

Cnut's raiding of Mercia before the battle of Assandun

Richard Dolby, April 2026

This paper arises from an ongoing Battlefields Trust (East Anglia) project aimed at locating the site of the battle of Assandun fought in Essex in 1016AD. It examines the route to battle of Cnut's raiding army, whether the Danes who were travelling from the Essex coast were intercepted by Edmund Ironside before or after reaching Mercia, and the counties that were raided. Cnut's routes from Cambridgeshire back into Essex prior to the battle are discussed, and two check points are derived for use in the objective assessment of any candidate Assandun site.

1. Introduction

An understanding of the routes taken by the Danish and English armies before the battle of Assandun in 1016AD is an important factor in this Battlefields Trust project, the principal aim of which is to locate the battle site.

The key sentences in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles Texts D, E and F (1) relating to the events leading up to Assandun are:

1. Se here gewende eft up on Eastseaxan 7 ferde into Myrcean... (*Bodleian Laud 636*), which Swanton (1) translates as:

The raiding army turned back up again up into Essex, and travelled into Mercia...

2. Da se cyng..... ferde him aet hindan 7 offerde hi innan Eastseaxan, aet þere dune, þe mann haet Assandun....

.... the king.... travelled behind them and overtook them in Essex at the hill which is called Assandun....

Two other editions of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles edited by Thorpe in 1861 (2) and Giles in 1914 (3) translated the OE phrase 'into Myrcean' in the first sentence as implying that Cnut had reached Mercia prior to the battle. However, Cyril Hart (4) noted that in 1930, Margaret Ashdown (5), an expert in old English and Norse, had rendered the OE phrase as '*towards 'Mercia'*'. Hart said this implied that the raiding army was still in Essex when it was overtaken from the south by the English army which had set off from London in pursuit.

Warwick Rodwell (6) also refers to the uncertainty concerning the Danes being intercepted before or after reaching Mercia. He argued that if interception was before, then a battle location in north Essex rather than south Essex was much more likely but

added that if the battle occurred on the Danes return from Mercia, then a battle in south Essex merited further discussion.

But is there uncertainty about Cnut reaching Mercia? Other manuscript evidence given in Hart's 'Site of Assandun' paper (4) can be read as showing with reasonable confidence that (i) Cnut did reach Mercia, (ii) that he had been raiding in South Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire, and (iii) that he was intercepted by Ironside following his return to Essex. This evidence is reviewed in the following sections.

Also in this paper, two check points related to events leading to the battle are created to allow an objective assessment of the location of any proposed candidate Assandun site.

2. Evidence on Cnut's raiding locations

There were four bordering counties to Essex in 1016AD but only two were part of Mercia. These were Hertfordshire and Cambridgeshire. In the south, Middlesex bordered Essex, but it was part of Wessex, and the fourth bordering shire, Suffolk, was part of the East Anglian earldom.

To reach Mercia from the Essex coast, Cnut could have crossed directly into Cambridgeshire or Hertfordshire. There were several Roman roads leading to both counties. However, Cnut's army may have moored in an Essex estuary, journeyed some way through Essex and then passed through parts of south Suffolk to reach the Cambridgeshire border. Thus, there were direct and indirect routes to reach Cambridgeshire from Essex.

Abbey and Diocesan archives are some of the very few sources of information on events prior to Assandun, and if Cnut did enter Mercia, then evidence of raiding needs to be sought from the relevant Cambridgeshire and Hertfordshire sources. However, archives in neighbouring counties also need study to determine whether the raiding army crossed other county/province boundaries within Mercia. So, the following archives have been examined: Ely, Ramsey and Thorney abbeys (Cambridgeshire), Peterborough abbey (Northamptonshire), Crowland abbey (Holland province of Mercia), St Albans abbey (Hertfordshire) and the Dorchester diocese (Oxfordshire).

Cambridgeshire

There are two manuscripts from Ely Abbey that indicate Cnut had entered Cambridgeshire.

- (i) the Book of Ely (Liber Eliensis) states that many Ely Abbey monks with relics were killed by the raiding army at the battle of Assandun while offering prayers and orations (7). Book 2 of the Liber Eliensis in which this statement was made was written 1140s-1160s (8).

