



Battles of the
Dark Ages

PETER MARREN



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British Battlefields AD 410 to 1065

Peter Marren



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Preface

The Dark Ages were, in Neville Chamberlain's notorious words, 'a far away place about which we know little'. Yet they seem to have shadowed my life, partly in my imagination but also, unexpectedly, in everyday life. As a son of an officer in the RAF I had an itinerant boyhood moving from one place to the next every two years or so. And, it seemed, wherever I went there was a local battlefield, often one so remote in time and so poorly known that it was less an actual place and more of a kind of haunting, a historical shadow where folklore reigned over fact. This gave the Dark Ages a special appeal, a distant time when the land was wild and dangerous, where wolves and eagles hovered around the places of slaughter and when the very names of people and places sounded strange and foreign. At least to my ten-year-old mind it was a magical place unbothered by the boring bits of history like laws, charters and economics.

My oldest memory is living at Riccall in Yorkshire when I think I was dimly aware of some local conflict with the Vikings that had taken place near the village a thousand years earlier (I remember being pretty amazed that a place like Riccall could be that old). Later, I was at RAF Andover at the time when archaeologists were digging up nearby Danebury Ring, the hill-fort by which an Arthurian battle was supposed to have taken place, named after a village with the splendid name of Nether Wallop. Later, when I got a job with the Nature Conservancy, I was struck by how many nature reserves had battlefields on them (a fact about which I was reminded when I was wandering over the field of Ashdown and put up a very rare stone curlew). Where I now live, in Wiltshire, you cannot walk far on the open downs before coming across ancient dykes and rings clearly designed to keep someone out. Liddington Hill, which welcomes me home whenever I return from the north or west may or may not be the real Mount Badon, Wiltshire's equivalent of Camelot. But it is certainly *my* Mount Badon, so much so that I never call this swelling green whaleback of deep history by any other name.

I first became seriously interested in ancient battlefields after reading the works of that great battlefield detective Colonel Alfred Burne. The chapters he devoted to *Ellandun*, *Deorham*, *Brunanburh* and other pre-Conquest battles were of a different

kind to the rest of his books. Rather than refight these dimly remembered, though important, conflicts, he devoted his energies to finding out where they were. And that remains the essential art of the Dark Age battling - not so much refighting the battles as refinding them. Of course one can have a try at reconstructing the battles themselves - and I hope this book will be of interest to war-gamers and re-enactors refighting them - but history offers only limited help. One gamer's *Ellandun* will not be another's (and in this particular case, if war games prove anything it is that the wrong side won!).

Finding Dark Age battlefields has involved the ingenuity of historians, antiquarians and archaeologists for at least four hundred years. They needed to be found because nearly all of them had been lost. Even the greatest of all pre-Conquest battles, the battle of *Brunanburh*, is no more than a name. There is nowhere on the map by this name, and none even in the Domesday Book. As a result we do not even know whether it was fought in the east or the west (the sources say one thing, geography and commonsense quite another). Persuasive and well-argued cases have been made for *Brunanburhs* as far apart as Rotherham, Huntingdon and the Wirral. What a pity they cannot all be right! Not that I am in any position to throw stones. I regarded myself as a great expert on the battle of Nechtansmere, now known as the battle of Dunnichen. That was until I read James Fraser's new book on this subject and realized, most reluctantly, that his site was better than mine. To some extent this ambiguity is true of nearly all battles fought between 410 and 1065. For each one you seem to have at least a pair of possible battlefields (and many others have no known battlefield at all!). And that is why, with the lonely exception of the battle of Maldon, no pre-Conquest battlefield has found its way onto the registers kept by English Heritage and its Celtic sister organizations. Uncertainty hovers over nearly every one of them. Whether *Brunanburh* was fought on land that is now a golf course, or a cokeworks and railway marshalling yard, or featureless arable fields somewhere near Huntingdon we can argue about. The exact disposition of the armies we shall probably never know.

The lack of the certainty that enables us to stand in Wellington's boots at Waterloo or Chard's at Rorke's Drift may mean that pre-Conquest battles are not everyone's cup of tea. Most books on British battlefields have neglected the Dark Ages. Yet these ancient conflicts have a strange romantic appeal. In a way, the fuzzier the past, the greater is the 'tingle-factor'. Standing even in the approximate footsteps of King Alfred or other Dark Age heroes (even their *possible* footsteps) is to dip into that bran-tub of thrilling history that can lie beneath the surface of the most ordinary-looking countryside. And although the actual battlefields are elusive, the wider military strategy of ancient conflicts is still visible in the mysterious earth walls and ditches that criss-cross the landscape on the downs and moors. Dark Age battle-finding takes you to nice, hidden places tucked away in the landscape. Since the heritage industry has ignored them you are free to use your imagination and have somewhere to park the car. And, as I have repeatedly discovered, Dark Age armies liked a good view or, if not a view, then a pleasant river.

Apart from describing the best-documented battlefields in England, Scotland and Wales, my aim has been to tell a story. By profession I am a writer and journalist, and battles are one of the things I write about. I am the author of two books on the subject, *Grampian Battlefields*, which is about the Scottish north-east and has been in print for fifteen years, and *1066: The Battles of York, Stamford Bridge and Hastings*, published by Pen & Sword in 2004. I have also written articles about Dark Age and medieval battlefields, mainly for *Battlefields Review*, and conducted field research for the Battlefields Trust on the threatened battlefield of Tewkesbury.

This book describes nearly thirty battles in detail, almost all of those where some reconstruction of events is possible. I have also listed all the battles of the period - some 130 of them - which are at least dignified by a name. Along the way I have tried to find space for all the principal contenders in the Dark Age epic: British (and, as they became, the Welsh), Saxon, Irish, the Picts and Scots and the various Scandinavian factions grouped together as the Vikings. All the famous names are here: Arthur, Hengest, Oswald, Alfred, Edmund Ironside and Canute, as well as names that deserve to be better known, like Athelstan, Ecgbert, Penda and Urien. In a long introduction I have also tried to provide a sense of what it was like to be in a Dark Age battle, and your chances of surviving one (quite good, I would say, so long as you won).

I take this opportunity to thank Rupert Harding and Jane Robson for helping to bring this book to fruition and for making the task as painless as possible. I also thank my old friends in the Battlefields Trust for their help, notably Michael Rayner, Christopher Scott and Tony Spicer. I have benefited from the work of several recent historians of whom I would like to single out James Fraser and Graeme Cruickshank (Dunnichen), Professor Stephen Harding and Michael Wood (*Brunanburh*), and Alfred Smyth (King Alfred and northern history generally). I also thank Michael Rayner and Stephen Harding for permission to use copyright photographs, and Professor Guy Halsall for permission to quote from his youthful pieces, written a quarter-century ago, in *Miniature Wargames*.

A note on Anglo-Saxon names

One of the problems of Dark Age history is the plethora of unfamiliar and similar-sounding names - those notoriously 'unmemorable' 'Egg kings' of 1066 *And All That!* The Saxons normally possessed only one name (though some seem to have had nicknames). Other cultures added a surname meaning 'son of, as in Bruide macBile or Olaf Tryggvason. Unlike modern Christian names, Saxon names were bestowed with great care and had a particular meaning. The 'egg' (actually Ecg-) name meant 'edge' or 'blade', which, combined with a suitable noun, gave names like 'Ecgbert' or 'sharp blade' or Ecgfrith, meaning 'edge-peace' in the sense of security.

Commoner than the 'egg' name was 'Ethel' or, more correctly, Aethel-, which means 'noble'. Hence, combined with a suitable word, we have Aethelwulf, noble wolf, Aethelgiva, noble gift, or Aethedreda, noble strength (the Saxon precursor of

the Normanized 'Audrey'). Other famous Saxons names include Alfred (elf-council), Edgar (fortune-spear), Edmund (fortune-protector) and Edward (fortune-guardian). The names were disposed individually, and were not passed from generation to generation. For example, the great king Ecgbert called his son Aethelwulf, who called his Aelfred (Alfred). However some names were more popular than others; for example, there are several Athelstans (precious stone) and Aethelreds (wise council) among Alfred's descendants.

Although the names were apparently bestowed when the child was baptized, they were definitely names to live up to. Most of the Dark Age men and women we know by name were members of the ruling class. There would be little point in calling a peasant 'noble wolf'; this was obviously a more suitable name for a warrior-prince. Someone with a name like 'Bright Blade' would be exposed to mockery if he turned out as a coward. That unlucky king Aethelred or 'Good Advice' did indeed become the object of satire, and was remembered as *Athelred Unraed*, that is 'Good Advice, Bad Advice'.

