

Ashdown,

By G. W. B. HUNTINGFORD.

IN trying to decide where the battle of Ashdown was fought, we are confronted at the outset with a serious difficulty : there were two places in Berkshire called Ashdown, one near East Ilsley, the other near Ashbury, and they are 15 miles apart. Four pre-Norman references to Ashdown show, however, that the name was applied to a tract of land as well ; these are :

- (1) AD. 648. Grant by Kenwal to Cuthred of 3000 hides *be Aescesdune* (by Ashdown). (ASChron., s.a.).
- (2) AD. 670. Grant by Kenwal to Edred of *mille villas iuxta Aescesdun*. (Hen. Hunt., II.).
- (3) AD. 871. *insuper per totam campestrem Aescesdun latitudinem ubique dispersa*. (Asser.).
- (4) AD. 1006. *and wendon him [the Danes] tha andlang Aescesdune to Cwichelmes hlaewe*. (ASChron., s.a.).

The area stated in the first reference, 3000 hides, which is about 360,000 acres, is not necessarily the area of Ashdown, for it is nearly three-quarters of the whole county of Berkshire, and obviously we are not meant to take it as meaning more than that *Aescesdun* was part of the grant.¹ It can further be established that *Aescesdun* included Compton Beauchamp and Ashbury as well as Cuckhamsley. These latter have already been mentioned in a quotation from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, where the Danes are said to have passed from Cholsey along *Aescesdun* to Cuckhamsley, which stands on the Downs, 2½ miles SW. of Chilton, in the parish of East Hendred.² A grant by Edred to Alfeus of eight *cassati in loco qui dicitur aet Cumtune iuxta montem qui vocatur Aescesdune* (AD. 955 ; KCD. 1172) names as a boundary-mark *thaet wide geat be estan Welandes smiththan*

¹ Area of Berks : 463,830 acres (Whitaker's Almanack, 1926). In 1813 it was estimated at 464,500 acres. (Lysons, p. 187).

² For this barrow see Hewett, "*Hundred of Compton*" (1844), pp. 96-102 ; Rev. J. Wilson in *Trans. Newbury F.C.*, 1872, I., 168.

(Wayland's Smithy), so it is evident that this place is Compton Beauchamp, not Compton near Ilsley. The same Edred granted in 947 to Edrigus (Edric) *viginti mansas . . . illic ubi vulgus prisca relatione vocitat at Aysshedoune*; a note added to the charter says *memoratum manerium quod nunc vocatur Aysshisbury*. (*Cartul. Glaston.* in Bodleian).³ There remains the manor of Assedone (= OE. *Aescsedun*) which in DB. is included in Nachededorne hundred,⁴ and is probably the manor of Ashridge in East Ilsley, south of which is a place called Ashdown Bottom. Ashdown thus extended nearly across the whole county, and crossed the ancient hundreds of Nachededorne, Chenetberie, Lamborne, and Hilleslav. (Fig. 1). Hilleslav is now the southern part of Shrivenham hundred; Lamborne and Chenetberie are more or less unaltered (modern Lambourn and Kintbury-Eagle); while Nachededorne is now contained in the hundreds of Compton and Faircross.

In DB. we are told that Nachededorne contained Assedone (Ashridge), Elleorde (Aldworth), Catmere, Cilletone (Chilton), Contone (Compton), Fermeberge (Farnborough), Hislelei (Ilsley), Hodicote (Hodcott), and Nachededorne, all now in Compton hundred; and Bristoldestone (Brightwalton), Etingedene (Yattendon), and Stanworde (Stanford Dingley), which are now in Faircross hundred. All these places exist to-day, with the exception of Nachededorne, which has vanished without leaving a trace. Dr. Wilson suggested many years ago that "some apparent traces of building" in Alfred's Castle, an earthwork close to Ashdown Park in Ashbury, might be the remains of Nachededorne church.⁵ But Ashbury was in Hilleslav hundred; and it is possible that these "apparent traces" are pre-Roman rather than post-Roman.⁶ We must look rather to some place in Compton or Faircross for the site of Nachededorne.

The name Nachededorne means "Naked Thorn," and Hewett tells us that it "stood near the site of the modern [East] Ilsley;

³ The manor of Ashdown passed with Ashbury from early times.