This shows that at some point in Ironside's pursuit of Cnut, Ely Abbey had been enlisted to support the English army, and since there is no record of raiding of the abbey itself, the most likely reason is that Cnut had been raiding Ely estates. Abbeys who held extensive estates were obligated to support a King's fyrd by supplying armed men and

provisions in times of existential threat (typically one man per 5 hides), and the support of their clerics and monks would also be required at impending battles, such as Assandun.

- (ii) a C12 Ely Calendar (9) contains the obit of Bishop Eadnoth on October 18th and shows an accompanying entry which translated states that ‘very many friends of ours were killed by the raiding army’. According to Dumville (10), this is in a similar script and ink to the obit and must have been written at the same time, the core of the Calendar being created between 1100-1110AD with obit additions up to 1169AD (see Appendix 1).

The phrase ‘very many friends of ours’ is unlikely to mean fellow monks. A monk was the author of the Calendar obit entry, and he was writing on behalf of the abbey. Instead, it most likely refers to regional benefactors who gave land to the abbey, along with the tenants and lay people who now worked for the Ely estates.

The estates belonging to the abbey in 1010AD are plotted in Fig 1 (red circles), and many of these lands would have been in the path of Cnut’s army if it was raiding in south Cambridgeshire. Some tenants and estate workers would have lost their lives in trying to defend their properties, and male survivors in these areas would have been enlisted to support Ironside’s fyrd in pursuit of Cnut.

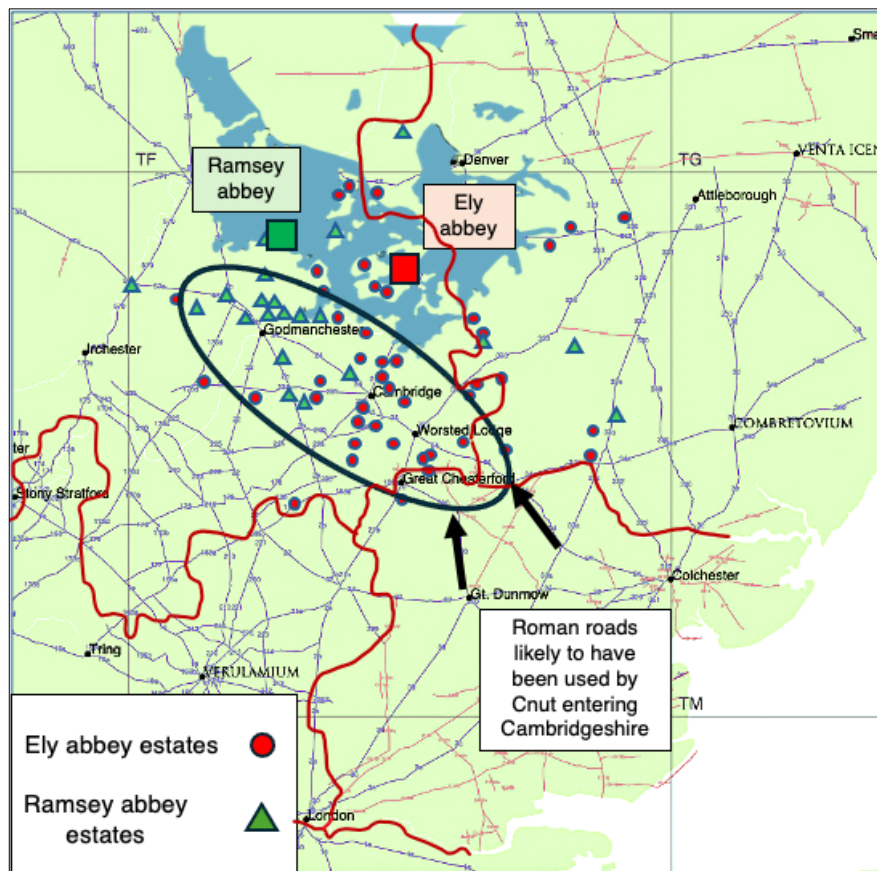


Fig 1. Abbey estates in 1010AD and the likely raiding area of Cnut in 1016AD

The obit entry uses the words “killed by the raiding army” which suggests the estate workers may have been killed before the battle of Assandun, but this is not certain. They may have lost their lives in the raiding both before the battle and at the battle itself.

