TRACES OF SAXONS AND DANES IN THE EARTHWORKS OF ESSEX.[1]

By the late I. CHALKLEY GOULD, F.S.A.

"An. 787. In his (Beorhtric's) days first came three ships of Northmen from Haeretha land. And then the reeve rode thereto, and would drive them to the king's vill, for he knew not what they were, and they there slew him. Those were the first ships of Danish men that sought the land of the English race."

Such is the simple record in the *Saxon Chronicle* which tells of the first coming of those terrible ravagers who for many long years wrought havoc in this fair land. Although our Saxon forbears managed to find time to fight among themselves occasionally, the necessity of opposing the invading Northmen grew overwhelming, and the pages of the *Chronicle* tell of the sad struggle which lasted with only one happy break, more or less continuously from the end of the eighth till well into the eleventh century. In terse but graphic fashion the story of battles is told: now and again we read of Saxon victories, but far too often the record ends by telling us that at the finish of the fight the pagans "had possession of the field of carnage."

We all know how bravely Alfred carried on the contest, but we also know that that politic king left much of England, including these eastern lands, to Danish rule, an arrangement by which, to use the words of Florence of Worcester, all this fair district became "enslaved to the brutal Danes more than thirty years." That the

[1] Read at the Colchester meeting of the Institute, 30th July, 1907.

Saxon population did not wholly quit their homesteads is evident from the deeds amongst them of ravaging bands of Danish pirates, and probably intermarriage was frequent between those of the foe who had settled on the land and the former subjects of Saxon kings.

It may be that to this period belongs the foundation of settlements in Essex bearing place-names of Danish origin, but the paucity of such instances is further evidence of the continuation of Saxon occupation of the district comprised within the limits of the present county. The inhabitants of towns, such as Colchester and Maldon, doubtless belonged largely to the Danish military class throughout the period of alien control, but there must also have been a considerable trading community, both Saxon and Danish, following peaceful pursuits.

Following the date of Alfred's famous treaty with Guthrum there was a time of comparative peace in Wessex, yet even those years witnessed raids into various parts of England, and the closing years of the good king's reign were ever shadowed by the danger of further incursions of the pirate Northmen. It is the story of one of these raids, conducted on a scale of sufficient magnitude to justify the term "invasion," which brings us into touch with my subject, the earthwork traces of contest in Essex.

I must ask to be excused for first journeying into Kent, for it was to the south of that county that in 892 or 893 the "great army" of Northmen came over in two hundred and fifty ships to the river Limen, towed their boats four miles up, and wrought a work at Appledore. I have sought in vain for any sign of Danish defensive works there, but the waters of the Limen, or Rother, which drained the great forest of Andred, have long since deserted their old course by Appledore and left a verdure-clad valley where Danish boats once rode. The deep deposit of silt in this hollow (north of Oxney Isle) may have buried the camp we seek, for doubtlessly it was placed near the waterside, as were the Danish works at Milton, Bemfleet (now Benfleet), Shoebury and elsewhere. However, I think it far more likely that the Danish stronghold is to be sought in Kenardington, the adjoining

