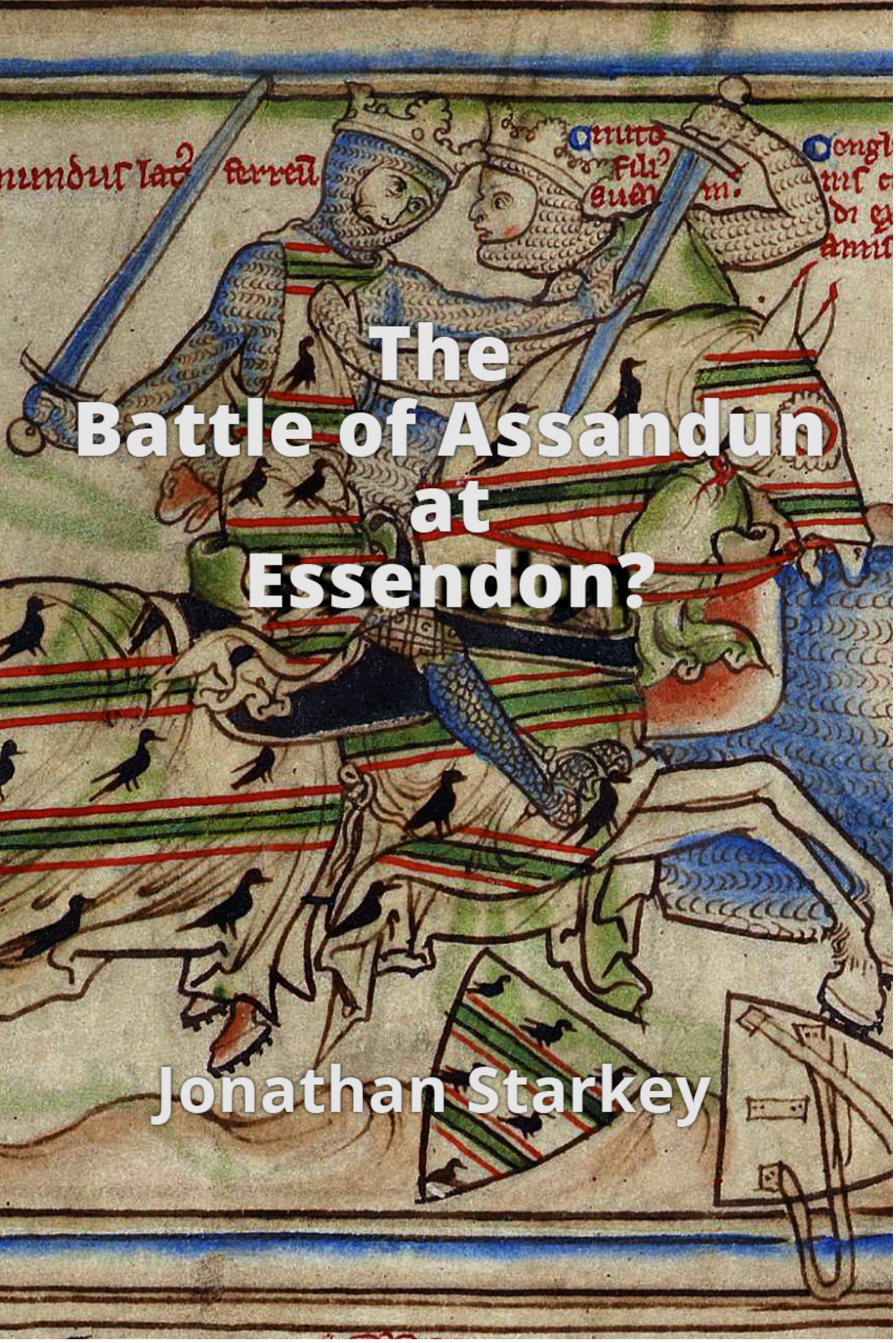

The Battle of Assandun at Essendon?

Jonathan Starkey

The
Battle of Assandun
at Essendon?

By

Jonathan Starkey

Draft First Edition

Contents

Introduction

The Battle of Assandun was fought on 18th October, 1016 between Danish invaders under King Cnut and the 'English' under King Edmund Ironside. After a string of inconclusive earlier battles, this one was a resounding victory for Cnut. Edmund fled west. Cnut chased him down and defeated him in a final battle, probably in the Forest of Dean. Edmund was forced into a division of his realm, Cnut taking most of modern England north of the Thames. Edmund died a few weeks later, allegedly having been stabbed from below in his privy, thereby ceding the rest of England to Cnut.

Historians think that the Battle of Assandun was fought at Ashingdon in southeast Essex or at Ashdon in north Essex. This paper explains why we think it is at least as likely to have been fought at Essendon in modern Hertfordshire.

Battlefield clues

There are dispiritingly few battlefield location clues in the contemporary accounts, and most of them are vague:

1. The Danes were returning to their ships after plundering Mercia when Edmund caught up with them at 'Assandun' in *'East Seaxan'*.
2. The Encomium implies that the battlefield was near the Danish fleet.
3. English accounts imply the battlefield was near the Essex border.
4. The Encomium says that the battlefield was north of Danes Wood.
5. At least one of the armies, perhaps both, descended from a hill to a level battlefield.
6. Cnut commissioned a stone minster at Assandun as a memorial to those killed in the battle. It was consecrated in his presence in 1020.
7. Alfred's Battle of Ashdown in 871 was fought somewhere that sounds like Assandun.

Only the first clue, the battlefield's name, is specific enough to identify candidates. Perhaps the others can be used to down select and/or rank

the candidates. *'East Seaxan'* is always interpreted to mean the county of Essex, so the only serious battlefield candidates hitherto have been hills in Essex whose names might derive from Assandun, namely Ashingdon and Ashdon,

The orthodox battlefield locations

Both the orthodox battlefield candidates have a venerable history. Holinshed proposed Ashdon (then 'Ashdone') as the battlefield in his 1577 'Chronicles of England'. There can be no ambiguity because he says it is three miles from Saffron Walden. Ten years later, William Camden proposed Ashingdon in his 'Britannia: Chorographical'. Or, at least, everyone has assumed he was proposing Ashingdon because he says it was near the *"pretty proper towne"* of Rayleigh. But he says that the battlefield was named 'Ashdowne' not Ashingdon. He provides no other details, so there is a possibility that he agreed with Holinshed that the battle was fought at Ashdon but confused the rest of his geography.

Renowned Norman Conquest historian Edward Freeman took up Ashingdon's case in the 1860s: *"As for the battle of Assandun, I have no doubt that the modern Ashington is the true site."* His main evidence is an 'exact' match between Ashingdon's geography and the battlefield described by John of Worcester. But that description is so vague that it also matches Ashdon and dozens of other hills in Essex. Freeman shares a local tradition that 'Canewdon', a hill near Ashingdon, means 'Cnut's Hill', confessing that the evidence is weak. He categorically states that the Danes moored in the Crouch estuary, without any sort of justification or supporting evidence, then argues circularly that one reason to think the battlefield was at Ashingdon is that it was adjacent to the Crouch. Perhaps his only valid evidence is that the etymological transition from 'Assandon' to 'Ashingdon' would be analogous to other places in England including *'Abbandun'*, *'Huntandun'* and *'Ethandun'* which became Abingdon, Huntingdon and Edington.

A H Burne favoured Ashingdon too, mainly because its *"spelling is practically the same as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle"*. Only it isn't. He says

that the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle spelling is 'Assingdon' but it is actually 'Assandun', or an Old English declension of it, in all recensions of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and most of the other English accounts. He notes that etymology expert Percy Reaney, writing in 'The Place-Names of Essex', agrees that 'Assandun' could easily transition to 'Ashingdon' but that *"it cannot lie behind the forms Ashdon"*. Domesday's spelling of *Ascenduna* and the Encomium's of *Æscenduno* are close enough to suggest that Reaney might be wrong.