Bruce Dickins (11) was the first to discuss the various obits in the Ely Calendar and concluded that while Cambridgeshire and the Ely area had suffered heavily at the battle, he placed the battle at Ashingdon. Later, Hart (4), while noting Dickins conclusions, considered the evidence for the battle site pointed to north-west Essex.

However, if we take points (i) and (ii) above together, the evidence suggests strongly that Cnut had reached Mercia and had been raiding in southern Cambridgeshire within the ringed area shown in Fig 1.

Huntingdonshire

Four pieces of evidence connected with Ramsey abbey suggest that Cnut must have crossed Cambridgeshire and raided parts of Huntingdonshire.

(i) the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles (Texts C, D, E) show that Abbot Wulfsig of Ramsey abbey was killed at Assandun (1). He would have had Ramsey monks in support.

(ii) the Chronicon abbatiae rameseiensis (Ramsey abbey Chronicles) states that many religious persons were killed at Assandun (12).

(iii) Ramsey abbey owned many estates in both Huntingdonshire and Cambridgeshire as shown by the green triangles in Fig 1.

(iv) Aethelweard, son of ealdorman Aethelwine (died 992), was killed at Assandun fighting for Ironside (1). His family owned many estates in Huntingdonshire, Cambridgeshire, Norfolk and Suffolk and the family hall was at Upwood near Ramsey (13). His father Aethelwine was the lay founder and first patron of Ramsey abbey.

These Ramsey connections imply that Ramsey abbey, as well as Ely, had become involved in events leading up to the battle of Assandun, and that the founder's son, clerics and monks had been enlisted by Ironside to travel with clerics and monks from Ely abbey to join the fyrd and support with relics and prayers.

Did Cnut then move further west or north-west out of Huntingdonshire and into Northamptonshire, or into the provinces of Kesteven or Holland? Figure 2 shows the location of Thorney, Peterborough and Crowland abbeys and their known estates in the early C11. The shire and province boundaries are also shown.

The Red Book of Thorney abbey is mainly a cartulary and focuses on lands, grants and disputes dating back to King Edgars time. It was not a narrative chronicle, but there is no mention of Cnut's raiding of Thorney estates in 1016AD (14).

