

The Danish Conquest of England 1016AD

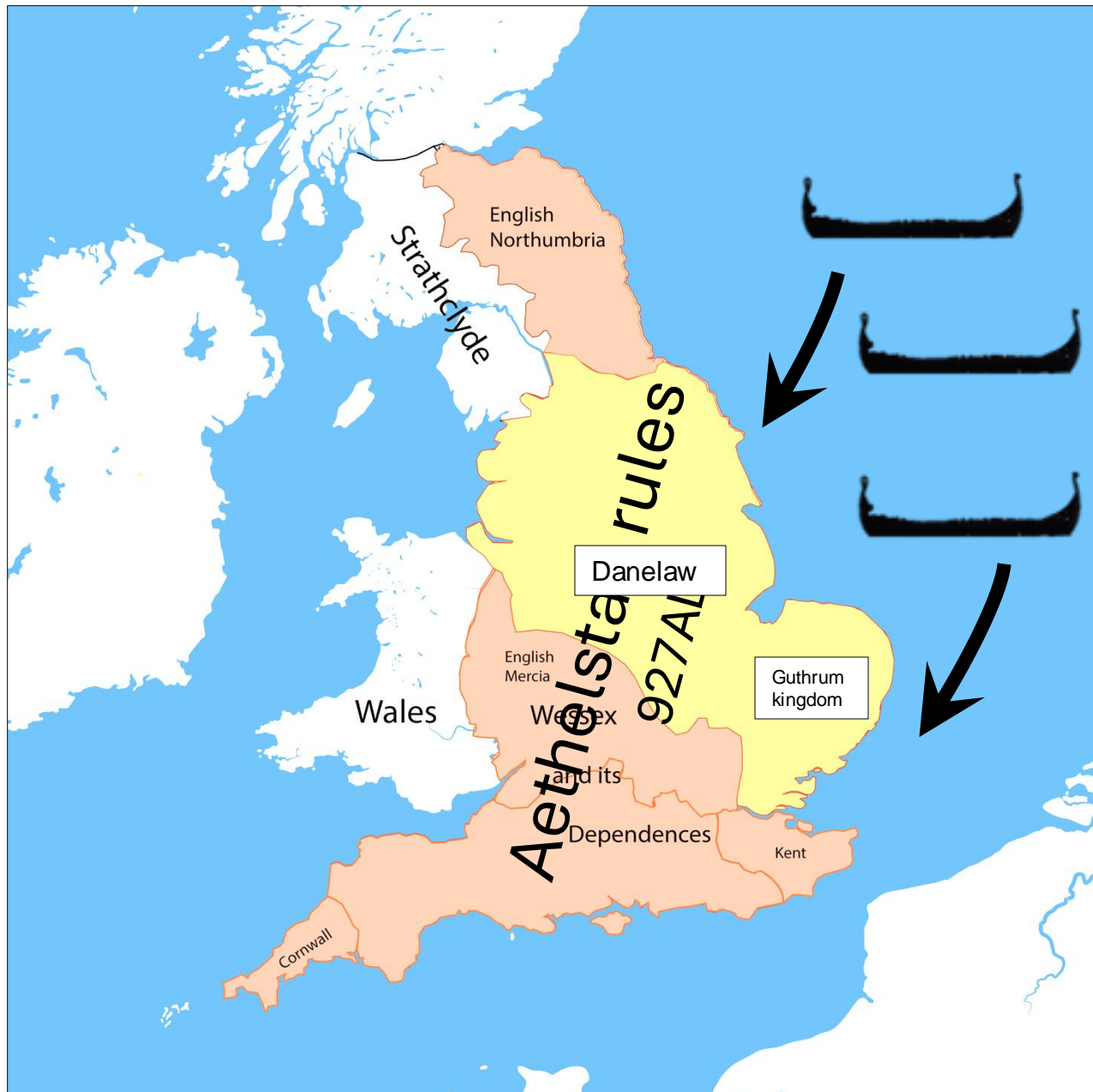
Cnut defeated
Edmund Ironside
and ruled England
for 19 years





In the 8th century.....

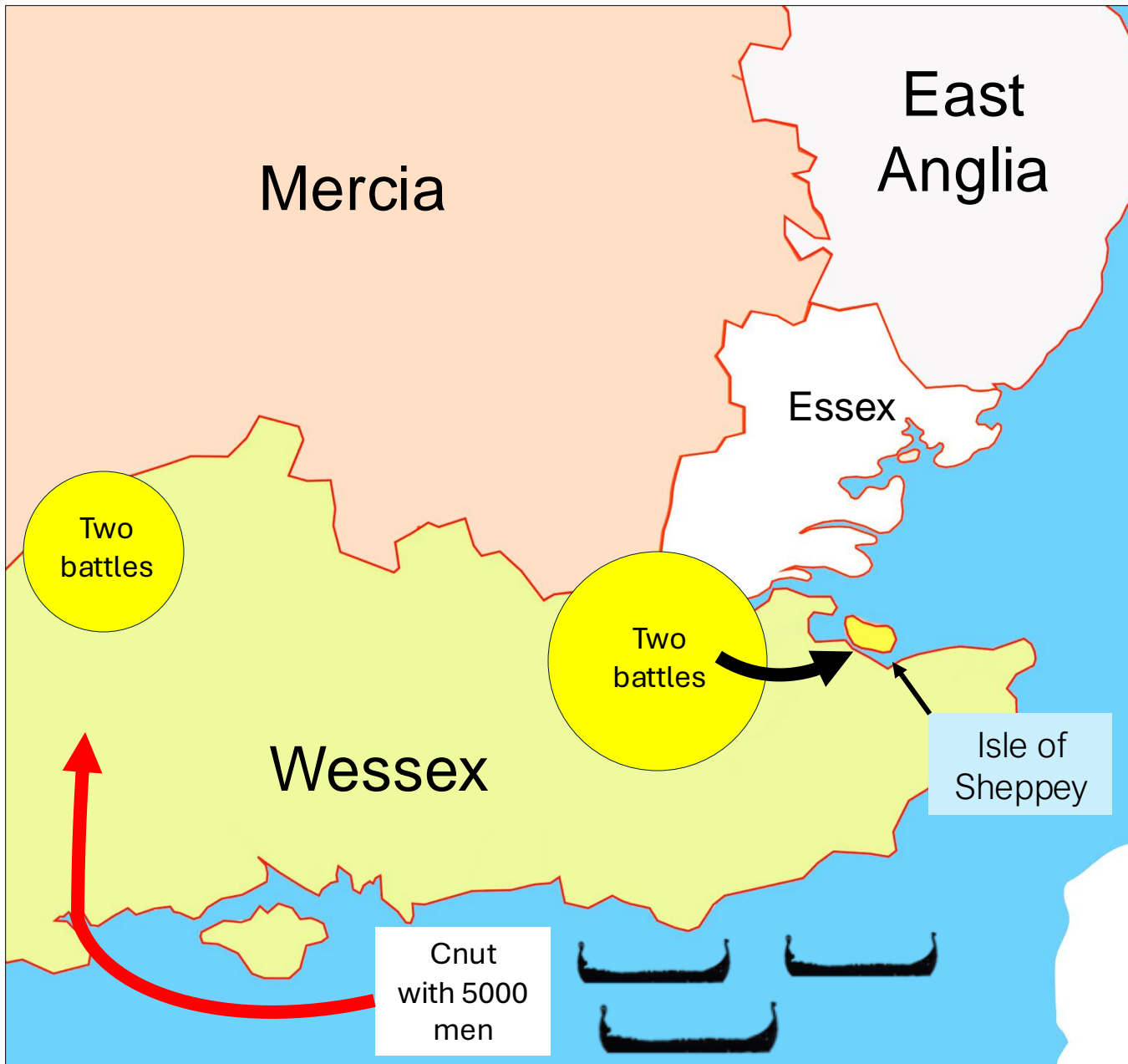
- England comprised 4 kingdoms, often at war with each other.
- Viking raids began c790AD targeting coastal monasteries.
- In 865, the Great Heathen Army came to colonise England. By 874, most of England had fallen.
- Only Alfred of Wessex resisted, defeating Guthrum at the Battle of Edington in 878.



England is partitioned

- Alfred and Guthrum agreed to divide England into three.
- The Danes settled in what became known as the **Danelaw**.
- But after years of tension, most Danelaw areas were regained by the English in 910AD.

However, Danish raids started again in 980AD



More Danish invasions followed...

- Sweyn Forkbeard led one in 1013. He nearly succeeded but died 1014. Aethelred came back from France and took control.
- A larger Danish - Norwegian invasion force (160 ships/5000 men) came to Poole in autumn 1015, led by Cnut his son.
- After 4 battles (Wessex, London and Kent) the raiding army was forced to retreat to its Sheppey base in late summer 1016.

“The raiding army turned back into Essex and travelled into Mercia”
(ASC E)



The final battle.....

- In September, Cnut left Sheppey for Essex and raided Mercia to resupply.
- The Chronicles say that Edmund Ironside intercepted Cnut and their fifth and final battle was in Essex, near a hill called Assandun.
- In 1020, a minster of stone and lime at Assandun was consecrated to honour the dead on both sides.

Ashingdon or Ashdon or?