Burne picks up on Freeman's etymology for Canewdon, noting that the Ordnance Survey labelled it as 'Supposed site of Canute's camp', which was true at the time, but the label has subsequently been removed. He reports what might be physical evidence of a battle in Ashingdon: *"There have been found in the churchyard at Ashingdon parts of a shield, a spear and also a silver penny with Canute's head"*. Alas, the evidence has been lost, so it is impossible to know whether it was relevant.

Cnut was attacked as he returned from his second raid into Mercia. Burne worked out where in Mercia he was probably returning from. His reasoning starts with the first raid into Mercia when the Danes moored in the Orwell. It is the northernmost of the major North Sea Essex estuaries, so they probably plundered north Mercia. Therefore, they probably plundered south Mercia on their second raid. Next, Burne uses Forester's translation of a passage in John of Worcester which says: *"Canute with his forces crossed the river into Essex"*. It does not say that they went up the Thames first, so Burne deduces that they must have crossed the Thames estuary to enter Essex on one of its North Sea estuaries, namely the Crouch, Blackwater, Colne, Chelmer, or Orwell. If the Danes plundered south Mercia, to minimise their march they probably moored on the southernmost of these, the Crouch. If they were returning from south Mercia to their ships in the Crouch estuary, they might have passed Ashingdon but had no reason to venture within 20 miles of Ashdon.

H B Swete weighed in behind Ashdon in the 1880s. He noted that Ashdon is named *'Ascenduna'* in Domesday, almost identical to the

Encomium's spelling of *'Æsceneduno'*. He also spotted that Ralf Baignard was *Ascenduna's* Domesday tenant-in-chief and that records from St Pancras Priory in Lewes (Cotton MS Vespasian F. XV) show that this same Baignard family made a series of gifts to the Priory, including the benefice of the church at *'Essendon'*. The manuscript says that this *'Essendon'* was also known as *'Assendun'* and *'Asshedon'*, so Swete concludes, not unreasonably, that *'Asshedon'*, and hence 'Ashdon', were cognates of *'Assandun'*. While he was vicar of Ashdon's church, Swete monitored work which exposed Saxon foundations. He speculates these might have been from Cnut's minster. He also commissioned the excavation of a nearby mound to find a huge pile of large animal bones and oyster shells, far too many for local consumption. He speculates that they may have been discarded by Cnut's army.

Miller Christy claimed to have incontrovertible proof that the battle was fought at Ashdon in his 1926 paper for the Journal of the British Archaeological Association. It proved to be much the same as Swete's, with the addition that the Saxon church at Hadstock, two miles from Ashdon, is of the right date and construction to have been Cnut's minster, and it was dedicated to St Botolph, with whom Cnut had an affinity. Subsequent dendrochronology dating has shown that the current Hadstock church is fifteen years too late to be Cnut's minster, although dating of some mortar confirmed that the original Saxon church was built in the 8th century. Burne reckons it is too far from Ashdon to be relevant anyway.

Patricia Croxton-Smith updated Ashdon's case in 2002. Her only accurate new evidence is that 'Assandun' meant 'the hill of the ash trees' which is likely on the chalky land around Ashdon but not on the London clay around Ashingdon. All her other new arguments are faulty. One is that that she says Liber Eliensis describes how the monks of Ely bore the body of Bishop Eadnoth back to Ely on the night of the battle, which is possible from Ashdon but not from Ashingdon. It is bogus because Liber Eliensis does not say or imply any timescale. His body might have been returned from anywhere. Another is that she found evidence contradicting Freeman's assertion that the Danes

'reached their ships' before the Battle of Assandun, but he says no such thing. She says: *"a local county history of Cambs reports that weapons were found in Red Field in the 1850s when the railway cutting was dug"*, but the original report in Kelly's Directory says: *"The remains of a Roman villa were discovered in 1825 in a field separated by the river Granta from the site of Barham Priory, and in 1862, when excavating for the railway from Cambridge to Sudbury, the workmen met with the remains of numerous skeletons in this field at a depth of 3 feet from the surface."* Even this might be faulty because the original evidence is lost, no human remains have been found at the location since. A geophysical survey in 2015 and an archaeological dig in 2017 failed to find any evidence of military action.

Swete notes that the English accounts suggest that the Danes were attacked soon after crossing the border into Essex, which would match Ashdon but not Ashingdon. Conversely, Burne notes that the Encomium implies that the battlefield was near the Danish fleet, which could match Ashingdon but not Ashdon. These criteria seem to be mutually exclusive, so it is worth checking their reasoning.

The Encomium implies that the Danes stashed their booty in their ships then left for the battlefield, saying they: *"left their ships and went ashore, preparing to receive whatever they should encounter"*. If they chose to go ashore and fight, it sounds like the battlefield was near their mooring place. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle says that Edmund: *"pursued them and overtook them in Essex at the hill which is called Assandun, and they stoutly joined battle there"*. The English army would not have been able to follow the Danes for more than a day or so because Cnut's army would have left nothing for them to eat. Therefore, the English accounts imply that the battlefield was near the Essex border. Both arguments look reasonable to us, but nowhere in modern Essex is close to the border and near a navigable stretch of coastal river.

In our opinion, all the established arguments are weak, faulty or irrelevant. Even the refutations are mostly weak or faulty. The only useful confusion is that the existence of two well supported battlefield candidates means that they each match some of the battlefield clues,

that neither of them has compelling supporting or debunking evidence, and that both have at least one major inconsistency against the contemporary accounts.

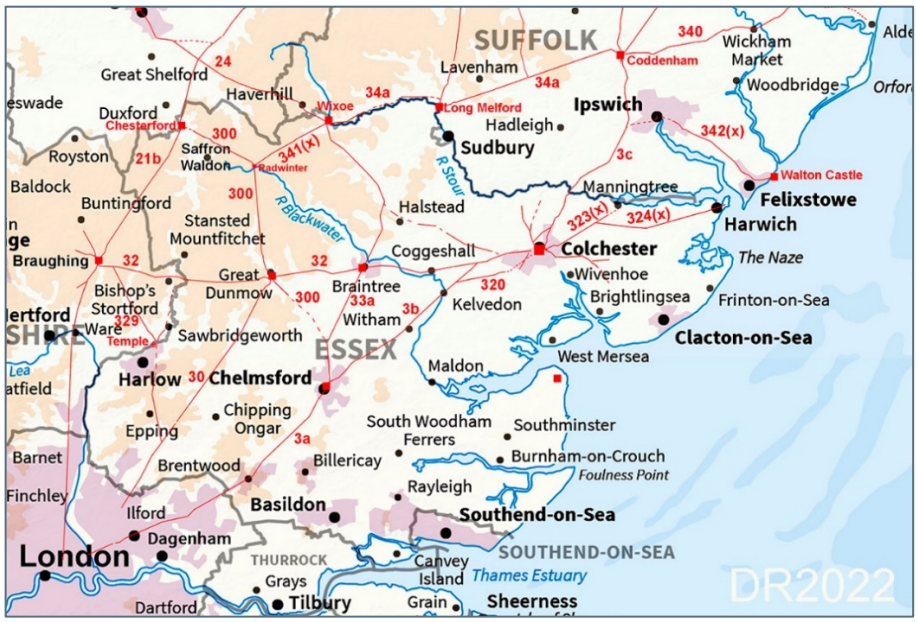

Figure 1: RRRA map of Roman roads in Essex

Neither Ashingdon nor Ashdon look like promising battlefields to us. Our reason, as so often with medieval battles, is Roman roads. The Danes expected to return from Mercia heavily laden with booty. It would have been impractical to haul their spoils over fields. Therefore, they probably moored their fleet where a navigable river met a Roman road (see Figure 1 - Ashingdon is near Rayleigh to the south, Ashdon is near Saffron Waldon to the north). We have no reason to doubt that their base was in *'East Seaxan'*. We agree with Burne that the Danes probably plundered south Mercia immediately before the Battle of Assandun, so they probably moored in a navigable part of a south Essex estuary and close to a Roman road.