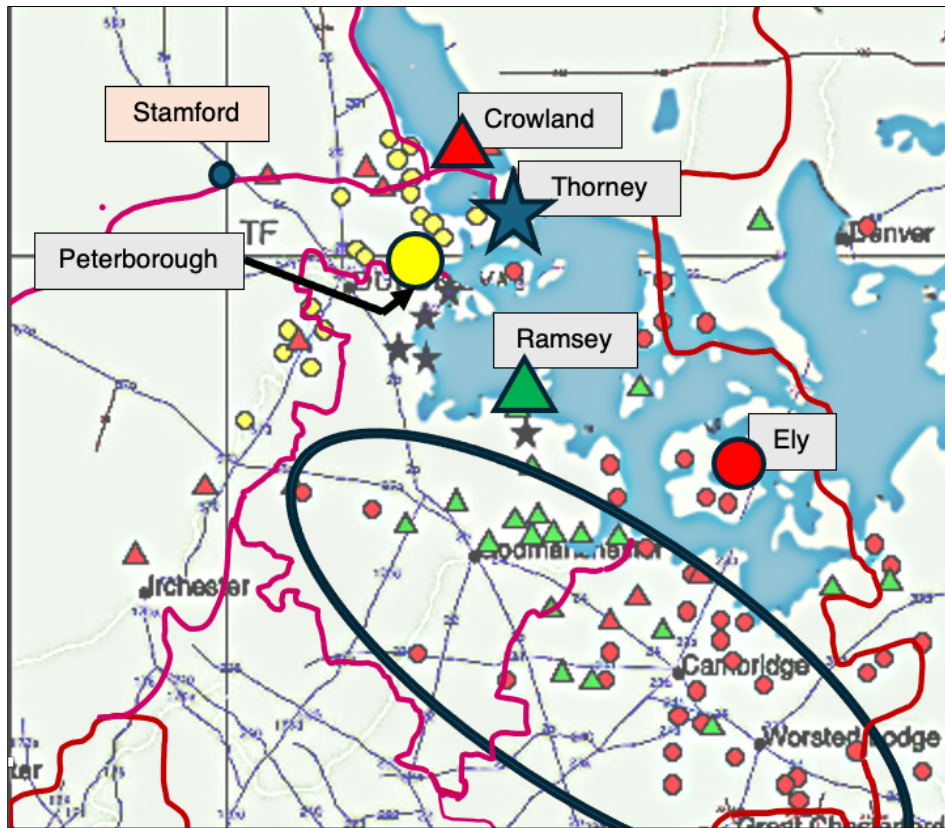


Fig 2. The abbey locations of Thorney, Peterborough and Crowland, all north of Ramsey and Ely abbeys. Estates are illustrated with the same icon and colour as the individual abbeys.

The original narrative chronicle written at Peterborough abbey, which was then in Northamptonshire, was destroyed by fire in the abbey library in 1116AD. Its replacement was Anglo-Saxon chronicle Text E as we see it today (1). This Text differs from A-S Chronicles C (Abingdon) or D (Worcester) in that the entries around the date of 1016AD are shorter. This is because after the fire, it is thought that the monks started by copying an early version of the Chronicles, possibly Text A (Winchester) which had little information for the year 1016AD. They then began adding their own narrative contributions from 1122AD onwards.

As with the cartulary from Thorney abbey, Peterborough Text E has no additional information on Cnut's raiding locations in 1016AD to that found in Texts C and D.

Crowland abbey sited in Holland province of Mercia was originally founded in memory of St Guthlac in the eighth century. It was destroyed by the Viking raids in 866AD but rebuilt as a Benedictine abbey in the tenth century on land provided by Aethelwine (15). The narrative chronicle of the abbey is often attributed to Ingulf who was abbot in 1070, but all abbey documents were destroyed by a fire in 1091 and the extant chronicle *Historia Croylandensis* (15) has been dated after the fire to the late C11 (16). However, its author is unknown.

The change of Crown from Ironside to Cnut in 1016AD is mentioned in the Historia but there is little mention of the circumstances and no reference to the battle of Assandun.

But there are details given on the Crowland abbey estates raided by the Danes in 1010AD led by Thorkell the Tall, and because the abbey lands receive no mention in the annal for 1016AD, this suggests Cnut probably did not raid in the vicinity of Crowland or any of its estates in his raiding mission before Assandun.

In summary, no evidence has been found that Cnut moved north or north-west out of Huntingdonshire and into Northamptonshire or into the provinces of Kesteven and Holland.

Dorchester Diocese

Bishop Eadnoth of Dorchester was killed at Assandun. He had been the first abbot of Ramsey abbey in the period 992-1007. Figure 3 below shows the Dorchester diocese which covered much of central and east Mercia and included both Ramsey and Ely abbeys, along with the bishop's see at Dorchester-on-Thames. This was located at the southern end of the Diocese because the see was moved south out of the Danelaw counties for security reasons in the 10th century.