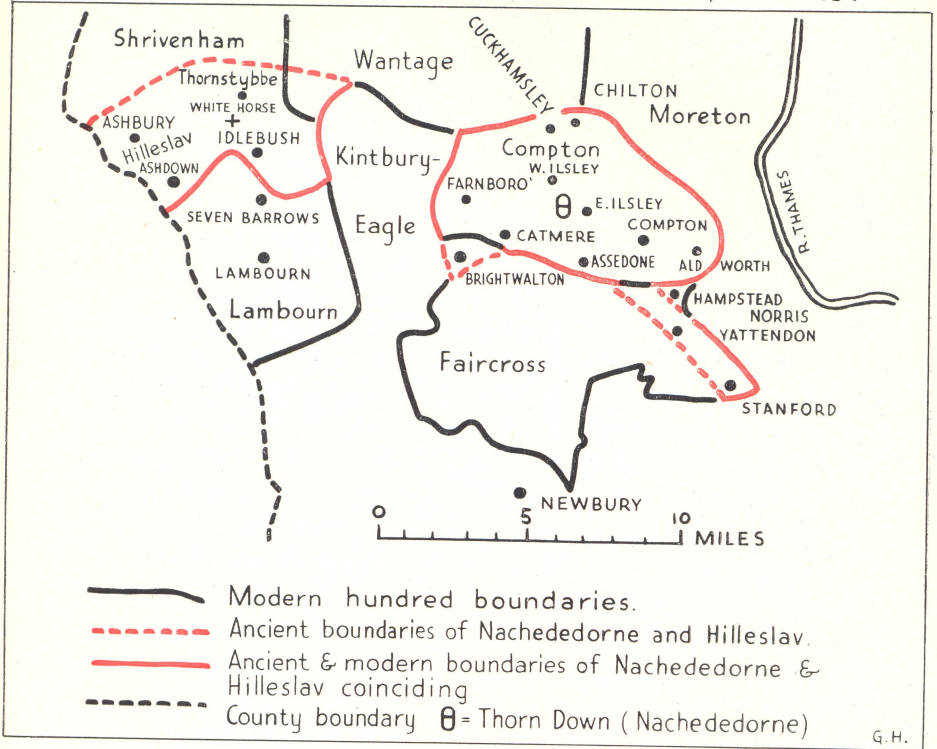
⁴ Wrongly placed in the modern hundred of Shrivenham, "Resumé of Domesday Book," *Quart. Journ. Berks Archaeol. Soc.*, III.

⁵ *Trans. Newbury F.C.*, I., 174.

⁶ R. E. M. Wheeler in *Antiquity*, 1933, VII. 21 seq. "Belgic Cities of Britain."

ASHDOWN.

FIG. 1. THE DOWNLAND HUNDREDS, BERKS.



having derived its name from a remarkable thorn-tree which crowned the summit of a neighbouring hill, around which the Druidical priesthood of the Britons were accustomed to assemble The thorn was universally held in esteem by the Druids, but this identical tree, standing alone on a conspicuous hill, was apparently the object of peculiar regard."⁷ It is not really necessary to bring in the Druids here, for Hewett drew on his imagination in this passage; and although the thorn does occur in Celtic mythology to a small extent,⁸ and gave a name to Thorn, the third rune, the oak, ash, elder, and hazel are of much greater importance, and in Druidism the oak in particular. It is more probable that a solitary thorn-tree was chosen as the hundred meeting-place, and so gave its name to the hundred. Hewett identifies the place with the modern Thorn Down, separated from East Ilsley by a valley "which popular tradition points out as the site of an extensive town long since destroyed,"⁹ and adds that bricks, tiles, and other building materials have been ploughed up here. A church, too, is said to have stood on Thorn Down; and the thorn-tree on this down was, according to Asser, the identical tree around which the Danes so carelessly assembled during the battle of Aescesdun in 871.¹⁰

And this brings us to the vexed question of the site of the battle. From the days of Wise (1738)¹¹ at least, and probably earlier, the neighbourhood of the White Horse has been claimed as the battle-field. The Berkshire ballad of the White Horse tells us that

The Bleawin Stwun in days gone by
 Wur King Alferd's bugle-harn;
 And the tharnin-tree you med plainly zee
 As is called King Alferd's tharn,

⁷ Hewett, p. 41.

⁸ A few references are given in Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, III., 1204; IV., 1674.

⁹ Hewett, p. 44.

¹⁰ Hewett, p. 42.