Ashingdon is adjacent to a navigable part of the Crouch estuary, which makes it a plausible place to moor, but it is too far from a Roman road. Burne refers to it as *"Burnham roadstead"*, giving the impression that it is close to a famous Roman road. He explains that the Crouch estuary:

"forms the famous roads of Burnham where landing would be easy and expeditious, and – even more important – a re-embarkation". It is not famous enough for us to have heard of it and, whatever it was, there is no evidence it was a Roman road. Indeed, no navigable part of the Crouch estuary is within ten miles of a known Roman road, which makes Ashingdon an unlikely place to moor. If the Danes did not moor near Ashingdon, it cannot have been the battlefield.

Ashdon has the reverse problem. It was adjacent to two Roman roads, Margary 300 and Margary 24, but it is a long way from a navigable river. Ashdon would have been on the route from a North Sea estuary to north Mercia, but it seems unlikely that the Danes raided north Mercia immediately before the Battle of Assandun. If they raided south Mercia, the route from a North Sea estuary via Ashdon would have been an improbable 75-miles or more, including a pointless 20-mile detour compared to using Stane Street. It is possible that the Danes returned to their ships via Ashdon, but we think it highly unlikely.

Therefore, if Burne is right that the Danes plundered south Mercia immediately before the Battle of Assandun, and we agree, it is worth considering other candidates.

Essendon, a third battlefield candidate

South Mercia was traversed southeast to northwest by Watling Street and east to west by Akeman Street. The Danes would have wanted to maximise plundering opportunities and minimise victualling issues, so they probably marched out on one and back on the other, triangulating via the Fosse Way or Margary 160. Akeman Street and Watling Street crossed at St Albans in the southeast corner of Mercia.

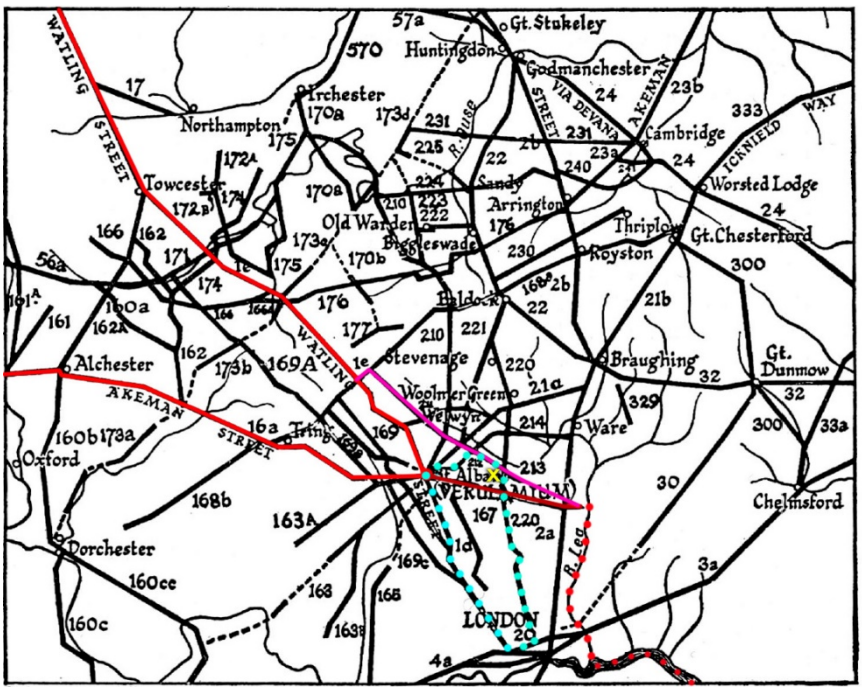

Figure 2: Margary map of South Midlands Roman roads

London was one of Edmund's strongholds. The Danes would probably have given it a wide berth. They were starting from the Isle of Sheppey. There were two tried and test routes to get to Watling/Akeman Street from the Isle of Sheppey. One was to moor in a south Essex North Sea estuary, either the Colne or Chelmer, march north to Stane Street, west to Braughing, then take the Margary 21a Ermine Street branch to St Albans. The other was to moor in a north Thames estuary.

Historians think the Danes took the first option, mooring in a south

Essex North Sea estuary before the Battle of Assandun, because they are working back from a battlefield at Ashingdon or Ashdon. The only supporting evidence is the passage in John of Worcester that we mention above: *"Canute with his forces crossed the river into Essex"*. It is a quirky translation. The original says: *"Canutus suas copias in East-Saxoniam trajecit"*. No mention of a river. *'trajecit'* can mean 'he crossed', but typically in the sense that 'he crossed the border'. It more usually means 'he marched'. Darlington translates: *"Cnut sent his troops into Essex"*.

Even if John of Worcester did mean Cnut 'crossed the Thames into Essex', the Danes might have rowed upstream first. Half a dozen tributaries drain into the Thames from the north, most notably the Lea, Roding and Benfleet. The Danes had used all three on previous raids. The tributaries downstream of the Lea were only navigable to Pye Street. It was a major Roman road between London and Colchester, but the route to St Albans was not good. One option was to march 80 miles via Chelmsford, in which case the Danes might as well have moored at Chelmsford. The alternative was to march 50 miles via Cheshunt, clipping the outskirts of London, in which case they could have saved 40 miles and mitigated the risks by mooring in the River Lea. If the Danes moored in a north Thames tributary, we think it was the Lea.

If Cnut moored on the River Lea, it would have been at Cheshunt, Ware or Hertford, each of which were beside Roman roads and less than 15 miles from St Albans. Cheshunt would have required seven miles less rowing upstream, but Cnut might have chosen to moor further upstream to get protection from an existing fortress.

According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Edward the Elder built fortifications either side of the Lea at Hertford. It is possible that Cnut dragged the Danish ships over the weirs from which Ware gets its name, to occupy one of Edward's fortifications at Hertford. We think it unlikely. The drop at Ware would have limited their ability to escape quickly with their booty, an option that they had used several times previously and one that they would want to be available.

Hæsten had previously built a fortification beside the River Lea, usually assumed to have been at Ware. We are sceptical. Arthur Jones explains that no evidence of a 9th or 10th century fortification has been found at Ware. He suggests that Hæsten's fortress might have been as far downstream as Hoddesdon. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle says that it was *"XX Mila buran Lunden-byrig",* usually translated as '20 miles above the City of London', which suggests Ware, just over 20 crow-flying miles from medieval London. But the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's *'Mila'* would have meant Roman miles, which places the fortress between Cheshunt and Hoddesdon, depending on whether it meant road miles or crow flying miles.

According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Alfred built a fortress on either side of the Lea to prevent Hæsten escaping with his ships. It continues: *"When they had just begun that work and had encamped for that purpose, the enemy perceived that they could not bring the ships out",* giving the impression that Alfred's fortresses were visible from Hæsten's fortress. If Hæsten's fortress was no further upstream than Hoddesdon, Alfred's fortress is unlikely to have been further downstream than Cheshunt. If Hæsten's fortress was at Cheshunt, Alfred's fortress might have been at Enfield. Either way, there would have been a fortress at Cheshunt, giving Cnut no obvious reason to moor further upstream.

There is another reason to think that Cnut might not have moored upstream of Cheshunt. Some contemporary accounts describe other obstructions built by Alfred to prevent Hæsten escaping by ship. John of Worcester suggests that piers were built out into the river. Henry of Huntingdon suggests that Alfred split the river into multiple channels, each too shallow for the Danish ships. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is unlikely to be mistaken about Alfred's fortresses, so these piers and shallows were probably in addition. Cheshunt is the obvious place for piers and shallows, and fortresses for that matter, because a ridge on the east bank constricts the river. If there were piers, shallows or fortresses at Cheshunt, learning from Hæsten's fate, Cnut would probably not have risked mooring any further upstream.

