

THE ACLEA[H].—I. OF THE BATTLE IN
851. II. OF THE SYNODS IN 782, Etc.

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(I.) One of the great battles between the Saxons and Danes was at Aclea[h],¹ where in 851 the Danes, who had gone from the neighbourhood of London "south across the Thames to Surrey," were severely defeated by Ethelwulf. Mr. Cooksey suggested with good reason in Vol. V. (1904, p. 26) that Acleah was Oakley near Basingstoke, not, as was generally said, Ockley on the southern edge of Surrey, pointing out that Ockley would be a strange place for the Danes to get to, or for the Wessex army to meet them, if they did get there. Ockley is on the Roman "Stane Street" leading to Chichester, and only six miles south of the old track from west to east, part of which along the North Downs was afterwards the Pilgrims' Way to Canterbury; but the Danish ships appear to have been on the Thames, not near Chichester, and along Stane Street south of Ockley the Danes would only plunge into the Andredsweald, where there was little to plunder; while if they *were* making for Chichester down Stane Street, the Saxons would not catch them by marching along the North Downs, but would have marched from Winchester to Chichester. But it may be well to add something to this argument.

The name Ockley cannot well have been derived from a Saxon "Acleah," which would not develop into Ockley, but into Oakley.² Ockley (Hoclei in Domesday Book) appears to have been the woodland or pig-land of Ockham near Ripley, and was in the same hands in 1086.³ Many Surrey parishes had bits of

¹ Aclea comes from "at Aclea," the dative of Acleah.

² See Mr. W. H. Stevenson's "Asser" (1904), p. 178, note 1. In "England before the Norman Conquest," p. 425, Mr. Oman has accepted Mr. Cooksey's identification of Aclea[h] with Church Oakley.

³ In Domesday Book, 55 b 2, Ockham is given as "Bocheham" by a scribe's slip for Hocheham. B. and H. may easily be confused in M.S.

the Weald attached to them, and just west of Leith Hill there is an Ockham Farm which up to 20 years ago, before the parishes thereabouts were re-arranged, was in the parish of Ockham.

Mr. H. E. Malden, who in his *History of Surrey* (1900, p. 56) made the best defence of Ockley, had to assume (1) that the Danish ships had moved or were moving from the Thames all round the North Foreland to Chichester, and (2) that Ethelwulf was waiting for the Danes at Ockley. But as to (1) there seems no particular object in such a manœuvre, and there is nothing to suggest it in the general drift of the story in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*; such little information as is given us would rather suggest that the Danes intended to return to the Thames. As to (2) Ockley, surrounded or nearly so by forest and therefore lacking in supplies, would be an odd place for Ethelwulf to wait with his army. The place for him to wait, if anywhere thereabouts, would be at the crossing of Stane Street with the east and west road along the North Downs, which would have led to a battle north of Dorking, not some miles south of it at Ockley. It is difficult to know what date or value to attach to the local traditions which he mentions—Anstiebury Camp was, as he says, clearly British, not Danish.

Mr. Cooksey, quoting the entry in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which says, in Dr. Giles' translation, that the Danes, after taking Canterbury and London and defeating Bertwulf of Mercia, "went south across the Thames to Surrey, and *there* King Ethelwulf . . . fought with them at Aclea," suggested that "Surrey" might well be intended to cover much more than the actual county of Surrey; but this explanation is not really needed. There is no reason to think that the entry puts Acleah in "Surrey," for the little word *there* is an addition by the translator—it is not in the original text at all. That says merely "and King Ethelwulf, etc.," which may, and probably does, mean simply "and then," *i.e.* (? not long) after they crossed the Thames to Surrey Ethelwulf met them—either in "Surrey" or Hampshire or Berkshire, or even elsewhere. Ethelwerd's version, which Mr. Cooksey also quoted, does give *et illic*, but it uses a different phrase, saying

that the Danes went "across the Thames to the country on the south of it *through* Surrey (*ad partem austri per provinciam Suthrie et illic*) and there Ethelwulf met them . . . at Aclea." In this phrase *illic* may be any point *in parti austri*, on the south of the Thames; indeed, strictly speaking, the phrase might point to Acleah being reached after the Danes had passed right through "Surrey." Unfortunately, in view of his style, we cannot put a strict interpretation on any of Ethelwerd's phrases, but anyway so far as these accounts go or any others Acleah might just as well be outside Surrey, like Oakley in Hants, as on the southern edge of Surrey, like Ockley.

Though the Chronicle does not put Acleah in Surrey, nor definitely anywhere except south of the river, its story, moving round the Thames and London, does seem to suggest that Acleah was not very far from Surrey, and, Ockley in Surrey being ruled out, Oakley in Hants would appear to be the probable site of the battle. Mr. Cooksey trusted much to the name of Battle Down Farm, but that may be a little dangerous. There were barrows on the down⁴ and they might give the hill the name of Battle Down without any real tradition of any actual battle. He also cited Ethelwulf's ring found in 1780 at Laverstoke *near Salisbury*; but that was clearly the Laverstock within a mile of Salisbury, not the Laverstoke 20 miles away between Whitchurch and Oakley in Hampshire.⁵

In the lack of direct evidence we must depend on topography, and it is here that the history of 1066 may help us. The Danes,

⁴ Several are shown in the Ordnance Map, but they seem to have been now cleared away.

