

English Heritage Battlefield Report: Maldon 991

Maldon (10 August 991)

Parish: Maldon

District: Maldon

County: Essex

Grid Ref: TL 867055

Historical Context

In AD 980, but two years into the long reign of the English king Æthelred II, 'the Unready', (978-1016), the Vikings returned to Britain bringing war to English society after almost a generation of peace. With armies more numerous and better organised than any confronted by Alfred the Great, the Vikings attacked and plundered England for the next thirty-six years. The first attack, by seven Scandinavian ships, fell on Southampton and it initiated a period in English history which has been characterised as one of recurrent doom, during which the Norsemen found a country rich in resources and wealth yet ill-equipped to defend itself.

Æthelred's reign has become an abiding symbol of military futility with both the King and his people apparently incapable of either defeating, or making peace with, the invaders. Yet the Viking descent in 980 found an England which, in terms of military effectiveness, was very different to the country which Alfred had mobilised against the Vikings. A politically unified England was at peace and commercial expansion, rather than defence, was seen as the priority. There was no longer a standing field army and the provision of permanent garrisons for fortified towns had been allowed to fall into disuse along with the very walls and ditches they were meant to defend. Moreover, the Viking raids of the 980s, although of great concern to coastal boroughs, were sporadic and on a relatively modest scale.

At that stage it may not have appeared necessary to divert central government resources to dealing with what was seen essentially as a problem for local authorities. Certainly, Æthelred did not possess any central strategy for combating the Vikings until after the defeat at Maldon had shown the true gravity of the situation. Thereafter, Æthelred used tribute to secure temporary peace with the Vikings, and diplomacy first to divide and then to recruit his enemies as allies. The King also began a significant programme of military building, both to provide new defences for the boroughs and to construct a naval force capable of denying the Vikings easy access to the English coast. That this strategy ultimately failed was due to errors in its execution, to treachery, and also to the fact that England faced Scandinavian armies of the calibre of those led by Swein Forkbeard and his son Cnut the Great.

Location and Description of the Battlefield

The battlefields of Early England (c.410-1060) are notoriously difficult to locate geographically. The chronicle and archaeological record seldom provides evidence of sufficient detail to allow the pinpointing of a battlefield and considerable supposition is usually required. Even so, a small number of battles from this period can be located with a degree of confidence and Maldon is one of them.

The entry for AD 991 in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (Manuscript A) presents a basic record of the events surrounding the Battle of Maldon:

In this year Olaf came with 93 ships to Folkestone, and ravaged round about it, and from there went to Sandwich, and so from there to Ipswich, and overran it all, and so to Maldon. And

Ealdorman Brihtnoth¹ came against him there with his army and fought against him; and they killed the ealdorman there and had control of the field....²

The *Chronicle* provides no clue as to where the battle was fought except that it was in the vicinity of the town of Maldon (*swa to Mældune*). The references to Ipswich and to Brihtnoth, who was Æthelred's thegn and the Ealdorman of Essex, are sufficient justification for the conclusion that this must be Maldon in Essex. Brihtnoth had extensive land-holdings in the eastern counties and particularly in Essex, and it would have been natural for the Ealdorman and his retainers to wish to defend their own lands in the region. Evidence from extant wills shows that in defending the vicinity of Maldon, Brihtnoth was fighting at a spot within a mile or two of some of his many manors. Maldon lies on the estuary of the River Blackwater which flows into the North Sea, and this marries well with the certain knowledge that the Vikings' chosen form of strategic mobility was the longship and their line of communication the sea. For a Viking, Maldon was a desirable target as it had possessed a royal mint since at least the reign of Æthelstan (924-939). The Maldon mint was not large but it confirmed the town's importance and the probability of discovering wealthy merchants in its vicinity.

Maldon had borne the brunt of defence against an invader on previous occasions, most notably between 912-917 when its fortifications had been used as a forward base by King Edward the Elder against the Colchester Danes. In 917 the Danes laid siege to Maldon, but their failure to take the borough and their subsequent rout forced them to make peace. Maldon was thus of both economic and strategic interest to any large-scale Viking attack upon the eastern counties of England.

For a more precise location of the battlefield we must rely upon a fragment of the Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon*. The 325 surviving lines of this vernacular poem represent the only 'contemporary' account to offer any detail as to the topography of the battlefield. The poem provides a stirring view of the battle from behind the English fighting-line, and the part played by geography in the tactics of the Saxons is recorded.