If the Danes moored in the River Lea, they would have marched to St Albans on Margary 212 or to Dunstable on Margary 213 (magenta line on Figure 2), depending on whether they intended to go clockwise or anticlockwise around south Mercia. In either case, there is a credible third battlefield candidate at Essendon (yellow X on Figure 2).

The meaning of 'East Seaxan'

There is an apparent glaring hole in the conjecture that the Battle of Assandun might have been fought at Essendon: It is in Hertfordshire whereas the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and Henry of Huntingdon say that the battle was fought in *'East Seaxan'* and *'Estsexe'*, respectively, which implies it was in Essex. Whitelock's translation of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, for example, says: *"When the king learnt that the [Danish] army had gone inland, for the fifth time he collected all the English nation; and pursued them and overtook them in Essex at the hill which is called Assandun"*.

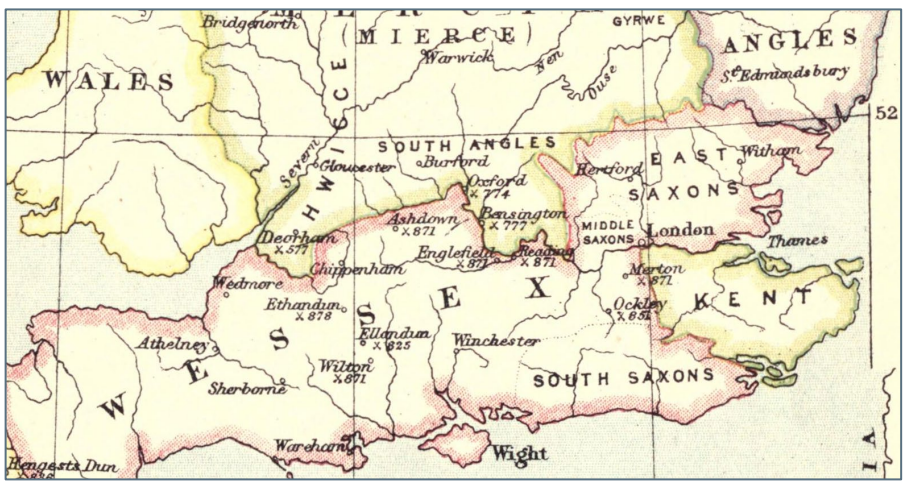

Figure 3: Bartholomew's Anglo-Saxon Heptarchy

East-Seaxan predated the formation of counties. It started as one of the seven Anglo-Saxon kingdoms known as the 'Heptarchy', encompassing all the land occupied by ethnic Saxons that was north of the Thames. It included modern Middlesex and south-east Hertfordshire, as well as modern Essex. Those bounds - described in 'The Place-Names of Essex'

and depicted on Bartholomew (Figure 3) – were enshrined in the Diocesan 'East Saxon See' from the early 7th century.

East-Seaxan had an eventful early history, getting conquered by Mercia, Wessex, Danes, Wessex again, Danes again, then became part of Edward the Confessor's united England, before getting conquered for good, along with the rest of England, by the Normans. It ceased being a kingdom in 825 when it was conquered by Ecgberht, King of Wessex. The current county bounds, without Middlesex and Hertfordshire, were probably established by Alfred. Yet the original 7th century bounds retained a vestigial Diocesan meaning into the 18th century.

Middlesex and south-east Hertfordshire had more complications. They were subjugated by Mercia in the 8th century. The Kings of Mercia regularly granted land in modern Middlesex and Hertfordshire. But *East-Seaxan* kings also granted land in those areas, Twickenham in 704 (S65), and Hemel Hempstead in 709 (S1784), for instance. Barbara Yorke explains: *"When East Saxon kings granted land in Hertfordshire or Middlesex, they frequently made reference to their foreign [Mercian] overlords whereas in Essex they granted land freely."* In other words, she is saying that modern Middlesex and south-east Hertfordshire were vassal parts of *East-Seaxan* with Mercian overlords.

So, what did the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and Huntingdon mean by *East-Seaxan*? There are four viable possibilities: 1) The post-Alfred County of Essex; 2) A vestigial geographic term for the historic *East-Seaxan* kingdom; 3) The eastern lands inhabited by Saxons; or 4) The Diocesan East Saxon See. The first would exclude Middlesex and south-east Hertfordshire, the other three would include them. There is no evidence that the 1016 references to *'East Seaxan'* and *'Estsexe'* excluded south-east Hertfordshire. Therefore, Essendon could match the crucial first Assandun battlefield location clue.

The Battle of Assandun at Essendon?

We believe that Essendon better fits the contemporary account battlefield clues than either Ashingdon or Ashdon. In this section we will compare the candidates.

Logistics

Ashdon is logistically an unlikely battlefield because the Danes probably plundered south Mercia immediately before the Battle of Assandun, in which case they had no reason to pass within ten miles of Ashdon.

Ashingdon is logistically even less likely. It is south of the Crouch estuary. The nearest Roman road was north of the Crouch estuary at Chelmsford. The estuary was 2km wide and, like all estuaries, would have been boggy when not full of water. This gives two logistical reasons that make Ashingdon an unlikely battlefield: 1) If the Danes moored in the Crouch estuary, they would probably have moored on the north bank; 2) If the Danes did moor on the south bank, they would have sent their ships across the estuary to meet the returning plunderers on the north bank. In either case, the battle would not have been at Ashingdon or anywhere else on the south bank.

The Danes could have moored in any of Essex's North Sea estuaries or in one of its north Thames estuaries. For the purposes of plundering south Mercia, the River Lea has the huge benefit of saving at least forty miles of marching in each direction compared to any other viable route that avoids London. This would have been especially beneficial on the return journey when the Danes were burdened with plunder.

If the Danes moored in the River Lea, they would have passed close to Essendon on their outward and return journeys. If they moored in a North Sea estuary or one of the other north Thames estuaries, they would probably still have passed close to Essendon on their return journey.

Therefore, logistically: 1) Ashdon is only a plausible battlefield in the unlikely event that the Danes plundered north Mercia twice; 2) It is unlikely that the Danes moored in a North Sea estuary which precludes Ashingdon; 3) It is especially unlikely that the Danes moored on the Crouch south bank, which also precludes Ashingdon; 4) Wherever the Danes moored, they would have had no reason to go within 10 miles of Ashdon but would probably have passed close to Essendon; 5) If, as we believe, the Danes moored in the River Lea, there is no possibility that the battle was fought at Ashingdon or Ashdon.

The battlefield location described in contemporary accounts

The English accounts suggest that the battlefield was close to the *East Seaxon* border, which makes Ashingdon an unlikely battlefield. The Encomium suggests that the battlefield was near the Danish fleet, which makes Ashdon an unlikely battlefield. There is nowhere in Essex county that is both close to the Essex border and near a navigable estuary. But if *East Seaxon* referred to the kingdom not the county, Essendon was both near the border and near a navigable estuary.

The etymology

Place names were spelled phonetically in medieval times. The contemporary accounts have a few stabs at the battlefield name: The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and John of Worcester have *'Assandun'*; William Of Malmesbury has *'Assandunam';* Henry of Huntingdon has *'Esesdune';* the Encomiast has *'Æsceneduno';* Knutsdrapa has *'Assatunis'*.

Philologist Percy Reaney thinks that the 'Ass' part of Assandun probably derives from Old English *'æsc'*, meaning 'ash tree' and pronounced 'aysh'. Alfred fought against the Great Heathen Army in 871 at a similar sounding place named *'Æscesdune'*. Dorothy Whitelock used similar reasoning to work out that is name probably derives from *'æsc'* too.