Most Saxon names are pronounced as spelt. The vowels are rolled together so that 'Aethel' sounds like ethel and Eadward as Edward. Ecg- names were pronounced as 'etch', or maybe 'edge', whilst names beginning with Ce- are pronounced as ch-, for example, Ceolwulf (ship-wolf) is Cheolwulf. The -ig in names like Tostig is silent; hence the Saxon word 'blodig' meaning 'bloody' is also pronounced that way. Names ending in -sc are pronounced -sh, so *Aescsedune*, the old name for the Berkshire downs, is Ash-dun, that is, ashdown. The Old English name Deorham is pronounced the same way as the modern village of Dyrham: that is, Dyr-ham, or, if you like, 'Durham' with a West Country burr. In this book I have used the familiar names of well-known historical characters: Arthur not Artorius, Alfred not Aelfred, Edmund not Eadmund and Canute instead of the more historically correct Knut. I have also avoided unfamiliar Saxon letters and diphthongs - which, in any case, my twenty-first-century PC seems unable to reproduce.

To Richard Seamons, Thanks Dick

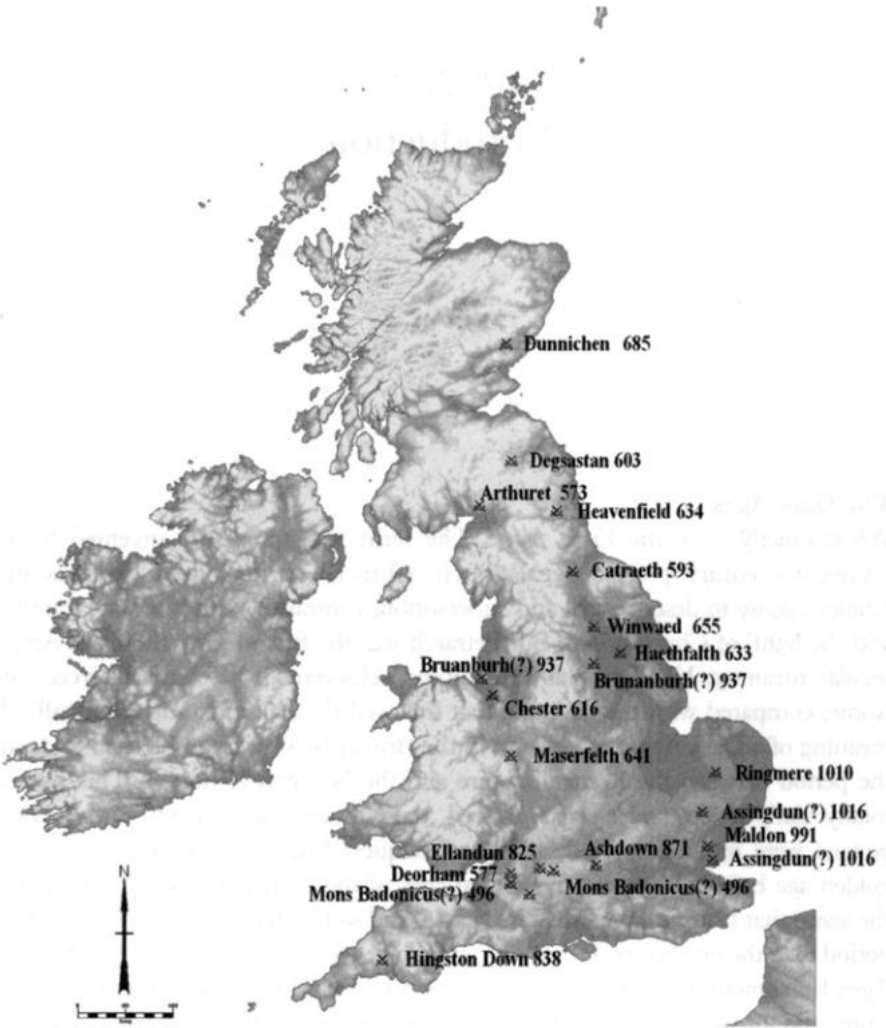
Chapter 1

Introduction

The Dark Ages

When exactly were the Dark Ages? The term was apparently invented by the fourteenth-century philosopher Petrarch. Christian writers used darkness in a religious sense to describe evil and superstition, contrasted with 'the way, the truth and the light' of Christendom. But Petrarch was the first to give 'the Dark Ages' a secular meaning. His light was the cultural achievement of classical Greece and Rome, compared with the darkness that followed the Fall of Rome. Gradually the meaning of a Dark Age changed and in the British Isles began to be used to denote the period between the Roman Empire and the Norman Conquest. This was not totally 'dark' in Petrarch's sense. Indeed, the cultural achievements of the Anglo-Saxons were much respected, and pre-Conquest England came to be seen as a golden age before the oppressive feudal laws of the Norman kings. It was dark in the sense that historical records were sparse, and so much less was known about this period than the one before or the one that followed it. In more recent times, the 'Dark Ages' has sometimes been restricted to the period that is truly dark, between the Fall of Rome and the Coming of Christianity - that is, for about 200 years in which there was next to no history.

Modern historians prefer to avoid loaded categorizations like this age or that. In archaeological terms, the early centuries of Saxon England are in fact better known than the later. And some places were darker than others. Seventh-century Northern England basks in comparatively bright historical sunshine, whilst Scotland and Wales were still pretty dark as late as the eleventh century. For one important kingdom, East Anglia, there is virtually no history at all (though its best-known king's favourite helmet, purse and harp were all found at Sutton Hoo). The advantage of using a term like the Dark Ages is that it avoids offending national sentiments. The English Anglo-Saxons, settlers from northern Germany, shared their island home with people originating from modern Scotland, Ireland, France, Denmark and Norway, as well with the native 'British'. Whether well-named or not, 'Dark Ages' is a convenient term and everyone knows what it means. Besides, as someone familiar



The main battlefields described in this book

with contemporary narrative documents describing the Norman Conquest and the Civil War in Scotland, I certainly came to regard it as, if not wholly dark, certainly dimly and fitfully lit. The great time-void before 1066 is a place of mist and shadow. Sometimes you see figures moving around, but you rarely see them well, and seldom know exactly what they are doing.

How Many Dark Age Battles Were There?

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and its Welsh and Irish equivalents are crammed with entries describing battles fought, kings, lords and warriors slain, towns besieged, and whole regions plundered and burned. But at what point did armed encounters become a battle? As it happens there is a helpful contemporary guide in the laws of King Ine

(Eye-na), who reigned from AD 688 to 725. An attack involving up to seven violent men was regarded as mere 'thievery'. Between seven and thirty-five men constituted 'a band', but any number in excess of that was classed as a *here*, which we can loosely translate as an army. Hence a conflict between two contending *heres*, composed of no more than thirty-five men - the equivalent of less than three rugby teams - on either side could by this definition be reasonably classed a battle. So, by this definition, would fights between Mods and Rockers, or rival bands of soccer supporters.

If so, there must have been a lot of Dark Age battles! It is likely that clashes of *heres* were going on all the time in some part of Britain and Ireland. In the centuries after the Roman legions departed, warfare may have been more or less permanent (though this has been disputed). The annalists probably recorded only those pitched 'battles' which were in some way significant. This is particularly true of the fifth and sixth centuries when, at least in Saxon England, a literate culture hardly existed. The records of battles of the fifth and sixth centuries were probably extracted from oral sources, such as elegies and war-songs. Their dates were retrospective, and very approximate. Indeed, they could easily be fiction.

Many of the battles recorded in pre-Conquest chronicles were small in scale. A good example is the conflict at *Merantun* in 784, which is described in unusual detail in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Cynewulf, the king of Wessex, happened to be in bed with his mistress at this place (the Chronicle calls it a 'bower') when it was raided by a rival band under the leadership of one Cyneheard. Cynewulf, emerging bleary-eyed and angry with sword in hand, was set upon and killed. His small retinue chose to die fighting. This was the Battle of *Merantun*, remembered principally because it involved the killing of a famous king. Later on we are told that Cyneheard's band consisted of just eighty-four men, though, under the definition of the laws of Ine, this constituted an army. Moreover Cyneheard's eighty-four men were enough to constitute a coup - an unsuccessful one since Cyneheard and all his men were soon slain in their turn by the dead king's outraged household.

Some other famous battles recorded by the chroniclers were seemingly little more than scuffles in a field. Hengist, the mighty conqueror of Kent, was said to have invaded our shores with just three small ships. Another invader, Port, was even more short-handed: his entire army was contained in just one ship. These figures may be semi-legendary, but one of the pitched battles around the first millennium was *Aethelingadene* (probably Alton in Hampshire) where the men of Hampshire under the king's high-reeve intercepted a party of Danish raiders. After a short but fierce fight, 81 Englishmen and perhaps as many Danes lay dead, suggesting that these armies numbered in the low hundreds. Yet this was a significant event. Among the dead of *Aethelingadene* was the high-reeve himself, along with a 'bishop's officer', a bishop's son, a second royal reeve and two local thanes. In moments the battle had swept away several of Hampshire's chief fighting men.