In 1925 E D Laborde³ argued that the combination of topographical and tidal factors surrounding the battle, as set out in the poem, could only be fulfilled if the battlefield was centred upon Northey Island causeway to the south of the town of Maldon on the estuary of the River Blackwater. *The Battle of Maldon* is full of topographical allusion, suggesting perhaps that the poet knew the site personally or was even present during the battle, and if Northey is to be accepted as the battlefield site it must meet the topographical and tactical demands of the poem.

It is clear from *The Battle of Maldon* that the Vikings had established themselves on an island separated from the Essex mainland by a tidal river. The river could be crossed by a causeway, but only at low tide, and although Brihtnoth deployed his army on the opposing shore the Vikings were unable to engage the Saxons because it was still high water:

Then he (Brihtnoth) bade the warriors advance, bearing their shields, until they all stood on the river bank. Because of the water neither host might come to the other. There came the tide, flowing in after the ebb; the currents met and joined. All too long it seemed before they might clash their spears together. Thus in noble array they stood about Pante's stream, the flower of the East Saxons and the shipmen's host. None of them might harm another, unless a man should meet his death through a javelin's flight.⁴

Pante's stream which separated the two armies ('Pantan stream mid prasse bestodon': line 68), is the old name for the River Blackwater and above Bocking, north of Braintree, the river is still known by it. The Blackwater flows round Northey Island with the incoming tide covering a causeway at the western end of the Island where it prevents a crossing at high tide. More significantly the tide approaches the causeway from both north and south simultaneously and locks together at the western tip of Northey ('the currents met and joined').

As the armies waited for the water level to fall the Vikings attempted to negotiate terms for their withdrawal, a

messenger shouting their offer across the water:

Then the messenger of the Vikings stood on the bank, he called sternly, uttered words, boastfully
speaking the seafarers' message to the earl, as he stood on the shore.

The distance between the bank of the Island and the shore of the mainland must thus have been short enough to allow speech to be heard by both sides, but wide enough to prevent the armies inflicting destruction on each other ('None of them might harm another, unless a man should meet his death through a javelin's flight'). Geological investigation by G R Petty and S Petty in 1973 established⁵ that in 991 the channel between Northey and the mainland at high tide was approximately 120 yards wide and not almost 240 yards as it is today. Shouted negotiation across the causeway would have been possible and the two armies would have been within bowshot range. As the tide ebbed, the Vikings advanced and the Northey causeway now met another of the poem's imperatives in relation to the Blackwater:

The wolves of slaughter pressed forward, they recked not for the water, that viking host; west over
Pante, over the gleaming water they came....

The Vikings advanced westwards across the Blackwater ('Pante'). The Northey causeway runs westwards from the island to the mainland.

The causeway is variously referred to in the poem as a bridge ('bricge') or ford ('forda') and both terms are appropriate in describing the link between Northey and the mainland. This is not to say that a causeway as we know it today existed in 991, but a crossing point of some kind certainly did. The Pettys have shown that there has always been a channel at this point (though not the main channel of the Blackwater), and that in 991 the crossing, at its lowest point, was covered at high tide to a depth of approximately six to eight feet. At low tide the presence of deep, impassable silt on either side of the crossing would have made some form of causeway indispensable. On the mainland end of the causeway the saltings which we see today would either have not been present in 991 or very limited in extent. Similarly, the banks on the mainland would have been relatively narrow and firm red soil ran down almost to the water's edge. It would thus have been possible for Brihtnoth, as the poem states, to bid 'the warriors advance, bearing their shields, until they all stood on the river bank'.

A significant feature of the topography of the poem is its references to a nearby wood:

Then Offa's kinsman first perceived that the earl would suffer no faintness of heart; he let his loved
hawk fly from his hand to the wood and advanced to the fight.

With him (Godric) his brothers both galloped away, Godwine and Godwig, they had no taste for war,
but turned from the battle and made for the wood, fled to the fastness and saved their lives....

It is interesting to note that to the west and south-west of the Northey site are to be found parishes with place-names suggestive of ancient woodland. Woodham Walter and Woodham Mortimer, immediately to the west, derive their names from the Old English 'wuda-ham' signifying 'forest manor or 'woodland estate'. To the south-west the names of the parishes of Hazeleigh and Purleigh contain the Old English 'leah', meaning 'forest with a glade' or 'open woodland'.