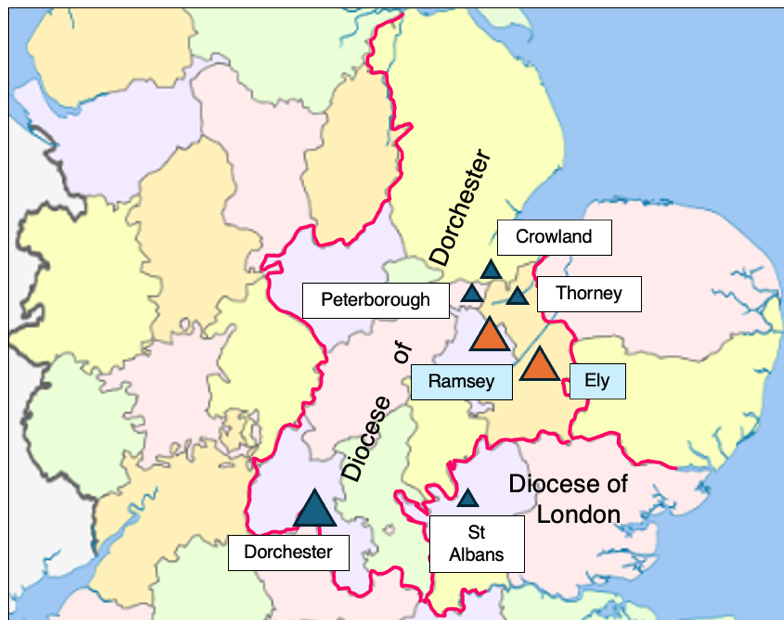


Fig 3. The main abbeys in Dorchester Diocese 1016AD. The bishop's see was a cathedral in Dorchester-on-Thames

Charters and confirmations of estates originating from the Dorchester diocese are held today by a variety of library and cathedral archives. The bishop's see moved back north to Lincoln from Dorchester-on-Thames in 1072 and early charters and property records of the original Dorchester cathedral were transferred there, but no diocesan cartularies

or narrative chronicles appear to have been created. So, there is no written evidence from the Dorchester diocese on Cnut's raiding of Mercia in 1016AD at the time when Eadnoth was Bishop.

However, Eadnoth's presence at Assandun suggests that Ironside had knowledge that Cnut's raiding was in the Dorchester diocese and wanted his support when assembling the English army. Eadnoth either joined the army as it journeyed north from London to intercept Cnut, or he was already in the Ramsey/Ely area when Ironside was in the north Essex/south Cambridgeshire area.

Hertfordshire

The chronicles of St Alban's abbey (17) are attributed to Matthew Paris. However, in the narrative around 1016AD, Paris copied /inherited earlier texts, including annals written by Roger of Wendover (18). The latter gives no detail about Cnut's raiding of Mercia prior to Assandun and no indication that Cnut had entered Hertfordshire and raided St Alban's estates.

However, the main reason for doubting that Cnut travelled west to Hertfordshire is the fact that the monks killed at Assandun were from Ely and Ramsey abbeys. If St Alban's estates had been raided, monks from that abbey would surely have been enlisted into Ironside's chasing army, but there is no record of the abbey's involvement.

The death of Ramsey and Ely monks at Assandun (7) and the evidence from the Ely Calendar (9) that many friends of Ely Abbey were also killed are the main reasons for doubting a recent claim that the battle was fought at Essendon in Hertfordshire (19).

The Essendon proposal is based on the theory that Cnut entered the River Lea after leaving Sheppey, and that Essendon was in ancestral Eastseaxan in 1016AD, an area in the 8th century which included land west of the River Lea in Middlesex and south Hertfordshire as well as Essex.

However, the River Lea was confirmed as the western boundary of Essex by Alfred the Great in his negotiations on Danelaw boundaries with Guthrum in 886AD. So, it is difficult to argue that Essendon was in Eastseaxon in 1016AD.

An additional point against Cnut entering present day Hertfordshire is that it is most unlikely the Danes would have chosen to leave Sheppey and then travel close to London. This would have given Ironside an early opportunity with minimum travel to intercept and engage him in battle. Also, anchoring up the River Lea to reach Essendon would have been a high-risk strategy with Ironside able to cut off the raiding army exit by blocking the river.

3. Cnut's return to Essex

We know from the Chronicles that Assandun was fought in Essex, so recognising that Cnut had probably reached Mercia, his raiding army must have turned around, most likely in the Godmanchester area, and travelled back into Essex. An exit by a direct

route south towards Braughing from Godmanchester seems unlikely since he would be expecting Ironside having left London to approach from this direction.

The two most likely Roman road exit routes for Cnut out of Cambridgeshire via Worsted Lodge and back into Essex are shown in Fig 4 (dotted red lines).