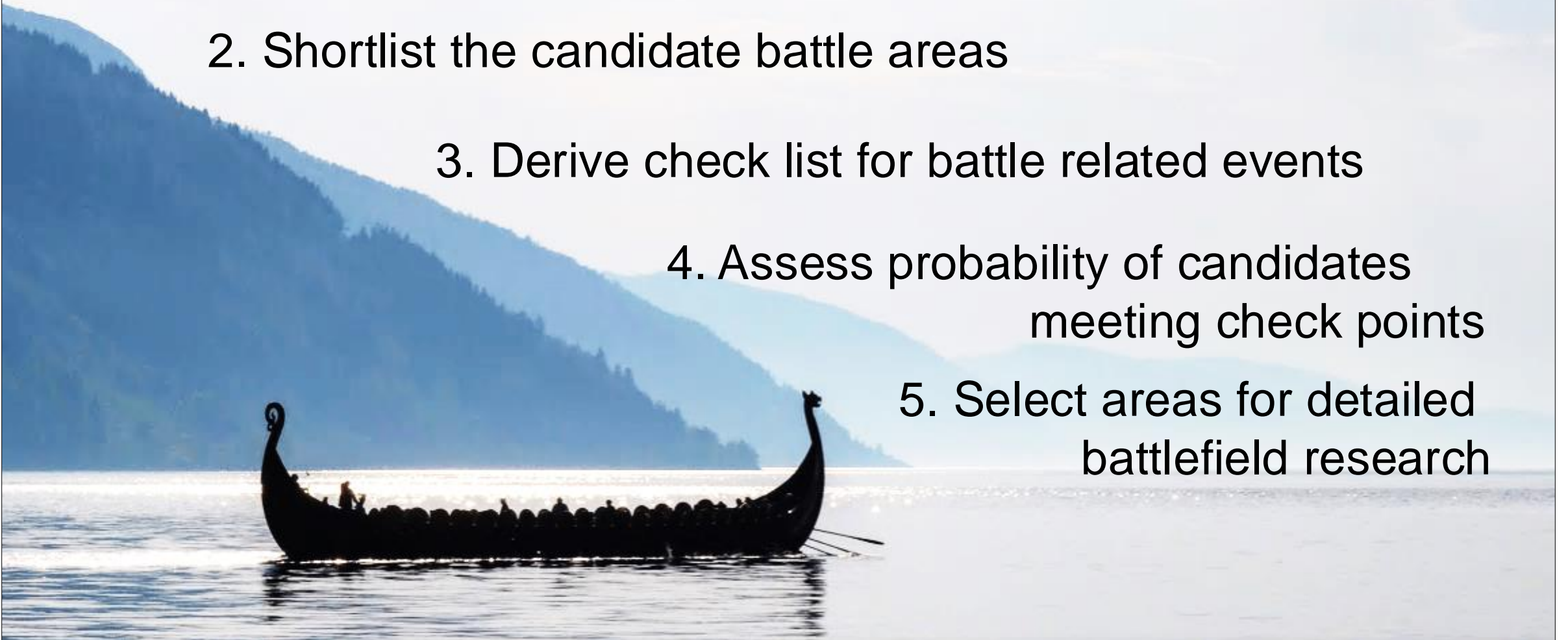
A Battlefields Trust project is investigating
led by Steve Davey + team from Essex

Only a few C11 sources available:
AS Chronicles, Encomium Emmae, Abbey Chronicles,
Danish sagas

This is a progress report
Rethinking old evidence and developing new

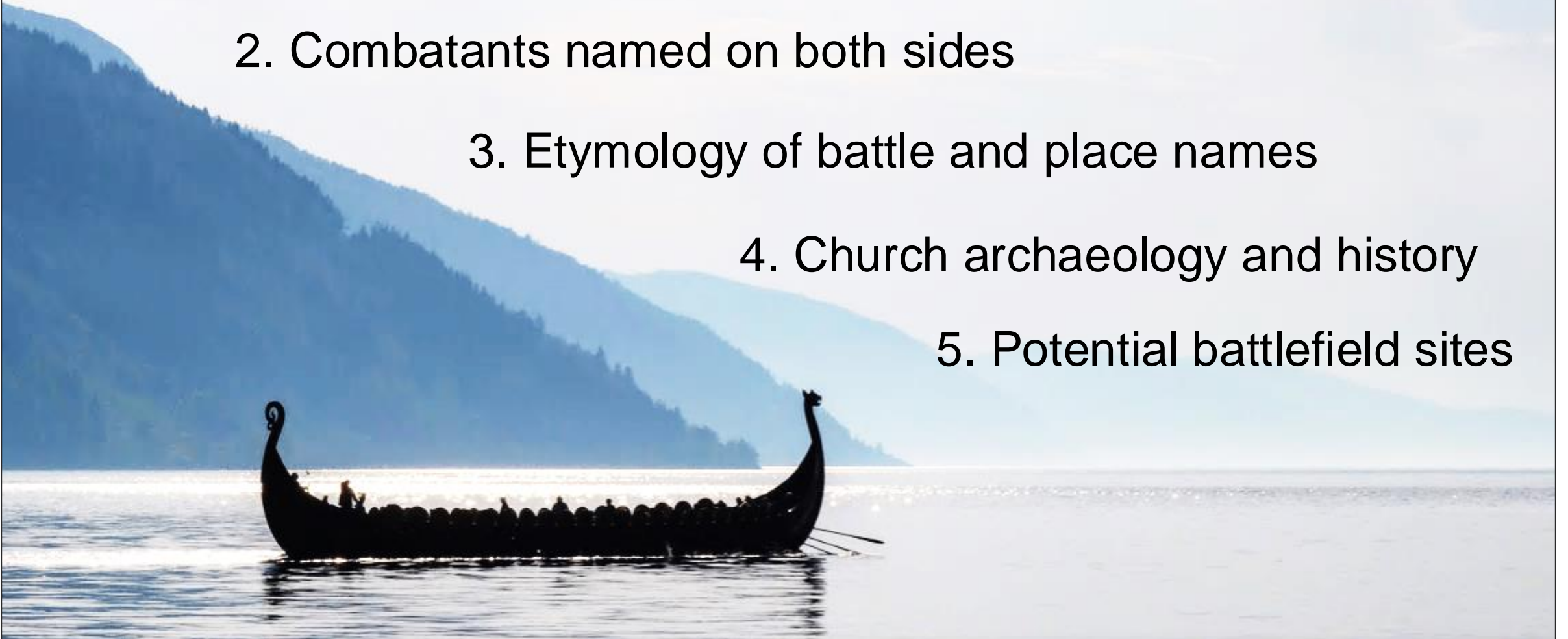
Project approach

1. Assess Cnut's most likely route to Mercia from Sheppey
2. Shortlist the candidate battle areas
3. Derive check list for battle related events
4. Assess probability of candidates meeting check points
5. Select areas for detailed battlefield research



Research themes

1. Mooring sites, Roman roads and routes to battle
2. Combatants named on both sides
3. Etymology of battle and place names
4. Church archaeology and history
5. Potential battlefield sites