There are, of course, other crossing points on the estuary and two, in particular, need to be eliminated as possible sites for the battle. Professor A E Freeman in *The Norman Conquest* (1869) placed the battle at the 'high bridge', or as it became known in the twelfth century Heybridge, one mile to the north of Maldon (TL 854080). Freeman chose Heybridge because it is near Maldon, the rivers Blackwater and Chelmer join just north of the town thus separating the two armies, and a bridge existed to allow them to give battle. Freeman made Brihtnoth approach from the north thus placing the Vikings with their backs to Maldon, effectively

trapping them between the Saxon army and the town. Yet there is no mention of the town in the poem, and the crucial imperatives of tide and tactics specified by the poet would not have come into play at Heybridge.

A more serious site is presented by the causeway linking the north shore of the Blackwater Estuary near Decoy Point (TL 892071) to Osea Island close to West Point (TL 904066). The problem here is that the distance between Decoy Point and Osea today is nearly a mile, and even if the channel has widened since 991 it is difficult to imagine it being possible to shout across, or launch a missile over, this causeway. A landing from Osea would also entail a much more difficult approach march to Maldon for the Vikings, and Decoy Point would represent a very poor choice of position by any commander defending the town. The Osea causeway does, however, like Northey, meet the criteria of a westward advance across the Blackwater, and Brihtnoth was lord of the manor of Great Totham of which Osea was part.

Laborde's thesis on the location of the battle has been widely accepted, though it was challenged in 1963 by J B Bessinger⁶.

The Landscape Evolution

Isostatic adjustment since the withdrawal of ice coverage at the end of the last Ice Age (10,000 years b.p.) means the South East of England is slowly sinking. As a consequence the relative sea level has risen since 991 and caused a number of changes to the coastal landscape. Foremost among these has been the establishment of extensive intertidal salt marsh and flood plains. The sea wall (depicted on the 1822 Tithe Map) would have been constructed to help reclaim some of this flooded land. Evidence from the later 1st Edition OS maps shows that much of the coastal area was regularly flooded as late as the turn of the century. This land has now been reclaimed for agriculture and is in fact considerably lower than Mean High Water to seaward of the sea wall.

As we have seen, the channel itself has widened at high tide from approximately 120 yards in AD 991 to some 240 yards today. The large expanse of saltings present today may not have existed in 991. In their place was compacted red soil, undisturbed by water channels, and covered by low, broad-bladed grasses shelving gently to the river bank. The banks themselves extended only a few feet back from the water, but at low tide they were steep and treacherous underfoot. The tidal action, although gentler than today, was in other respects identical in 991.

The battlefield area is the lowest ground in the vicinity. The ground rises immediately to the east and south of the battlefield area, fields which have not apparently been subjected to flooding in the past. The higher ground to the north now is a reclaimed landfill site upon which some recent tree planting is evident.

The extensive areas of saltmarsh fronting the estuary banks, and the flood control dyke, are features of some prominence in today's landscape.

The Battle: its sources and interpretation

A reconstruction of the military events that took place at Maldon on 10 August 991 can be simply stated. Brihtnoth, Ealdorman of Essex, commanding the East Saxon *fyrð*, intercepted an army of Viking raiders at Northey Island. Separated by a tidal river the opposing forces entered into negotiations, with the Vikings offering to leave peacefully in return for a payment of tribute. With their offer rejected by Brihtnoth and the water level at the causeway connecting the Island to Maldon now falling, the Vikings prepared to advance to battle. Their progress, however, was blocked by three Saxon warriors defending the western end of the causeway. Again negotiations began, and Brihtnoth agreed that the Vikings might have unimpeded passage across the causeway to the point where the Saxons would be waiting in battle array. The Vikings now faced the Saxons on the west bank of the River Blackwater below Maldon and a savage and bloody battle followed. The

Ealdorman was cut down and with his death a large part of the Saxon army fled. Brihtnoth's retainers, however, fought to the death around the body of their lord, inflicting heavy casualties on the raiders before the last Saxon was killed.

Substantiating the above account of events at Maldon with acceptable evidence is of course difficult. The written sources documenting the battle are not numerous and in comparison they reveal both inaccuracies and contradictions. Moreover, scholarly work on the sources continues and many are still subject to re-appraisal. The extant sources can be divided conveniently into those that predate the Norman Conquest and are thus contemporary or near-contemporary, and those compiled after 1066. Of the pre-Conquest sources the most notable are the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the *Life of St. Oswald*⁷, and the poem *The Battle of Maldon*.

