The debate about the location of The Battle of Maldon by Stephen Nunn & Keith Scrivener

In recent months, two distinguished local historians, Stephen Nunn and Keith Scrivener, have both submitted articles to be published in the magazine on the debate about the actual site of the battle of Maldon in AD 991. The two articles fluxuate mainly of the same points so rather than publish both of them we thought we would merge the two articles into one. The original articles will both be available in the near future under the ‘Members’ only’ section of the Battlefield Trust website.

The Editors

Like many Maldonians, I was brought up on stories of the town’s most important historic event – the battle of 991. The tale that was drummed into me and my contemporaries at Maldon All Saints Primary School was about the unquestionable bravery of our early founding father, Rynoldm. His statue would stare down at us as we processed to All Saints Church for school services and Sunday school. That 1907 sandstone image seemed to my young eyes to epitomise the story – a strong, elderly looking man, with a square cut jaw, mighty sword, helmet and shield, staring out across the High Street, daring any enemy to come within sight of his town. To reinforce all of this, the poem, was read out to us during lessons – a testament to his strength of character in ‘doing the right thing’ and being somewhat ‘British’, almost ‘cricket like’ in allowing fairness and balance despite overwhelming odds. And then there was the battle-site itself – no one was in any doubt whatsoever, it took place on the mainland opposite Northey Island – the Viking army being allowed to cross the tidal causeway by our brave ealdorman.

It is all inspiring stuff that instills pride in one’s national heritage and home town, but something was wrong. To my mind the topography just didn’t make sense. Why would a hitherto unchallenged invasion fleet, consisting of two barks (through the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles) of ninety-three long-ships, land on a remote island, a considerable distance from the ancient core of our town? And why would the invaders purposely cut themselves off in this way, creating such logistical difficulty? They had, after all, been offered no resistance during their previous raids on Ipswich and Sandwich. They had sailed the length of the river Blackwater and their arrival must have received some kind of local alert from the men who had passed the settlement of ‘Chanchester’ (Bradwell-on-Sea). And, of course, the river, hadn’t its course changed since the tenth century? Wasn’t the main channel into town along the small ditch that we now know as Heybridge Creek? hadn’t Northey Island changed size and shape? And weren’t there other islands – not least Osea (opposite the Barrow Hills) and the now long-gone Ramsey Island, near Stansgate? Wasn’t the heart of Maldon and its church – in the form of an operational mint – originally situated in the burh fortress, which was located in the London Road area, rather than in the riverside parish of St Mary?

I soon discovered that I wasn’t the first to think about these things and the original topography of the battle. In fact, one of my heroes, the former mayor and local historian, Edward Arthur Fitch, who knew Maldon’s story and its geography like the back of his hand, had the battle taking place not at Northey, but in the area of Heybridge church and he said in his important work – Maldon and the River Blackwater (first published in 1895), and he wasn’t the only one, the nationally renowned historian, E.A. Freeman, in his major study on the Worman Conquest also located it in the area preferred by Fitch. In fact, it wasn’t until the mid-1920s that anyone had even suggested Northey Island as a feature of the battle. So it has been my life-long mission to search out the truth, or, more importantly, to at least challenge what has now sadly become the accepted, rather blinkered story. It hasn’t been easy, popular, or welcomed by certain official bodies.

(Oddly for some reason in 1846, the battle fought at Heybridge in 991 was renamed ‘The Battle of Maldon’. Why? It could have been that by 1846 Maldon now had a larger population than Heybridge which had by then become regarded as a suburb of Maldon if so, they had illogically disregarded the relevant sites of the local settlements in 879 when Heybridge was the larger community. Despite being renamed as the battle of Maldon, it was still acknowledged by all as being fought at Heybridge. For example, E.A Freeman, in his 1869 book, situates the battle firmly at Heybridge. Later, in 1894, E.A Fitch’s book went into even more detail stating that the battle took place near St Andrew’s Church, Heybridge.

(Keith Scrivener)

Enrled, Dr Edward Dalmythey Laborde and his enter, thirteen page paper and single map in the English Historical Review of 1926, identifying Northey as the scene for the very first time. But why, in the words of A. H Burne in his Battlevields of England, would the Danes allow themselves to be ‘cooped up on the island’, cut-off from the shore at an undoubted strategic disadvantage and a considerable distance from town? Perhaps they didn’t, and the clues can take us elsewhere. Fitch believed that the battle took place (in his words) ‘where Heybridge church now stands’. Consider that idea. Difficult to believe today, but Heybridge creek would have been navigable all the way up to the site of the church – to the settlement established by the Romans and later under the control of Tid-Towadington (Tidc’s town) – a lordship endowed under King Athelstan. The course is the western town limit of the river (the west of the pontoons). That river course continued in use for many centuries, later linked to the economy of Heybridge and its mill, but it would regularly flood. The route from Heybridge to Maldon up on the hill (Meadlune – the hill of assembly or hill marked by a cross)

was by way of a track across the marsh – the road is still, to this day, called The Causeway (the exact term used in the poem). That track regularly flooded on the tide – Morant said, in the mid-eighteenth century, that the church lies on ‘the Strand’ and the tides comes up to the churchyard.