Another small but significant fight took place on the south coast, possibly at Poole Harbour, in 897 during the reign of King Alfred. It was counted as an English victory, since they lost 62 men compared with 120 Danes. But the English losses

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included Lucumon, the king's reeve (king's reeves clearly led a dangerous life), along with three named leaders of their Frisian allies, and one Aethelfrith, an important official in the king's household. Again, these were high-ranking men who were hard to replace.

When, in its more detailed passages, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle gives apparently exact figures for the combatants or casualties in various battles, they are more often than not fairly modest. In 1051, Harold, the future king, fought at Porlock and slew 'more than thirty good thanes as well as other men'. This would constitute a battle under the laws of Ine, but the Chronicle avoids calling it one, and says only that Harold put the local men to flight. Possibly the chronicler did not wish to offend the mighty sons of Godwin. A step up from this small encounter was an unnamed but clearly important battle fought in Devon in 878. The English managed to slay the Viking Ubba, a half-brother of the infamous Ivar the Boneless, along with 'eight hundred men with him and forty men of his retinue, and captured the Raven banner'. The detail about the banner is significant because no self-respecting Viking would have allowed Woden's sacred banner to be captured while there was breath left in his body. The implication is that Ubba's army was annihilated and that 840 men was more or less its sum total. Assuming that the excavated Gokstad longboat was an average ship of its time, Ubba's force would have been transported in about thirty ships, a figure comparable with the Battle of Carhampton in 836 (twenty-five ships), or Southampton in 840 (thirty-three ships).

The English, Scots and Welsh war-bands of earlier centuries may well have numbered in the hundreds rather than thousands. One early source states that in about 670 King Ecgrith attacked the lands of the Picts with an elite mounted army (*equitatus exercitus*) - yet with it he achieved all his objectives and, claims the same source, reduced the Picts to slavery. In another battle a century earlier, the Britons attacked the Roman town of Catterick with only 300 men, all of them aristocratic warriors of great renown. Evidently the preference for long-distance forays at least was for quality above quantity. Catterick was remembered not for its scale but for its heroic nature, as an example for future generations to study and follow. The same may be true of Maldon in 991, a relatively small battle, but one that was marked by self-sacrificing heroism and remembered with pride, even though, by modern standards, the English commander would have been sacked for gross incompetence.

What, then, are we to make of the apparently precise figure of 2,065 Welshmen killed at the Battle of *Beandun* in 614, or the 5,000 dead Hampshire men at *Nathanleag* in 508, or the 'thousands' of Vikings cut down after the Battle of Ashdown? Perhaps only that the slaughter was great and the dead uncounted. There is good reason for supposing that the size of Alfred's victory at Ashdown, for instance, was later exaggerated for the purposes of glorifying the hero king. However, some Dark Age battles almost certainly did involve large levied armies, even coalitions. *Degsastan*, in 603 was probably one of them, fought between the highly militarized Angles of Bernicia and Deira and an alliance of northern kingdoms capable in theory of producing thousands of warriors. *Winwaed* was another battle on the

grand scale, pitting Oswy, the powerful Northumbrian king, against an alliance of Welsh and Saxons from Mercia and East Anglia. *Winwaed* drew on forces from perhaps three-quarters of Britain south of the Forth. Greater still was the Battle of *Brunanburh*, which involved troops from the greater part of England, Scotland, Wales and even Ireland. *Brunanburh*, the ninth-century 'battle of nations', was a conflict of exceptional and perhaps unheard-of size, almost certainly dwarfing the Battle of Hastings. *Assingdun* and Stamford Bridge, too, may have been huge battles with troops raised from all over England. But these were the exceptions. Most Dark Age battles probably numbered hundreds rather than thousands of fighting men, and graded imperceptibly into raids, ravaging and other local mayhem.

Major kingdoms of Britain during the Dark Ages



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There may be an element of chance about which battles have come down to us and which are unknown. A certain Ceolwulf, who ruled Wessex at the turn of the seventh century, was said to have 'ever made war either against the Angles, or against the Welsh, or against the Picts, or against the Scots' - high praise as contemporaries saw it - but not a single named battle in all this prodigious amount of fighting was remembered. By contrast, the *Annals of Ulster* record scores of named small battles in Ireland and Scotland. For example, a decade taken at random from between the years 490 and 500 includes the following battles:

- 490 or 491. Battle of *Cenn Losnada* in *Mag Fea* in which fell Aengus son of Nad-fraich, king of *Munu*: Mac Erca was victor, and the king of Caisel defeated.
- 493. The second Battle of *Granaivet* and the Battle of *Smeth*.
- 494. The Battle of *Tailtill* won over the Laigin by Cairpre, son of Niall.
- 495. The second Battle of *Granaivet*, in which fell Fraech, son of Finnchad: Eochu, son of Coirpre was victor.
- 496. The storming of *Dun Lethglaise*.
- 498. The Battle of *Inne Mor* in the territory of *Ui Gabla* won over the Laigin: Muirchertach MacErca was victor.
- 499. The Battle of *Slemain* of *Mide* won by Cairpre, son of Niall over the Laigin.
- 500. 'A battle'.³

A list of what were presumably mostly small-scale actions extracted from the Celtic annals would be a long one. For the single year 656, the year of the Battle of *Winwead* in England, the Irish annals record 'the battle of Anna', the 'battles of Cumascach, son of Ailill in which he fell', and 'the slaying of Rogallach, son of Uatu, king of Connacht'. At least five British and Irish kings were killed in battle that year. And even this was not a record; in 642 six kings died, including the blessed King Oswald, the most powerful king who had lived up to then. These were violent times!

And so to the original, impossible question: how many Dark Age battles were there? My own count from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is 110 field battles from 420 to 1065, not counting minor engagements or sieges. From the sparser Welsh annals, which overlap only slightly, I counted another forty specific battles among a lot more ravaging and slaying. These figures suggest that one year in every four experienced a battle somewhere in England or Wales. If we added Scotland and Ireland to the list, the number of battles would be considerably more, perhaps with a battle every two years.

Dark Age Weapons and Armour

Dark Age weaponry is the subject of several books currently in print.⁵ The subject has benefited from the popularity of re-enactments, which suggest how the age might have drilled and deployed its armies even when the contemporary record is silent. Facsimile weapons have shed light not only on how Dark Age weapons were used but also on how they were made. Round shields, for example, are four times more

effective at resisting missiles when bent into a concave shape. Plain wooden shields, on the other hand, are useless, splintering on the first impact. It is reasonable to suppose that no one used wooden shields without some more effective form of strengthening.

The fighting men of late Saxon times were better equipped than is sometimes implied. A law of Aethelred the Unready states that a ceorl was not the equal to a thegn, *even when* he possessed a helmet, mail shirt and a sword, unless he was also the owner of a minimum of five hides of land. In other words, even humble ceorls ruling over no more than a peasant's patch sometimes had resource to the most expensive items of military hardware.

As for the thegn, the Saxon landowning class roughly equivalent to an eighteenth-century squire, another law specified a kind of death duty (*heriot*) on his land. In its original form this consisted of a gift to the king consisting of four horses, two of them with saddles, four shields, four spears, a helmet and a coat of mail. This seems to have been equivalent to a thegn's personal retinue of a second mounted man and a couple of foot soldiers. By implication, a thegn went to battle on a horse, attended by a small retinue. His 'death duty' to the king must have helped the latter to build up a sizeable armoury and ensure that his followers were well armed.

Shields

The shield was the universal weapon of Dark Age armies. You would not have lasted very long in a Dark Age battle without one, and probably every warrior bore one. Indeed, as even the best shields shattered after prolonged combat, they probably went into battle with a spare. According to Tacitus, writing in the first century AD, to lose your shield was considered a great disgrace. Before the kite shield came into vogue in the age of armoured knights near the end of our period, most shields were round and measured between two and three feet in diameter. They were made of wooden boards glued together with an unlikely-sounding but apparently effective rubbery mixture of cheese, vinegar and quicklime. Traditionally shields were made of limewood, but in practice any light, springy wood, such as pine, was used, on which rawhide was then stretched.