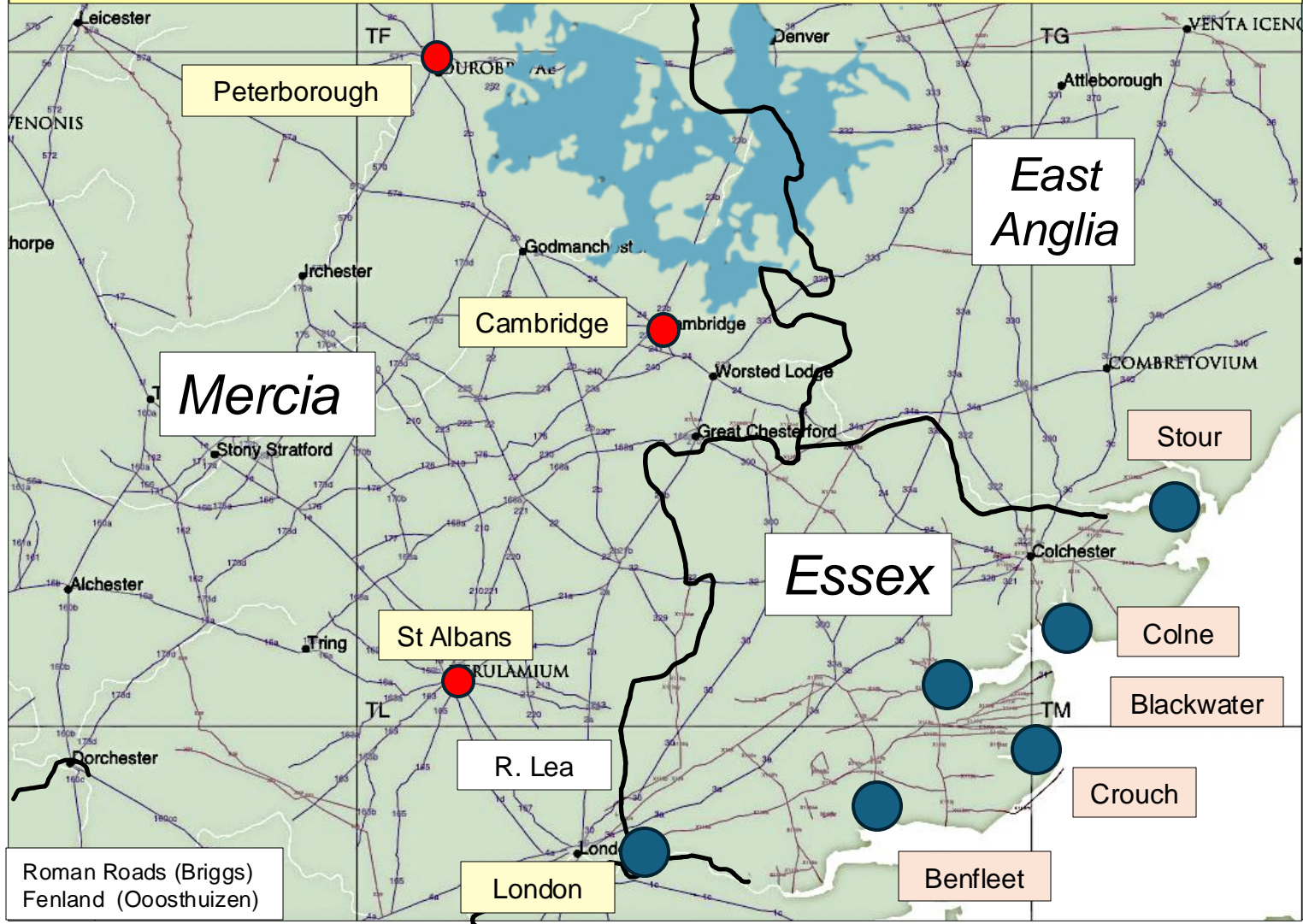




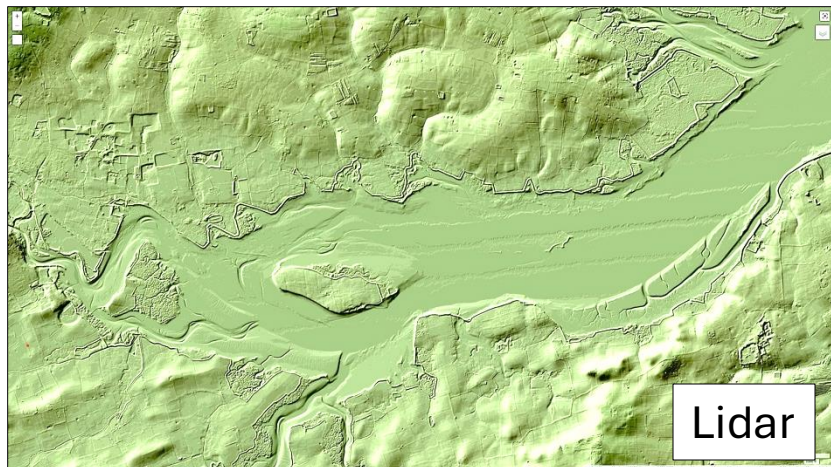
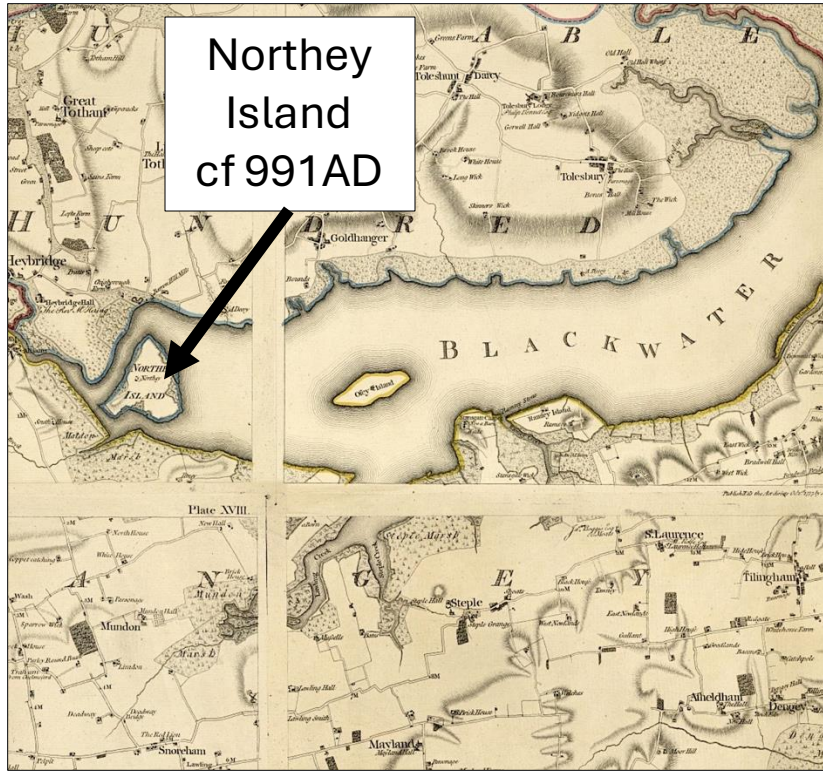
Cnut's most probable
route from Sheppey to
Mercia

“The raiding army turned back into Essex and travelled into Mercia” (ASC E)

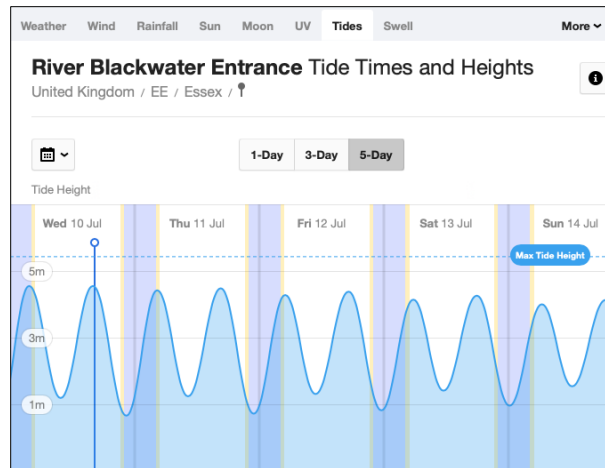
Where did Cnut enter Essex?



- 6 Essex river estuaries are being studied for probable mooring sites.



e.g. Blackwater Estuary



Mooring sites research

- Estuaries being visited – searching for sites for up to 50 Viking ships.
- Minimal mud flats, marsh-free banks and islands would create a defensible base and allow quick exit.
- Relevant tidal and LiDAR maps are being consulted.

Research continues to find the most probable landing site.



Cnut's route options to Mercia

- A Roman road close to a mooring site.
- A road network for quick travel inland to Mercia.
- Southerly routes would take Cnut close to enemy troops moving north from their London base.
- Northerly routes would give Cnut more time before enemy contact.



The English army assembles....

- Edmund was in the London area when Cnut sailed from Sheppey.
- At least 5 English regions were summoned to intercept Cnut, including his London garrison.
- We know because senior men from these regions were killed or named as present at Assandun.



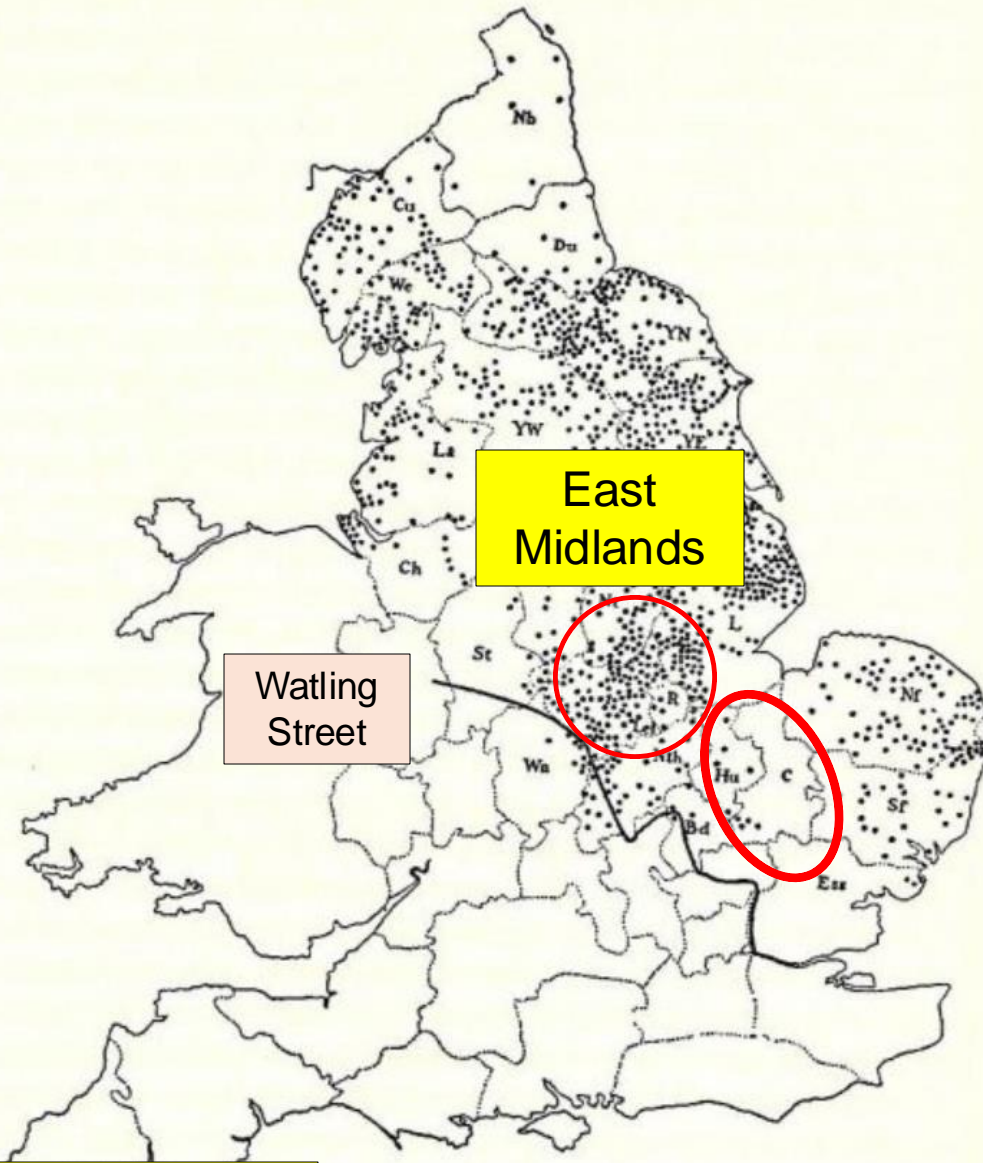
A clue to Cnut's route

- Monks from Ramsey/Ely abbeys were killed at Assandun. (ASC, Liber Eliensis).
- Edmund must have learned that Cnut was raiding near the abbeys.
- He then assembled the English army in East Mercia to intercept Cnut and enlisted local clerics to help.

