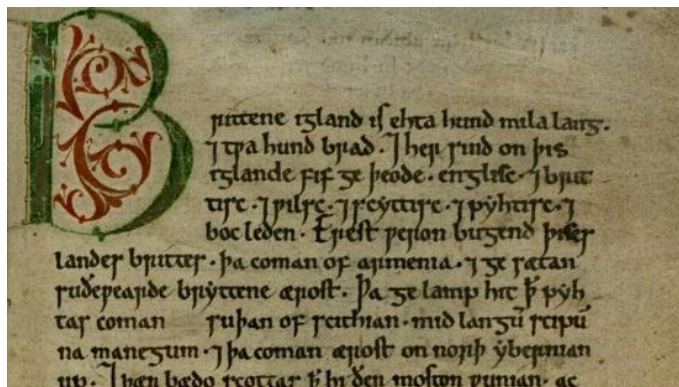


The Battle on the Field of Woden – 5th August 910

The Battle of Wodensfeld – or was it Tettenhall, or both, or neither, or was it in the year 909, 910 or 911? Wednesfield History Society remains convinced that it was Wednesfield in 910.

The source material is limited, but then again it usually is for Anglo-Saxon events. Historians draw a lot of information from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles – plural. The ‘book’ is a collection of annals (events listed by year) written in Old English and which largely copy each other, especially during the period of the battle. To the right is a section of the opening page of the annal known as the Peterborough Manuscript.



The first and original annal, known as the Winchester Manuscript, was begun in Wessex during the latter years of King Alfred the Great who died in 899AD. Multiple hand-made copies were then made and distributed to monasteries around England, which in turn, updated them with their own local events. It can be shown that some copying errors sometimes occurred which may explain the apparent discrepancy between versions of the Battle years – 909, 910 and 911. 910 is the one usually accepted.

The Battle and the Various Manuscripts

The Winchester Manuscript

910 King Edward sent an army both from Wessex and Mercia, and it raided the north raiding-army very greatly, both men and property, and killed many men of those Danish, and were inside there for five weeks. Here the English and the Danes fought at Tettenhall, and Aethelred, leader of the Mercians, passed away.

The Abingdon Manuscript

910 In this year English and Danes fought at Tettenhall, and the English took the victory.

The Worcester Manuscript

909 Here the Mercians and West Saxons fought against the raiding-army near Tettenhall and had the victory.

The Chronicle of Aethelweard

910 After a year the barbarians broke the peace with King Edward, and no less with Aethelred, who then ruled the Northumbrian and Mercian areas. They harried through Mercia and over the Severn into the west country; but, when, rejoicing in rich spoil, they were in the process of crossing back over the Severn at Cwatbrice they were attacked by both Mercians and West Saxons, which on 5 August gained a great victory on Woden's field killing three viking kings, Halfdan (Healfdene), Eowils (Eywysl), and Ivar (Inwaer).

What is noticeable about these sources is that Winchester and Abingdon say the battle was at Tettenhall, Worcester says it was near Tettenhall, and Aethelweard says it happened at Woden's field, no other place name given.

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So, why give more credence to Aethelweard's Chronicle over and above the other sources? Well, mostly, but not exclusively, because of who he was, what he was, and why he put quill to parchment in the first place.

Aethelweard

Aethelweard was a descendant of the royal house of Wessex. Possibly of King Alfred himself, or more likely of Aethelred the First, Alfred's older brother. He was an ealdorman of the Royal Court of Wessex and acted as witness to many charters from the mid-970s until 998, after which his name disappears, presumably because he died. Lists of 993 seem to credit him as a senior ealdorman, and in a charter of 997 he is titled '*Occidentalium Prouinciarum dux*' - ealdorman of the Western Provinces. Around the year 980, he wrote a chronicle in the form



of a very long letter to his 'sweet cousin Matilda'. Matilda was the Abbess of Essen in modern-day Germany, and a descendant of Alfred the Great (her mother was Alfred's grand-daughter Edith (Eadgyth) who married Otto I of Saxony). The intention was to educate his cousin about English history, and their family's place in it. Matilda is pictured left along with her brother Otto – as opposed to her father Otto.

In summary, he moved in Courtly circles, had an interest in history, and had access to original sources which historians believe are now lost.

Criticisms of Aethelweard's version of Events

- Q. Isn't it suspicious that he wrote his chronicle in Latin instead of the original Old English?
- A. No. He wrote his chronicle in Latin, presumably because Matilda, being an Abbess, would have been familiar with Latin, but not with Old English. After all she had never lived in England.
- Q. Why is his chronicle the only source material that mentions somewhere other than Tettenhall?
- A. His is the only surviving chronicle that does not mention Tettenhall. As professional historians have commented, material has been lost over the intervening centuries. Parchment and vellum are highly susceptible to damage by fire, water, insects, rodents, and even careless storage.
- Q. Why would a Christianised country name a battle location after a pagan god? Even though there were pockets of paganism still existing after Christianisation it had been nearly 200 years since that practice had died out.
- A. Because when you have spent centuries building up your family's right to rule based on your descentance from a god-warrior ancestor called Woden, you cannot just 'dump' him when it seems otherwise convenient. As John Smallshire said "*Despite the Christian conversion and the catechism condemning Woden as the devil, the Anglo-Saxon royal houses, and specifically the Mercian royal house, continued to claim 'divine right' due to their Woden oriented genealogies*"
- Q. But is Woden's field the same place as Wednesfield?
- A. Yes, for several reasons:-
- because of its proximity to the River Severn and Tettenhall, both mentioned in other chronicles;

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- because in 994, a place called Wodensfield, the boundaries of which were wrapped in with that of a place called Bilstone, was gifted by the Saxon noble woman Wulfrun to St Mary's Monastery at Hampton - the forerunner to St Peter's Collegiate Church;
- because the Domesday survey of 1066 clearly shows the existence of a place called Wodensfield, owned by the Canons of St Mary's at Hampton, in the County of Staffordshire;
- because very old property deeds, refer to a township called Wodensfield as being part of the parish of Wolverhampton.

All of which makes it highly unlikely that Aethelweard's Woden's field and Wednesfield are two entirely different places.

So, we remain anchored to the view that the Battle is rightly described as being of Wednesfield, but accept that given the nature of battle back then, and the alleged thousands who took part in it, the battle probably wandered around a bit on the flat land between Wednesfield and Tettenhall – inside the red oval on the map to the right.

It is possible that in 910AD, Wednesfield did not exist as a settlement, no matter how small, but only became a township after Wulfrun gave the land to the Monastery of St Mary 75 years later, which then took on a more detailed management of its people and lands.



Whatever the situation regarding a settled area called Wednesfield, the Battle was a significant success for Edward the Elder of Wessex. It was also a success for Edward's older sister Aethelflaed, wife of Aethelred, Lord of Mercia. She went on to successfully govern Mercia after Aethelred's death and was well respected for doing so. She died in 918AD just a few months before Edward managed to conquer the southern Danelaw. She was succeeded for a very short while by her daughter Aelfwynn, but in December 918AD Edward deposed her and took Mercian under his control. Her fate is unknown.

Following in his father's (Alfred's) footsteps, Edward was now on the road towards a unified England, even if there were to be large bumps in the road along the way. All thanks to the Battle of Wednesfield.