(Stephen Nunn)

Laborde himself notes that the ‘Chronical’ says the battle was near Maldon, not at Maldon, and even admits the poem doesn’t even mention Maldon. So what evidence about the 991 battle is there? There is still in existence a copy of a fragment of a poem, believed to originate from shortly after the battle, and possibly written at the isheth of Lady Alphæ, widow of Earleman Beorhthorn who had bravely led the East Saxons before being killed. Although ancient battle accounts tend to reflect the victor’s viewpoint by exaggerating the bravery of the author’s side, geographical pointers are far more likely to be accurate. The poem states about the attacking Vikings, ‘On the banks of Pante stream with pride they lined the
Laborde also makes the mistake of specifying that the battle was fought adjacent to Northey Island. The curator of the Norwegian Viking museum states that the Vikings invariably used fast and bristly attached sails to oppose the chance of gathering reinforcements. Thus the Vikings would never have been reckless enough to camp for several days on Northey Island organizing their base in full view of the Saxons in the burn, then fight a conventional standing battle as Laborde maintains.

For some reason Laborde was scathing about the Saxons' defence in the battle. Writing about what he calls the Viking victory over the Saxons at Maldon, "the disaster at Maldon" and "The Saxon defeat at Maldon". But were the Vikings really victorious as Laborde claims? Let us look at the evidence.

The Viking fleet had ninety-three longships. The largest would carry a crew of about seventy-five and the smallest as little as thirty. This indicates a huge army for those days of 3,000 men or more. Before the battle the Vikings had gathered extensive tribute from raid at Folkstone, Sandwich and Pevensey, where they found little resistance, in fact Ipswich may have paid them off. At the Blackwater Estuary it is likely they aimed to steal the bigger prize of the gold and silver in King Egbert's mint, situated in the burn on the Hill above Maldon. At Maldon, the Vikings certainly didn't fulfil this aim, not even reaching the burn. In fact the only thing they managed to take away was the crown of the Saxon leader, Edfaroon. Byrhtnoth, as the Saxons had driven the greatly depleted Viking forces back out to sea and they sustained so many deaths and grievously wounded they didn't even have enough men to crew all their ships. In fact the Saxons had successfully defended their homeland and their treasure in King Alfric's mint. This should surely count as a Saxon victory, certainly not a defeat as Laborde claims. John Mc sweeps in his book Ethelred-Saxon Warrior, even if the Vikings were victorious in the battle, they was only a pyrrhic victory.

(Keith Scowen)

And then to on Maldon. Before the battle Ethelric Byrhtnoth, the elder man for his day, described in the Life of Osvald (997-1005) as tall, grey-haired and of middle age (perhaps 65). Archaeological evidence, albeit of 1769 vintage, adds credence to the suggestion that the invaders decapiitated Byrhtnoth, for his head was missing from his exhumed skeleton in Ely Cathedral. Danegeld of £10,000, the first payment of this early exaction money, including Maldon-based coinage was eventually paid to the Vikings. But how did the battle actually unfold? We turn to one of the most important pieces of Anglo-Saxon literature - the poem of the same name - The Battle of Maldon. We can't study the original document because it was destroyed in a fire in 1751, so we must trust a transcript of what is, after all, a fragment of a poem. It remains an evocative work but it is accurate? It is certainly very heroic - but then it would be because it was commissioned by Byrhtnoth's nephew and it's one of the best lay works of history and is full of the imagery that you will find in other works of a similar nature, in particular works of the Anglo-Saxon period.

It should also be noted that the fields opposite Northey Island causeway that Labarde contends was the site of the battle, have been comprehensively searched several times for artefacts indicating a battle. A D. Scragg in his 1981 book The Battle of Maldon, states, "No archaeological evidence has been forthcoming to indicate a battle took place in the area, thus the site remains unproven". Other searches have been undertaken more recently using modern equipment, also with no success. Admittally, in 1979, George and Susan Pretty carried out a geophysical survey on the Northey Island causeway, again with negative results.

However, in contrast, new clues to where the battle was fought have been found. Some years ago several Viking swords and shield bosses were discovered in the shingle bed of the new digging up part of the original Pante river at Heybridge. These battle-related artefacts were discovered by a workman extracting shale for profit. Unfortunately, his employer was unwilling to lose those profits, so ordered the workman to re-buy the weapons. The man did so, except for one Viking sword that he sold to the Combined Military Services Museum in St Mary's Church in Maldon. However, as this sword is the only Viking find locality that we can assume so far, it gives added credence.

(Keith Scowen)