Combat shields probably bulged outwards in a lens-like shape. Experiments show that this makes them much stronger and more resistant to blows. In addition some shields were reinforced with leather or iron, fixed around the rim with short nails. Most also bore a conical metal boss attached to the middle with rivets. This protected the hand and enabled the shield to be used to parry a blow or even as an offensive weapon to smash into your opponent using the weight of your body. An opponent whose weapon had become stuck in your shield could be disarmed by a sudden twist and then forced to the ground by the weight of the shield and its projecting boss. Shields were slung around the neck by a strap and held in front of the body using a grip. The strap might have been adjustable, allowing a warrior to fight with a two-handed weapon while covering his body.

Probably most shields were brightly painted and, with the banners, formed part of the colour and spectacle of a Dark Age battlefield. Viking art often shows a cartwheel

pattern of colours radiating from the centre of a shield. Those found with the Gokstad ship-burial were painted yellow and black alternatively. The shields of the Christian king Olaf's army were painted with crosses in various colours on a white background. Very likely, such colours helped identify units, or in this case a whole army, in battle. Fragments associated with shields show that some were also studded with metal objects in the shape of birds, beasts or fish. Were these good luck charms, or did they have some function of group identity?

Spears

The spear was the universal Dark Age weapon. Since slaves were forbidden arms, bearing a spear was the mark of a free man. Nearly everyone, from kings to commoners, carried a spear in battle, 'grasped in fist, lifted in hand'. In line facing the enemy you bore your shield in one hand, usually the left, and your spear with the other. The spearman had two basic choices. You could hold the weapon overarm, using it to jab at your opponent's face, and also retaining the option to hurl it. Or you could hold it underarm and, supported by the forearm, give it greater thrust-power and a longer reach. Some warriors grasped their spear with both hands for still greater force, leaving the shield to hang from its strap. Some Dark Age spears had cutting blades which must have required two hands to wield in the manner of a pole-axe.

Dark Age spears measured anything between five and nine feet long (the much longer pikes belong to a later age). The smaller, lighter ones were used for hurling as missiles. The Bayeux Tapestry shows a scene which might have been typical of an earlier age in which stacks of spears are kept in readiness for hurling. Although it isn't always possible to distinguish throwing spears from close combat weapons, the former was sometimes custom-made with a thin iron neck which bent on impact to prevent it being thrown back. Throwing spears were also often barbed for the same reason, and also, of course, to increase the injury caused. A barrage of light spears hurled from perhaps twenty to forty paces (but, in expert hands, for up to twenty paces more) would have been unpleasant to endure.

Longer spears were retained for defence. The shafts were normally made of ashwood, which grows straight and withstands hard knocks without shattering. The butt end was sometimes protected with a sleeve of iron, capable of being used as a club. There were several types of blades. The commonest were angular, with a diamond cross-section, or leaf-shaped. The former had the best chance of penetrating mail. Some spears had sharp wings which could hamstring the enemy with a sideways blow, or be used to hook down shields by the rim.

Swords

Spears were the weapon of a freeman, but a sword was the mark of high status. A pattern-welded Dark Age sword was worth at least as much as a Ferrari; in modern terms, perhaps a quarter of a million pounds. Swords had names; *Hrinting* (perhaps meaning 'roarer') was the fictional Beowulf's sword, *Quernbiter* the sword of the real

Olaf Tryggvasson, leader of the Danes at Maldon. They were heirlooms. Athelstan, son of Aethelred the Unready, considered his silver-hiked sword a kingly gift. Swords were craft-made weapons, produced by the slow art of pattern-welding in which strips of metal were repeatedly heated and hammered together. Without such work, the blades would soon break in combat. Towards the end of the period, the improving quality of iron ore meant that swords could be made more cheaply, and hence more people could afford to own one. But as late as the tenth century, nearly half of the swords found by archaeologists were produced by the old pattern-welded method. Possibly swords were more often seen in the south than the north. Some 22 per cent of Dark Age graves in Kent contained swords, compared with only 3 per cent of Anglian graves in northern England.

Dark Age swords were about a yard long, including the metal 'tang', with a double-edged blade about two inches wide. Consequently, though they were well-balanced, they were quite heavy. Dark Age warriors did not have 'sword fights'. A Viking saga reminded its listeners that the expert swordsman did not 'strike fast and furiously' but took his time to pick his strokes carefully, so that they 'were few but terrible'. The sword was a bludgeon used to hack at the parts of a warrior not covered by his shield, notably his head or forward leg. An overarm blow crashing down on an opponent's head would have been fatal. Other blows could disable your opponent and expose him to the kind of wounds sometimes found on Dark Age skeletons - repeated cuts on the bones of the head, arms and legs. Viking sagas are full of images of arms and legs being severed with a single blow - which, surprisingly, the victim often survived. Swords also had a heavy pommel, shaped like a tea-cosy, which not only acted as a counterweight to the blade but at close quarters could be used to deliver a disabling blow to the head or chin. Versatility was an asset to any weapon in sweaty, close-order fighting.

Swords were carried in wooden, leather-covered scabbards lined with oily fur or wool to keep the blade free of rust. The scabbard was often richly decorated and was another mark of high status. It was suspended either from the belt with the help of a couple of supporting straps, or from a shoulder harness or baldric.

Ninth-century sword found in Abingdon, now in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. The silverwork on the hilt-guards incorporates the symbols of the four Gospel writers: a fit weapon for a Christian warrior fighting a heathen foe.



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Armour

Mail is perishable and rarely survives, even in burials. It was also expensive, and, like the sword, was the mark of the wealthy professional warrior. The scraps of mail surviving in the Sutton Hoo burial suggest that seventh-century mail consisted of a short-sleeved shirt that reached down to the hips. By the eleventh century, the mail shirt had become a coat covering the body down to the knees, or, in Harald Hardrada's case, the calves. Mail was made up of thousands of metal rings about a third of an inch in diameter and 'woven' in alternate rows of riveted and welded rings. A hip-length mail shirt or byrnie weighed about 25 pounds (11 kg) - no mean weight, especially considering that most of it had to be borne on the shoulders. It was fine so long as the fighting was static but mail was awkward to wear on the march, especially when going uphill. One reason why the Vikings lost the Battle of Stamford Bridge was that on a hot day they had decided to leave their armour behind with the ships. Similarly King Magnus of Norway threw away his ring-shirt during a battle in 1043. It could be more trouble than it was worth.

Mail gave the wearer a good degree of protection against cutting and glancing blows. It was less effective against arrows and spear thrusts. Some warriors probably wore a leather shirt under their mail. Kings and other wealthy men wore elaborate belt buckles and shoulder clasps. Nineteenth-century engravings of Saxon warriors often show them wearing fish-scale armour. This might have been cheaper and easier to make than mail, but not a single example has been found in this country. The most convincing example is on a stone carving of a Frankish warrior. Much cheaper than mail was leather. Padded leather 'jacks' were a surprisingly effective form of

body protection, whose quilted lining absorbed glancing blows. Deer hide worn by Vikings was said to be quite as strong as mail, and infinitely lighter and more flexible.

The better class of Dark Age warrior also wore protective head gear. At the top end, this consisted of an elaborate helmet. Early helmets were made of metal bands riveted together with nasal guards, neck-guard and hinged cheek-pieces similar to the helmets of the late



Seventh-century Saxon helmet unearthed from a burial during aggregate quarrying at Wollastone, Northants, in 1997. The boar emblem on the crown indicates that its wearer was a high-status warrior, possibly a king. The remains of a sword and a bronze bowl were found nearby.

Roman Empire. The Sutton Hoo helmet also has a face-mask, complete with metal eyebrows and a moustache. Some helmets bore crests. The seventh-century Benty Grange helmet gives an idea of what the great kings of Northumbria might have worn in battle, which in this case probably bore a plume of horsehair - somewhat like the knights of Rohan in the film of *The Lord of the Rings*. By the eleventh century, helmet design seems to have become simplified and more standardized. Canute and Harold Godwinson wore the familiar conical helmet with its nasal guard, apparently without any decoration or symbols of rank.

Other weapons

Spear and shield were the main weapons of Dark Age warfare. Other weapons were perhaps a matter of personal choice. Most people carried a knife for domestic use, and it would have made a familiar and useful weapon for close-quarter fighting. A longer single-edged combat knife could be almost as long as a sword when it was known as a *seax*. A rare piece of statuary from eighth-century Mercia shows a mailed horseman carrying a *seax* suspended horizontally from his belt. A *seax* attached to a pole would become a primitive pole-axe.

Combat axes became important in the eleventh century, and the long-shafted Danish axe was the housecarl's weapon of choice. Axe action is vividly shown on the Bayeux Tapestry, and was particularly suited to defence against a mounted charge. For most of our period axes may have been used for throwing rather than swinging. Light axes were thrown in such a way that the blade struck the target with great force. Even when they missed their target, men would naturally duck if an axe came whizzing their way. Hence throwing-axes were used to disrupt the enemy line in the last vital seconds before the lines collided.