If Reaney and Whitelock are right, the 'Ass' part of Assundun was pronounced *'Æsc'*. Reaney reckons that roughly three-quarters of Old

English 'Æ' ligatures in Essex evolved into Middle English 'A' when they did not immediately precede a hard consonant. The rest evolved into Middle English 'E'. So, it is more likely that Assandun's *'Æsc'* would become 'Ass' or 'Ash', but not unlikely it might become 'Ess' or 'Esh'. On the other hand, it is more likely that Assandun's 'andun' would become Essendon's 'endon', but not unlikely it might become Ashingdon's 'ingdon' or Ashdon's 'don'. Thus, all the possible transitions are similarly plausible.

Reaney and Whitelock mention another possibility, that 'Assandun' and *'Æscesdune'* might derive from Old English *'Æssa's dun'*, where *Æssa* is a personal name and 'dun' meant 'hill'. Knutsdrapa's *Assatunis* is an Old Norse genitive singular declension, which supports this conjecture. If this was so, 'Assandun' might easily have evolved into 'Essendon' or 'Assingdon' (Ashingdon's name until the 19th century) but is less likely to have evolved into 'Ashdon'.

John of Worcester has a different take, saying that 'Assandun' meant *'mons asini'*, the 'hill of asses'. It would have had a hard 'A', favouring Ashingdon and Ashdon over Essendon, but it does not seem likely. Donkeys were rare in Saxon England, and they were too valuable to roam free over hills. Reaney reckons that John of Worcester got confused.

Just to reiterate something noted above, Swete argues that the St Pancras Priory papers specifically say that Assandun was another name for Ashdon. His argument is not unreasonable. Those papers say that *'Essendon'* (sometimes *'Essendun')* was also known as *'Assenden'*, *'Assendon'* and *'Asshedon'*, so *Asshedon* was an *Assendon* cognate. Ashdon was a common place-name. Swete argues that the papers must refer to Ashdon in Essex because it belonged to the Baignard family in Domesday, and it was this same Baignard family that gifted the church at *Essendon* (aka *Assendon* and *Asshedon*) to the St Pancras Priory. It is a good argument, but there is a twist.

Hertingfordbury manor in Hertfordshire also belonged to the Baignard family in Domesday. *Essendon* does not have its own Domesday entry.

It was midway between Hertingfordbury and Hatfield. They were both Domesday manors, so it must have been in one or the other. The River Lea runs between Hertingfordbury and Essendon, but there is no reason a manor cannot span a shallow 3m wide river like the fluvial Lea and Hertingfordbury's name suggests that it spanned the Lea and/or Mimram. If Essendon was in Hertingfordbury manor, the Baignards could have gifted Essendon's church to St Pancras Priory.

We have investigated the St Pancras papers for many years without reaching any definitive conclusion. They never say or imply whether their minster at *Essendon/Asshedon* was in Hertfordshire or Essex, and it might not be useful anyway because, as a religious institution, its idea of 'Essex' would probably have been the East Saxon See. There are a dozen or more references to Essendon in Charters, Pipe Rolls, Feet Fines and the like. Some references are associated with *'Newenham'* (Newnham) in Essex, but others are associated with Bayford or Epping in Hertfordshire. Most of the references to Essendon are in the Essex volumes of the Pipe Rolls or Feet Fines without an alien county note, which suggests that Essendon – and therefore Assandun - is an alias of Ashdon. But those volumes also have separate references to *Asshedon*, or cognate, which suggests Essendon and Ashdon were different places.

Even though they are 25 miles apart, it is possible that joint references to *Essendon* and *Newenham* referred to *Essendon* in Herts and *Newenham* in Essex because they were both owned by the Baignard family until the mid-13th century. Perhaps, for example, the family gifted land in both manors to a favourite retainer. While this is possible, we have never found any specific supporting evidence and if this is so, we have no explanation for why most of the references to Essendon are in Essex records.

Our conclusion is that Ashdon was sometimes known as Essendon in medieval times, and that both Essendon and Ashdon were sometimes known as Assandun in Saxon times. Ashingdon was known as Assingdon in the 18th century, and it probably had its own separate etymological transition from Assandun. It is not obvious that any of the

three stands out as significantly more likely, or less likely, to have been the Assandun battlefield on etymological terms.

Danes' Wood

Encomium says that the battlefield was north of Dane's Wood. This might apply to Essendon and Ashdon but not to Ashingdon. Chapman and André published a map of Essex in 1777. It shows the peninsula between the Crouch and Thames, which includes Ashingdon, as mostly marshland. It would have been wetter still in the 11th century. It was too boggy to support woodland south of Ashingdon in the 18th century and it is less likely to have done so in Saxon times.

Essendon and Ashdon were north of the Forest of Essex which covered much of inland Essex and east Hertfordshire south of Stane Street. There is no evidence that it was ever known as Danes Wood, but it was one of the biggest woods in the Danelaw, so it might have been.

There is a 'Dane Wood' ten miles from Essendon. It is to Essendon's northeast rather than south, but it might be all that remains of dense woodland between Much Hadham and Hatfield that arced south of Essendon. This woodland arc is there on the 1883 Ordnance Survey map. There is no evidence of it ever having been known as 'Danes Wood', but there is a manor house named 'The Danes' 1km southeast of Essendon which would have been in that wood. The manor house is only Georgian, but it might have taken its name from an eponymous woodland, although there is no evidence it did so.

We mention above that Patricia Croxton-Smith calculates that ash trees would have been commonplace on Ashdon's chalky soil but rare on Ashingdon's clay soil. Ash trees would have been equally commonplace at Essendon. It is even more chalky than Ashdon, the soil is full of flint, the nearby land is pitted by old chalk excavations, 'Ashfield Farm' is less than 1km away with 'Ashen Grove' and 'Ashendene Farm' beyond that.

Previous battles at Assandun

In 871 Alfred fought the Great Heathen Army in the Battle of Ashdown. According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, the battlefield was at *'Æscesdune'*. It looks and sounds similar to Assendun and, allowing for the Old English to Latin transliteration, it is identical to Henry of Huntingdon's Assandun spelling *'Esesdune'*. Perhaps, both battles were fought at the same place. If so, the Battle of Ashdown's location clues might be co-opted to find Assandun.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle says that the 'Battle of Æscesdune' was four days after the same belligerents fought at Reading and two weeks before they fought at *'Basing'* in modern Basingstoke. There are three more references to *Æscesdune* in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. In 648, Cenwealh King of Wessex gave three thousand hides of land near *Æscesdune* to a kinsman. In 661, Cenwealh fought Wulfhere at *'Posentesbyrig'* and was chased to *Æscesdune*. In 1006, the Danes went to Wallingford, spent *"one night at Cholsey, and then turned along Æscendune to Cuckamsley Barrow"*.

Historians interpret these clues to mean that Alfred's *Æscesdune* was in Berkshire, not least because it was adjacent to Cholsey and the Danes had no obvious reason to march from Reading to Essex (or Hertfordshire) then return to Basingstoke. They are probably right but if not, *Æscesdune* and Assandun are the same place and it can only be Essendon: It is feasible that the armies marched 45 miles from Reading to Essendon in three days, but they could not have marched 80 miles to Ashdon or 100 miles to Ashingdon.

The ambush

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle hints at the engagement: *"The [Danish] army went again inland into Essex, and proceeded into Mercia and destroyed everything in its path. When the king learnt that the army had gone inland, for the fifth time he collected all the English nation; and pursued them and overtook them in Essex at the hill which is called Assandun"*. It sounds like

Edmund might have chased the Danes through much of Mercia, but that is implausible because they would have left a barren swathe wherever they went. It seems most likely that Edmund summoned his army to London, then tagged onto the Danes as they crossed north of London heading back to their ships. He would probably have attacked the Danes the following day.

Ashdon was five miles east of Ermine Street and two miles north of Margary 300 which ran between Colchester and Great Chesterford. The Danes might have been returning to their ships on Margary 300 when Edmund caught them. If that was, as we think, the day after they left Ermine Street, it could have led to a battle at Ashdon, but only if the Danes moored in a north Essex North Sea estuary and plundered north Mercia for a second time before the Battle of Assandun, both of which seem unlikely to us.