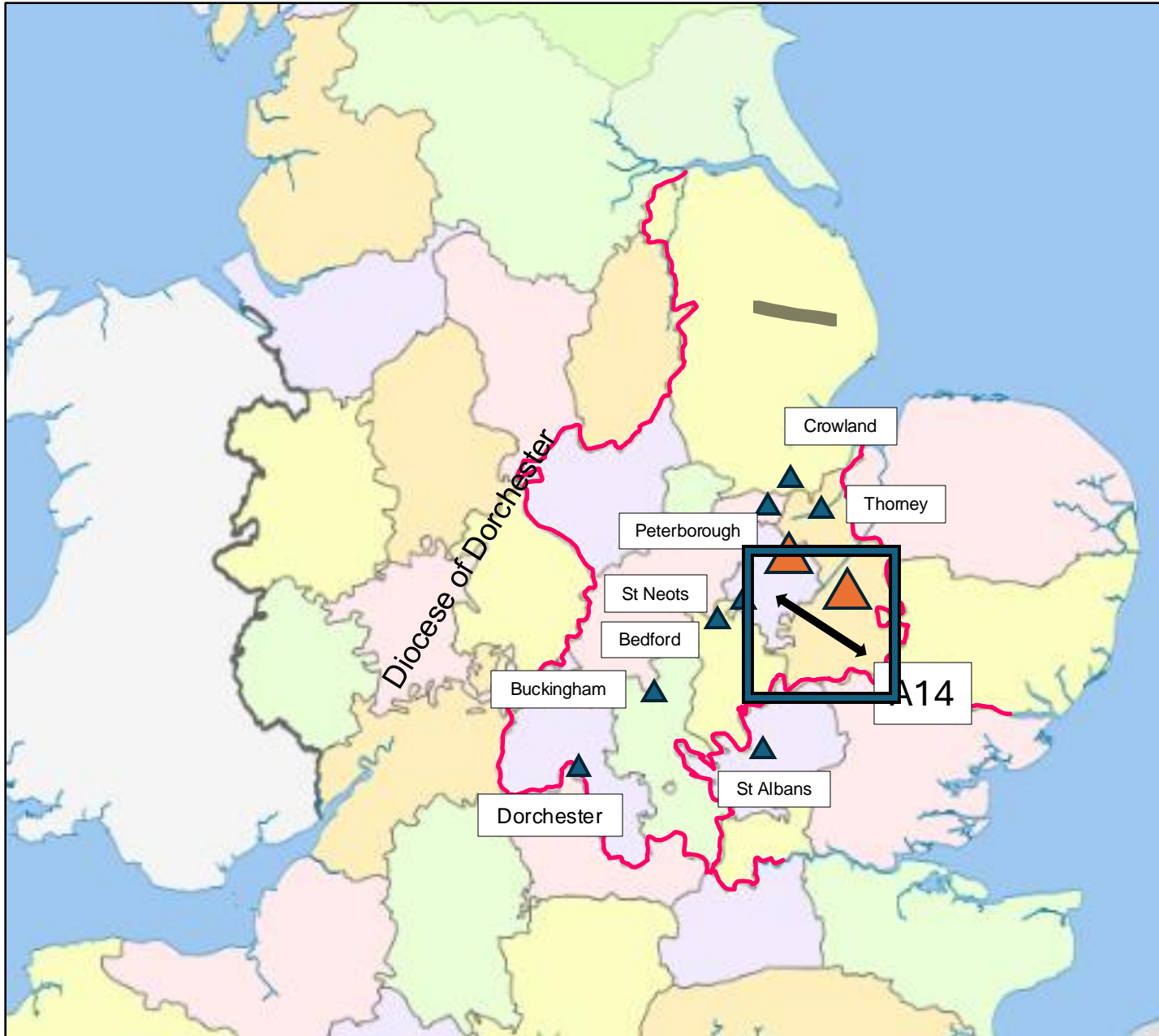
How far did Cnut reach into Mercia?

- English place name locations with Scandinavian elements:
 - by and -thorpe (Domesday)
- 40,000 Danes settled in the Danelaw Counties 900-1030AD. The Midlands well populated, and many would have welcomed Cnut.
- But Cambs/Hunts remained mainly Anglo-Saxon and would have fought the raiding army.

Cambs and Hunts were probably Cnut's main target



Distribution of Scandinavian place names (Smith)

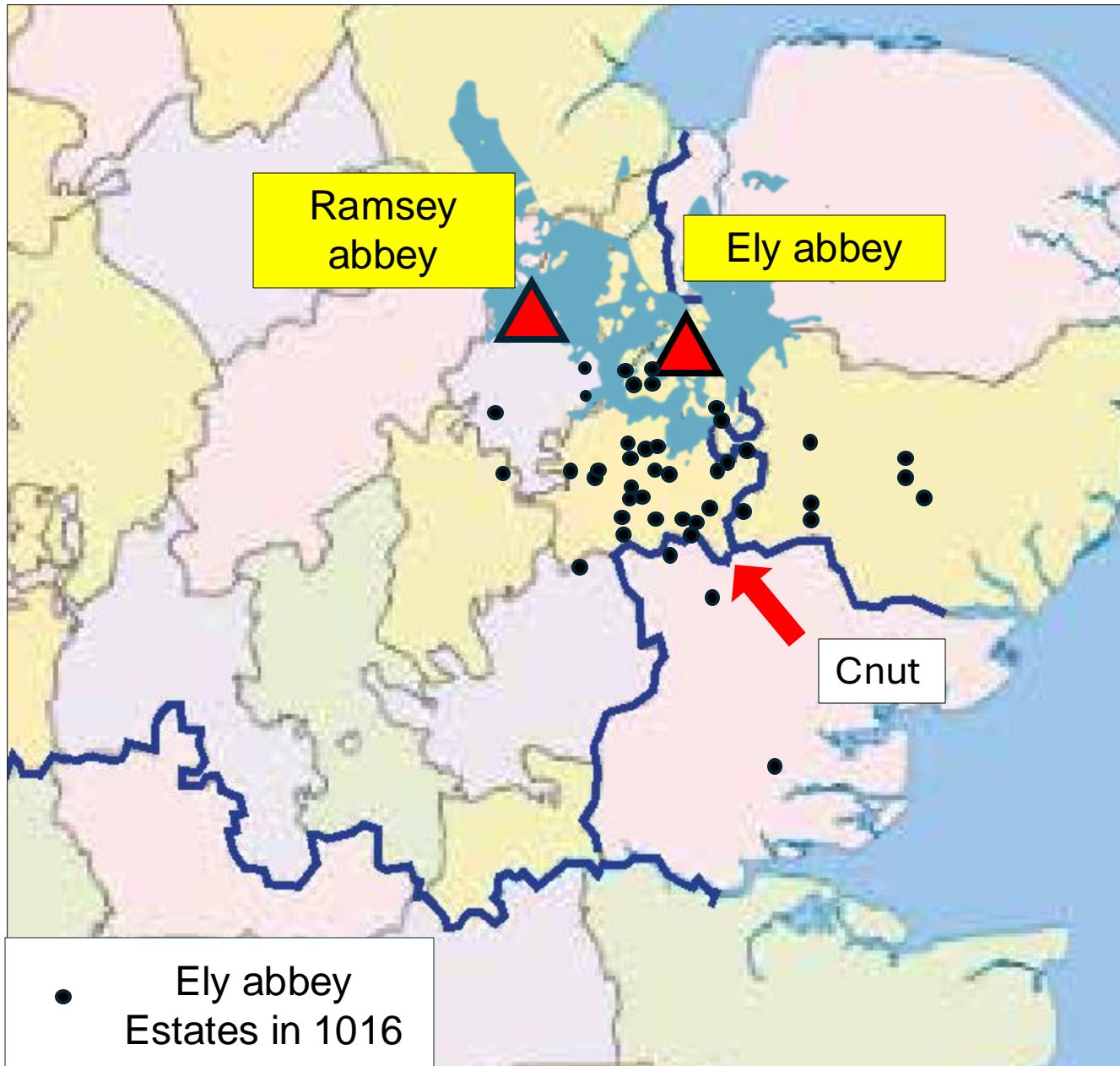


Two further clues

- 8 other abbeys in the London /Dorchester dioceses could have supported the English army. But no evidence.
- The Assandun battle date was first revealed as 18th Oct in an **Ely Abbey C12** calendar. (Dickins)

So, we think Cnut had been raiding near Ely and Ramsey

Probably up and down the A14!



So why were Ramsey/Ely monks involved?

Here's a possible scenario...

- Leaving Essex, Cnut entered Mercia at the S.Cambs border.
- Many Ramsey and Ely estates in S.Cambs, and abbots, priors and monks came to help defend their estates.
- Edmund commanded the “nearest available” clerics to support the assembling English army with relics and prayers.

Ob fr̄m̄ Brihtung?

Ob dōn̄ adnōd ep̄c̄ z p̄liamici n̄ri q̄ i c̄p̄ta s̄c̄ ap̄t̄
z p̄d̄z m̄a leofwara q̄ d̄ed̄it nob̄ d̄ic̄t̄une z w̄el̄t̄une

O b̄ rex angloz̄ step̄h̄ cū sit̄ miseratio d̄i.

Many local people died at
Assandun

- This Ely Abbey C12 obit for Eadnoth, Bishop of Dorchester states he died on Oct 18th.
- The obit then adds:
Many friends of ours were killed by the invaders. (Dickins)
- This suggests men from Abbey estates, serving as local militia, had died serving Edmunds army.

It appears that South Cambridgeshire was hit hard by Cnut's raiding army.