Every hunting man of the Dark Ages was familiar with the bow. The bow of choice was the longbow, up to six feet long and made of a single piece of yew, ash or elm. Yet bows and arrows are surprisingly rare finds in this period. The Bayeux Tapestry shows only a single, forlorn English archer. On the other hand, 'bows were busy' at the Battle of Maldon.⁶ The bodkin arrow seems to have evolved specifically as a war-arrow designed for piercing mail. Archers were certainly used for a long-distance missile shower before throwing-spears, axes and possibly slings came into play. However they do not seem to have been deployed in a mass, as the Norman archers were at Hastings. Perhaps the bow was seen as a rather low-status form of soldiery, compared with spears, swords and axes, and so there were never enough of them.

Battle Tactics

Battle was a high-risk strategy. It brought matters to a decision and could save the country from the horrors of rampaging armies. On the other hand, if one lost a battle one risked losing everything, including, of course, one's life. No quarter was given to high-status prisoners in the Dark Ages. Even kings were summarily knocked on the head. A sensible commander therefore did everything possible to avoid battle unless he was confident of winning. Battles tended to happen when two forces were

more or less equally matched, or thought they were, or when the commander had run out of other options. The Dark Ages have plenty of examples of desperate measures taken to avoid battle with a superior force. King Oswy of Northumbria offered to buy off his enemy King Penda in 655. A few years before, his rival King Oswin of Deira had disbanded his army and sent them home rather than face Oswy in battle.

Once battle had become inevitable, Dark Age commanders would choose their ground carefully. When Penda refused to be bought off in 655, Oswy reduced the odds by deploying in a strong position on high ground, forcing Penda's forces to advance through a flooded river valley. A striking number of Dark Age battles were fought by fords in rivers. Perhaps the river not only secured at least one flank but enabled the army to be supplied by boats. At *Brunanburh* one flank of Athelstan's army was secured by a stream and the other by a wood. Finding a short line with secure flanks enabled a smaller army to negate the enemy's superior numbers and create several lines of defence. Another consideration was to have somewhere to retreat if things went badly. For example, at Dyrham in 577 the British commanders probably fought in front of their hillfort, retreating behind its stout walls as they were pressed back. Not that, in this case, it did them much good.

Dark Age battle tactics are difficult to reconstruct for want of evidence. The only detailed account of a real battle is Maldon, where tactical considerations went no further than standing firm. The commander 'bade his men make a war-hedge (*wihagen*) with their shields and hold it fast against the foe'. Like a hedge, the line would be long, straight and thin, and bristling with thorns - a thicket of spears. The more usual name for Maldon's war-hedge was the shield-wall (*bordweall*). The line would stand to receive a charge behind overlapping shields with spearpoints projecting. The advancing enemy would see a line of wood and metal, eyes glinting between helmet and shield, and the only flesh on display being the lower legs. Breaking through this human wall would be akin to breaching the walls of a fort, and one source did indeed compare the Battle of Hastings with a siege.

Since everyone, whether Saxon, Briton or Viking, adopted shield-wall tactics in battle, the challenge was how to break through. If the commander had chosen his ground well, it would be impossible to outflank him. Sometimes, perhaps, the opposing shield-walls simply advanced towards one another and fought it out. However there is evidence that Roman tactics were familiar to Dark Age commanders through tracts such as that of Vegetius, written down in the early fifth century. As a means of breaking through, Vegetius recommended the wedge, a tactic particularly favoured by the Vikings who compared it with a charging boar and called it *svinfylking* or 'swine-array'. Well-trained troops would mass in front of the shield-wall in wedge formation some ten lines deep. The wedge would then charge forward, keeping formation in order to penetrate the line with great force at a narrow point. Once the wall was broken more men would flood in and the enemy would be outflanked or even attacked from behind.

The correct way to prevent this, according to Vegetius, was to 'swallow the charge' by receiving it in a curved formation known as the forceps. It was easier to do this in a

dense formation, but of course required training and a cool commander. Both the wedge and its countermeasures depended on firmness under fire and on fighting together as a well-drilled unit. How well drilled, in fact, were Dark Age armies? No drill manuals have come down to us. On the other hand, re-enactment experience suggests that formations can be taught basic proficiency in spear-and-shield warfare very quickly. Mastery of the basic moves - open order, forming ranks, advancing from column to line and turning about (in which the shield is passed over your head) - can be learnt in a day. In terms of basic drill, levied men could be turned into soldiers in a short time. To create a soldier who would stand firm in battle was another matter. There are many instances of a Dark Age army disintegrating under pressure. Morale depended on strong leadership and a sense of comradeship. Other requirements were personal fitness, which was probably high among the yeoman class, and courage. Re-enactments have confirmed another contemporary aspect of fighting - that, as the shield-walls lock together, it helps to shout! As anyone who attends football matches or has marched in large, noisy demonstrations will know, you lose your individuality in a pack, especially when you yell with the rest.

How did Dark Age armies find one another? Although hard evidence is scarce, it seems that armies of the period were highly mobile. King Harold famously marched from London to York in twelve days at some seventeen miles per day. This implies two things: that at least the flying columns of the force were mounted and that the roads and bridges were kept in good repair. From the striking correlation of Dark Age battle sites with Roman roads and major ancient tracks like the Ridgeway, it is evident that Dark Age armies made good use of roads. Perhaps this explains how kings like Oswald and Ecgfrith could campaign far from home without maps or a compass. They simply followed the roads. They also used scouts and presumably enlisted local people as guides, though recorded instances are hard to find from this period.

Shire armies seem to have been mustered at traditional outdoor assemblies or moots, such as Swanborough Tump in Wiltshire during Alfred's Ashdown campaign or at Egbert's Stone somewhere on or near the border of Gloucestershire and Wiltshire at the start of Alfred's victorious campaign of 878. The shire reeves were responsible for ensuring that the men arrived on time and properly equipped. National service lasted for sixty days and, as the levies showed time and again, not a day longer. On more than one occasion, Alfred's commanders had to let the Danes escape because the shire levies insisted on their rights and went home. This alone might explain why Dark Age commanders often seemed anxious to get the fighting over and done with.

To maintain speed the army marched as light as possible. Heavy war gear was carried in the rear in carts or by packhorses. Towns were expected to supply the army with food and other necessities as it marched. Bede confirms this with his story of the man who escaped death at the Battle of the Trent by pretending to be a civilian ferrying food supplies to the army. We are in the dark about living conditions on the march, but it seems that armies did bring tents with them. In *Egill's Saga*, Athelstan used his city of tents to confuse the enemy about his battle deployment.

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Major towns and roads in the Dark Ages

The saga might be fiction, but it would make no sense to its listeners had not tents been a normal part of army life.

We know little about battle formations in the Dark Ages. Large armies were evidently divided into sub-units, serving under different lords. From the ninth century, the shire levies were led in battle by their respective reeves, as at Ringmere in 1010 when the men of Cambridgeshire and East Anglia fought in separate divisions. Men of the top social class, royalty or ealdormen, fought among their hearth-troops who were expected to defend their lord to the death. Ealdorman Byrhtnoth at Maldon probably acted in the way expected of Dark Age commanders by putting himself in a prominent position in the centre of the line where his banner would be visible to the rest of his force.



Swanborough Tump was the open-air moot or meeting place of the Hundred of *Swanbeorg* in the vale of Pewsey, Wilts. The county levies assembled here in 871 to resist the Danish invasion of Wessex.

Victory or defeat in a Dark Age battle depended on moral as well as physical strength. The professional Dark Age warrior, hearth trooper or mercenary, married late, if at all. The prime of his manhood was spent in the service of his lord, and he spent his leisure in the company of men, hunting, hawking and drinking. He lived on the cusp between the fiction of the sagas and praise poetry and the hard facts of military life: the former informed him of the way he was expected to behave, the latter of how heroic ideals worked out in practice. He repaid the mead he drank and the gifts he received by absolute loyalty and devoted service. One is bound to wonder: did the Dark Age warrior fear death in battle? It has been suggested that he was a fatalist: what will be, will be, and better to die gloriously than to live dishonourably. To fall in battle was considered an honourable death. Some warriors, especially the Welsh, thought that to die in bed was a disgrace. The trouble is that we do not know these people very well except through the doubtlessly idealized form of poetry. Although they might have been expected to conform to a heroic stereotype, the Battle of Maldon shows us that there were good and bad apples in every barrel. Some did indeed live and die according to their oaths. Others, it is clear, did not.

Did Dark Age Armies Fight on Horseback?