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* represents the main narrative source for any account of the political events of Æthelred's reign, but in the case of Maldon it provides little more than a brief record that the battle took place, that Brihtnoth was killed, and that the Vikings were victorious (see above). The *Chronicle* has survived in five main manuscripts referred to as A, C, D, E, and F. Manuscript A is the oldest with entries up to AD 891 written in one hand of the late ninth or early tenth century, but it is at least two stages removed from the original and it is carelessly written.

Brihtnoth's fate is recorded in all the surviving copies of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* which have entries for the 990s. Manuscript A, however, presents the most detail, reporting not only that a Viking named Olaf (possibly Olaf Tryggvason, King of Norway AD 995-1000) led the raiders, but that his fleet comprised 93 ships and that before descending on Maldon he had attacked Folkestone, Sandwich and Ipswich⁸. That, however, is the sum of Manuscript A, and although it has taken us some way forward, it is this version of the *Chronicle* which is responsible for creating confusion about the actual date of the battle.

Whereas versions C, D, E, and F of the *Chronicle* date the Battle of Maldon as 991, version A's reference to the battle is included with the entry for AD 993. The former date is usually accepted as correct and the error in version A is attributed either to the fact that it is a retrospective annal inserted after the importance of Maldon had been grasped, or simply to an error by a scribe who had already entered information relating to 993 on the same page. If we accept the entries in Manuscripts C, D, E and F we have the year in which the battle took place, but to pinpoint the day we must rely upon abbey calendars. The abbey calendars of Winchester and Ramsey record the death of Brihtnoth on 11 August 991 while that of Ely cites 10 August. The battle may therefore have been fought on either 10 or 11 August 991, but given the close connection deriving from Brihtnoth's substantial patronage of Ely, and his burial there, it seems probable that the Abbey must once have known the date of the Ealdorman's death with some accuracy.

The *Life of St. Oswald* written by Byrhtferth of Ramsey between AD 997-1005 provides a near contemporary source for the battle which is almost certainly independent of the poem *The Battle of Maldon*. As such it is valuable in confirming that a battle took place at Maldon and that Brihtnoth was a leading participant in the action. It also confirms the brutal and destructive style of warfare waged by the Danes, and Byrhtferth records the entry of the Vikings into English life in apocalyptic terms:

... before he (Æthelred) had passed the age of adolescence, the Prince Behemoth rose against him ...
 During his reign the abominable Danes came to the Kingdom of the English, and laying waste and burning everything, did not spare men, but, glorying in flashing blades and poisoned arrows, armed themselves in bronze helmets, in which they fought and were wont to terrify beholders.⁹

Brihtnoth is seen as a champion of Christian values against the Prince of Darkness and his struggle is sustained by religious virtue:

When not many months had passed, another very violent battle took place in the east of this famous

country, in which the glorious Ealdorman Brihtnoth held the front rank, with his fellow soldiers ... He himself, tall in stature, stood conspicuous above the rest; his hand was not sustained by Aaron and Hur, but supported by the manifold faithfulness of the Lord, since he was worthy. He smote also on his right hand, unmindful of the swan-like whiteness of his head, for alms-deeds and holy masses strengthened him. He protected himself on his left hand, forgetful of the weakness of his body, for prayers and good deeds sustained him. And when the beloved leader in the field saw his enemies fall, and his own men fight bravely and cut them down in many ways, he began to fight with all his might for his country. An infinite number, indeed of them and of our side perished, and Brihtnoth fell, and the rest fled. The Danes also were wondrously wounded, and could scarcely man their ships.

Notwithstanding the fact that the account of the battle is set firmly in a biblical mould, or that the sole surviving manuscript of the *Life of St. Oswald* was written by an incompetent scribe at Worcester who succeeded in reducing much of the text to gibberish, it is possible to salvage something of historical value. We learn that although Brihtnoth was advanced in years ('the swan-like whiteness of his head' and 'forgetful of the weakness of his body'), he was a tall man of commanding presence who fought in the front rank of his army. The turning point in the battle comes with the death of Brihtnoth, and although the Saxons were defeated with heavy losses they inflicted casualties on the Vikings which made it difficult for them to man their ships.

