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Westbury White Horse and Neighbourhood.

HISTORICAL ASSOCIATIONS

OF

The Westbury White Horse.

OUR ENGRAVING this year* is a representation of WESTBURY WHITE HORSE, of which it gives a very fair idea. This picturesque and historically interesting object attracts the notice of travellers on the Wilts and Somerset Railway, who look out of the carriage windows towards the east. It is formed by excoiating the turf from the steep slope of the northern escarpment of Salisbury Plain. The chalk thus denuded presents the form of a White Horse of colossal dimensions. Remodelled in 1778, it had looked down on nearly three generations

* This History was published in W. Michael's Household Almanack for 1864, with the exception of a paragraph, which is extracted from the 'Local Events of Note' in the Almanack of 1874.

unaltered, until in the year 1873, censures on its condition having become rife, a Committee, comprising most of the principal inhabitants of the place, undertook its restoration. Under their auspices, at a cost of between £60 and £70, the figure of the Horse was rectified, its surface cleansed and made good, and its outline protected from future displacement by an edging of stone deeply set in the earth. These, however, and other similar ones preceding them, were mere works of reparation. From time immemorial a smaller and ruder Horse stood there, which, according to popular tradition, was cut to commemorate the victory gained by ALFRED THE GREAT over the Danish Invaders of his Country. This memorable battle, according to the old Saxon Chronicle and the contemporary Historian Asser, was fought at Ethandun, A.D. 878. That this was no other than the village of Edington, which, at that period, may have extended to the foot of the hill on which the White Horse is cut, is the opinion of the celebrated antiquary Camden, who is strenuously supported in this by the researches of Sir R. C. Hoare, Gough, Gibson, and others.

We give the literal translation, first, of the short account of the battle by the Saxon Chronicle, and then Asser's more detailed description, which will enable our readers, in a measure, to judge for themselves. Other Historians, as Ethelward, Florence of Worcester, Huntingdon, and Simeon of Durham, lived long after the event, and merely copy or embellish the account of the contemporary Chroniclers.

SAXON CHRONICLE. "Then in the seventh week after

"Easter he (Alfred) rode to Ecgbryhtes Stone, east of Selwood, and there came to meet him all the Somerset and Wiltshire men, and that part of Hamptonschire that was on this side the sea, and were glad of him. And he marched after one night to Æthandun, and there fought against all the army, and routed it, and rode after it to the Hill Fort, and sat there a fortnight."

ASSER. "In the same year, after Easter, King Alfred with a few of his partizans formed a stronghold in a place which is called Æthelingey, and from that stronghold continued undefatigably to wage war against the Pagans, at the head of the noblemen, his vassals of Somersetshire. And again the seventh week after Easter, he rode to the Stone (of) Ægbryhta, which is in the eastern part of the forest, which is called Selwood, but in Latin, Silva Magna; in British, Coitmaur; and there met him all the Inhabitants of Somerset and Wiltshire, and all such Inhabitants of Hampshire as had not sailed beyond sea for fear of the Pagans, and upon seeing the King received him as was proper, like one come to life again after so many troubles, and were filled with excessive joy, and there they encamped for one night. At the dawn of the following day he advanced his standard to a place which is called Æglea, where he encamped for one night. At dawn of the following day he came to a place that is called Ethandun, and fiercely warring against the whole army of the Pagans with serried masses, and courageously persevering for a long time, by Divine favor, at last gained the victory, overthrew the Pagans with very great slaughter, and put them

"to flight, and pursued them with deadly blows, even to their stronghold, and all that he found outside of it, men, horses, and sheep, he seized, immediately killed the men, and boldly encamped before the entrance of the Pagan stronghold with all his army."

Thus, according to the Chroniclers, the third day before the battle was fought, Alfred was at Ecgybrht's Stone, at the eastern part of Selwood Forest, where he was joined by all the men of Somerset, Wilts, and part of Hants. These, with few exceptions, must have been foot soldiers. The following night we find them at *Æglea* (Oak Meadow), or *Iglea* (Island Meadow). The next morning, soon after day-light, they are at Ethandun, where the battle was fought. The Pagans, after a desperate resistance, fled to their Hill Fort (*arx*). Before the entrance of this camp Alfred sat down with his army, and after a siege of fourteen days the enemy surrendered.

It is allowed on all hands that Ecgybrht's Stone is Brixton Deverell. The name and position identify it. *Æglea* or *Iglea* as it is variously spelt, where Alfred rested the second night, is considered by Sir R. C. Hoare and Gough, to be Clay Hill or Bugley; others think it is Westbury Leigh, while more lately, and with more probability, as the name points to an island formed by a river, it is supposed to be some place on the Wiley near Upton Lovell. Ethandun or Edderandun, the seat of the battle, is evidently connected with Edington, spelt Edendone in Domesday Book, and Edyndon in a chartulary as late as 1449. The *dun* or *don* of the last syllable, afterwards changed to a *ton*, may be referred to the down on the slope

of which the village lay.* Some Antiquaries have contended for Heddington, near Devizes, as the scene of the battle, but the position of that village, and the orthography of its name set aside the idea. It has been observed by Anglo-Saxon scholars that no word in that language beginning with A, E, or *Æ*, ever assume an H or aspirate; nor do those beginning with an H in that language ever drop it. Nor was Heddington ever spelt with a *don* or *dun*, but from Domesday Book downwards with a *ton*. Others have pled for Yatton, to the N.W. of Chippenham, alleging that its other name Eaton makes it probable that it is the Ettone of Domesday Book, and then going in search of a *dun* or down, which they find in "some hilly or down land on the west of the parish, to explain the final syllable of the name Ethandun." But this, in more senses than one, is rather far-fetched, the place lying so wide of the point of Alfred's departure.