The key uses of horses on the battlefield were for intelligence gathering, the pursuit of a fleeing enemy, and for opposing or breaking up enemy cavalry formations. We know that most, if not all, Dark Age armies employed horses as transports, and on the

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march. The Vikings certainly depended on horses for mobility and speed, and they blackmailed local leaders into supplying them as the price of peace. For example, the sainted King Edmund supplied horses to Ivar's great army in 867 for his attack on York, and many of the Danish raids were for horses as well as food and removable wealth.

It has been truly said that the aristocracy did not often walk (the Bayeux Tapestry shows Harold dismounting only once, to save a soldier from drowning). They rode everywhere, and their halls would have included stable yards and smithies. A horse was part of any warrior's basic accoutrement. The Gododdin's 300 warriors rode to battle at *Catraeth*, and Ecgrith commanded a mounted force on his expedition to the lands of the Picts. Similarly Harold is known to have used mounted forces to suppress the Welsh in the 1050s. At Maldon, ealdorman Byrhtnoth rode in front of his army, although he dismounted and joined his household men before the battle commenced.

The question is not whether the armies of the age used horses but whether horses were used on the battlefield. The evidence is thin, but it is there. Even if we disregard the saga account of Harold's cavalry charges at Stamford Bridge as anachronistic, we still have the *Brunanburh* battle poem's evidence of 'chosen mounted companies' (*eorod-cysta*) used by Athelstan to pursue the beaten enemy. There is also the scene on the Aberlemno Stone which shows mounted warriors charging at a file of foot-soldiers. If, as seems likely, this stone records episodes of the Battle of Dunnichen, it forms startling evidence that, at least in the seventh century, units of the Saxon army fought on horseback.



Admittedly the impression given from most descriptive accounts is that men fought entirely on foot in a compact shield-wall. At the Battle of Hereford in 1055, the local English levies are said to have fled before a spear was thrown precisely because the local commander, who happened to be a Norman, had made them fight on horseback, contrary to custom. Perhaps the use of horses by the deeply traditional English was limited by the small size of their mounts, no larger than modern ponies. Horse warfare may have come more naturally to mercenary troops from the continent, for example, from Brittany or, later on, from Normandy. According to one account, Athelstan had Frankish and Breton troops in his army at *Brunanburh*. Were these the 'chosen mounted companies'?

Images from the Dark Ages. This seventh-century Pictish stone at Aberlemno, near the battlefield of Dunnichen, portrays a hunting party complete with cryptic double mirror and crescent symbols.

Perhaps the best conclusion we can come to is that, when the occasion warranted the use of 'men on horses with big sticks', then commanders had them and used them. The Britons seem to have used cavalry on the battlefield more often than the Saxons, for example at the famous downhill charge at Mount Badon. The Vikings and Saxons routinely used horses for harrying operations, but whether units of cavalry were retained for manoeuvre and pursuit on the battlefield is more questionable. It would have made sense to keep a mounted force in reserve to pursue the enemy or to cover a retreat. The successful pursuit of the Vikings after Ashdown, for example, is hard to account for without horses.

The Fate of Defeated Opponents

What were your chances of surviving a Dark Age battle? The chance find of probable battlefield grave-pits at Cuckney and Burrington (see below) indicates that fatalities could number in the hundreds. Some battles resulted in total annihilation. At *Anderida* in 491, for example, Aelle and his Saxons 'slew all the inhabitants; there was not even one Briton left'. A hundred years later King Aethelfrith swept through the northern counties of England 'exterminating or enslaving the inhabitants'. These were wars of conquest in which the aim was to drive out the Britons or reduce them to servitude. The Britons retaliated with equal savagery, as in 632 when Cadwallon, having disposed of his English adversary, King Edwin, 'set upon exterminating the entire English race, sparing neither women nor innocent children'. 'The general fate of those defeated in battle or taken in war', comments Matthew Strickland, 'was either death or enslavement'.

A stark illustration of what must sometimes have happened is displayed on Sueno's Stone in Forres, where decapitated prisoners lie in heaps, their hands still tied behind their backs. At the siege of Durham in 1003, earl Uhtred had the severed heads of enemies slain during the siege washed and groomed by local women (for which each lady was rewarded with a cow) before being placed on spikes along the public highways. The Viking era was particularly merciless. Some of the raids were marked by rape and torture. As Alfred Smyth noted, Viking poetry 'reflects a taste for violence on the part of the Norse aristocracy which verged on the psychopathic'. Because these raiders gave no quarter, they were offered none. After Ashdown, the West Saxons cut down every Viking they could lay their hands on. Even the civilized Alfred had two shipwrecked Viking sailors hanged out of hand.

The risks of battle were at least as high for the warrior elite as they were for the humbler levies. Many Dark Age kings fell in battle. Of all the kings that ruled Northumbria in its years of power, only one, Oswy, died in his bed (at the not very advanced age of 58). The rest were either killed in battle or assassinated. There is some evidence that leaders, especially kings, were deliberately targeted in battle. The Dark Ages had no rules of chivalry that spared the well-born. At *Brunanburh*, five kings and seven Viking 'jarls' lost their lives; at *Winwaed*, thirty 'famous commanders' were wiped out; at Ashdown, a king and five more jarls; at *Assingdun*, a bishop,

an abbot and three ealdormen. At the Battle of Maldon, the Vikings made the greatest efforts to identify the Saxon leader, Byrhtnoth, and pick him off. There were sound reasons for this. A battle generally came to a speedy conclusion after the death of the army commander, although his household men often chose to fight to the death.

It is likely that some men recorded as being killed in battle were in fact captured and executed afterwards. Such may have been the fate of the three British kings Coinmail, Condoddin and Farinmail after the Battle of *Deorham* in 577. Unlucky enough to be captured by the Vikings after a lost battle in 870, King Edmund of East Anglia was first beaten, then tied to a tree and shot with arrows. Finally they cut his head off and carried it away to prevent the king from enjoying himself in the afterlife. In 796, a captured king called Eadbeht Praen ('Edbert the Rich') was led bound to Mercia, where his eyes were put out and his hands cut off. The bodies of fallen kings were sometimes mutilated after death. The defeated King Edwin's head was carried off as a trophy. A few years later, the severed head of the Dal Riata King Domnall Brecc was stuck on a pole where it was gnawed by ravens. The dead King Oswald's arms, as well as his head, were hung up and exhibited on the battlefield, perhaps in a parody of the crucifixion. Battles against fanatical foes of different religions (all of which took a 'fundamentalist' line), or where there was 'bad blood' between a leader and his rival, were likely to be particularly ferocious.

Nonetheless there were rules. At Tempsford in 921, Edward the Elder slew everyone who had put up armed resistance but made prisoners of the rest. There was quarter for those not directly engaged in the battle. At Stamford Bridge in 1066, Harold spared those Norwegians who had not taken part in the battle but had stayed behind to guard the ships. Bede relates the story of a Northumbrian nobleman called Imma who, when taken prisoner after the Battle of the Trent in 679, protested that he was 'a poor married peasant who had come with others of his kind to bring provisions for the army'. His life was spared and his wounds treated, not so much out of compassion as because at the slave market he would be worth more healthy than sick. Later on, when Imma's real identity became apparent, his captor told him that, had he known of it, he would have put him to death there and then in revenge for his kinsmen slain in the battle. Instead he was sold to a Frisian merchant. Fortunately Imma had friends in high places and was able to buy his way out of trouble by paying the Frisian a ransom. The Imma story suggests that the fate of prisoners taken in battle was to some extent at least at the whim of their captor. It implies that, contrary to later practice, the prisoner was *more* likely to be killed if he was a noble or a warrior. Imma was spared partly because he was taken for a low-born peasant, and therefore of little account, but also because he persuaded his captor that he had only brought provisions to the field, and had not fought in the battle.

One reason why fighting was so entrenched in Dark Age culture was revenge. Dark Age aristocrats behaved rather like Sicilian bandits or rival Godfathers. Bad blood endured for decades, and caused not only village massacres and slayings but full-scale battles between rival war-lords. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle relates one such

feud between Cynewulf, king of Wessex and a sub-king called Sigebeht. The latter had been stripped of his lands 'for unlawful actions' and driven into Sussex where he was eventually 'stabbed to death by a herdsman' (the low status of the murderer may have made matters worse). This, the Chronicle tells us, 'avenged the ealdorman Cumbra', presumably a victim of Sigebeht. Later on, Sigebeht's son Cyneheard in turn avenged this blot on the family honour by killing Cynewulf himself, before being slain in his turn by Cynewulf's men.