Of the post-Conquest sources that mention Maldon, many originated as monastic histories and few have anything of substance to add to the textual record of the battle that existed at the time of their composition. The *Chronicle of Chronicles* by John of Worcester (circulated c.1120) and the *History of the Kings* attributed to Symeon of Durham (written c.1140-50), simply note that the battle occurred in 991 and that Brihtnoth was killed along with a large number from both armies. Henry of Huntingdon in his entry for 991 in the *History of the English* (written c.1129-54) is more precise in his record of detail:

Ealdorman Brihtnoth indeed opposed them with great forces and fought them, but was defeated. He was killed, cut down by swords, and his troops were driven back and destroyed.

Brihtnoth deployed 'great forces', he was 'cut down by swords', and 'his troops were driven back and destroyed'.

The *Liber Eliensis*¹⁰, a compendium of sources brought together at Ely over many years and possibly completed between 1169-74, provides an idiosyncratic account of the battle probably written more to celebrate Brihtnoth's connection with Ely than to provide an accurate historical record. It conflicts with other sources in fundamental ways:

Accordingly, at one time, when the Danes landed at Maldon, and he (Brihtnoth) heard the news, he met them with an armed force and destroyed nearly all on the bridge over the water. Only a few of them escaped and sailed to their own country to tell the tale.¹¹

This is not, as might be supposed, an account of the battle of 991 in which the scribe has mistakenly identified the Saxons as the victors, for:

When Ealdorman Brihtnoth returned quickly to Northumbria after this victory, the Danes, greatly saddened by the news, fitted out another fleet, hastened to England, and landed at Maldon again four years later to avenge the killing of their men, with Justin and Guthmund, the son of Stecta, as their leaders. When they reached the harbour and learned that it was Brihtnoth who had done these things to their men, they at once sent word that they had come to avenge them, and that they would hold him a coward, if he would not dare join battle with them. Moved to boldness by their messengers, Brihtnoth summoned together his former comrades for this matter and, led by the hope of victory and his excessive boldness, he set out with a few warriors on the road to battle ...

We thus have a first Battle of Maldon fought in AD 987 in which Brihtnoth was victorious and which spurred the Danes to attack again in 991. This time the Ealdorman fought to defend his honour and rushed into battle at Maldon with a small band of warriors:

On arrival there, he was neither shaken by the small number of his men, nor fearful of the multitude of the enemy, but attacked them at once, and fought them fiercely for fourteen days. On the last day, with few of his men remaining (and) realising that he was going to die, he did not fight the less actively against the enemy, but almost put them to flight after inflicting great slaughter on them. In the end, heartened by the small number of his men, the enemy made a wedge and, grouping together, rushed with one resolve upon him and with great effort, just managed to cut off his head as he fought. They took this away from there with them as they fled to their native land.

This account of a battle stretching over fourteen days is supported in only one bizarre respect; the fact that, according to James Bentham, historian of Ely Cathedral, Brihtnoth's corpse when disinterred in 1769 lacked the head. In other respects the version of the Battle of Maldon given in the *Liber Eliensis* is not repeated elsewhere.

Whilst it is difficult to assess how independent of *The Battle of Maldon* the other sources are, it is worth recognising that contemporary and later writers, although of varying quality, do provide a supporting context in which to place the information about the battle contained in the poem. Before we even turn to the evidence in the poem, it can be argued that a battle was fought at Maldon in Essex on 10 August 991; that it was fought between Saxons and Vikings; that the Saxon commander was Ealdorman Brihtnoth, a leader of physical presence and stature who fought in the front rank; that the force commanded by Brihtnoth was for the period large in numbers; that the combat was particularly bloody; that many Saxons fled when their leader was cut down; and that casualties on both sides were heavy.

The poem *The Battle of Maldon*, although primarily heroic literature and thus subject to the conventions of its form, is still the only source to present a picture of the events of the battle itself and the associated geography of the battlefield. Its author is unknown, as are the circumstances in which it was written and the date on which it was completed. The poem may have been commissioned by Brihtnoth's widow Ælfflæd, who donated a textile hanging depicting her husband's deeds to Ely, and there is nothing in the style or language of the poem to suggest that it is anything but contemporary to the battle.