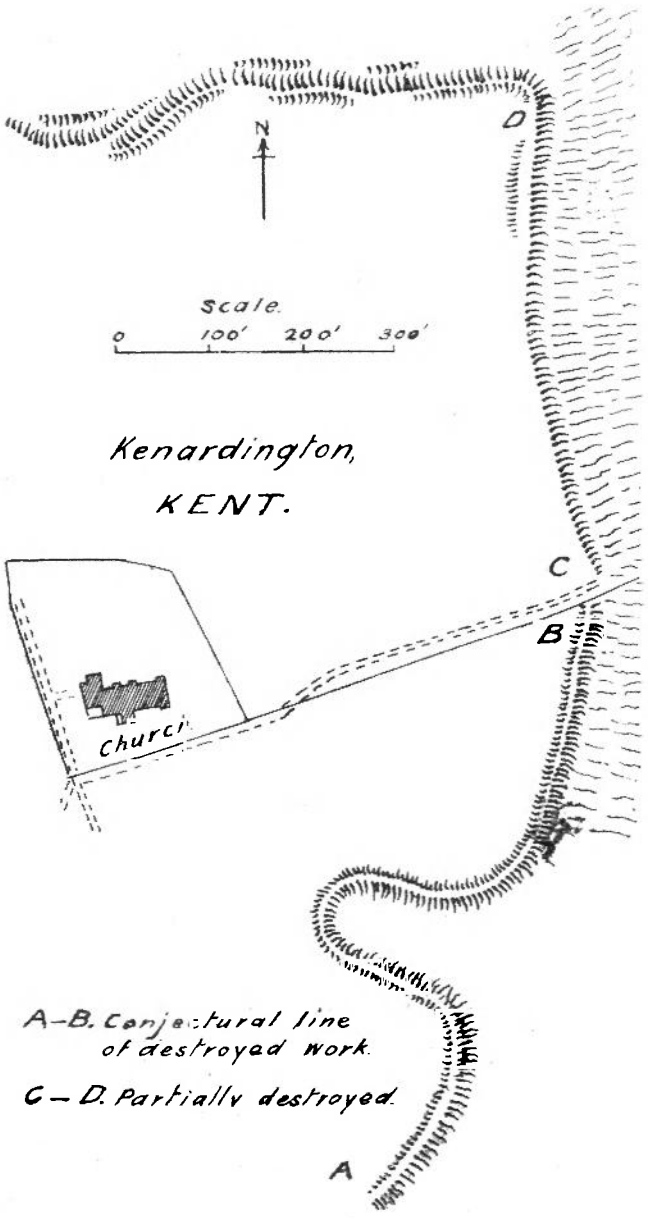

N
D
Scale.
0 100' 200' 300'
Kenardington,
KENT.
C
B
Church
A–B. Conjectural line of destroyed work.
C–D. Partially destroyed.
A

FIG. 1.

parish, for the place-name "Apuldre" need not be regarded as exact location. The *Chronicle* tells us that the Danish landing parties stormed a half-wrought fortress in which only a few countrymen were stationed, and the words of *Ethelwerd's Chronicle* seem to imply that the Danes made it their stronghold.

When the Rother followed its old course. water lapped the foot of the rising ground on which Kenardington church now stands ; the marsh is well drained, but the discovery of the remains of ancient boats below the surface leaves no room to doubt the former conditions of the lowland. On the rising ground just below the church are the remains of an ancient camp, but the fragments are poor in the extreme : of its eastern side 600 feet remain, but it evidently extended southward into the adjoining arable field, where it has been ploughed out of sight, while the piece still visible is no more than an eight foot scarp on the slope towards the valley. The destruction of the southern extension is greatly to be regretted, as, according to the view given by Hasted (1790), it presented interesting features ; the rampart was carried in a loop up the slope, evidently to cover the access by water and to afford shelter for the war-boats drawn up beneath the protecting ramparts. (See plan, fig. 1.)

About the same time that the "great army" swarmed into the southern parts, Hasten, the prince of pirates, sailed across the channel and wrought a work at Milton, in the north of Kent, near the Swale, then the waterway between the open sea and the river Thames. There is an earthwork at Milton, now called Castle Rough, which antiquaries have claimed to be the Danish camp, but the most casual examination of the remains will show how inadequate a shelter it would have been for the men of Hasten's eighty ships.[1] I am inclined to agree with Mr. F. C. J. Spurrell, who many years ago showed the probability that the Danish camp was at Bayford, now in the parish of Sittingbourne, over a mile south of

[1] Though not large enough to serve an army it is probably of early date, and may have sheltered Danish marauders whose boats could lie protected in the water which flooded all the land immediately east and south ; or perchance a Saxon or later settler here constructed a strong defence against the Danish enemy.