The most famous feud in Dark Age history was skilfully reconstructed by Richard Fletcher in his book, *Bloodfeud*.⁸ Starting with the assassination of Uhtred, a Northumbrian nobleman, the feud passed through three generations, culminating in the massacre of one family by the other during a winter feast. However, under certain circumstances family honour could be satisfied by a payment, known as *wer-geld*, which was carefully graded according to the status of the slain. *Wer-geld* for slain kings was likely to be ruinously expensive. In 687, Kent was ravaged by a sub-king called Mul. The men of Kent managed to turn the tables and corner him in a house, which they set fire to. Mul and twelve of his men died in the flames. Mul's brother Caedwalla swore vengeance and harried the kingdom of Kent, burning and slaying without mercy. Caedwalla's wrath was finally appeased by a payment of 'thirty thousands' as *wer-geld* for the dead Mul. It sounds rather unfair that the Kentishmen should be made to pay up after having their lands ravaged twice over, but it did at least draw a line under the affair. Similarly the king of Mercia agreed to pay *wer-geld* to King Ecgfrith of Northumbria in 679 for the loss of his popular brother Aelfwine at the Battle of the Trent - even though Mercia had won the battle! Perhaps this incipient feud was nipped in the bud because Aelfwine had apparently been slain in honest battle rather than singled out for assassination.

The pagan Saxons and, still more, the pagan Vikings tend to be represented as merciless brutes, slaughtering and pillaging with few apparent restraints. The Vikings did not hesitate to slaughter the clergy. They killed three Frankish bishops out of hand in 859, and although they sometimes kept a high-ranking prisoner alive for his ransom, death was his likely lot if the ransom was not paid - for example, the grisly fate of Archbishop Aelfhere in 1013, beaten to death with ox-bones by drunken Vikings. The wars between Saxons and Welsh were also bitter. There never was much love lost between the two. The sense of being driven out from their rightful lands by the Saxon remained strong in Welsh culture and identity. The same was probably true of the Cornish (the 'West Welsh'), who were quick to make common cause with the Vikings against the English.

Christianity did at least bring some possibility of mercy and forgiveness. Bede has a story of how two captured heathen nobles were baptized before execution, an act regarded by all, including the victims, as merciful: their bodies were punished but their souls were saved. Conflicts were, on occasion, resolved by negotiation. After the Battle of Archenfield in 917, the men of Gloucestershire and Herefordshire cornered the remnant of a Danish raiding party in an enclosure. They could presumably have chosen to kill every last man at the cost of some of their own lives,

but instead agreed to let them go after the Danes made oaths to depart sealed by surrendering hostages. At Sherston in 1016, both sides seem to have ignored their leaders and decided to call it off.

Looking back, the Dark Ages were not one long period of anarchic violence. Apparently quite trivial causes were often enough to start another round of ravaging and burning; the whole community paid for the sins of its leaders. But there were also periods of peace - much of the eighth century for example - and some places, like East Anglia, were apparently free of major wars, at least until the Viking age. The most violent episodes of Dark Age history were usually short and highly localized, for example, in Kent during the dimly remembered conquests of Hengest, the later conquest of north Britain under Aethelfrith, or during Ceawlin's drive to the west coast in 577. Battles and sieges are most frequent during times of rapid social interchange, during the Saxon Conquest, the internecine wars of Northumbria and Mercia and the later Viking incursions.

So what *were* your chances of surviving a battle? Probably better than even, especially if your side won, or at least held its ground. We do not have reliable figures of the dead, wounded or missing for any Dark Age battle, but there is no reason to suppose that casualties were routinely higher than in later times. Dark Age weapons were less deadly than massed Welsh longbows or powder weapons. One way of surviving was running away. The larger part of most armies was levies, whose loyalties extended beyond their lord to their homes, families and farms. Sometimes, if they mistimed their departure, a battle could be followed by a slaughter. But the non-warrior class probably had a reasonable chance of escaping the field alive if things turned out badly.

Of course, it was better to win. Although reliable figures are lacking, there does seem to be a large disparity in casualties between winners and losers. At Ashdown for example, six named Viking princes were killed, among 'thousands' of others, but no named Saxons, or at least none that the chronicler felt able to mention. Many of the casualties of a battle were killed in the pursuit afterwards. For example, at *Brunanburh* the victorious English 'in troops pressed on in pursuit of the hostile peoples'.

Why was warfare in the Dark Ages so proverbially brutal and merciless? Matthew Strickland offers two main reasons. The first is that the wars of Briton against Saxon, pagan Saxon against Christian Saxon, and then Saxon versus Viking, were to some extent wars of religion. As in the early crusades (or, perhaps, in the ideological conflict between Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia) killing a heathen was seen as a praiseworthy act. And secondly, the Saxons, at least, believed that war under certain circumstances was not only just but a duty. The eleventh-century homilist Aelfric taught the righteousness of fighting for home and country against a foreign invader. As the *Brunanburh* poet expressed it, it was natural for men of royal lineage 'to defend their land, their treasure and their homes in frequent battle against every foe'. It was kill or be killed, and, beyond that, war was seen as an honourable calling. There were very few Dark Age pacifists.



Modern monument to a Dark Age battle: Fulford, at the gates of York, in 1066.

Battlefield Archaeology

Finding evidence of ancient battlefields below ground is normally a matter of luck. For pre-Conquest battlefields finds have been few and equivocal. Unlike musket balls, arrow-heads and spear-points soon rust away. Excavation of certain hill-forts has shed some light on warfare in the early Dark Ages. For example, the evidence that Liddington Castle had been refortified after the Roman withdrawal is a point in its favour as a possible site of the elusive battlefield of Mount Badon. Excavation has also revealed the layout of the Roman frontier town of Cataractonium in North Yorkshire and of everyday life in its crowded streets. But although Cataractonium almost certainly became the Dark Age settlement of Catraeth, it casts no new light on the whereabouts of the famous battle of that name celebrated in the lines of the oldest poem in British history, *The Gododdin*.

More direct evidence of a battle are mass graves. Relatively few have been discovered in Britain, but some of those few are from the Dark Ages. One such possible battle grave was found beneath the foundations of Cuckney Church in Nottinghamshire in 1950-1. It is said to have contained at least 200 skulls, and,

strikingly, all of them seemed to be those of fully grown adults. Since the present church dates from soon after the Norman Conquest, the grave was clearly of earlier date and indicates a catastrophe, such as a battle, that killed adults but not children. Given Cuckney's traditional association with King Edwin of Northumbria, this may well have been a mass grave dug after the battle of Heathfelth in 632, when Edwin's headless corpse is said to have been buried at nearby Edwinstowe. Unfortunately the bones are not available for inspection by modern forensic techniques which could certainly establish their approximate date and confirm the cause of death.

What was almost certainly another battlefield cemetery, this time from King Alfred's reign in the ninth century was uncovered at Buttington, a village by the River Severn in Gloucestershire, in 1838. Building work on the south-western perimeter of the churchyard revealed pits containing up to 400 skulls among other bones which had evidently been buried all at the same time. They were assumed, probably rightly, to be the bones of Alfred's warriors who fell in the battle of Buttington in 893, following a siege of a Viking camp by the river. The event, which is recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, resulted in the death of one Ordheh, King Alfred's thane, 'and many other king's thanes'. The bones were almost certainly those of Christians. The Vikings they were fighting were heathens and would not have been buried in consecrated ground. Again, the whereabouts of the bones today is unknown.

More evidence of ancient strife came to the surface during the building of South Benfleet railway station by the Thames opposite Canvey Island during the nineteenth century. Human bones and charred timbers preserved in the mud made a vivid reminder of the siege of Benfleet, in 894, when Londoners stormed the fortress of the Viking leader, Haesten, and captured ships and goods, as well as the Viking women and children, who were carried off to London and Rochester. Most of the ships were broken up and burned on the spot, and it was their timbers that had lain by the river for a thousand years. Unfortunately the Viking camp, whose walls were still visible in the nineteenth century, has been lost to modern development. The graves of the English fallen are said to lie near Benfleet Church.

The only pre-Conquest battlefield graves to have been investigated by archaeologists are at York and Riccall where bones bearing the distinctive marks of battle wounds were assigned to the mid-eleventh century, possibly from the invading army of Harald Hardrada in 1066. Many more graves may lie hidden and unknown, possibly in lost churchyards like the mysterious church 'of stone and lime' that King Canute had built on the battlefield of Assandun 'for the souls of those men that had been slain there'. One day, perhaps, they will be found and an obscure conflict known only from ancient annals will suddenly become famous.

Visiting Dark Age Battlefields

The problem about visiting Dark Age battles is that we can rarely be sure exactly where they are. Even some of the best-known ones have at least two possible sites.

