

ON THE SITE OF THE BATTLE OF ACLEA, A.D. 851.

BY CHARLES COOKSEY.

Everyone who is familiar with the chalk downs of the South of England must have noticed the enormous number of camps by which all the strategic positions on the eminences are occupied, as well as those upon the ancient lines of communication. These camps are of various forms and sizes, and belong, for the most part, to a remote period of the history of this country. The experienced archæologist however, can distinguish, with practical certainty, whether the work is of Celtic, Roman, Saxon, Danish, or more recent origin; but beyond this, in the great majority of cases, he is unable, in the absence of any historical records, to say when or by whom the camps were made and defended. The records of many of the battles which have come down to us are meagre and obscure; for example, even to this day, authorities are not agreed as to the site of the crucial conflict between Alfred the Great and the Danes at "Ethandune."

During the period when the South of England was ravaged by the pagan hordes the chalk uplands of Hampshire and Wiltshire were the scene of many severe fights. The invaders evidently slaughtered without mercy persons of all ages and both sexes. The terror of fire was added to that of the sword, and the too frequently victorious Northmen left behind them a pathway strewn with corpses, and a sky darkened with the smoke of burnt and plundered towns, villages, homesteads and religious houses. Nor did this happen once only, but again and again, during a period extending over five hundred years, viz.:—from the landing of Cerdic at Cerdicesore at the opening of the sixth century, till the early years of the eleventh century.

The object of this paper is to endeavour to trace and localise the course of one of these predatory excursions under Rōric, a nephew of the Danish Prince Harald Klak, about the middle of the ninth century.

The following are extracts from the writings of the early chroniclers who refer to this great and decisive event :—

1. Ethelwerd, the writer of the first record, died in 1016, according to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. His narrative extends from the Creation of the World to A.D. 975, and must have been written between 975 and 1011.

Under the year 837, and in recording the events from that year until 854, he writes :—

"Before the completion of that year" (the exact year is not clearly indicated), "a very large fleet of pagans arrived, consisting of 350 ships, at the mouth of the river Thames, commonly called Thames-Mouth, and destroyed the cities of Canterbury and London, and put Beornulf, King of Mercia to flight, after defeating his army. They returned after the battle across the river Thames, towards the South, through the province of Surrey, and there King Athulf, with the West Angles, met them in battle; immense numbers fell on both sides, nor have we ever heard of a more severe engagement than that fought on that day. These events happened near the wood called Aclea."

2. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle contains a record extending from the time of Julius Cæsar to the year 1070.¹ There is uncertainty as to almost every question connected with its date, its origin, its progress, and its component parts, and its value is thereby seriously effected. All the existing M.SS. must have proceeded from a common original, and this prototype has not survived to our day.

Under the year 851, occurs the entry :—

"And in the same year came 350 ships to the mouth of the Thames, and the crews landed and took Canterbury and London by storm, and put to flight Boerhtwulf, the King of the Mercians, with his army, and then went South over the Thames into Surrey; and there King Aethelwulf and his son Aethelbald, with the army of the West Saxons, fought against them at Aclea, and there made the greatest slaughter among the heathen army that we have had reported to the present day, and there got victory."

(This and Ethelwerd's account are evidently derived from one and the same source).

¹ Some copies bring it down to 1047 only, and others not beyond 1016.

3. Asser's Annals, commonly called Asser's Life of King Alfred, give an account of the Exploits of Alfred the Great from A.D. 849 to 887.

Under A.D. 851, they say :—

" During the same year also, a large army of pagans, with 350 ships arrived at the mouth of the river Thames, and ravaged Doruberna, the chief City of Kent, and the City of London, which is situated on the north bank of the Thames, on the confines of Essex and Middlesex (but yet this city belongs properly to Essex), and they put to flight Beorhtulf, King of Mercia, who had come forth to oppose them. After this, the previously mentioned Pagan forces advanced into Surrey, a district which is situated on the Southern bank of the river Thames, to the West of Kent. Then Aethelwulf, King of the West Saxons and his son Aethelbald, contended with them for a very long period with all their troops, at a place called Aclea, which means Oaklea. There a lengthened engagement took place, displaying great courage and spirit on both sides, till the greatest portion of the pagan multitude was utterly routed and slain; so that we never heard of their being so cut to pieces, either before or since in any region, in a single day: and the Christians claimed the victory with honour, and remained masters of the field of death."

