

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 duplicate many 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 Battlefields 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, Byrhtnoth. 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 somehow '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 instils 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 (we are told 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 moment they passed the settlement of Yhanchester (Bradwell-on-Sea). And, talking of 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 itself 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 wealth – 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 so 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 *Norman 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.

(Stephen Nunn)

Oddly for some reason in 1846, the battle fought at Heybridge in 991 was renamed 'The Battle of Maldon'. Why? Could it 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 sizes of the local settlements in 991 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 examples, 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)

Enter, Dr Edward Dalrymple Laborde and his brief, thirteen-page paper and single



Statue of Ealdorman Byrhtnoth on the south wall of All Saints Church, Maldon (Photo G Foard)



Statue of Byrhtnoth at Maldon, by John Doubleday

map in the *English Historical Review* of 1925, identifying Northey as the scene for the very first time. But why, in the words of A H Burne in his *Battlefields 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 – Tidwaldington (Tid's town) – a lordship endowed under King Æthelstan. The course is the western town limit of the river (the west of the poem). 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 its hill (Maeldune – 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 tide comes up to the churchyard.

(Stephen Nunn)

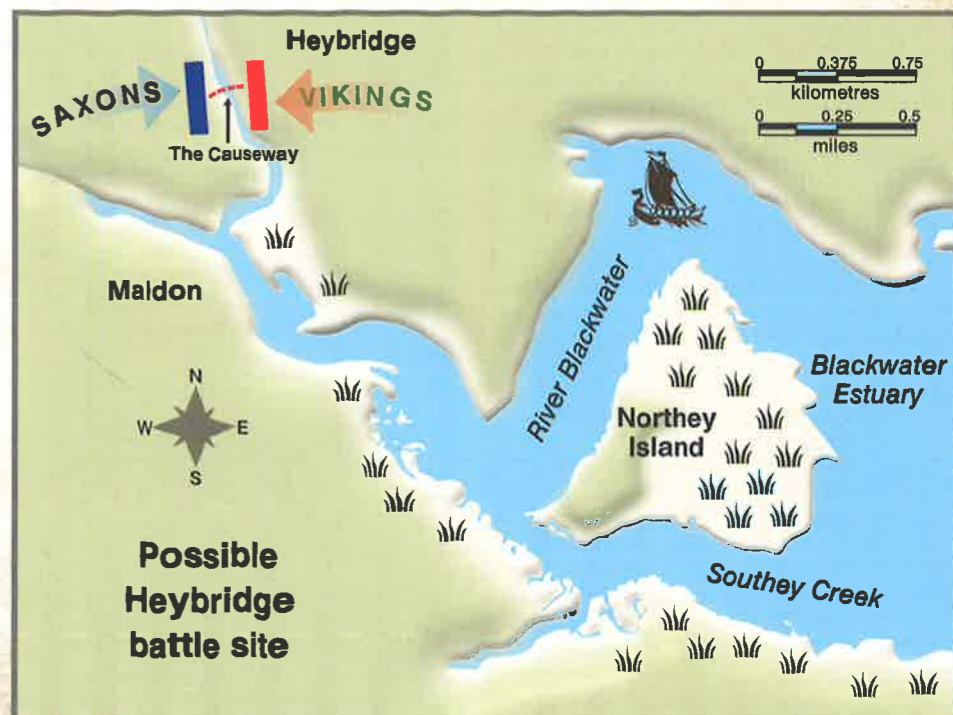
Laborde himself notes that the 'Chronical' says the battle was near Maldon, not at Maldon, and even admits the poem doesn't even mention Maldon. So what evidence about the 991 battle is there? There is still in existence a copy of a fragment of a poem, believed to originate from shortly after the battle, and possibly written at the behest of Lady Ælflæd, widow of Ealdorman Byrhtnoth 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



Causeway to Northey Island looking eastward (Photo G Foard)



Northey Island battle site



Possible Heybridge battle site

Byrhtnoth's
Plaque

THE NATIONAL TRUST
THIS MARKS THE SITE OF THE BATTLE
OF MALDON. ON AND AROUND THIS
SPOT AN ARMY OF DANISH RAIDERS
AND THE ESSEX ARMY COMMANDED
BY EARL BYRHTNOTH FOUGHT ON 10TH
AUGUST 991 A.D. BYRHTNOTH'S HEROIC
DEFEAT AND DEATH BECAME THE SUBJECT
OF A GREAT ANGL0-SAXON POEM.

PLAQUE PRESENTED BY ESSIX COUNTY COUNCIL

banks'. Plus, 'Then advanced this band of Vikings west over the Pante shining water they carried their shields'. These excerpts incontestably situate the battle by the Pante river, which in 991 flowed into the Blackwater Estuary at Heybridge, and remained as the accepted battlefield consensus for the next 900 years, locating the battlefield two miles further west of Northey Island.

Laborde in his 1925 book claimed that the two rivers that fed into the Blackwater Estuary were 'the Chelmer plus the Blackwater'. Had Laborde been confused by the existence in 1925 of the Chelmer and Blackwater canal that was there then and still exists with that name to this day? Why did Laborde ignore the fact that the poem makes multiple references to the Pante stream, indicating that the northern-most river that flowed into the estuary at Heybridge was called the Pante in 991, not the Blackwater.

