

Battle of Assandun 1016 (18th October 1016)

Talk by Dr Sam Newton, (Independent scholar, Director
of the Wuffing Education Study Centre, Sutton Hoo)

19th May 2016 at St Botolph's Church, Hadstock

Around 80 people enjoyed Sam Newton's presentation of the background to the Danish invasions of England, which started in ninth century and ended when Cnut defeated Edmund Ironside at the Battle of Assandun in 1016. Shortly after Cnut became King of all England and later of Denmark, Norway and parts of Sweden, and reigned until his death in 1035.

Dr Newton presented the arguments for and against the Assandun battlesite being in the area of Ashdon/ Hadstock in North West Essex, as against Ashingdon near the River Crouch in South East Essex. He argued that the combined evidence from place names, the battle casualty list, and local church architecture favoured the Ashdon /Hadstock site. Saint Botolph's Church at Hadstock may have been Cnut's Minster, built in 1020 to commemorate the dead on both sides.

Well illustrated with family trees and maps, he traced the family line of Cnut and discussed the tradition of Danish soldiers, based in ring forts throughout Denmark, to make annual journeys to invade Norway, Sweden and England. Danegeld was money and bullion paid by the Saxon King Aethelred II (the Unready) to the Danes to maintain peace in England and prevent destruction of buildings and infrastructure.

Cnut's father, Sweyn Forkbeard harried England during the period 991-1015AD, and many Danes settled in the East of England in the Danelaw shires. However, Sweyn was murdered in Gainsborough in 1014AD and Cnut was chosen by his fleet as King but returned to Denmark for a period to discuss succession with his brother.

In 1015, Cnut invaded the South of England once more and took his army into Mercia and Northumbria. He later laid siege to the Saxon army in London, which was now led by Edmund Ironside, who had succeeded his father King Aethelred. A series of four battles occurred around London in which Edmund tried to break the siege.

Cnut was finally forced to retreat to his base at the Isle of Sheppey and then took his ships up to an unnamed estuary on the Essex coast. His army then moved inland to Mercia. Edmund attacked Cnut once more as Cnut was returning to his ships and the most decisive battle of all, Assandun, was fought in October 1016. Cnut won, mainly due to a Saxon Ealdorman Eadric Streona who with his troops switched sides and joined Cnut.

Dr Newton referenced the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles to explain that there were heavy losses on the Saxon side including senior clerics and monks from Ramsey and Ely. This evidence favoured Ashdon/ Hadstock as the likely battle area of Assandun because of its closer proximity compared to Ashingdon. However, arguments based on the Saxon word 'Assandun' were not conclusive, since it could mean 'Hill of the Ash Trees' or 'Hill of the Asses'.

The Chronicles record that Cnut returned to Assandun in 1020AD and founded a minster of stone and lime to commemorate the dead on both sides. Stigand, chaplain to King Cnut, later to become Archbishop of Canterbury, attended the consecration and owned estates in North Essex. This evidence together with the evidence of many late Saxon architectural features at Hadstock Church, absent in the architecture of local churches in Ashingdon in S E Essex, point to the battlesite of Assandun being in the Ashdon/Hadstock area.

Shortly after Assandun, a treaty was agreed between Edmund and Cnut at Alney in Gloucestershire to divide the country into two parts, but Edmund died within a few months and Cnut became King of all England.

In her vote of thanks, The Reverend Paula Griffiths, Priest at Hadstock Church and Chair of the Hadstock/Ashdon Millennium Group, said, "We are hugely grateful to Dr Newton for getting our programme of events off to such a flying start with his fascinating talk. We look forward to welcoming many other visitors to Ashdon and Hadstock during the summer".

Richard Dolby
The Hadstock Society
25th May 2016