The coincidence between the Saxon Chronicle and Asser is striking. Whence did it arise? Did Asser copy from the Chronicle or the compiler of the Chronicle from Asser, or are they both derived from one common authority? No ancient copy of Asser has come down to our time. The burnt Cottonian copy appears to have been written in the eleventh century.

4. Florence of Worcester, said to have been a Benedictine Monk, wrote a work the earlier portion of which is borrowed from the Anglo Saxon Chronicle.

Under the same year 851, he writes :—

" In this year, too, a great army of pagans, with 350 ships, came to the mouth of the river Thames, and laid waste Dorubernie (Canterbury) that is the chief city of Kent, and London, which is situated on the north bank of the river Thames, on the boundary of Essex and Middlesex, though in fact this city belongs to Essex; and put to flight Beorhtulf, King of the Mercians, who with all his army had come up to war against them. After this the same pagan army advanced into Surrey, a district situated on the south bank of the River Thames, and to the Eastward (sic) of Kent; and Aethelwulf, King of the West Saxons, and his son Aethelbald fought a long contested battle with the whole of that army at a place called Ockley, which means Oak's field. After both sides had fought fiercely and courageously for a long time, the greater part of the

pagan army was utterly routed and put to sword, so much so that we have heard that there were never so many of them slain in that region in one day either before or after; and the Christians gained a splendid victory, and remained masters of the field of carnage."

5. Simeon of Durham's History of the Kings gives a chronicle of events, from after the death of the Venerable Bede, until the death of Henry I, that is for a period of 429 years and 4 months. Simeon was present at the disentanglement of St. Cuthbert in the year 1104, and is supposed to have died shortly after 1129, some writers say that he flourished in the year 1164, but it is difficult to accept this statement. In the early part of the work, Asser's life of King Alfred is largely employed. Florence of Worcester is afterwards copied at some length.

Under the year in question (851), Simeon writes:—

"In the same year a great army of pagans came with 350 ships to the mouth of the River Thames. They pillaged Canterbury, that is the city of the men of Kent, and put to flight Berhtulf, King of the Mercians, with all his army, who had gone to battle against them. After this the Danes became more bold, and assembled a great army in Suthrige (Surrey). Hearing of this Ethelwulf, the warlike King of the Saxons, together with his son Ethelbald, also assembled a numerous army in a place called Aclea, that is, the Plain of the Oak. And when the flower of the English nation appeared, resplendent, in clashing armour, there ensued a long battle between the English and the Danes, the former fighting bravely when they saw their King conducting himself so fiercely in war; and thus they proved superior to their enemies in the contest. And when they had manfully contended for a very long time, and the fight was stoutly and courageously maintained on both sides, the greatest part of the pagan multitude was entirely overthrown and routed so that never in any country in any one day either before or since had so many met their death. On that very day the Christians gloriously obtained the victory, and remained masters of the field of slaughter, rendering thanks to God in hymns and confessions."

6. Roger de Wendover's Flowers of History (sometimes called from its continuator, Mathew of Paris's History) contains the record:—

"In the year of our Lord 851, a great heap of pagans arrived at the mouth of the River Thames with 350 vessels, and ravaged Doruberna, that is to say Canterbury, and put to flight Bertulf, King of the Mercians, who had come against them to battle. Rendered bolder by their success, they advanced with all their forces into Surrey; which being told to Aethelwulf, King of the West Saxons, he assembled a mighty army and accompanied by his son Aethelbald, engaged them in battle in a place called Aclea, there he defeated them with unheard of slaughter."

Modern historians, have followed one another, as usual, in placing this battle at Ockley in the present county of Surrey, a most natural course, as it is the only place existing in this particular county with a name at all resembling that given by the Chroniclers of the battle. It must however be borne in mind that the name Surrey did not in the middle of the ninth century refer to any precisely defined geographical division, but was applied, as Asser definitely points out, to "a district which is situated on the southern bank of the River Thames, to the West of Kent," which would equally include the present counties of Hampshire and Surrey.

This invasion of Rōric seems to have been the first of a long series of incursions which desolated both banks of the Thames. The usual route taken seems to have followed the lines of hills north of the river as far as South Gloucestershire, and to have returned over the open wolds at or in the neighbourhood of Cirencester. From this point the return journey was made over the chalk downs near Marlborough and the vale of Pewsey to the south bank of the navigable portion of the Thames.