The first surviving reference to the poem occurs in the library catalogue of Sir Robert Cotton (1571-1631), the antiquarian book-collector. A manuscript catalogue of the Library dated 1621 lists the poem as part of Volume 29 with the title *Fragmentum Historia Saxonum in Lingua Saxonica* (Fragment, History of the Saxons in the Saxon Language). In 1731 while it was stored at Ashburnham House, Westminster, and when it had already been acquired by the nation, a considerable portion of Volume 29 was destroyed by fire, including every leaf containing the poem. Fortunately, a transcript of the 'Fragment' had already been completed and had been published as part of an edition of John of Glastonbury's Chronicle in 1726. Since the early nineteenth century the Fragment has been entitled by its editors *The Battle of Maldon*.

Although the poem provides the sequence of events during the battle, it gives only minimal information concerning the military organisation of Brihtnoth's army at Maldon and none regarding its size. The military potential of England in the tenth century depended upon the fulfilment of the three 'Common burdens' due from all landed estates: *fyrdfærel* (service in the army), and *burhbot* and *brycgegeweorc* (the construction and repair of fortifications and bridges). Anyone holding land was duty bound to respond to the king's summons to war and to provide a specified number of warriors from amongst his own retainers.

This goes only part way towards explaining who fought at Maldon. Was Brihtnoth's army a national force consisting of men drawn from a number of ealdordoms across England, or a provincial force consisting of no

more than the *fyrð* of a particular shire? In line 69 of the poem there occurs the phrase: *Eastseaxena ord*. This has been variously translated as 'the flower of the East Saxons', 'the Essex vanguard' and 'the Essex battle-line'¹², and it implies that Brihtnoth commanded men predominantly from Essex.

Henry of Huntingdon's reference to Brihtnoth's 'great forces' should not be taken to mean that tens of thousands took part in the battle. Although Henry's text suggests that the Saxon army was destroyed we have no record of the number of casualties suffered by either side, or indeed even an approximate number for the forces engaged. This is not unusual for the battles of the period and the assumption would be that the forces of both sides were numerically weak. The laws of the West Saxon king, Ine (AD 688-94), for example, declared that 'we call up to seven men "thieves"; from seven to thirty-five a "band"; above that is an "army"'.¹³ Contemporaries, however, appear to have regarded the Battle of Maldon as exceptional in terms of the size of the forces involved, although the only clue they provide is the assertion in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (Manuscript A) that the Vikings arrived at Folkestone in 93 ships.

It is generally accepted that Viking longships were of two main designs, the larger crewed by approximately 60 men and the smaller by about 30. If we assume that a quarter of the fleet comprised longships of the smaller design - the larger ship would seem more appropriate to the crossing of the North Sea - the strength of the Viking fleet at the start of the campaign would have been roughly 4,900. After attacking Folkestone, the Vikings ravaged Sandwich and Ipswich, and it seems probable that by the time they reached Maldon, the number of ships in the fleet would have been reduced by casualties and vessels returning to Scandinavia with booty. The Viking strength at the Battle of Maldon might therefore have been in the region of 4,000, assuming that the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* was correct in its estimate. To offer battle so readily with his less well trained and more poorly armed and equipped force, Brihtnoth must almost certainly have outnumbered the Vikings.

Although *The Battle of Maldon* conveys the savage brutality of a battle fought principally with cutting and thrusting weapons it provides only a glimpse of the tactics employed by the opposing forces during the fighting. The opening line of the surviving portion of the poem:

Then he (Brihtnoth) bade each warrior leave his horse, drive it afar and go forth on foot....

reveals clearly that the English fought on foot. This was normal practice for both English and Scandinavian armies whose troops used the mobility of the horse for reaching the battlefield, and for pursuit of a beaten foe, but who did not usually engage in pitched battle on horseback.

It is probable that the geography of the battlefield severely limited the scope for tactical deployment. The banks of a river provide little room for subtle manoeuvres. The Vikings might have attempted a feigned retreat to draw the English from their shield wall but the proximity of the river would make this a hazardous manoeuvre. Once battle was joined, Maldon is most likely to have been a dour, slogging match interspersed with incidents almost amounting to personal combat. Although the poem employs a wide range of descriptive language to detail the weapons used at Maldon, the combatants appear to have been armed mainly with the bow, sword and spear. The bow, in 991 a weapon of lowly social standing, is mentioned only as the armies closed for the first clash of battle: 'bows were busy, point pierced shield; fierce was the rush of battle....', but we hear much of the offensive power of the weapons of aristocratic combat: the sword and the spear:

He (Eadric) advanced to war with spear in hand; as long as he might grasp his shield and broad sword,
he kept his purpose firm.