Candidate Battle Areas

*Cnut's army was returning to his ships,
but was caught by the English at Assandun*

A literature search led to 4 candidates

Ashdon Ashingdon Assington Essendon

Check points

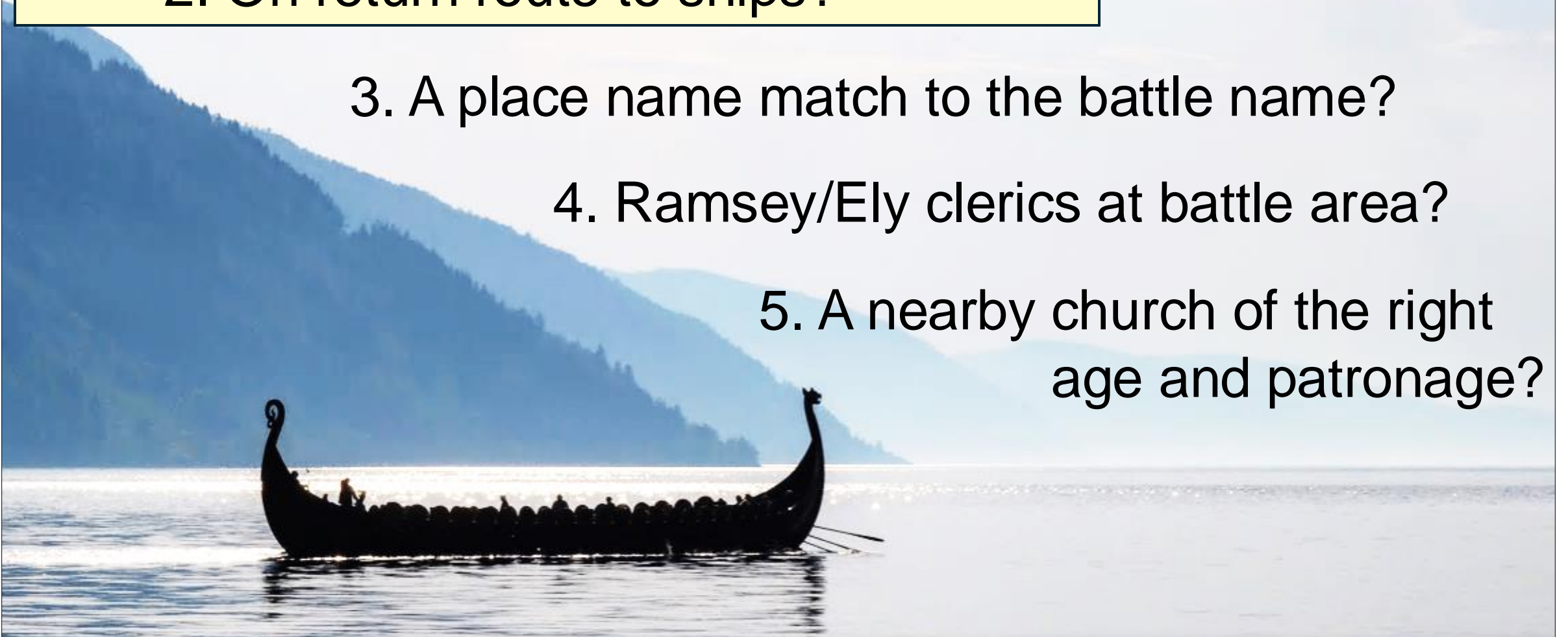
1. In Essex county?

2. On return route to ships?

3. A place name match to the battle name?

4. Ramsey/Ely clerics at battle area?

5. A nearby church of the right age and patronage?

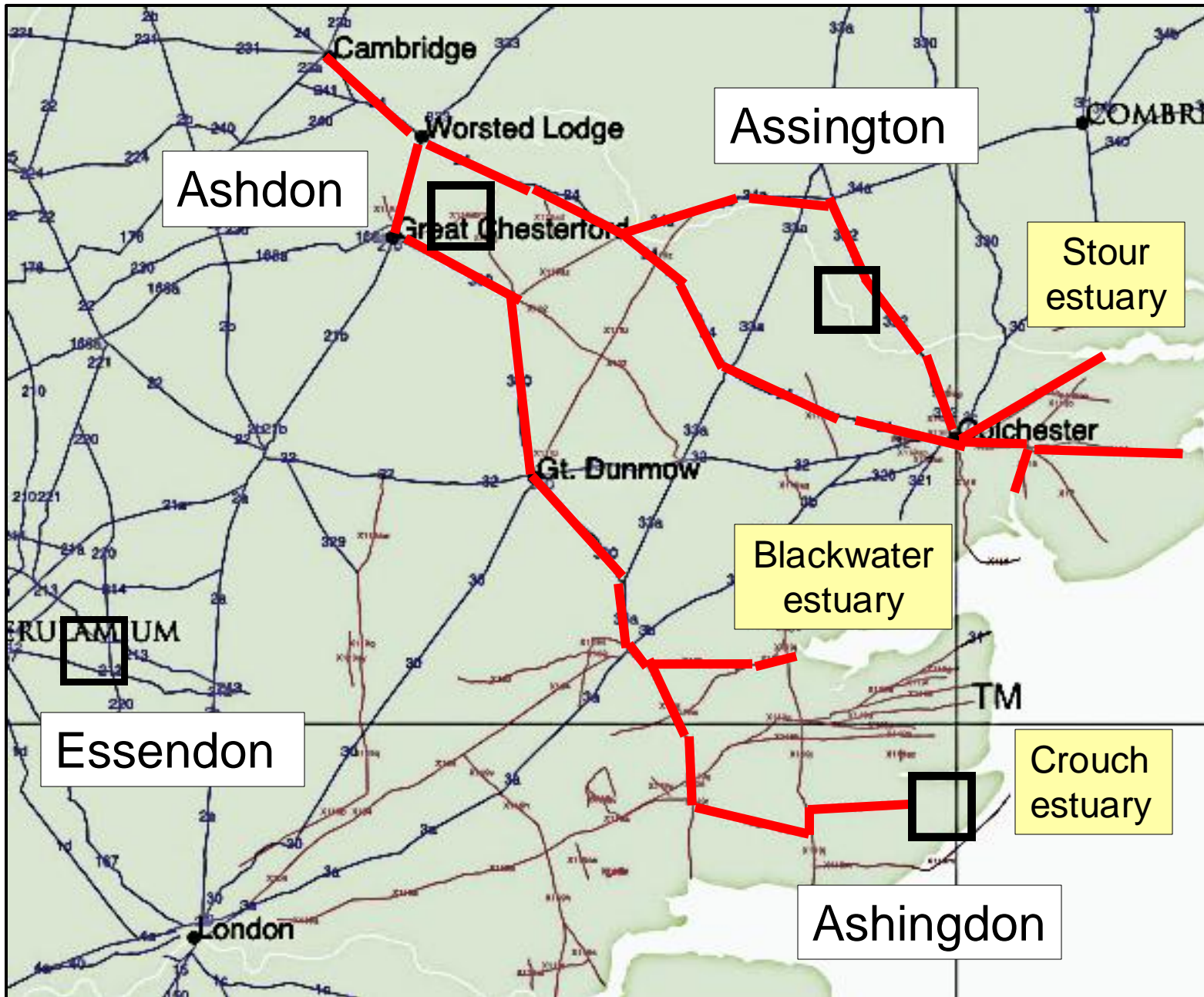


“... overtook them in Essex at the hill which is called Assandun.....” (ASC E)



In Essex County?

- Cnut had been raiding in S Cambs, but the battle was in Essex. He was clearly returning to the Essex Coast.
- Ashdon and Ashingdon are both in Essex.
- Essendon is in Herts. It was in East Seaxon in C9, but Herts County was created late C10.
- Assington is in Suffolk.



On return route to ships?

Leaving S.Cambs for the Essex coast, northerly exit routes would reduce risk of enemy contact.

- Ashdon and Assington were on the most northerly route to the Essex coast.
- The route via Ashington was closer to London.
- Essendon was many miles from exit routes to the Essex Coast.

A Probability Table to help battle location assessment

	Ashingdon area	Ashdon area	Assington area	Essendon area
Located in Essex?	Yes High	Yes High	No Low	No Low
On return route to ships?	Med	High	High	Low

Check points

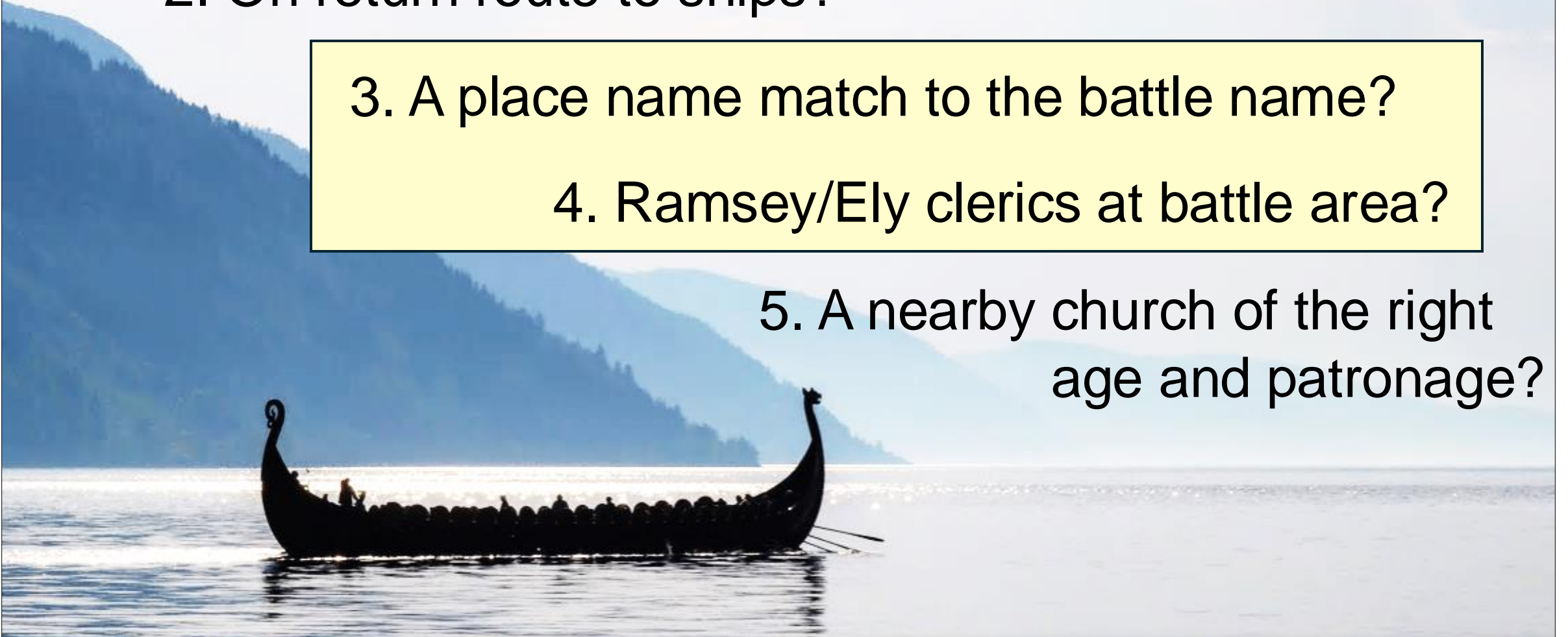
1. In Essex County?