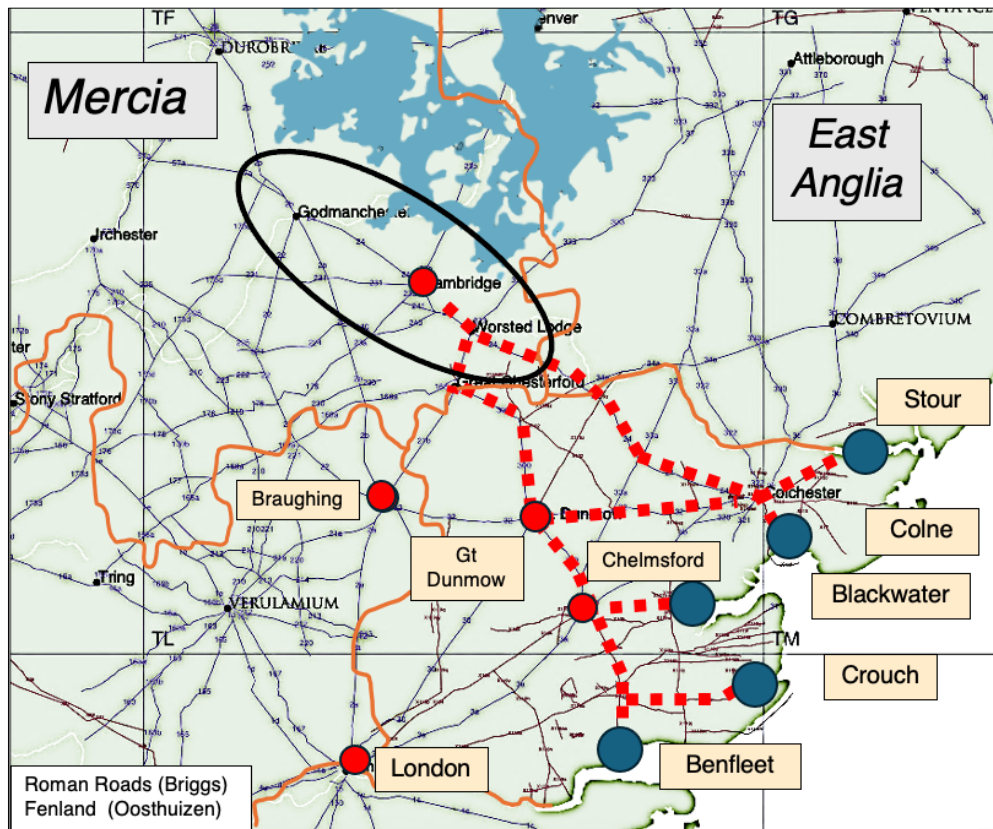


Fig 4. Exit routes for Cnut out of Cambridgeshire

The northerly of the two routes would have meant Cnut entering south Suffolk near Haverhill for a few miles, before crossing the border into Essex. This route would have taken Cnut to the Stour or Colne estuaries, assuming the Danish ships were moored there under guard.

The more southerly route through Gt Dunmow and Chelmsford would have been taken if Cnut had moored his ships in the Blackwater, Crouch or Benfleet estuaries.

His choice of route would have been decided by the need to regain his ships and by his knowledge of the location and likely movement of Ironside's chasing army. But Ironside did intercept him at Assandun, and the battle site must have been close to one of the dotted red line exit routes shown in Fig 4.

This proximity to one of Cnut likely exit routes is seen as the first check point for any candidate site proposed as Assandun, and the second check point follows in that any candidate site must be located near a hill in modern day Essex as given in the translation of the second sentence from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, namely,

..... overtook them in Essex at the hill which is called Assandun'...

4. Discussion

The evidence from the abbey archives, particularly those from Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire, strongly supports the scenario that Cnut's raiding army travelled across Essex and entered East Mercia through Cambridgeshire. This was the second occasion in about 3 months in 1016AD that Cnut had moored on the East coast and reached Mercia, the previous time mooring his ships in the Orwell (1).

Why did he make this second trip to Mercia, at a time we can estimate was probably early October?

Resupply of Sheppey?