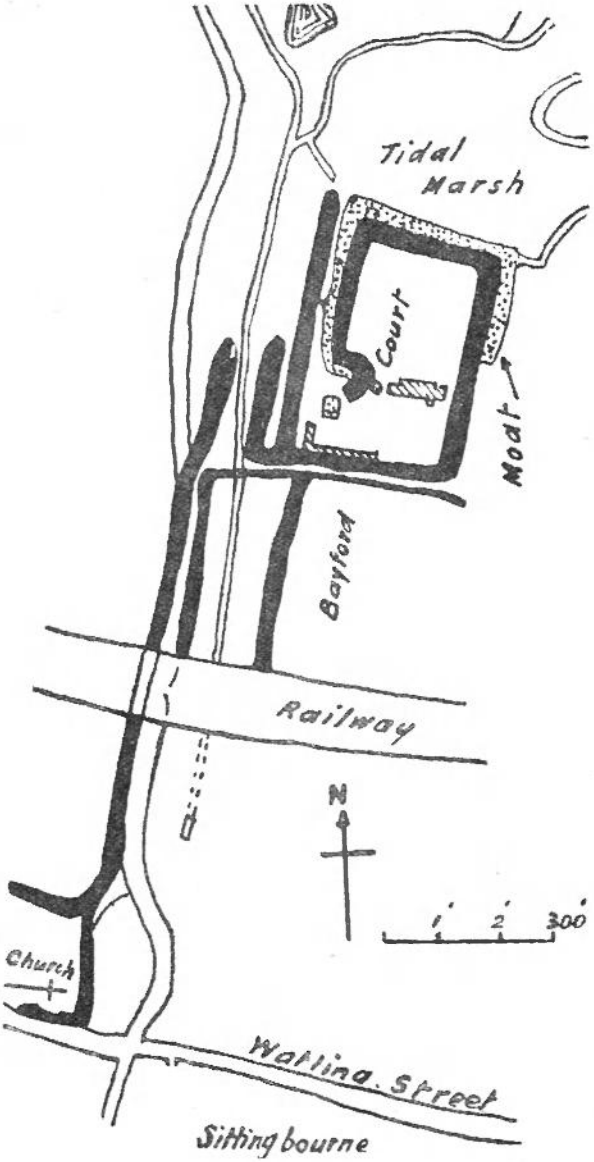

Tidal
Marsh
Court
Moat
Bayford
Railway
N
1
2
300
Church
Watling Street
Sittingbourne

FIG. 2.

Castle Rough, but once served by the same waterway. There he traced lines of banking extending from the rectangular moated enclosure, now occupied by Bayford Court, in a southerly direction. (See plan, fig. 2.)

The shelter afforded by their two strongholds, the one near Appledore, the other by Milton, protected the Danes during the winter, and either in 893 or 894 occurred a series of operations which space will not allow me to dwell upon; suffice it to say that Alfred drove the invaders back from the west, that the Danish forces escaped to Milton, and from thence crossed the Thames to Bemfleet. There Hasten wrought a work, apparently on a large scale, as the *Chronicle* shows that it accommodated the army which had sat at Milton and the "great army" which had been at Appledore.

Alfred, obliged to march rapidly to repel invaders in Devonshire, sent part of his forces to London, and they with the townsmen marched east to the fortress of Bemfleet, from which Hasten had marched on a harrying expedition, leaving the "great army" at home. The Saxons made a desperate attack upon the fortress, captured it, put the great army to flight and took all that was within the work, and brought all to London; the ships they either broke in pieces, or burned, or brought to London or to Rochester. No scrap of bank or moat remains at Bemfleet which can with certainty be assigned to Hasten and his Danes. Some have thought the camp to have been on the high ground east of the town, but no doubt here, as elsewhere, the fortress was close to the water-side, alike for the protection of their boats, and their own escape if necessity should arise.

The church-yard is bounded in parts by a scarp or glacis which may be a fragment of the Danish work. The scarp has a rectangle at the north-west corner from which it extends eastward and southward. The church is near the creek and in just such a position as the Danes loved to entrench upon, but whether or no this scarp is due to them is very open to question. Happily we have circumstantial evidence in connection with the story of the siege of the fortress in 893. As stated above the Saxons burnt some of the Danish boats; when making the railway across the creek below the church, the con-

structors came across burnt boats' timber in considerable quantity, buried far down in the mud and silt. Little time elapsed ere the Danes, driven out of Bemfleet, joined forces again and erected that strong fortress at Shoebury which became a chief shelter for them after their raids into other parts of England. What is left of the Danish stronghold? The sea has washed away about half of it, and the banks of the remaining portion have been sadly mutilated by the War Office authorities, who now occupy the site. Rampart and ditch remain on the south side, while Rampart Street marks the north line. A fraction exists, or did till recently, on the west side, showing a ditch 40 feet wide outside a bank of about 12 feet in height. In fig. 3 on the folding plate, the dotted lines show what has existed, while the hatching indicates the little of this historic fortress that the sea and the War Office have left to our day. The great width of the moat, once in direct communication with the water, enabling the Danes to draw their "wave horses" or war boats under the safeguard of their fortress walls, is a typical feature of the Northmen's work.

Beaten elsewhere at times the marauders made Essex their home, the district to which they ever retired to rest and recruit for fresh enterprises.

Thus we read that in 895, after plundering North Wales, they wended their way by friendly Northumberland and East Anglia "into the eastward part of the East Saxons' land, to an island that is out in the sea, which is called Mereseg" (Mersea).