Probably Rōric followed this route on this occasion, for after he had met and conquered the King of Mercia, had penetrated his kingdom, and was returning thence laden with plunder to his ships, he would naturally select the most open and sparsely peopled country in the hope of avoiding a second conflict.

Thus he would strike the Harrow Way near Andover, would endeavour to follow it to Worting where it crossed the Roman Road from Southampton to London, (which ran by way of Winchester, Silchester and Staines), about two miles west of Basingstoke. A mile or so west of the point of intersection of these roads, is a ridge forming the watershed of the Rivers Test and Loddon, near which are situated villages now and long since called by the names of East Oakley and Church Oakley.¹ A mile or so further on, to the east, in the tything of East Oakley, is a lonely farm house in a valley, with one or two venerable oak trees still remaining

¹ See Map, illustrative of Dr. Andrews's paper on "Dummer."



BATTLEDOWN FARM.



RING OF KING ETHELWULF.

as evidence of the correctness of the appellation, "The Field of Oaks." This farm, which singular to say, is known to this day by the name of "Battle Down Farm," can be seen from the train on the south side of the London and South Western Railway, at what is called the "Battle Down Junction," of the Southampton and Salisbury branches, about two miles to the west of Basingstoke.² Just eastward of this farm, the Roman Road before mentioned runs diagonally across the valley from the top of Kempshott Hill to Sherborne St. John, while beyond it, on a bold spur, of the down, is the Saxon Camp known as "Wincklebury" or "Bury Ring." A few hundred yards north of Battle Down Signal Box, in a field adjoining the railway, is a large oval tumulus, and, upon the surrounding downs, are several more tumuli, partially destroyed by the plough, denudation, and by other causes, but still traceable to the experienced eye. Here, where the "Harrow Way" intersects the Roman Road, it is claimed the battle of Aclea was fought. That an important battle did take place on this spot is proved by existing remains, but, beyond that, no one appears to have associated it with the great battle of 851 except the writer, who directed attention to the subject in a letter to the "Hampshire Chronicle" twenty years ago.

It is a curious fact that none of our early antiquaries place the scene of this battle in Surrey, they content themselves with following the Chroniclers, and call it the battle of "Aclea."

The first of English antiquaries, Leland, says that the battle was fought at "Aclea," and quoting from Henry of Huntingdon, he gives it in the form of "Haclea." The celebrated Oxford antiquary Anthony Wood, in his reference to the battle, makes no mention of Ockley, Surrey, nor does the industrious antiquary Hearn, and it is not till the publication of Manning and Brays history of Surrey that "Ockley" Surrey is claimed as the "Aclea" of History. It will be necessary to go somewhat closely into the nomenclature of the two places to make it clear that there was no justification for the claim.

² See Illustration.

In Manning and Bray's History of Surrey, 1804-1814, under the head of Ockley, in the hundred of Wotton, the place is named under the following spellings:—

"Hoclie," in the Domesday Book. "Okeley," in the Testa de Neville temp Henry I. and Edward I. (As a matter of fact in the Testa de Neville this place is mentioned twice, once as "Ockle" and again as "Okkele," consequently Mannings and Bray's reading needs correction). "Okeley," in Quo Warranto Roll 1300. "Okeleye," in 1300 Patent Roll. "Okeleghe," in 1294, Close Roll. "Ockley," in 1694 in sale of advowson. "Ockley," in Parliamentary Return of 1800. In no instances is it given as Oakley or Aclie. On the other hand, Oakley, Hampshire, appears as "Aclei" in Domesday Book three times, thus:—"Aclei," Chuteley Hundred, viz., Church Oakley, held by Hugh de Port. "Aclei" Oakley, held by Robert Fitz Gerald. "Aclei" Oakley, held by Hugh Fitz Baldry, and again as Aklie, in 1340. Thus, it seems, that the identification of the site rests entirely upon the authority of Manning and Bray, and not upon that of any of the early writers on the subject.