One explanation is that he needed to resupply the Sheppey base and fleet. Sheppey is around 30 square miles in size and feeding a large ship-army of many hundreds would have been difficult. The army needed continuous supplies of grain, vegetables and meat and Cnut's aim may have been to bring back bulk food supplies to Sheppey as he had done a few months earlier when raiding Mercia via the Orwell (1).

The evidence points to the Fen-edge communities of Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire being the principal target for resupply on this second raid. These areas possessed some of the richest estates in the country for grain, vegetables and other agricultural output, and much of this would have been harvested in the autumn and was probably already stored in barns. Estates would have been relatively undefended targets for a raiding army foraging for bulk food supplies.

However, to reach these Fen-edge areas, Cnut needed to cross Essex. Although originally part of the Danelaw, the County was only very lightly populated with Scandinavian settlements, see Fig 5. Hart (20) and Boulton (21) have reviewed place names in Essex and East Anglia respectively, both showing that the Tendring peninsula had a few Danish settlements, but generally Essex would not have been friendly or neutral to Cnut. But neither was Essex strongly defended by Ironside. There were only 3 fortified burghs in the County in 1016AD, sited at Maldon, Witham and Colchester.

Essex therefore offered Cnut a relatively low resistance coastal entry, and it provided a good corridor for him to reach the Fen-edge areas, providing the three Essex fortified burghs could be avoided or skirted around. It would have allowed Cnut, with a light, fast raiding force, to move from the Essex coast to Mercia at probably 10-15miles/day.



Fig 5. Distribution of Scandinavian place names showing settlement areas of the Danes in the period 900-1030AD (22)

If Cnut's mission was to sustain his Sheppey base with food supplies, then at some point, the raiding army needed to turn back from the Fen-margin areas and re-enter Essex to return either to the ship moorings or to Sheppey by land.

However, his army composition had now changed and would have comprised a large mixed force with wagons, carts, infantry and horse riders, moving more slowly at say, around 10miles/day. It was therefore more vulnerable to being caught by Ironside's pursuing army.

Military link-up with allies?

An alternative explanation for Cnut's second trip to Mercia in the second half of mid-1016 is that his mission was to link with militias in the Dane-friendly areas of East Mercia and attempt once more to face Ironside and conquer England.

Eadric Streona was Ealdorman of Mercia, but Mercia was divided into regions with different allegiances. People in the south and west regions of Mercia were loyal to Streona but he had less control over the north and east regions, the latter being part of the original Danelaw. Over 40,000 Danes settled in the Danelaw areas between 900-1030AD. In particular, the 5 boroughs of Leicester, Nottingham, Derby, Lincoln and Stamford had retained a strong Scandinavian identity and if Cnut was looking to link with allies, the East Midlands could have been his target destination.

If so, then raiding of estates would have been primarily to sustain his army as it moved across Essex, south Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire in the line of march to the East Midlands.

But something happened in Huntingdonshire to change his mind. The Godmanchester area was only 30 miles from Stamford when his army appears to have changed direction and moved back through Cambridgeshire with Ironside's interception finally occurring in Essex. One possible reason is that he received intelligence on the proximity

and large size of Ironside's army approaching from the south and realised he would be intercepted and outnumbered if he continued north-west from Godmanchester.

He may have chosen to withdraw back to the Essex hills to defend the return route to his ship moorings on the Essex coast rather than engage with Ironside in the flat terrain of the fen margin areas. Or he may have decided to abandon the mission completely and return to Sheppey.

5. Conclusions

The chronicle and calendar evidence suggests strongly that Cnut was raiding in the fen-edge areas of Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire before the ensuing battle at Assandun.

The reason Cnut chose to leave Sheppey for this October mission is not clear. It could have been to resupply Sheppey for a winter camp there, or to link with allies in East Mercia and strengthen the Danish army in preparation for a decisive battle with Ironside.

His extensive raiding in the fen-edge communities could signal that the resupply motive was his main objective because the alternative, an ally link up with the East Midlands, would have been done as speedily as possible with minimal raiding.

Ironside enlisted senior clerics and monks from Ramsey and Ely abbeys to help with prayers, orations and relics. Lay tenants and workers on abbey estates were obligated to join Ironside's fyrd and fight the raiding army. No chronicle or charter evidence has been found that other abbeys in eastern England were involved.