If we may trust Ethelwerd's *Chronicle*, Mersea figured in the story as the rallying place for the pagan ships in 893, but the entry is confused. There is, however, no doubt of the importance of the island to the Danish pirate forces, and one naturally seeks for earthwork evidence of their presence. There is a great tumulus at the Barrow Farm near the shore, on the north of the island, which very likely may be their memorial, but the search for camp works is vain; the whole island may be traversed and the only defensive enclosure found will be the large moated area on the hill at East Mersea. (See plan, fig. 4.) This I believe to be the site of a defended Saxon settlement which included the thane's

hall, worker's huts, space for cattle shelter, and perhaps then, as now, a Christian church. It may be likened to other such great village enclosures in Essex, and its formidable moat regarded as a protection against wolves, other wild beasts and Danish foes, rather than a stronghold of the latter, whose works were more often placed near the water they loved so well, accessible by boat as well as by land. Of course if East Mersea moat already existed, the Danes may have made some use of the

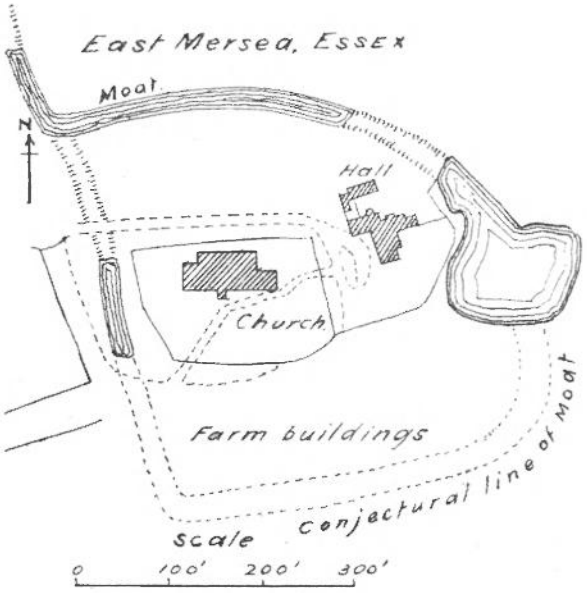


FIG. 4.

defended enclosure, but there is no evidence to indicate whether it was constructed prior or subsequently to Hasten's days, and there was abundant need for such defence long after that redoubtable leader had gone the way of all flesh. East Mersea moat has long since been largely destroyed, but enough remains to indicate its importance. The sea has played tricks with Mersea Island, and I venture to think the Danish camp has long since gone beneath the waves.

In the year 895 occurred an incident with which I

would not burden my story, as the venue was principally in Hertfordshire, but that Sir James Ramsay in his interesting book, *The Foundations of England*, suggests the association of a great Essex earthwork with the event. In the autumn of 895 the restless Danes who sat in Mersea, towed their boats up the Thames, and then up the Lea, "and wrought a work on that river, twenty miles above London." Sir James Ramsay thinks the work referred to is possibly Walbury in Essex near Bishop's Stortford; but this camp, reared on a high bank above the river Stort, has formidable double ramparts which would have taken far longer to raise than it is likely the Danes had at their disposal, watched as they were by the Saxon enemy; moreover its great size (over thirty acres within the walls) was beyond the requirements of the pagan army.

Again we must remember that this work is on the banks of the Stort, not on the Lea, and that it is nearer thirty than twenty miles from London. Danes may at some time have occupied this work, but its dimensions, its position high above the waters of the river, and its general character render it very unlikely that this was the work which the *Chronicle* tells us was the work of the Danes. On the contrary it seems probable that Walbury, being placed on the extreme western border of the land of the Trinobantes, was an ancient British fortress intended to accommodate families, flocks, and herds, as well as men to fight against their western foes.

As we all know, Alfred succeeded in driving the Danish forces out of their stronghold by *commencing the construction* of two forts, one on either side of the river lower down, and so cutting off the enemy from the Thames and the sea.[1]

Perhaps no part of the *Chronicle* so gratifies and interests us as the annals of those early years of the tenth century which witnessed the successes of the Saxon Edward, the son of Alfred, and his courageous sister Ethelfled, "Lady of the Mercians," who went forth winning and constructing burhs throughout the Danish districts of our land.

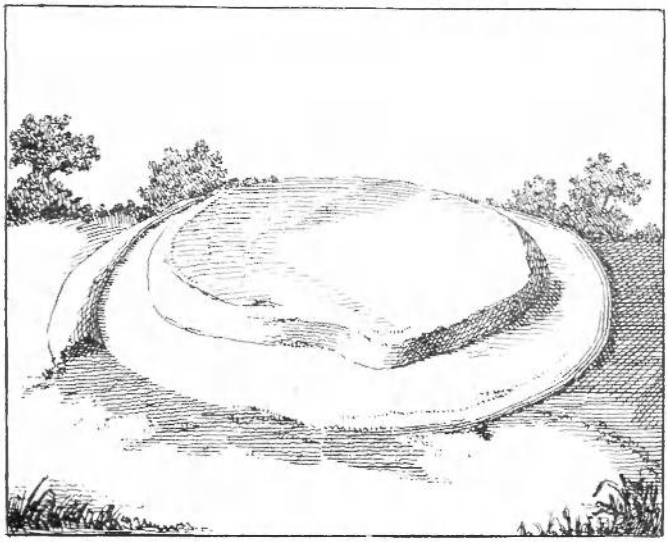
[1] Florence of Worcester says that Alfred ordered a dam to be thrown across the river, but does not mention the two forts.