We have no doubt that the Hill Fort or stronghold to which the Danes fled on their defeat, was the large entrenched camp called Bratton Castle. It is of an irregular shape approaching the oblong, having its longest sides towards the north and south, and its eastern side considerably longer than its western. It is formed by a double rampart, in some places still thirty-six feet in perpendicular height, and enclosing about twenty-three acres. Being situated on the brow or steep escarpment of the down,

* It is interesting to know that the only other mention made of Ethandun in Saxon times, is in the Will of the great Alfred, who probably purchased an estate or manor on the spot, as he bequeathed one of this name to Ealswith his Queen.

where it projects like a natural rampart into the valley below, it is thus fortified on nearly three sides by its position. Its principal entrance is on the south side, and the other at the N.E. corner, answering to the Pretorian and Decuman Gates of the Roman Camp. At both entrances there are strong additional earthworks projecting beyond the ramparts. That this was the Danes' camp seems to be confirmed by the traditionary name of the eastern slope of the hill on which it stands, which is still called Danes' Leigh or Lye. There is a local tradition that the tent of the Danish King, before the approach of Alfred's army, was pitched in Luccombe Bottom, just below.

That an able General like Alfred should attack the Danes in a position that gave them every advantage is certainly an objection to the idea that the battle was fought on the low grounds *below* Bratton Castle. Entrenched as they were in a camp on the brow of the hill overhanging the plain, with the choice of ground on which they would fight, it is not likely that Alfred would provoke them to a conflict on a field so unfavourable to himself. It is much more reasonable to suppose that the route of the English Army from Brixton Deverell and the Island Meadow (Iglea) lay up the western ascent of the Downs to the high grounds on the south of Bratton Castle. *There* the battle would be fought on more equal terms, and, on the defeat of the Danes, *there only* was it possible that Alfred could, in the words of Asser, "encamp before the entrance "of the Pagan stronghold with all his army."

An able writer in the Wiltshire Archaeological Magazine suggests, that as the word *Æthan* has no meaning in the Saxon language, the British or Welsh word *Æth*,

plur. *cithin*, a furze bush, offers a probable explanation of the name *Æthandun*; for as that bush is not usually found on chalk downs, when it does occur there, it is likely to give its name to the spot. Now no name could be more appropriate than Furze-down (*Ethandun*) to a large part of the plain lying south and east of Bratton Castle. Many hundreds of acres, not far to the right of the route which we have supposed the English army to take, have been covered with furze in the memory of men still living, and not a little still remains. *Edington* lying at the foot of the hill may have received its name from the down that overhung it.

The Horse is situated about two miles from the town of Westbury. The visitor can reach it, from this place, either by a road running along the foot of the hill towards the village of Bratton, which will bring him, in due time, to a footpath leading straight up to the object of his search; or else, by scaling the hill at a nearer point, and reaching its top by the road conducting to the Chalk Quarries, and locally to be enquired for as the "Long River." The latter route is recommended as the preferable of the two. This is done, not only on the general principle that the most difficult part of any work should be the first to be taken in hand, but also, because in this instance, the experimentalist will find himself in earlier possession of the exhilarating air of the hill-top, and will obtain, at once, an extended prospect over the wide valley to Bath, and even in the remoter landscape, to the hills of South Wales.

The following are the principal dimensions of the Horse,

HISTORICAL ASSOCIATIONS OF THE WESTBURY WHITE HORSE.

viz.—length from nose to outside of tail, 170 feet; from breast to rump, 113 feet; depth from top of neck to fore feet, 160 feet; from highest part of back to hind feet, 128 feet; thickness from back to belly, 55 feet; length of head, 50 feet; eye, 6 feet by 8 feet.

From the brevity of the old Chroniclers, the distance now nearly of a thousand years since the event, and the changes which the country and its population have undergone in a millenium, it would be foolish to lay down with absolute certainty the scene of Alfred's Victory. Enough that it is ascertained with a high degree of probability. Let WESTBURY WHITE HORSE ever remind us of the blessings we enjoy in our long exemption from a foreign yoke!

ALFRED THE GREAT.

BEHOLD a pupil of the monkish gown,
The pious ALFRED, King to Justice dear!
Lord of the harp and liberating spear;
Mirror of Princes! Indigent Renown
Might range the starry ether for a crown
Equal to *his* deserts, who, like the year,
Pours forth his bounty, like the day doth cheer,
And awes like night with mercy-tempered frown.
Ease from this noble miser of his time
No moment steals; pain narrows not his cares.*
Though small his kingdom as a spark or gem,
Of Alfred boasts remote Jerusalem,
And Christian India, through her wide-spread clime,
In sacred converse gifts with Alfred shares.
When thy great soul was freed from mortal chains,
Darling of England! many a bitter shower
Fell on thy tomb: but emulative power
Flowed in thy line through undegenerate veins,—
The Race of Alfred covet glorious pains.—WORDSWORTH.

* Through the whole of his life Alfred was subject to greivous maladies.

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION.
The Publisher has much satisfaction in offering to the public this Second Edition of the Life of KING ALFRED. In so doing he cannot withhold the information that the Compiler of the narrative, who while he lived was both a scholarly and an esteemed man, and the Editor, in an abridged form, of the well-known "Annals of the English Bible," now rests from his labours on earth. He was a man of extensive reading, and one who was competent to form a judgment on such a matter. It is to the point therefore, to record his frequent saying that it was his belief, that since the days of Solomon, so wise a man had not lived as our English ALFRED THE GREAT.
London: E. Marlborough & Co., Ave Maria Lane; The Publisher, Westbury, Wilts; Westbury Railway Station; and all Booksellers.



18 Oct 2/60

Westbury
White Horse

Photograph and
Description