¹¹ "Letter to Mr. Mead concerning some antiquities in Berkshire," 1738. A detailed account of the disposition of the forces is given by Thomas Hughes in his "Scouring of the White Horse" (1857), where, following Wise, he places the Danes in Uffington Castle, Aethelred in Hardwell Camp, and Alfred in Alfred's Castle.

thus definitely associating White Horse Hill with the battle. Hewett, however, presents a counter-claim for his hundred, identifying Thorn Down with the battle-field, and producing a tradition that Alfred pitched his tent for the night on King's Standing Hill.¹² He also affirms that certain place-names corroborate this, and quotes Dane Bottom, Banager Bottom, and Denispere as evidence. Banager may indeed be, as he says, the OE. *ban aecer*, "field of murder"; but his naive suggestion that Denispere, "a corruption of Danes'-spere, seems to indicate that at this place the carnage or regular fight was ended,"¹³ is in defiance of etymology, for the suffix of this name is more likely to be from OE. *spaer*, "balk of timber," than from the verb "to spare."

Local patriotism is sometimes blamed for undue preference for its own district, and Mr. A. D. Godley once said that though "the battle of Aescsedun was fought far to the east, among the hills near Moulsoford or Streatley, . . . if you want to publish this abroad, you had better not do so anywhere between Wantage and Ashbury."¹⁴ The fact is that Asser, although he was an eye-witness of Berkshire's most famous battle, has lamentably failed in his duty to the historian, for he records only four facts which have any topographical significance. These are: (1) the battle was fought *in loco qui dicitur Aescsedun*; (2) *ille locus certaminis belligerantibus inaequalis erat*; (3) *Pagani* [the Danes] *editiorem locum praeoccupaverant*, *Christiani* [the English] *ab inferiore loco aciem dirigebant*; (4) *erat in eodem loco unica spinosa arbor, brevis admodum*. Uneven country, where one army would be on higher ground than the other, may be found everywhere; and a thorn-tree, even if stunted, is not really very much more helpful, though it may lead to suggestions, absolute proof being out of the question. Taking the thorn-tree as a guide, we find that there are three places where a thorn or bush existed:

- (1) The thorn-tree of Nachededorne in Compton, with a tradition of the battle.

¹² Hewett, p. 112; Lord Wyfold, "*The Upper Thames Valley*," 1923, p. 43.

¹³ Hewett, p. 112.

¹⁴ In "*The Oxford Country*," 1912, p. 168.

- (2) A "thorn-stump" (*thornstybbe*) which occurs in the Uffington charter of AD. 940 (A.I. 70), and which was somewhere near the White Horse on the lower slope of the downs below the Icknield Way, in a part which also has traditions of the battle.
- (3) The barrows called Idlebush south of the White Horse, where there is no tradition. The first element of this word may be a personal name *Ydel*, while the suffix might refer to any bush, including a thorn-bush.¹⁵

I must admit that I have always been strenuous for White Horse Hill as the site of the battle. But if the thorn-tree is to be taken into account, the only such tree nearby for which we have documentary evidence is below the hill, and in a place not very suitable for a battle where the force occupying the lower ground was victorious. Nachededorne and the ground between Idlebush and the Seven Barrows are easier to visualize as a field of battle, and near both places occurs a name Ashdown which has survived from early times. The claims of both are somewhat flimsy, but I think the balance is slightly in favour of the western Ashdown. In this region we have an earthwork called Alfred's Castle, the pre-Roman origin of which need not prevent us from supposing that it might have been occupied temporarily by English or Dane; and to this western region too belongs the ballad of the White Horse, a stronger expression of tradition than any produced by Hewett in support of the claims of Ilsley.

And a further circumstance, first noted by Dr. Wilson,¹⁶ is worthy of attention. Lambourn was a royal demesne, devised by Alfred to his wife Ealswith, and as late as the Norman Conquest held by the king. We are told by Asser that four days after an unsuccessful attack on Reading, the English collected their forces for the battle of Aescsedun. It is perhaps not altogether fanciful to suggest that they withdrew from Reading to

¹⁵ Dr. Grundy identifies Idlebush with the *Waerdaes beorh*, or "Watchman's barrow," of the Woolstone Charter of AD. 856 (B.A.J. XXXI., 144). Even so, the barrow may have had two names.

¹⁶ "The Battle of Aescsedun," *Trans. Newbury F.C.* I. 172 n.

Lambourn,¹⁷ where they set their affairs in order, and finally met the Danes between Lambourn and White Horse Hill in the neighbourhood of Seven Barrows¹⁸, the English with their backs to Lambourn occupying the lower ground, and the Danes on the slope which rises towards the White Horse, the bush that gave its name to Idlebush being Asser's *unica spinosa arbor*.

¹⁷ Reading is 25 miles from Lambourn across country, a march of only 10 hours.

¹⁸ On these, see Wilson in *Trans. Newbury F.C. I.*, "The Seven Barrows."