I cannot dwell on their conquests elsewhere, but note that in the year 913, King Edward pushed through the heart of the Danelegh, and encamped at Maldon while building a burh at Witham. No doubt Edward saw that his operations at that important point might be interrupted by the Danes of the east, hence his taking up his quarters where he could overawe the turbulent spirits among them. We must return to Maldon presently, but may first dwell for a little on Edward's burh at Witham. The strategic value of the site was doubtless due to its nearness to the ford by which the river Panta or Pant was crossed by the old Roman road; this, one of the few roads in any sort of fair condition, was doubtless useful for the transit of armed bands. And by holding Witham as well as Maldon, doubtless with intermediate posts of observation, Edward drove the Danes further north.

Alas! when we seek to discover what Edward's work was, we find but poor traces, and those ever growing less and less. Most mercilessly has this historic fortress been treated. Some sixty years ago the Eastern Counties Railway Company cut through the heart of it and erected a station on the northern side of the inner defence: since then road-makers and others have aided the work of destruction, and recently the Great Eastern Railway Company, widening the line and station, have still further lessened the fragments which remained of the burh that Edward "worhte and getimbrede aet Witham." In 1887 Mr. F. C. J. Spurrell published an account of the work in *The Essex Naturalist*, showing on a plan the traces he discovered by careful examination of the ground. The plan here reproduced is based on this, the solid black lines indicating the course of the ramparts. (See folding plate, fig. 5.)

The original fort seems to have consisted of a large enclosure about 400 by 350 yards, with an inner ward 200 by 175 yards. If this could be regarded as the typical form for a royal military burh of the period, much importance would be added to the traces which remain.

On the south-west side the hill slopes sharply to the river Pant, and there some portions of the inner and outer scarping of the rampart are still conspicuous on the left hand side, when travelling from London. The fosse



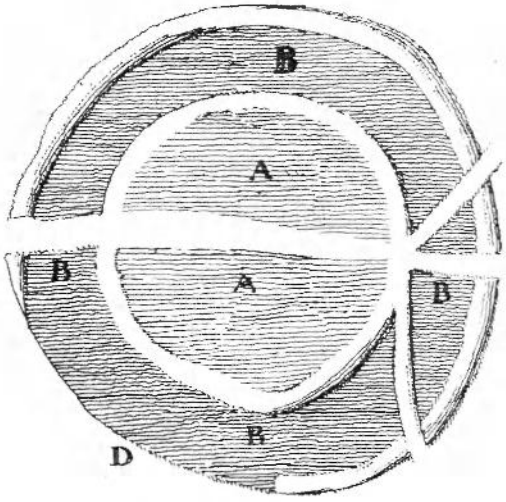


FIG. 6.—WITHAM BURH,
from Strutt's *Horda Angel-Cynnan*, 1775.

outside the outer rampart seems to have been dry and of slight depth. Mr. Spurrell thought it probably about 30 feet wide and 3 feet deep, except on the west, the weakest side, where it was much deeper. A section exposed in the course of widening the space for the station showed that the inner rampart also possessed a fosse, but of smaller dimensions, the fosse being at that point about 10 feet in width.

The fortress could never have been of great strength except for the timber defences which once crowned the banks, these of course may have been sufficiently strong to atone for the weakness of the position.

In Strutt's *Horda Angel-Cynnan*, published in 1774, is a plan and view of the burh, the accuracy of which I fear must be regarded as doubtful, but it seems desirable to reproduce them (fig. 6) as showing how the work struck the old antiquary.

Maldon was again visited by King Edward in 920. In this year, says the *Chronicle*, the king went to Maldon and "built and established the burh ere he went thence." This entry makes it doubtful whether the encampment of 913 was more than a temporary erection. Perhaps it had so suffered in the interval that in 920 Edward had to reconstruct it, or possibly he erected a new and stronger burh. Be that as it may, we glean from the *Saxon Chronicle* that a year later than 920, the Danes besieged Maldon with determination, but were forced to retreat.[1] This fact shows the formidable nature of the defences. Little as is left, it is enough to indicate the strength of the fortress, and we doubt not that it was well guarded, for probably hardly any other in England was so exposed to the attacks of Danish marauders; in the tenth century it must have been a veritable "Castle Dangerous."