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What is the battle name? (Hart, The Danelaw)			Place name match to battle name?
Assandun	AS Chronicles c1017-20	OE Assa's hill OE ash tree hill	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All 3 names documented once only and are equally reliable and admissable (Hart). Thus, Assandun may not be the correct name. But we have two battle name meanings for checking against candidate battle areas:
Assatun	Knutsdrapa 1027	ON Assa's enclosure or hill OE ash tree enclosure or hill	
Aescenedune	Encomium Emmae 1040	OE ash tree hill	Assa's hill/enclosure Ash tree hill/enclosure



Cambridge Dictionary of English place names

Candidate battle area names and meanings

- There is a match for both Ashdon and Ashington:

Assa's hill/enclosure
Ash tree hill/enclosure
- There is no similarity of Essendon to the battle site name.
- There is some similarity for Assington but a different personal name, Asa not Assa.



Index

(Pick) (YN); Aslockton (Nt).
Aslákr (ODan) *Oselokeswey* 1334, *Oselokeszwong* 1250 (Nth).
Asli PASE1.
Asloc DLV.
Asmoth PASE1 DLV.
Asmund (ODan) *Osmoundesdikys* 1467×84 (Le).
Ásmundr (ME, ODan, OE, ON, Sc) (↔**Ösmund**) ?*Osmanthorpe* (Nt); ?*Ossoms Hill* (St); *Asemondcroft* 1313, *Osemundewong* 1253 (Nth); *Asmundemere* 1279 (BdHu); *Asmundesrugge* (Gl); *Osmans Dene* 2.89 (Ch); *Aismunderby* (YW); *Osmotherley* (YN).
Asne DLV.
Asnoth PASE1.
Assa Asham (Sx); Ashingdon(?) (Ess); Assendon (O).
Asser PASE2.
Ast PASE1.
Asten (A-Sc) *Alstonby*, *Astinhole* 1261 in *Rottington* (Cu).
Asterius PASE1.
Astin (ME) *Astinriding* 13 (YW); *Astenthwaite* (We).
Asulf PASE2 DLV.
Ásúlfr (Sc) *Aislaby* (WhitbyS) (YN).

K Briggs

Is 'Assa' an Anglo-Saxon name?

- New index (2023) of 12,651 'personal names in place names' created from records dating 597-2000AD (Briggs)
- There are 3 locations based on the name 'Assa'.
- But no 'Assa' locations for name records up to 1066AD.

So, it seems unlikely that the 1016AD battle is named after a hill belonging to Assa



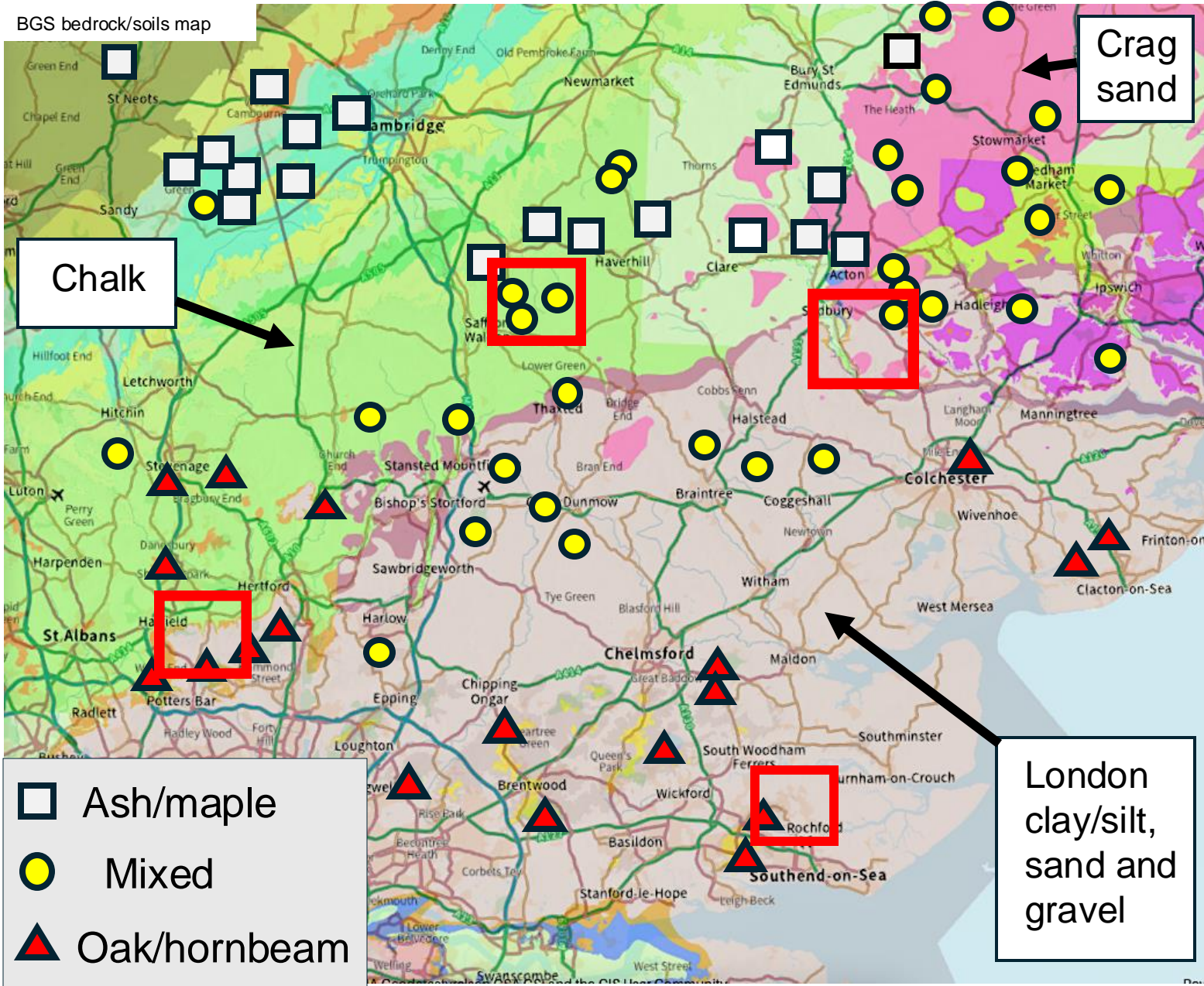
- Ash - the second most common tree to oak.
- Single ash trees are common in hedge rows across East Anglia.
- But ash dominant woodlands in East Anglia are unusual.
- In SE England, there are two main classes of ancient SSSI woodland (*NVC, Rackham*).

Were there ash tree woodlands at the candidate locations?

ash/maple
(oak/hazel)

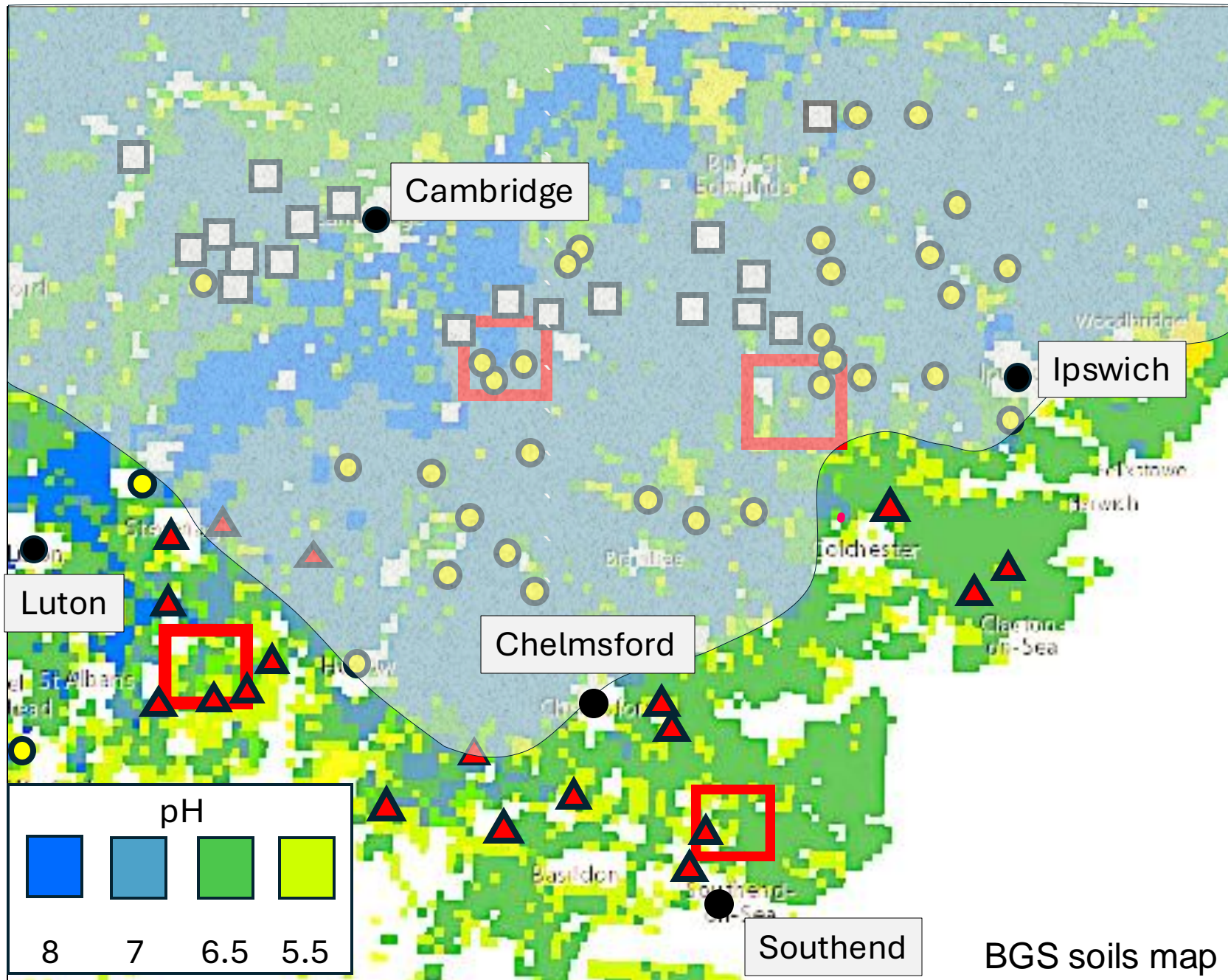
oak/hornbeam
(birch/chestnut)

BGS bedrock/soils map



Where are these ancient woodlands?