Then Brihtnoth drew his blade, broad and of burnished edge, and smote upon his mail. All too quickly
one of the seamen checked his hand, crippling the arm of the earl. Then his golden-hilted
sword fell to earth; he could not use his hard blade nor wield a weapon.

As is to be expected in a work that may have been written as a eulogy, the poem recognises Brihtnoth's national

and local standing and projects his central role in the battle. Brihtnoth makes the tactical decisions and conducts the negotiations with the Vikings:

Brihtnoth lifted up his voice, grasped his shield and shook his supple spear, gave forth words, angry and resolute, and made him answer: 'Hear you, searover, what this folk says? For tribute they will give you spears, poisoned point and ancient sword, such war gear as will profit you little in battle. Messenger of the seamen, take back a message, say to your people a far less pleasing tale, how that there stands here with his troop an earl of unstained renown, who is ready to guard this realm, the home of Ethelred my lord, people and land; it is the heathen that shall fall in the battle. It seems to me too poor a thing that you should go with our treasure unfought to your ships, now that you have made your way thus far into our land. Not so easily shall you win tribute; peace must be made with point and edge, with grim battle-play, before we give tribute.'

Brihtnoth had already taken great care to supervise the deployment of his hearth-troop of warriors and the less reliable *fyrð* in a formation that suggests a form of shield-wall:

Then Brihtnoth began to array his men: he rode and gave counsel and taught his warriors how they should stand and keep their ground, bade them hold their shields aright, firm with their hands and fear not at all. When he had meetly arrayed his host, he alighted among the people where it pleased him best, where he knew his bodyguard to be most loyal.

As the tide began to recede the Vikings prepared to cross to the mainland but Brihtnoth ordered three warriors, Wulfstan, Ælfhere and Maccus, to hold the western end of the causeway. Brihtnoth may have been hoping to inflict casualties on the enemy with minimum loss to his own force and also to demonstrate to the *fyrð* that the Vikings were not invincible. In the event the defence offered by the three warriors was so successful that the Danes abandoned their attempts to force a passage.

The poem is not uncritical of Brihtnoth's conduct of the battle and particularly the vital issue that now arose. The Vikings, realising that they risked serious loss in breaking through the defence on the causeway, asked that they be given free passage to the western bank. Brihtnoth agreed:

Then the earl, in his pride, began to give ground all too much to the hateful folk; Brihthelm's son called over the cold water (the warriors gave ear): 'Now is the way open before you; come quickly, men, to meet us in battle.'

Once the Vikings had refused to waste further lives in tackling the causeway defence it is difficult to see that Brihtnoth had any alternative but to allow the enemy to cross. Having run the raiders to earth it made little sense to refuse battle, as the Vikings would then simply return to their ships and sail away to menace another part of the coast.

With the Vikings now on the mainland Brihtnoth appears to have relied upon the capacity of his hearth-troop to absorb a frontal assault by the Vikings rather than risk any form of manoeuvre. The Saxon line survived the initial clash:

Thus the stout-hearted warriors held their ground in the fray. Eagerly they strove, those men at arms, who might be the first to take with his spear the life of some doomed man ...

As the enemy regrouped a Viking, 'strong in battle', advanced towards Brihtnoth who, perhaps interpreting this movement as an individual challenge, stepped forward to meet him. From the first lunge the combat went against Brihtnoth. He was wounded twice by spear thrusts, though not seriously enough to prevent him killing

two of the enemy, and a Dane succeeded in disabling his sword arm. Sinking to the ground, Brihtnoth continued to urge his men into battle, but the Danes closed in and finally cut him down along with two warriors, Ælfnoth and Wulmær, who had rushed to their Earl's defence.

The death of Brihtnoth proved the turning point. A large part of the Saxon army fled and only a small band of Brihtnoth's hearth-troop continued the fight, determined to die alongside their lord:

Ælwine said: 'Remember the words that we uttered many a time over the mead, when on the bench, heroes in hall, we made our boast about hard strife. Now it may be proved which of us is bold! ... Thegns shall have no cause to reproach me among my people that I was ready to forsake this action, and seek my home, now that my lord lies low, cut down in battle. This is no common grief to me, he was both my kinsman and my lord.'

Leofsunu lifted up his voice and raised his shield, his buckler to defend him, and gave him (Offa) answer: 'This I avow, that I will not flee a foot-space hence, but will press on and avenge my liege-lord in the fight' ...