Some of our old antiquaries concluded there was a castle of masonry here, but I think that, could we see this stronghold as it was in the tenth century, we should find the outer line of defence a deep fosse or moat and next, a high rampart of earth with a strong stockade, or paliseda of timber on its summit.

[1] "They went to Maldon, and beset the burh, and fought against it, until there came greater aid to the townspeople from without; and the army then abandoned the burh and departed." *Saxon Chron.*, An. 921.

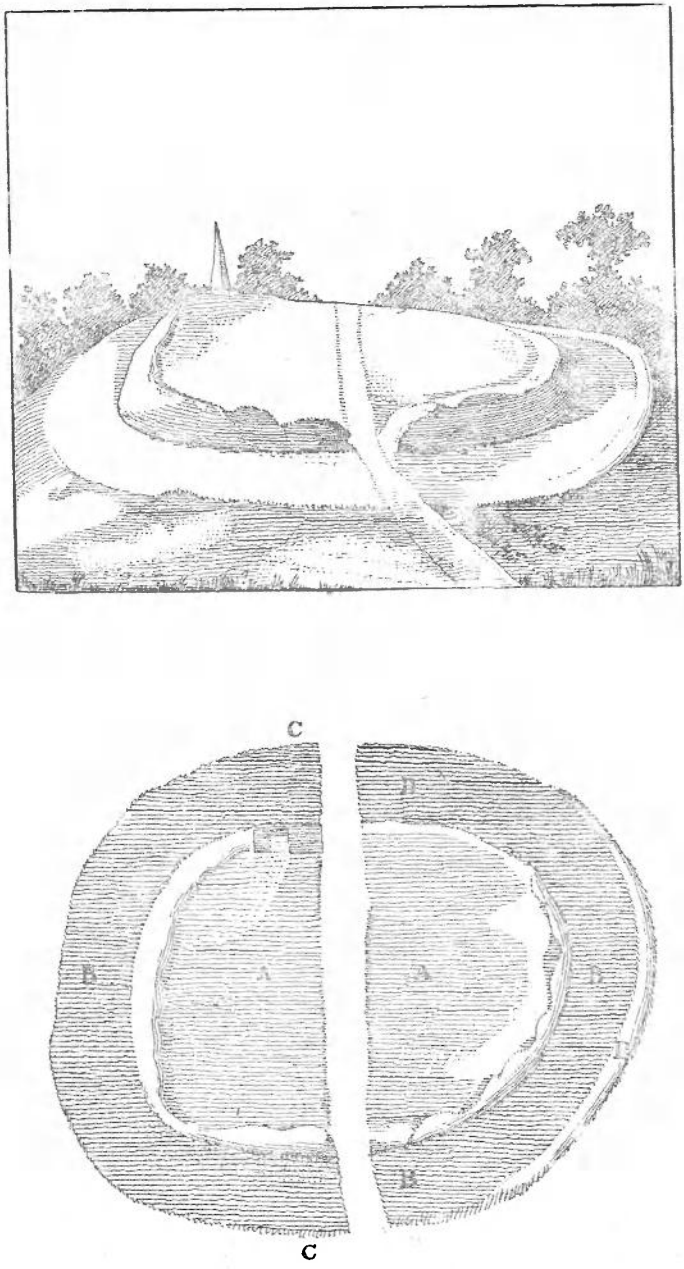


FIG. 7.—MALDON BURH,
from Strutt's *Horda Angel-Cynnan*. 1775.

It is hard to realise the presence of the rampart, for every vestige of it has been thrown into the fosse to level the latter for agricultural or building purposes. So effectual has been the process that little remains of the fosse beyond the section at the north-west angle, and a few shallow lengths here and there at other points.

Strutt's view and plan published in 1775 (see fig. 7), though probably not to be exactly relied upon, is interesting in suggesting the strength of the place both by its natural position and the height and character of the earthworks, though the plan is simple, just a strong encircling ramparted scarp with a fosse or moat outside it.

Though Maldon had yielded to Edward and become a link with Witham in the king's scheme, the greater stronghold of Colchester was held by the pirate Northmen till 921, when, as the *Chronicle* tells us, "A great body of people assembled in autumn, as well from Kent as from Surrey and from Essex, and everywhere from the nearest burghs, and went to Colchester, and beset the burgh, and fought against it until they reduced it, and slew all the people, and took that was there within, except the men who fled away over the wall." It was probably to avenge the loss of Colchester that the Danes from East Anglia, both of the land-army, and of the Vikings whom they allured to their aid, made that desperate but happily futile attempt to recover Maldon, already mentioned.