- Does woodland class depend on bedrock type?
- South Essex and South Herts clearly favour 'Oak/hornbeam'.
- Cambs and West Suffolk favour 'Ash/maple'.
- Only limited correlation evident with bedrock type.



Top-soil pH?

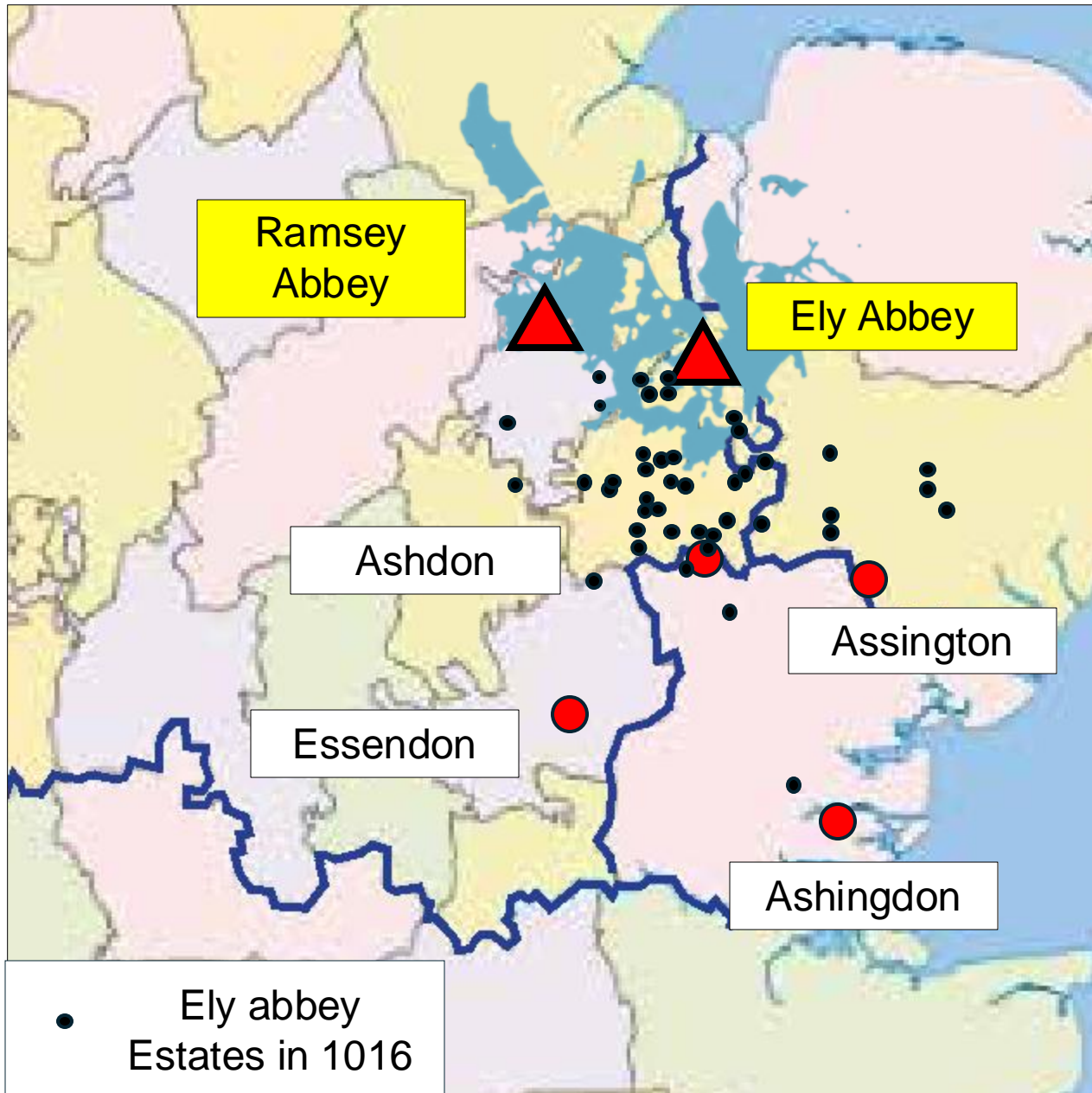
- Most oak/hornbeam woods associated with pHs of 5.5-6 (sand/silty soils).
- Ash/maple woods with pH 7 (chalky boulder clay soils).
- A better correlation

The Ashdon area is the most probable location for ash tree woods

BGS soils map

A Probability Table to help battle location assessment

	Ashingdon area	Ashdon area	Assington area	Essendon area
Located in Essex?	Yes High	Yes High	No Low	No Low
On return route to ships?	Med	High	High	Low
Place name match to battle name	Low	High	Low	Low



Probability of Ramsey/Ely monks at the battle area? (CP4)

- Chasing Cnut, Ramsey/Ely clerics were now required to travel with and support the English army
- Depending on Cnut's route to his ships,
Ashdon, Assington, Ashington and Essendon were all reachable by the clerics

All candidates have a strong case

Check points

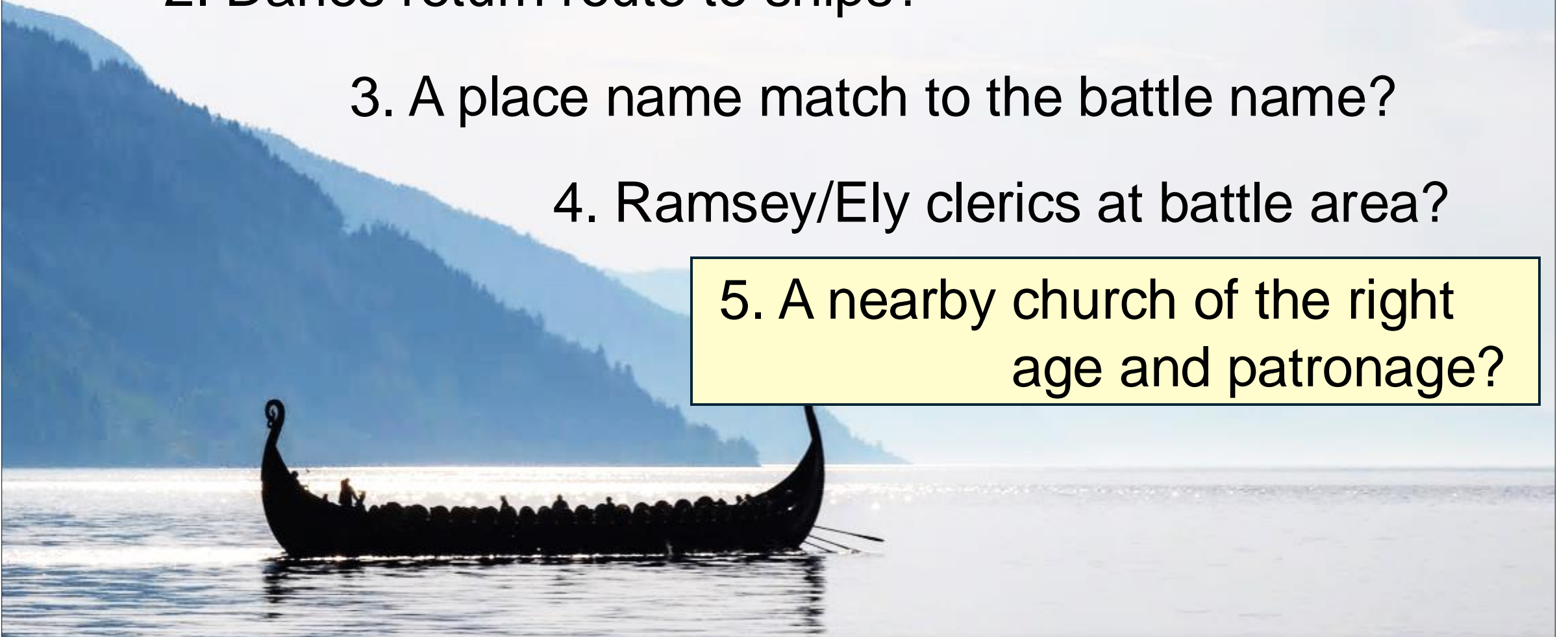
1. In Essex County?