⁵ *Archæologia* (Soc. of Antiquaries) VII., 421. "March 22nd, 1781: Lord Radnor (of Longford Castle close to Salisbury) communicated a piece of gold found about August, 1780, in a field near Salisbury in the parish of Laverstoke . . . by William Petty, pressed out of a cart rut sideways . . . It was carried down to Mr. Howell, a silversmith in Salisbury, who gave the man 34s. for it . . . and from Mr. Howell Lord Radnor purchased it." This plainly refers to Laverstock close to Salisbury; Professor Oman (*ubi supra* 425 note) must have trusted to Mr. Cooksey and cannot have seen the full text in *Archæologia*. Mr. Way's paper on ornaments in the *Journal of the Archæological Institute* II. 163 (1845) spoke of this ring as found "in the parish of Laverstock, *Hants*, in a cart rut," but he seems to be (mis)quoting the *Archæologia*; anyway, his "*Hants*" must be a slip.

having just taken Canterbury and London, may well have made bold to strike at Winchester, which was not then a fortified town⁶ and was actually taken only nine years later in 860 by a Danish raid from Southamplon Water, or they may only have intended to make a raid to the south-west. In either case it would agree perfectly with the Chronicle if the Danes used in 851 the route which appears afterwards to have been followed by the Normans in 1066 past Leatherhead to Guildford, thence along the old "Harrow Way" past Crondall towards Basingstoke. If that route suited the Normans, it would suit the Danes, and for the same reason, viz., that for an army living on the country it was the best road from London to the south-west. This line of march would naturally lead to a meeting at Oakley with Ethelwulf and his Saxons coming from the direction of Winchester or Wiltshire, for Oakley, besides being close to the Roman road from London to Winchester and the branch from Silchester to Salisbury and Dorchester, was also at the point where these roads are crossed by the old track from East to West, afterwards known as the Pilgrims' Way and the Harrow Way, so that it was just the place that Ethelwulf would naturally occupy to intercept a Danish raid either into Hampshire, Wiltshire and Dorsetshire, or into Berkshire and the upper Thames valley.⁷

(II.) Was Oakley in Hampshire also the Acleah, where several synods were held, 782—810? There are many Oakleys scattered through England, but the monk who wrote the entry in the Chronicle for 851 must have known of these synods, so it is natural to presume that in speaking of a battle "at Aclea" he meant the then well-known Acleah of the synods. But, while this would be clear in a record of the 19th century, it is much less certain in one of the 9th. A strong point, however, in favour of Oakley in Hants is its very central position, from which Roman roads and ancient tracks radiated in all directions; to London and beyond, to Canterbury (the Harrow and Pilgrims'

⁶ Oman, *ibid* 434.

⁷ Mr. Cooksey suggested a raid *north* of the Thames westward, *returning* through Hampshire, but that does not seem to agree so well with the Chronicle.

Way), to Winchester and Chichester, to Salisbury, Dorchester and the south-west, and *viâ* Silchester to Bath, to Gloucester and to the Midlands. Such a position would seem almost essential for a synod, and this Oakley was also not far from Winchester, the old capital of Wessex.

The only scrap of written evidence we have speaks of "Acleah in Wessex," but gives little other help. In an early Durham ritual book is a later 10th century note made at the lodgings (*in his getelde*) of Aelfsig bishop (of Chester-le-Street, Durham, 962—990) by a secretary which is dated thus, "south of Woodgate at Aclee in Wessex, on St. Lawrence's day, Wednesday, the 5th of the old moon,"⁸ and looks as if it was made while the bishop was attending some later synod there, though this is far from certain. Mr. W. H. Stevenson has suggested that this note points to an Oakley Farm and Down a mile south-west of Wood Yates on the border of Dorsetshire, where it is crossed by the Roman road from Salisbury to Dorchester,⁹ but that does not seem a very central place for a synod. Moreover, it would seem that the note did not mean to define Acleah as near Woodgate, but rather to treat Woodgate as in Acleah; as we might write "the south side of Woodland St. in Hackney." The nearest surviving "Woodgate" to Oakley in Hants seems to be five miles north of Oakley, at Salter's Green, north of Monks Sherborne, which will hardly suit the case; but the country north of Oakley was well wooded, and in those days probably most, if not all, open field villages so placed would have a "wood-gate" to keep the sheep and cattle out of the wood, and the bishop may well have been lodging on a farm near the "wood-gate" of Oakley. On the whole, therefore, it would seem likely that the Hampshire Oakley was the Acleah of the synods as well as of the battle in 851.

⁸ Surtees Soc. No. 10 (1840), *Durham Ritual*, p. 185. Liebermann dates the note 970.

⁹ Stevenson, *Asser* p. 178, note 1 (1904). This road seems to be now known as Ackling, Ickling, or Eggleton Dyke, but that name represents "Icknield Street," and has nothing to do with Acleah. (Hutchins' *Dorsetshire I.*, p. 6).