In the winter of 921 Edward with an army of West Saxons went to Colchester, repaired the burh where it had been ruined and, according to Florence of Worcester, stationed therein a garrison of hired soldiers, probably some of his own trusty West Saxons, who were willing to accept more continuous military service instead of returning home to till the soil.

For considerably over fifty years after these events Essex enjoyed peace, and here it would be pleasant to end the record of Essex references, but in the dark days which followed, two events occurred on Essex soil, leaving their mark on England's history.

In the year 993 or 994, under the weak rule of Aethelred the Unready, England was exposed to furious attacks of the old enemies, who came, under the command of Olaf,

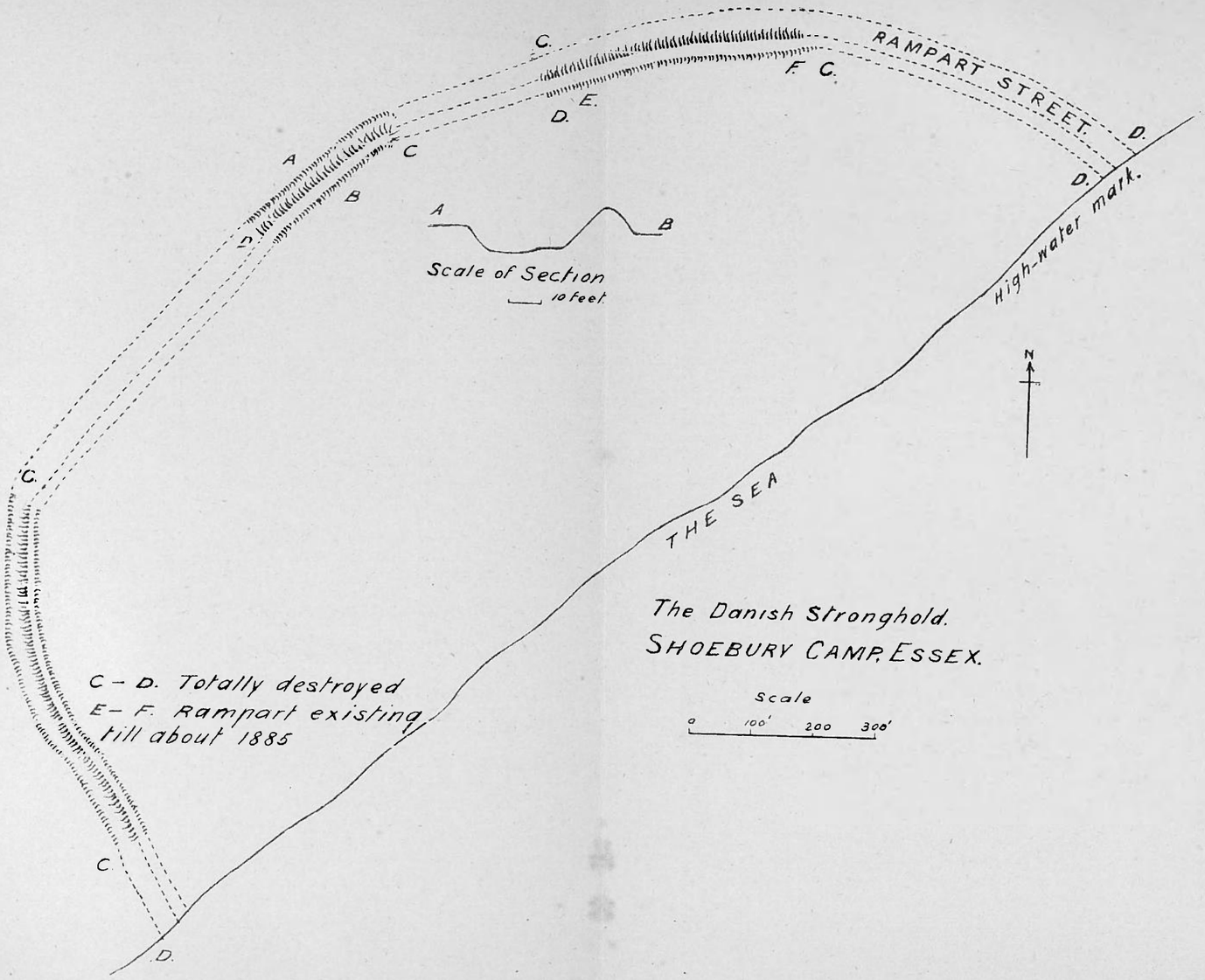


FIG. 3.