Ashingdon is equally unlikely. Assuming for a moment the Danes were returning to Ashingdon from Mercia, they would have had to cross Ermine Street, march east on Stane Street to Great Dunmow, and southeast on Margary 300 to Chelmsford. The last 12 miles to Ashingdon would have been cross country. The first reason is that Chelmsford is north of the Crouch, Ashingdon south of it. To get to Ashingdon, the Danes would have had to cross the 2km wide boggy Crouch estuary. We mention above how unlikely it is that the Danes would moor south of the Crouch, but even if they did, Edmund would have attacked as they tried to cross the Crouch estuary, giving the English a huge military terrain advantage. The second reason is that Edmund would have had to follow the Danes along 20 miles of Roman road and 10 miles of fields before getting to the Crouch estuary. They would leave a barren swathe, eating everything in their way. It seems implausible that Edmund would choose to march through barren land for four days or more. In our opinion, he would have attacked the Danes at the first opportunity after tagging onto them at Watling Street or Ermine Street.

There are no such issues at Essendon. Edmund would have tagged onto the Danes at St Albans or Welwyn, depending on whether they returned on Akeman Street or Watling Street respectively. He would have followed them along Margary 212 or 213 - dotted cyan line on Figure 2. The Danes may well have camped on the hill at Essendon. Edmund would have attacked the following day.

Cnut's minster

Cnut commissioned a minster church near the Battle of Assandun battlefield that was consecrated in 1020. St Andrews Ashingdon and St Mary's Ashdon are not old enough. According to Historic England St Andrews is: *"Said to be on the site of the Church built by King Canute AD 1020"*, but there is no evidence of it. Swete reports that he saw earlier foundations beneath St Mary's Ashdon when repairs were being made, but they were not dated and have not been seen since. Miller Christy was convinced that Cnut's minster became St Botolph's Church at Hadstock, two miles from Ashdon. Its door was dendrochronology dated to 1035, making it at least 15 years too young. The entire area was intensively surveyed and excavated in 2005, to reveal no evidence of battles or occupation in the early 11th century.

Essendon's church is no older than Ashdon or Ashingdon. But, as we mention above, Essendon was probably in Hertingfordbury manor in Saxon times. The Hertfordshire VCH explains, *"In many instances the church lies a short distance from the village and adjoins the court or hall which in almost all Hertfordshire parishes retains the Anglo-Saxon title of 'bury'."* In other words, Hertingfordbury almost certainly had a significant Saxon era church that would have been outside the settlement. There is no reason it could not have been at Essendon and even if it was not, it would have been near to Essendon.

In summary, there are no churches of the right age or construction to have been Cnut's Assandun minster at Ashdon, Ashingdon or Essendon. There is anecdotal evidence of possible a Saxon church at Ashdon and Ashingdon. There was almost certainly a Saxon era church

at or near Essendon. It is possible that any of these might have been Cnut's minster. None of them seem any more compelling than the others.

Encomium's claim that the Danes left their ships

As we say several times above, the Encomium says that the Danes left their ships before the Battle as Assandun. It seems inconsistent with the English accounts that say Edmund chased and 'overtook' the Danes as they made their way back to their ships. We guess Encomium is trying to say that the fleet guard left the ships to join their brethren at the battlefield. This would be consistent with a battle at Essendon or Ashingdon but not Ashdon.

Summary

If it is assumed that Essendon might have been in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's *East Seaxan* – we explain above why this was so - it is at least as likely to have been the Battle of Assandun battlefield as Ashingdon or Ashdon. Moreover, Essendon is consistent with all the battlefield location clues, whereas Ashingdon and Ashdon are each inconsistent with at least two of them. If, as we think, the Dames moored in the River Lea, there is no possibility that the battle was at Ashingdon or Ashdon, but every likelihood that it was at Essendon.

Revised battle narrative

Medieval battles were seldom fought at settlements. Instead, they were usually fought in fields and named after the nearest settlement, or perhaps the nearest settlement that the author thinks his readers might recognise. So, where might the Battle of Assandun have been fought if it was near Essendon?

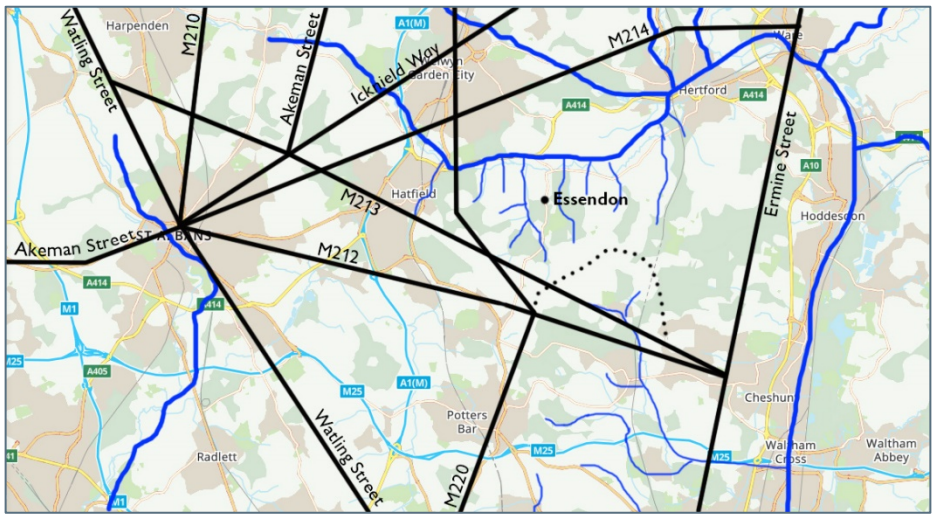

Figure 4: Roman road network near Essendon

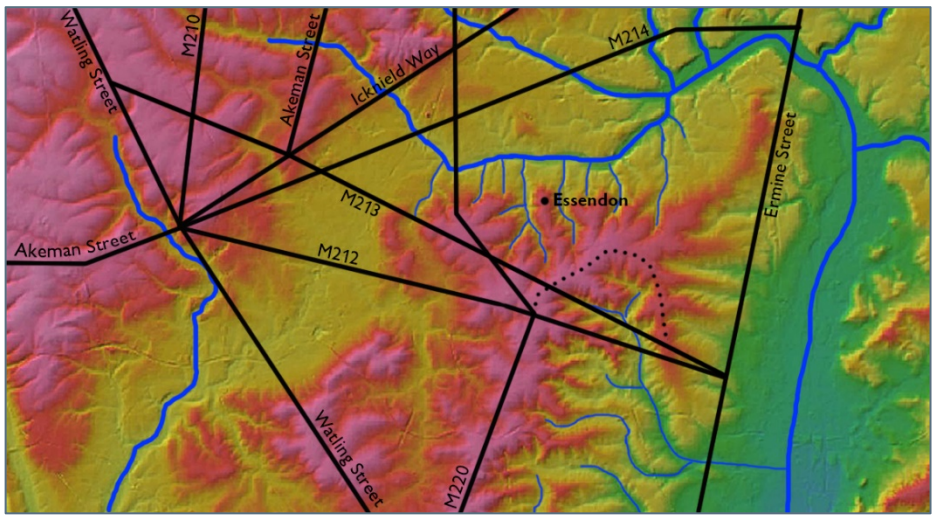

Figure 5: Essendon LiDAR with roads

The only useful clue is in John of Worcester who says that Edmund: *"pursued them with the army which he had collected from all parts of England, and came up with them on their march at a hill called Assandun"*, then *"Canute very slowly brought his men down to a level ground; but King Eadmund, on the contrary, moved his forces as he had arranged them with great rapidity, and suddenly gave the word to attack the Danes".*

The first point to note is that Margary is unsure about the exact route taken by the 213 and 213. He seems to be convinced that both roads ended at Cheshunt, and that the 212 started at St Albans while the 213 started at Dunstable. Some evidence of the western side of the roads was found by his 'Viatores' group, but nothing in the elevated stretch south of Essendon. In our opinion, the 212 and 213 probably both looped north following an ancient ridgeway through Epping Green (dotted line on Figure 4 and Figure 5).