The resistance of the hearth-troop continued for what appears to have been a considerable time and the Vikings probably suffered the majority of their casualties in this phase of the battle. The poem ends here, however, before the final Viking triumph.

Indication of Importance

The Battle of Maldon occurred relatively early in the later Viking descent on England and it is possible that it was the first occasion on which the Vikings met resistance from an English army, certainly one under the command of a noble of Brihtnoth's rank and importance. Maldon may thus be the first major engagement of a period which initially undermined Anglo-Saxon England and then led to its incorporation for a quarter of a century in a Scandinavian empire. In the aftermath of Maldon the first payment of tribute to the Vikings in Æthelred's reign was made. With the payment of £10,000 in 991 the English sought to buy peace with those who ravaged their shores. Thereafter, increasingly large sums were paid every few years, culminating with a tribute of £72,000 in 1018 (the total annual revenues from land in the Domesday Book survey for 1086 barely exceeded £70,000). At the same time, defeat at Maldon was a spur to the implementation by Æthelred of a central strategy, however ineffective, for dealing with the Vikings. The battle also encompassed the death of an Ealdorman of England - Brihtnoth - Æthelred's thegn.

The Battle of Maldon is one of the finest battle poems of any period in British history and although it leaves much unsaid concerning tenth-century military organisation and tactics, it provides a useful starting point for their study.

If we accept the poem as a contemporary, or near-contemporary, document written to commemorate the death of Brihtnoth at the hands of Viking raiders, then we may also accept the detail it provides on the topography and events of the battle. When the conventions of heroic literature come into play, most notably in dealing with the service of the hearth group to their lord, greater caution is warranted. The work of historians, literary critics, and geologists has provided a strong assumption, lacking only supporting artefactual evidence, that the Northey Island causeway is a site which fulfils as no other the topographical imperatives of the poem.

With the loss by fire in the early eighteenth century of the only manuscript copy of the poem to survive from the medieval period, and the demolition a few years later of Brihtnoth's tomb at Ely, we are fortunate that the extant

section of the poem allows such a positive reconstruction of the battle to be made. Equally, although the topography of the battlefield has changed in the last 1,000 years, the terrain today still allows the visitor to appreciate each stage of the battle.

Battlefield Area

The battlefield area boundary defines the outer reasonable limit of the battle, taking into account the positions of the combatants at the outset of fighting and the focal area of the battle itself. It does not include areas over which fighting took place subsequent to the main battle. Wherever possible, the boundary has been drawn so that it is easily appreciated on the ground.

The battlefield area is confined to an area on the west bank of the River Blackwater below Maldon. The area extends from mean high water some 800 metres inland as far as South House Farm and extends both north and south of the public right of way between the farm and the causeway, where existing field boundaries have been used. The southern extension below the path allows for the possibility that the Viking forces formed up to the south of the causeway having come ashore. It seems probable that Brihtnoth would have wished to place his battle line between the Vikings and Maldon.

Notes

1. Ealdorman Brihtnoth's name has been rendered in various alternative spellings, for example as 'Byrhtnoth'. The version given in this report is that used in the translation of 'The Battle of Maldon', printed in *English Historical Documents c.500-1042* ed. D Whitelock (2nd Edition, London 1979) pp320-24.
2. 'Anglo-Saxon Chronicle' (Manuscript A), printed in *English Historical Documents c.500-1042*. p234.
3. Laborde, E D 'The site of the Battle of Maldon' *English Historical Review* 40 (1925) pp161-173.
4. 'The Battle of Maldon', printed in *English Historical Documents c.500-1042*. p320-24.
5. Petty, G R and Petty, S 'Geology and *The Battle of Maldon*'. *Speculum* 51 (1976) pp435-446
6. Bessinger, J B 'Maldon and the Oláfsdrápa: An Historical Caveat' in *Studies in Old English Literature* ed. S B Greenfield (Eugene, Oregon 1963)
7. 'Life of St. Oswald', printed extract in *English Historical Documents c.500-1042*. p912-917
8. Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 173 (often called the Parker Manuscript)
9. *English Historical Documents c.500-1042*, p916
10. *Liber Eliensis*. Cambridge, Trinity College O.2.1
11. *The Battle of Maldon AD 991* ed. D Scragg (Oxford 1991) p67-8.
12. *English Historical Documents c.500-1042*, p321; *The Battle of Maldon AD 991* ed. D Scragg (Oxford 1991) p21 & p146.
13. *English Historical Documents c.500-1042*, p400