Pre-Conquest battles were fought too long ago for traces of local folk-memory to survive, and there have been remarkably few archaeological battle finds. This is the main reason why, of all the major battlefields in England identified and registered by English Heritage, only one, Maldon, dates from before 1066.¹⁵ Similarly, in Scotland only Dunnichen/Nechtansmere has been proposed as an official battle site.¹⁶ The evidence for the others is simply too thin to enable the battlefield to be located, even when the general locality is known beyond reasonable doubt, as at Dyrham or Edington. Some Dark Age battles, like *Winwaed* or *Brunanburh*, were important historical events which determined the course of history and whose sites, if known, would certainly deserve protection. But until archaeology yields some unambiguous clues their famous names refuse to be anchored to a particular place.

This does not mean that Dark Age battles cannot be looked for. By combining the available sources with a reasoned discourse about what must have happened, Alfred Burne proposed plausible sites for at least nine. He may or may not have been right in each case, but it is an exercise that anyone can undertake, especially as most of the sources are now readily available (more so than when Burne was writing in the 1940s and early 1950s). To me, the mere possibility that Liddington Hill is the site of the remote Battle of Badon adds a historical *frisson* to a walk along that windy ridge. The seeker of Dark Age battles will become a connoisseur of hill-forts, like the mighty works at Old Sarum and Badbury where Briton fought Saxon for the long-term destiny of England. We might not know exactly how Cynric overcame the great walls of *Searoburh*, but we can enjoy ourselves speculating how he might have achieved it. Dark Age battles were often fought in remote country which is still remarkably unspoiled. One can still stand on Ashingdon Hill, perhaps in the footsteps of Edmund Ironside, and see, as he did, the hill of Canewdon at the opposite end of a ridge where Canute's Danes were camped, and beyond to the broad River Crouch where his ships were beached. *Ethandun*, Ashdown, Dunnichen, Hingston Down and the approximate sites of dozens of other Dark Age battle offer some fine walking in open country of hills and valleys in which an aura of the distant past still seems to cling. Even battle sites that have, at first glance, been overtaken by suburbs, like *Ellandun* or Benfleet, repay exploration. The past lives on in places like Ashingdon and Edington where the Saxon names for battles adorn the village signs, or in the Wirral whose claim to the lost Battle of *Brunanburh* has become an issue of local pride.

Many sites connected with Dark Age battles are open to the public or accessible via the footpath network, or, recently, as open land where people can now roam. Actual monuments to Dark Age battles are few, but they are increasing. *Ethandun* received a fine memorial stone during the Millennium celebrations, and panel board displays have sprung up by roadsides and car parks for Maldon, Heavenfield, Stamford Bridge and no doubt others. The 'Alleluia Battle' of *c.429* has a fine monument erected in the eighteenth century on what was then thought to be the battlefield. A fine eighteenth-century cross marks the place near Alnwick where King Malcolm Canmore received his death-wound in 1093. A monument to commemorate the

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Battle of Dunnichen was unveiled in the village in 1985. Several Dark Age battles were commemorated by churches. Those at Ashingdon (or alternatively at Ashdon), Oswestry, Heavenfield and Benfleet are believed to lie under the foundations of the existing church. If so they must have originated as places where prayers were offered for the battle dead, and should be close to, if not actually on, the scene of battle.

monks'. More plausibly, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle says there were 200 monks, although that is still rather a lot for a single monastery. Possibly among them was Iago ap Beli, a member of the royal house of Gwynedd, who had turned monk, as royal children and even retired kings often did in the seventh century.

Told who they were, the pagan Aethelfrith retorted that 'If they are crying to their God against us, they are fighting even if they do not bear arms'. He thereupon directed his first onslaught against the monks, who were promptly deserted by Brocmail and his men. The monks were slaughtered to a man. This, Bede tells us with uncharacteristic spite, was the fulfilment of St Augustine's prophecy that 'if the Welsh will not have peace with us (i.e. the Roman church), they shall perish at the hands of the Saxons'.

There are few other details about the battle, and the battlefield probably lies under the northern suburbs of the modern city. All we know is that Aethelfrith 'destroyed the rest of the accursed army, not without heavy losses to his own forces'. As a result, Chester became an English city, and Cheshire an English county. It seems to have represented the culminating point of Aethelfrith's campaign of conquest to settle the north-west England with warrior-farmers.

Good King Edwin

Just as Aethelfrith's earlier successes alarmed his northern neighbours, so his excursions into the English Midlands brought him into conflict with the Saxon king of East Anglia, Raedwald. Scarcely noticed in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Raedwald was immortalized in death by the riches of his probable burial chamber at Sutton Hoo. Thanks to the Sutton Hoo treasures we can picture him in his elaborate, embellished helmet, his pattern-welded sword worn on a decorated belt with its huge, solid-gold belt-buckle, and his great cloak with its gorgeous clasps worn over a tunic of mail. He was a man of the new age, half-Christian, half-pagan, sanctified in his kingship but adhering to the old ways and surrounded by the trappings of wealth and prestige.

The immediate cause of conflict between the two English kings was the presence at Raedwald's court of Edwin (Eadwine), heir to the kingdom of Deira. Aethelfrith at first tried to bribe his fellow king to have Edwin assassinated. When that failed, he demanded that Edwin be handed over. Instead, Raedwald decided it would serve his interests better if he reinstated Edwin in his kingdom and got rid of the troublesome Aethelfrith at the same time. Secretly and speedily, Raedwald used his wide-ranging power as a *bretwalda* to gather together a large army from his extensive *imperium* in southern and eastern England. With Edwin in tow, he set out towards York in the summer or early autumn of 616.

He was in luck. Aethelfrith was left with insufficient time to summon his full strength. The Bernician king unwisely gave battle on the east bank of the River Idle, the border between the English kingdoms of Mercia and Deira. Heavily outnumbered, Aethelfrith went down fighting - but not before Raedwald's son Raegenhere had also been killed. The Battle of the River Idle reinstated Edwin on

the Deiran throne and drove Aethelfrith's own brood of seven sons into exile. The battle probably took place where the Roman road from Lincoln to Doncaster forded the river at the Yorkshire village of Bawtry. Excavations in 1983 determined the exact site of the crossing a few hundred yards north of the present road bridge. The Roman road, which, given its importance, had probably been kept in good repair as far as possible, crossed the river floodplain on a causeway of oak timber piles on a layer of gravel. We can therefore imagine the battle taking place around the ford, with Raedwald's men attempting to force the crossing and break through Aethelfrith's lines on the far side.

According to Bede, Edwin became the most powerful king England had yet seen, with an ill-defined *imperium* or lordship stretching over a confederation of English kingdoms from Kent to the Scottish borders, and even at one point into Wales. His power rested on personal alliances but also, of course, on force. He consolidated English gains in the north by expelling the last British king of Elmet, made war on the Welsh in Gwynedd and Anglesey, and even took possession of the Isle of Man. But as well as making war, Edwin also upheld the peace. A century later, said Bede, the proverb still ran that in the days of good King Edwin a woman could carry her newborn babe across Britain from end to end without fear, unlikely as it may seem. On his horseback perambulations across Britain surrounded by his thegns, Edwin was preceded by a standard similar to those carried at the head of Roman legions and featuring a globe mounted on a spear. As a baptized Christian, Edwin received the approval of clerical writers like Bede. Even so, he comes across not only as the first king of the English but as the first all-round 'Mr Anglo-Saxon nice guy'!

Of course some parts of Britain did not see Edwin in that light at all. To the Welsh, for example, he was 'Edwin the Deceiver'. The bitterest of his enemies was Cadwallon ap Cadfan of Gwynedd, whom Edwin had at one point driven from his kingdom to cower on the tiny island of Priestholm (Puffin Island) off the east coast of Anglesey. Cadwallon demonstrated the latent power that still remained in the British kingdoms by moving across the Pennines to strike at the English settlements while Edwin was preoccupied in Gwynedd.

In 632, in a mighty alliance with Penda, the ambitious new king of Mercia, Cadwallon's army marched on York, very probably along the same route that Raedwald had used seventeen years before. This time it was Edwin who was caught off guard. On 12 October, the two armies clashed at the Battle of *Haethfelth*, whose name in modern English is Hatfield. In the Welsh annals, where the battle is called Meigen (*Gueith Meicen*), its date is moved backwards rather improbably to the Kalends of January, that is, to New Year's Day.

Saxon *Haethfelth* was both a settlement and also the name given to a sub-province of low-lying land between the Don and the Humber. It was a desolate no-man's-land, the boundary between what Bede called 'the southern and northern English'. Like Aethelfrith before him, Edwin had probably rushed to these borderlands to defend his homeland with whatever forces he could muster. It was not enough to prevent an annihilating defeat. We can imagine Cadwallon, as his bard remembered him,