2. Danes return route to ships?

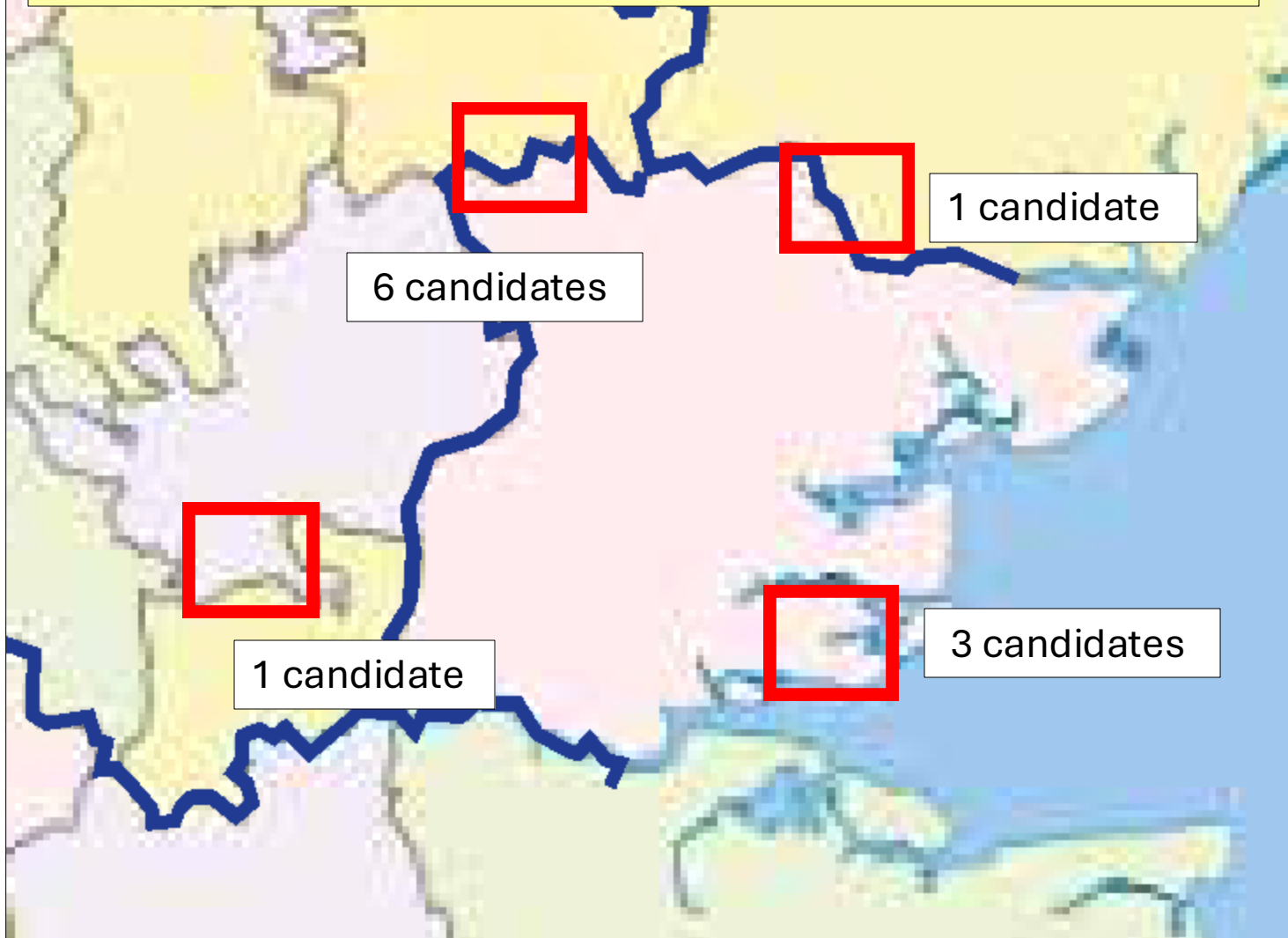
3. A place name match to the battle name?

4. Ramsey/Ely clerics at battle area?

5. A nearby church of the right age and patronage?



“The King....had a minster built there of stone and lime.... and gave it to his priest Stigand” (ASC F)



A nearby church of the right age and patronage?

- Could be an existing church or a long-lost site.
- 9 existing churches and 3 place-name sites reviewed.
- Information being sought on: church/site history, build date, dimensions, architecture, patronage history (royal connection in 1020AD).
- Short list of 4 churches and 3 sites created for further research.

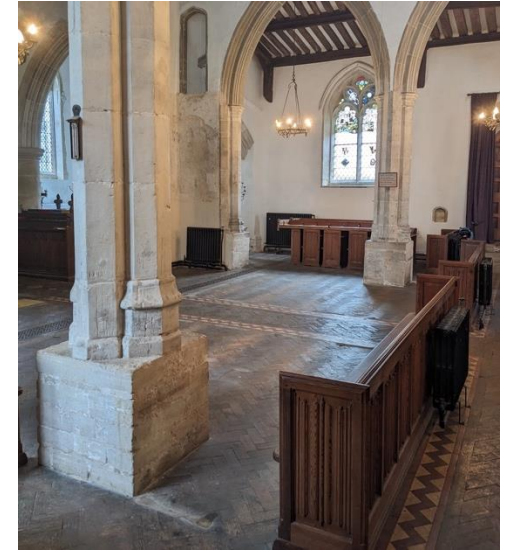


All Saints, Ashdon

Aisled with many C14 features

C19 mention of earlier church foundations (under investigation)

Patronage history under review



St Botolph's, Hadstock

C11 features, C8 foundations.
Large cruciform church in rural area

Nave wall has complex build history (under investigation)

Patronage research completed.
Royal church in 1016AD





St Andrew, Ashingdon

Many C14 features. Shortened nave and chancel could be C11/C12.

C20 mention of earlier church foundations. Build history to be expert assessed.

Patronage history under review.



St Nicholas, Canewdon

C14 nave and chancel. Dimensions suggest Saxon construction. Large complex church in rural area.

Build history to be expert assessed

Patronage history under review.



Battlefield Studies

- 7 battlefield sites identified
- For each, a written statement is being produced outlining:

Previous research

Relevant maps

Terrain and vegetation

Routes and tracks

Minster church location

Relevant archaeology

Research continues

Summary probability table so far

	Ashingdon area	Ashdon area	
Located in Essex?	High	High	
On return route to ships?	Med	High	
Place name match to battle name?	Low	High	
Ramsey/Ely monks at battle area?	High	High	

Project Summary

1. Cnut was probably raiding E. Mercia, close to Cambridge.
2. He was returning to his ships at the time of the battle.
3. The Essex coast mooring site is not known, research continues.
4. The battle name relates to 'ash trees' hill, not to the personal name 'Assa's' hill.

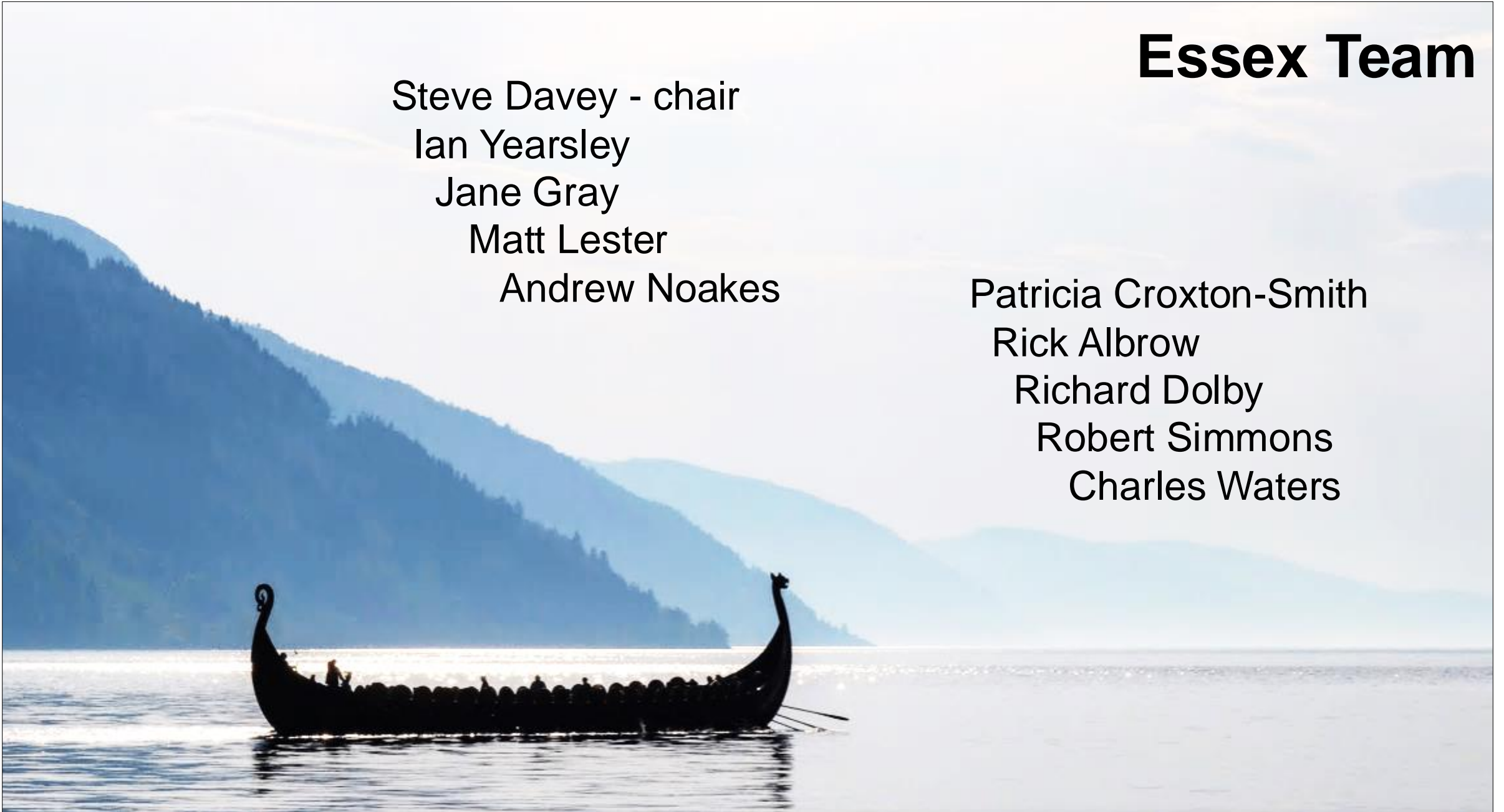
Project Summary

5. Ash dominant woods are to be found on chalky boulder clay derived soils of S.Cambs and S.Suffolk .
6. Archaeology ground and building surveys continue on 4 churches and 2 sites to locate Cnut's minster church.
7. A battlefield paper-based study has commenced on 7 candidate locations.

Essex Team

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Robert Simmons
Charles Waters



Questions please