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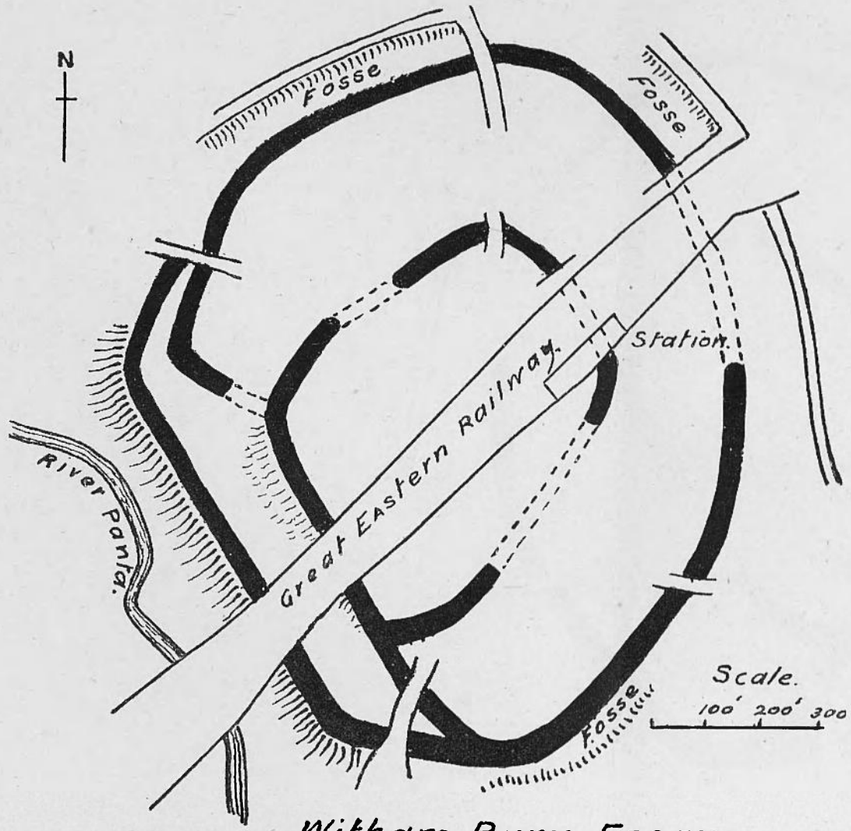

Witham Bury, Essex.

FIG. 5.

king of Norway, and Svein, king of Denmark, and "wrought the greatest evil that ever any army could do, in burning and harrying, and in manslayings, as well by the sea-coast as in Essex, and in Kent, and in Sussex and in Hampshire." Then it was that Maldon fell again into Danish hands; but not till one of the most gallant of recorded contests was fought by the Saxon defenders. Of that grim battle and of the death of the brave Brihtmoth the "Song of Maldon" tells with pathetic detail.

My final reference is to the important battle which settled the line of Danish kings on the throne of England. In 1016 the victorious Edmund Ironside pursued the Danish army and overtook it in Essex "at the hill which is called Assandun." There, thanks to the vile treachery of the alderman Eadric who "betrayed his royal lord and all the people of Angle race," Cnut had the victory and won him all the English nation. Ashdon, at the extreme north-west of Essex, had been claimed as the site of the great battle, but there is every probability that Ashingdon, near Rochford, is the place referred to in the *Chronicle*, though it may be that the actual fight took place at, or close to, the adjoining settlement we now know as Canewdon. The formidable moating surrounding much of this place was certainly not excavated on the occasion, nor can we find any certain traces of military work; this is not surprising, for terrible as was the result of the battle in the death of the flower of the English nobility and the slaughter of the warrior-ranks, the fight was of a hasty character, affording little time or occasion for the construction of defensive earthworks.

I cannot conclude this paper without mentioning that near the heads of creeks on the Essex coast are found fine examples of those artificial, water-girt islands we call Homestead moats. Such works abound throughout Essex and in some other districts of England, and were made at very varying periods down to the sixteenth and possibly to the seventeenth century, but on this coast they are not only in close proximity to the water, but also so large and powerfully constructed that I can only suppose them made to defend Saxons or Danes, and as

they sometimes included church, hall and village within their area it seems certain they were made to protect Saxon settlements rather than to guard bands of Danish rovers. As a rule these Homestead moats are of the character of the example at East Mersea, but some are stronger and retain evidence of the existence of ramparts in addition to deep water defences; but the full story of our Homestead moats yet remains to be unravelled.

NOTE.—This paper, which was the last work undertaken by Mr. Chalkley Gould before his death, has not had the benefit of the author's revision.—ED.