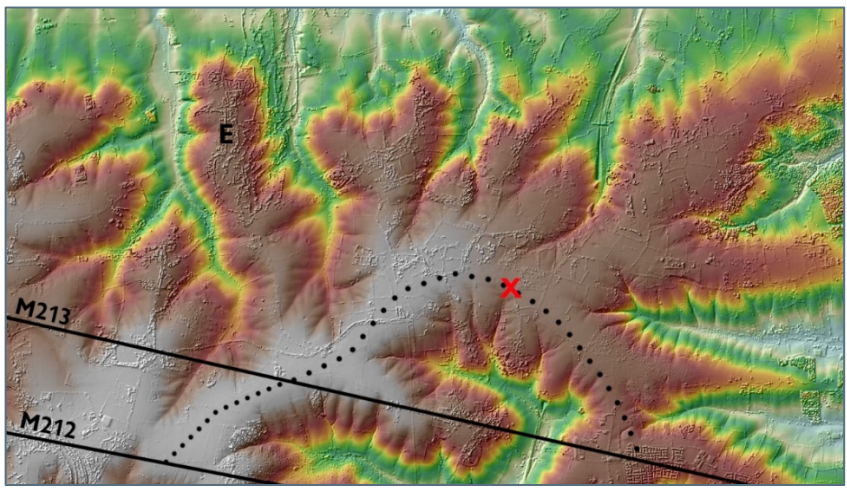

Figure 6: Possible battlefield location

Encouragingly, Margary 213 probably passed immediately south of Essendon hill (E on Figure 6), Margary 212 perhaps five hundred metres south of that. So, as we suggest above, Edmund could have been waiting in London for the Danes to cross north of London on their way back to their ships. As soon as he got notice they were nearing St Albans or Dunstable, he could have taken his army up Watling Street and tagged onto their route along Margary 212 or Margary 213.

Burdened with plunder, we guess that the Danes took the ridgeway towards Essendon rather than cross the valleys between Essendon and Cheshunt, if indeed, the Roman roads did not follow the ridgeway anyway. It is therefore perfectly plausible that Edmund would have caught the Danes on the ridgeway south of Essendon hill.

There are two obvious problems: 1) It seems unlikely that Cnut would voluntarily relinquish higher ground to advance into the engagement; 2) The ridgeway south of Essendon is level so Cnut could not have ordered his troops down to level ground in the direction of the enemy. But John of Worcester does not say that Cnut advanced towards enemy. If the battle was fought near Essendon, the obvious solution is that the Danes were slowly backing away from the English, heading east along the ridgeway through Epping Green, perhaps hoping to back all the way to their ships at Cheshunt. If so, the road gradually descends. It sounds like Edmund waited until they had backed onto level ground until ordering a swift attack. If this is right, the battlefield is between Epping Green and Broxbourne Woods (marked with a red X on Figure 6).

The Battle of Assundun is the least compelling of our lost battlefield studies, but the battle was fought somewhere. In such circumstances, the least unlikely candidate is transformed into the odds-on favourite. We have searched for other candidates in vain. Given something of a 'beggar's choice' between Ashingdon, Ashdon and Essendon, in our opinion, Essendon is overwhelmingly the most likely battlefield.

As always, we are happy to hear from anyone that has extra evidence, or that can help narrow down the battlefield location or who can refute anything we say. Please contact us on our usual email address: momentousbritain@outlook.com

Appendix A – Contemporary Accounts

Anglo-Saxon Chronicle 1016 annal (Whitlock translation)

> Then King Edmund collected all his army for the fourth time, and crossed the Thames at Brentford, and went into Kent. And the Danish army fled before him with their horses into Sheppey. The king killed as many of them as he could overtake, and Ealdorman Eadric came to meet the king at Aylesford. No greater folly was ever agreed to than that was. The army went again inland into Essex, and proceeded into Mercia and destroyed everything in its path. When the king learnt that the army had gone inland, for the fifth time he collected all the English nation; and pursued them and overtook them in Essex at the hill which is called Assandun, and they stoutly joined battle there. Then Ealdorman Eadric did as he had often done before: he was the first to start the flight with the *Magonsæte*, and thus betrayed his liege lord and all the people of England. There Cnut had the victory and won for himself all the English people. There was Bishop Eadnoth killed, and Abbot Wulfsige, and Ealdorman Ælfric, and Godwine, the ealdorman of Lindsey, and Ulfcetel of East Anglia, and Æthelweard, son of Ealdorman Æthelwine, and all the nobility of England was there destroyed. Then after this battle King Cnut went inland with his army to Gloucestershire, where he had learnt that King Edmund was. Then Ealdorman Eadric and the councillors who were there advised that the kings should be reconciled, and they exchanged hostages. And the kings met at Alney.

Anglo-Saxon Chronicle 1020 annal (Whitlock)

> And in this year the king [Cnut] and Earl Thorkel went to Assandune, and Archbishop Wulfstan and other bishops and also abbots and many monks; and they consecrated the minster at Assandune.

Encomium Emmae Reginae, by 'Encomiast' (Campbell)

Soon after Eastertide, [Edmund] attempted to expel the king and the Danes from the country of the English, and advancing with a great multitude, planned a sudden attack upon them. But a report of this did not fail to become known to the Danes, who left their ships and went ashore, preparing to receive whatever they should encounter. Now they had a banner of wonderfully strange nature, which though I believe that it may be incredible to the reader, yet since it is true, I will introduce the matter into my true history. For while it was woven of the plainest and whitest silk, and the representation of no figure was inserted into it, in time of war a raven was always seen as if embroidered on it, in the hour of its owners' victory opening its beak, flapping its wings, and restive on its feet, but very subdued and drooping with its whole body when they were defeated. Looking out for this, Thorkell, who had fought the first battle, said: "Let us fight manfully, comrades, for no danger threatens us: for to this the restive raven of the prophetic banner bears witness." When the Danes heard this, they were rendered bolder, and clad with suits of mail, encountered the enemy in the place called Æsceneduno, a word which we Latinists can explain as 'mons fraxinorum'. And there, before battle was joined, Eadric, whom we have mentioned as Eadmund's chief supporter, addressed these remarks to his comrades: "Let us flee, oh comrades, and snatch our lives from imminent death, or else we will fall forthwith, for I know the hardihood of the Danes." And concealing the banner which he bore in his right hand, he turned his back on the enemy, and caused the withdrawal of a large part of the soldiers from the battle. And according to some, it was afterwards evident that he did this not out of fear but in guile; and what many assert is that he had promised this secretly to the Danes in return for some favour. Then Eadmund, observing what had occurred, and hard pressed on every side, said: "Oh Englishmen, today you will fight or surrender yourselves all together. Therefore, fight for your liberty and your country, men of understanding; truly, those who are in flight, inasmuch as they are

afraid, if they were not withdrawing, would be a hindrance to the army." And as he said these things, he advanced into the midst of the enemy, cutting down the Danes on all sides, and by this example rendering his noble followers more inclined to fight. Therefore a very severe infantry battle was joined, since the Danes, although the less numerous side, did not contemplate withdrawal, and chose death rather than the danger attending flight. And so they resisted manfully, and protracted the battle, which had been begun in the ninth hour of the day, until the evening, submitting themselves, though ill-content to do so, to the strokes of swords, and pressing upon the foe with a better will with the points of their own swords. Armed men fell on both sides, but more on the side which had superiority in numbers. But when evening was falling and night-time was at hand, longing for victory overcame the inconveniences of darkness, for since a graver consideration was pressing, they did not shrink from the darkness, and disdained to give way before the night, only burning to overcome the foe. And if the shining moon had not shown which was the enemy, every man would have cut down his comrade, thinking he was an adversary resisting him, and no man would have survived on either side, unless he had been saved by flight. Meanwhile the English began to be weary, and gradually to contemplate flight, as they observed the Danes to be of one mind either to conquer, or to perish all together to a man. For then they seemed to them more numerous, and to be the stronger in so protracted a struggle. For they deemed them stronger by a well-founded suspicion, because, being made mindful of their position by the goading of weapons, and distressed by the fall of their comrades, they seemed to rage rather than fight. Accordingly the English, turning their backs, fled without delay on all sides, ever falling before their foes, and added glory to the honour of Knutr and to his victory, while Eadmund, the fugitive prince, was disgraced.