Laborde seems to have made his battle position judgment after just comparing the merits of the three islands with causeways that were still in existence in the early-twentieth century, but failed to acknowledge the existence of the Heybridge to Maldon causeway. Laborde also completely failed to mention, or wasn't aware, that in 991 sea levels were around six feet lower than when he wrote his tale in the twentieth century. Because of Laborde's omission he has not acknowledged that because of these lower sea levels there were more islands within the confines of the Blackwater Estuary than were still there in 1925 and, obviously therefore, were also not shown on the 1925 Ordnance Survey maps; for example Ramsey Island, near Stansgate, situated to the east of Northey Island. In fact, as Ramsey Island would have been shielded from the East Saxon garrison at the burh, it would have made more sense than Northey Island if the Vikings really needed to rest up locally.

Laborde quotes the poem as indicating the tides meeting and that the Vikings crossed the river westwards as proof that they had landed at Northey Island. These arguments by Laborde are spurious, as the tides were similar at other points in the Blackwater Estuary. Plus the Northey Island's causeway doesn't even cross westwards but at best south-westwards, although the Vikings would have to cross the river Pante westwards at Heybridge, just as the poem states. So what made Laborde and subsequent authors ignore the fact that the poem clearly sites the battle on the banks of Pante's stream at Heybridge?

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 brutal attacks to deny their opponents 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 burh, 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 Vikings' victory over the Saxons at Maldon', 'The disaster at Maldon' and 'The Saxons' 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 gained extensive tribute from raids at Folkestone, Sandwich and Ipswich, where they found little opposition. In fact Ipswich may have paid them off. At the Blackwater Estuary raid it's likely they aimed to steal the far bigger prize of the gold and silver in King Æthelred's mint, situated in the burh on the hill above Heybridge at Maldon. The Vikings certainly didn't fulfil this aim, not even reaching the burh. In fact the only thing they managed to take away was the head of the Saxon leader, Ealdorman 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 Æthelred's mint. This should surely count as a Saxon victory, certainly not a defeat as Laborde claims. John McSween says in his book *Byrhtnoth: Anglo-Saxon Warrior*, 'even if the Vikings were victorious in the battle, it was only a pyrrhic victory'.

(Keith Scrivener)

And then on to Maldon where battle ensued with Byrhtnoth – an older man for his day, described in the *Life of Oswald* (997–1005) as tall, grey-haired and ageing (in reality perhaps only about 65). Archaeological evidence, albeit of 1769 vintage, adds credence to the suggestion that the invaders decapitated Byrhtnoth, for his skull was missing from his exhumed skeleton in Ely Cathedral. Danegeld of £10,000, the first payment of

this early extortion money, including Maldon-minted 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 1731, so we must trust a transcript of what is, after all, a fragment of a poem. It is an exceptional work but is it accurate? It's certainly very heroic – but then it would be because it was commissioned by Byrhtnoth's widow – along with a now lost tapestry – and is full of the imagery that you will find in the quite separate and unrelated words of *Beowulf*. So you decide – were the raiders unexpected, did Byrhtnoth allow a fair battle resulting in such devastating consequences? The poem does, however, contain some quite specific clues as to the geography of the battle that might just be an objective and contemporary report. There is talk of some directional compass points (the Vikings passing west for example). Reference is made to a delay caused by the tide. There is mention of a causeway and, more controversially, a *bricg* (or bridge – or is it a ford) and a nearby wood.

(Stephen Nunn)

It should also be noted that the fields opposite Northey Island causeway that Laborde contends was the site of the battle, have been comprehensively searched several times for artefacts indicating a battle. D G 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 this site remains unproven'. Other searches have been undertaken more recently using modern equipment, also with negative results. Additionally, in 1976, 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 shale bed of the now dried-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-bury the weapons. The man did so, except for one Viking sword that he sold to the Combined Military Services Museum in Station Road, Maldon. However, as this sword is the only Viking find locally that we can examine so far, it gives added credence



The Viking sword on display in the Combined Military Services Museum (Photo K Scrivener)



King Æthelred



to the poem's guidance that the battle was indeed at Heybridge.

(Keith Scrivener)

In commemoration and remembrance of all this, was the church of St Andrew, Heybridge, constructed? Was this just like the church at nearby Ashingdon – built to commemorate the later battle of Ashingdon – and also, by a strange coincidence, dedicated to St Andrew, apostle and early Christian martyr? The present Heybridge church building was founded in the twelfth century but a Saxon predecessor has always been assumed.

There is one final piece of remarkable evidence. Maldon's award-winning Combined Military Services Museum in Station Road, has acquired a sword for its ever-growing collection. It was originally uncovered by some local contractors back in the 1960s and experts have concluded it to be late-tenth century Viking. If that wasn't exciting enough, it is the circumstances and location of its original discovery that is the game-changer. If the reports are to be believed, the sword was one of a larger number, along with what were described as shield bosses. The owner of the company concerned was allegedly worried about the delay that the discovery might have had on their work and so ordered the cache to be re-buried. The location of that spectacular find wasn't anywhere near Northey, but suffice to say it supports the Heybridge/Causeway/Fullbridge theory perfectly.

The Heybridge theory certainly makes sense to me, but then it always has done and, to my mind at least, is far more convincing than the Northey theory. But idea is all that it is. It has never been my intention to be as equally dogmatic about the Heybridge route as others are about Northey. Rather, the important thing is to question and to not blindly accept the 'official location'. If we do then the legend (albeit originating some 934 years after the event) becomes the fact. Surely we owe history, our schoolchildren and the generations to come much more than that?

If you want to see the sword, it is now on permanent display in the ground floor gallery of the Combined Military Services Museum, Station Road, Maldon.

(Stephen Nunn)



St Andrew's Church, Heybridge



Modern stained glass window in St Mary's Church commemorating the battle (Photo G Foad)