

Conquest and Reconciliation 1016-1023

Talk by Professor Simon Keynes, Elrington and Bosworth
Professor of Anglo-Saxon, The University of Cambridge.

10th June 2016 at St Botolph's Church, Hadstock

This was the second of two talks on events surrounding the Battle of Assandun in 1016. Speaking to a full church, Professor Keynes recapped on the sequence of events preceding the battle, noting that all parts of England had been invaded many times by the Danes during King Aethelred's 39 year reign.

Life under Aethelred was harsh but the country was run efficiently by Royal Assemblies, which comprised regular meetings of the King with his Archbishops, Bishops, Earls and Thanets. The Assemblies were responsible for making laws, charters and land grants. Most of the main shires recognisable today in England were created in the tenth/eleventh centuries.

After the Battle of Assandun, where Edmund Ironside, Aethelred's son, was defeated, an agreement was reached with Cnut at Deerhurst on the division of the kingdom between Edmund (Wessex) and Cnut (Mercia). But Edmund died in November 1016 and Cnut became King of all England, comprising the four regions of Wessex, East Anglia, Mercia and Northumbria.

Cnut took firm charge of the country in 1017. Several notables and contenders for succession were exiled or killed, and Cnut married Aethelred's widow, Emma. New coinage was immediately minted, and large hoards dating to this period are still being found by detectorists today. By 1018, most of the invading Danes had returned home but already those remaining and the English were settling their differences and had agreed to work to the laws of King Edgar and worship a single God. The English paid a large money settlement to the Danes.

Cnut went back to Denmark in 1019 leaving the highest ranked Earl in charge, (Earl Thorkel) and successfully persuaded the Danes to stop further invasions of England. He wrote an extraordinary letter to the English people around Christmas 1019, which can be found today published in the York Gospels Book, held at York Minster. The letter promised he would be a faithful observer of God's rights and just secular law, and showed that he had received messages of direction and support from the Pope to 'exalt God's praise, suppress wrong and establish full security.' His letter was read out first at the Royal Assembly, and then at meetings of shires, hundreds, and parishes.

He returned to England in 1020 and set about further acts of reconciliation with the Anglo-Saxons, one of which was founding a minster at Assandun to commemorate the dead on both sides. Cnut, Archbishop Wulfstan and Earl Thorkel attended and the minster was given to a priest in the Royal Court, Stigand, later to become Archbishop of Canterbury. Professor Keynes hoped that archaeological and other evidence would eventually settle the many centuries

old puzzle as to where Assandun and the minster of 'stone and lime' were sited in Essex.

A lengthy major law code covering ecclesiastical and secular matters was issued in December 1020 from Winchester. Cnut by this time was King of England, Denmark and Norway.

Another major act of reconciliation occurred in 1023 when the relics of St Aelfheah, the Archbishop of Canterbury, who was murdered by Danes in 1012 were moved ceremoniously from St Pauls to Christchurch Canterbury for reburial. Cnut wrote a second letter to the English people in 1027.

Professor Keynes thought Cnut was an extraordinary man, and should be seen as someone of equal importance to English history as Alfred the Great. The well-known image of Cnut trying to hold back the tide is usually wrongly interpreted. He was simply demonstrating that the power of a king is nothing to the majesty of God. The pleasant image of him in the *Lieber Vitae* of the New Minster, Winchester suggests that he had broken away from his harsh Danish roots and become a sincere Christian and gentle man.

The talk was followed by questions on the Godwin family; procedures for ensuring Royal letters were heard throughout England; and the tax system, which took money from landowners to create the required amounts of Danegeld.

In thanking Professor Keynes, the Reverend Paula Griffiths, Priest at St Botolph's Hadstock and Chair of the Ashdon and Hadstock Millennium Group noted that the Queen's Christmas broadcasts in our own time had become an important part of our own relationship with the monarchy. It was a fitting but extraordinary coincidence that, on the very day when the Queen celebrated her own 90th birthday in St Paul's Cathedral, we were hearing how another monarch nearly 1000 years ago had worked so hard to reach out to his people.

Dr Richard Dolby
The Hadstock Society
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