Knútsdrápa in Knytlinga Saga (Paulsson)

King Knut fought the third battle, a major one, against the sons of Æthelred at a place called *Assatun*, north of Danes' Wood. In the words of Ottar:

> At *Assatunis*, you worked well
> in the shield-war, warrior-king;
> brown was the flesh of bodies
> served to the blood-bird:
> in the slaughter, you won,
> sire, with your sword
> enough of a name there,
> north of Danes' Wood.

John of Worcester (Stevenson)

When the king had gone back into West Saxony, Canute led his forces into East Saxony, and again went into Mercia to pillage, ordering his army to commit greater enormities than before. They were not backward in obeying his orders; and after having beheaded all who fell into their hands, burnt numerous vills and laid waste the fields, returned laden with spoil to their ships. Eadmund Ironside, king of the English, pursued them with the army which he had collected from all parts of England, and came up with them on their march at a hill called Assandun, which means 'The ass's hill'. There he quickly formed his line of battle, supporting it with bodies of reserve three deep. He then went round to each troop, commanding and adjuring them to be mindful of their former valour and victories, and to defend themselves and his kingdom from the rapacity of the Danes; and [reminded them] that they were going to engage the men whom they had conquered before. Meanwhile Canute very slowly brought his men down to a level ground; but King Eadmund, on the contrary, moved his forces as he had arranged them with great rapidity, and suddenly gave the word to attack the Danes. The armies fought obstinately, and many fell on

both sides. But the traitorous ealdorman, Edric Streona, seeing that the Danish line was giving way, and that the English were getting the victory, kept the promise which he had previously made to Canute, and fled with the Magesetas [men of Herefordshire], and that division of the army which he commanded; thus craftily circumventing his lord king Eadmund and the English army, and by his craft throwing the victory into the hands of the Danes. There were slain in this battle Alfric the ealdorman, Godwin the ealdorman, Ulfketel, ealdorman of the East Angles, Aethelward the ealdorman, son of God's friend Athelwin, ealdorman of the East Angles, and almost all the English nobility, who never sustained greater loss in battle than on that day. Moreover Eadnoth, bishop of Lincoln [Dorchester], formerly abbot of Ramsey, was slain, as was likewise abbot Wulsi, both of whom had come to offer up prayers to God for the soldiers while they were fighting. A few days after this, King Eadmund Ironside still wished to renew the battle with Canute, but the traitorous ealdorman Edric and some others prevented him from so doing, and advised him to make peace with Canute and divide the kingdom. At length he yielded, although unwillingly to their suggestions; and messengers having passed to and fro, and hostages having been exchanged, the two kings met at a place called Deorhyrst.

William of Malmesbury (Giles)

While Edmund was preparing to pursue, and utterly destroy the last remains of these plunderers, he was prevented by the crafty and abandoned Edric, who had again insinuated himself into his good graces; for he had come over to Edmund, at the instigation of Canute, that he might betray his designs. Had the king only persevered, this would have been the last day for the Danes; but misled by the insinuations of a traitor, who affirmed that the enemy would make no farther attempt, he brought swift destruction upon himself, and the whole of England. Being thus allowed to escape, they again assembled; attacked the East Angles, and, at Assandunam, compelled the king himself, who came to their assistance, to retreat.

…

Edmund flying hence almost alone, came to Gloucester, in order that he might there re-assemble his forces, and attack the enemy, indolent, as he supposed, from their recent victory. Nor was Canute wanting in courage to pursue the fugitive. When everything was ready for battle, Edmund demanded a single combat; that two individuals might not, for the lust of dominion, be stained with the blood of so many subjects, when they might try their fortune without the destruction of their faithful adherents: and observing, that it must redound greatly to the credit of either to have obtained so vast a dominion at his own personal peril. But Canute refused this proposition altogether; affirming that his courage was surpassing, but that he was apprehensive of trusting his diminutive person against so bulky an antagonist: wherefore, as both had equal pretensions to the kingdom, since the father of either of them had possessed it, it was consistent with prudence that they should lay aside their animosity, and divide England.

…

He [Cnut] repaired, throughout England, the monasteries, which had been partly injured, and partly destroyed by the military incursions of himself, or of his father; he built churches in all the places where he had fought, and more particularly at Assandunam, and appointed ministers to them, who, through the succeeding revolutions of ages, might pray to God for the souls of the persons there slain. At the consecration of this edifice, himself was present, and the English and Danish nobility made their offerings: it is now, according to report, an ordinary church, under the care of a parish priest.

Henry of Huntingdon (Forester)

King Edmund again crossed the Thames at Brentford, and went into Kent to fight the Danes. But as soon as the standard-bearers who preceded the armies met, the Danes were filled with enormous fear,

and turned back in flight. Then Edmund pursued them with great slaughter as far as Aylesford. If he had continued to pursue them that would have been 'the last day of the war and of the Danes'. But Ealdorman Eadric, giving very evil counsel, got him to stop. Worse advice had never been given in England. Edmund entered upon the sixth battle with a great host, and Cnut with all the Danish armies gathered in Estsexe at Esesdune. And so the fiercest and final battle was fought, and both sides stood their ground unconquerably, despising death. There the valour of young Edmund was made manifest. For when he saw that the Danes were fighting more fiercely than usual, he left his royal position, which was customarily between the dragon and the sign which is called the 'Standard', and rushed, creating fear, towards the first line. He split the line like lightning, brandishing a sword chosen and worthy for the arm of the young Edmund, and tearing into the line he passed through the centre, and left his followers to overwhelm it. Then he sped towards the royal line. When shouting and shrieking began there, Ealdorman Eadric, realizing that the downfall of the Danes was imminent, shouted to the English nation: *'Flet Engle, flet Engle. Ded is Edmund'*. In translation this is: 'Flee Englishmen, flee Englishmen. Edmund is dead.' Shouting these words, he was the first, with his men, to take to flight, and the whole English nation followed. So in that place there followed amazing slaughter of the English army. That was where Bishop Eadnoth was killed, and Ealdorman Ælfric, Ealdorman Godwine, Ulfcetel of East Anglia, Æthelweard son of Ealdorman Æthelwine, and all the flower of the nobility of Britain. King Cnut, strengthened by this great victory, took London and the royal authority.

Bibliography

Arthur Jones; *'The River Lea Campaign of 894-5';* 1969; Hertfordshire Past and Present no. 9

Barbara Yorke; *Kings and kingdoms of early Anglo-Saxon England;* 1997; Routledge

Christopher Brooke; *London, 800-1216 : the shaping of a city;* 1975; Secker and Warburg

Gover, Mawer, Stenton; *Place-Names of Herfordshire; 1938;* English Place-Name Society

Percy Reaney; Place-Names of Essex; 1935; Cambridge University Press

John George Bartholomew; *A literary & historical atlas of Europe;* 1914; Everyman

Patricia Croxton-Smith; *The Site of the Battle of Assandun, 1016;* Saffron Walden Historical Journal No 3 (2002)

Dorothy Whitlock; *The Life of King Alfred*'; Clarendon Press; 1959