Mr. H. Elliot Malden, in his history of Surrey, follows in the same track, and states, in spite of the assertions of the Chroniclers, that the ships of the Danes were on the Thames, that they were going to their ships off the South Coast. Can anyone believe that Ethelwulf, waiting to intercept an army, which had landed on the north bank of the Thames, sacked London, defeated the King of the Mercians, and plundered his Kingdom, and which was returning after a victorious raid to its ships in the Thames, would have awaited it so far south as the recesses of the great forest of Andredsweald in Surrey? On the other hand, assuming the battle to have been fought at Oakley, Hampshire, Ethelwulf appears at the exact spot where he might have been expected. The Danes would not be in a position to attack strongly fortified places like Winchester the capital, or Salisbury. They would naturally try to reach the important Roman Road to the Thames which, upon leaving the chalk downs, would afford the easiest route through the heavy forest lands of the Thames Valley.

Again, there is no local tradition or evidence of a battle at Ockley, Surrey. Mr. H. Elliot Malden brings in Leith Hill as its actual site, from the fact of the existence of an earth work, and the discovery of a few skeletons in oak coffins, in the vicinity. Judging from the names of battles recorded between the same combatants, fought upon eminences, the eminences generally gave the name to the battle field, therefore it is not reasonable to suppose that a battle fought on Leith Hill would have been described as Aclea or "the field of oaks."

About half a mile northward from Winklebury camp, on the down known as "Rooks Down," of which the site of the camp is a spur, is a tumulus near which are some Scotch fir trees which are prominent landmarks. There are local traditions of a mysterious burial and of the appearance of a ghost at this spot. May not the name of the down, the tumulus, and the tradition point to the death and burial of the bold and princely Danish leader Röric, upon the stricken field of Aclea?

Near the Railway stations at Basingstoke, a mile or so distant from Winklebury Camp, and upon the same chalk down, stand the ruins of a beautiful chapel of the late Tudor period, erected as a mortuary Chapel by Lord William Sandys, dedicated to the Blessed Trinity, and attached to the ancient chapel of the Guild of the Holy Ghost, the origin of which is lost in the obscurity of the past. These ruined buildings adorn an extra mural burial ground known as the "Chapel litten," a name which carries us back to Saxon times, and here, for years, buried only eighteen inches or two feet beneath the surface, many skeletons have been discovered when the ground has been opened for recent interments. It is suggested that these are the remains of the Christian Saxons, who fell victoriously in the defence of their country in one of the greatest battles ever fought on English ground. For the benefit of the souls of these patriots the Guild of the Holy Ghost was possibly established, and the first chapel consecrated by that holy Bishop St. Swithun of Winchester, the patron of the arts,

tutor, guide and the friend of the King, and the earliest teacher of Alfred the Great.

In case the evidence adduced may not be considered sufficiently conclusive, to convince those who have been patient enough to read thus far, it may be well to add one other item, which seems to have an important bearing upon the subject. In Volume II. of the *Journal of the Archæological Institute*, written in 1845 by that able and precise antiquary, Mr. Albert Way, F.S.A., is the account of a gold ring, ornamented with niello, which was found in the year 1781, in the parish of Laverstock, Hampshire.¹ This ring bears the inscription, "Ethelwulf R." The front has a pyramidal form, and is decorated with two dragons and a floral device. The ring is now in the British Museum, to which it was presented by the Earl of Radnor. Some confusion has arisen between Laverstock and Laverstoke, both names having been indiscriminately applied to two villages, one of which is in Wiltshire. Arising from this confusion, and from the fact of the Earl of Radnor's residing near Salisbury, someone has ascribed it to the Wiltshire Laverstock or Laverstoke, and it is so labelled in the British Museum. Extensive enquiry has demonstrated that, in no existing account of the discovery is there mention of any county but Hampshire. In *Archæologia* Volume VII., page 421, it is said to have been found at Laverstoke "near Salisbury," a description which would again apply to both places, as Laverstoke, Hants, is situated upon the great western highway, upon which Salisbury is the nearest large town. Here then, upon the direct line of the advance and subsequent flight of the Danes, and about five miles from the field of battle, was found a massive gold ring, bearing the name of the Saxon King, who was victorious in this conflict. This fact, even standing alone, would prove of great interest to historians of the county; but, when it is taken into consideration with the other evidence, it seems to complete the chain, which connects Oakley in Hampshire, with Ethelwulf, just as the celebrated jewel found at

¹ See Illustration.

Athelney confirms the tradition which connects that place with his son, Alfred the Great.

The writer begs to express his gratitude to Mr. Francis Joseph Baigent, of Winchester, for his generous assistance in the preparation of the data for this paper.