The fact that Ely and Ramsey clerics, monks and many friends of Ely were killed shows that in pursuing Cnut, Ironside's army was assembling and manoeuvring close to the south Cambridgeshire region.

It appears Cnut turned around in Huntingdonshire and re-entered Essex prior to the final battle at Assandun.

The map of exit route options for Cnut, Fig 4, leads to the first check point for any proposed Assandun candidate site in that the battle must have been close one of Roman road routes (corridors) leading from Cambridgeshire back to the Essex coast.

A second check point follows from the several translations of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles which state that the battle was near a hill in Essex. The boundaries of Essex in 1016AD were those that define the county today.

6. References

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Appendix 1. The C12 Ely Calendar (9)

The Calendar can be found online attached to the O2.1 version of Liber Eliensis, held by Trinity College, Cambridge.

It shows a series of obits, month by month, and was primarily for the abbey to remember feast days for saints, royalty, bishops and abbots. No years are given for any of the obits. The O2.1 Calendar was a living document and has been deduced by several experts to have been started in the period 1100-1110AD and judged by the last dated obits, completed around 1169AD.

The Bishop Eadnoth obit on October 18th is shown in Fig A1. The date in the month comes from its position in the table, starting with day 1 at the top of the page. The number and letters to the left side should be ignored. They are for determining which days are Sundays and checking on the date of Easter from the lunar calendar etc.

The O2.1 Calendar revealing Bishop Eadnod's death on Oct 18th is regarded as the earliest monastic/chronicle source which allows the date of the battle of Assandun to be deduced. Other obits of special interest in the Calendar include Edmund Ironside, Cnut, Queen Emma, and Archbishop Stigand.

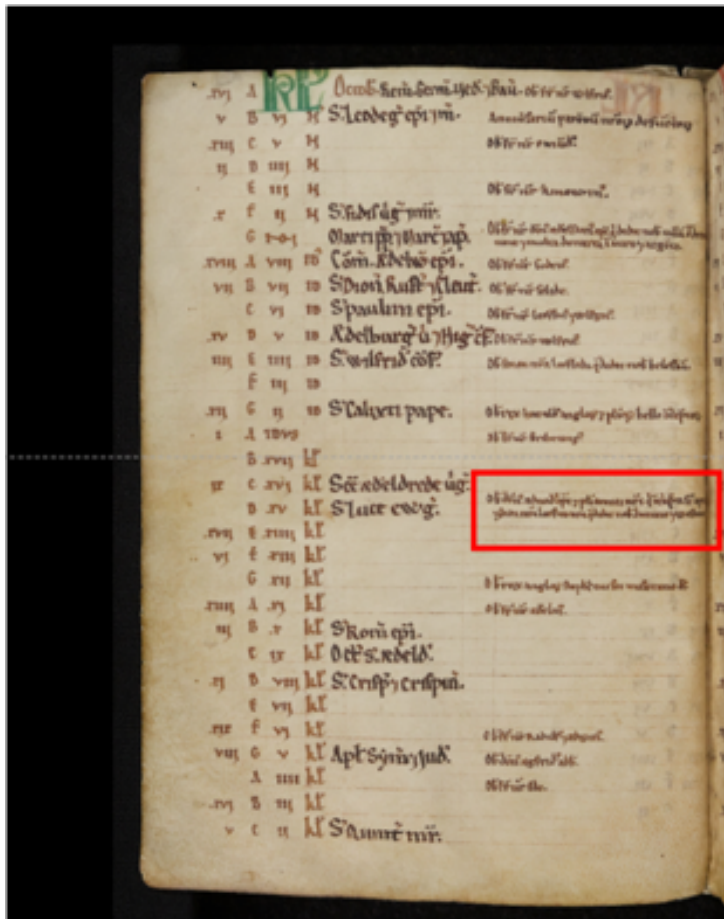


Fig A1. Obit entry on Oct 18th of Bishop Eadnod:
Obiit dominus Aednodus episcopus 7 plurimi amici nostri qui interempti sunt a piratis.