

BUCKINGHAM, 12 SEPTEMBER 934

This note examines the events surrounding the meeting of the Anglo-Saxon witenagemot held at Buckingham one Friday in September 934, a largely-forgotten event that ranks as one of the most momentous in the history of the town.

INTRODUCTION

The early history of Buckingham and its relationship with the county was discussed in detail by Arnold Baines in two papers in the mid-1980s.¹ He briefly alluded to the meeting there in the autumn of 934 of the English *witenagemot* (literally ‘meeting of the wise [men]’, usually translated as ‘council’; hereafter *witan*). This paper discusses in greater detail how the great and good of tenth-century England came to be at Buckingham and one of the items of business transacted there.

The name Buckingham was first recorded only twenty years earlier, in connection with the creation of a *burh* north of the Ouse by Edward the Elder (899–924), part of his campaign to reconquer the Danelaw of eastern Mercia, East Anglia and southern Northumbria.² This territory had been ceded in the late-ninth century to Scandinavian raiders-turned-settlers after a decades-long war that left Alfred the Great’s Wessex as the sole survivor. Edward and his sister Æthelflæd ‘Lady of the Mercians’ and his son and successor Æthelstan were effectively responsible for the creation of England as a unitary kingdom by 940, with the latter claiming hegemony over other, largely Celtic rulers in Britain.

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records that before Martinmas (11 November) 914, Edward the Elder went to Buckingham with his army. They stayed for four weeks, during which time they ‘made both the boroughs, on each side of the river’.³ Jeremy Haslam has proposed that the *burh* at Buckingham, together with many of those in Wessex, was in fact built in 878/9 as part of Alfred the Great’s campaigns against the Danes. More recently,

he has advanced the thesis that there were never two *burhs* at Buckingham, one on each side of the bridge across the Ouse, and that the second, a creation of the 910s, was in fact at Newport Pagnell.⁴ Although the erection of two fortified positions linked by a bridge at key river crossings was not unusual, with examples at Hertford and Bedford, it has to be acknowledged that the Ouse at Buckingham is relatively insignificant.

The time Edward and his men spent at Buckingham would have been sufficient for the building of earthen ramparts, probably with timber upperworks. The *Chronicle* implies that Edward received the submission of Earl Thurketel and the men of Bedford and some Danes from Northampton at this time. The *Burghal Hidage* assigns 1,600 hides to the defence of the *burh* at Buckingham, equivalent to a perimeter of 2,220 yards if the formula relating length of defences to manpower used in Wessex was also applied to *burhs* elsewhere.⁵ (In 917, Edward was again on the upper Ouse, where he stayed at Passenham while the *burh* at Towcester was provided with a stone wall.⁶)

There is no documentary record of any settlement at or near Buckingham before 914, and the same is true of the commercial functions of the borough prior to 1086, although a mint was in operation between the mid-970s and 1066.⁷ The name *Buccingahamm*, ‘land hemmed in by water or marsh belonging to Bucc’s men’, is a succinct description of its location within a meander of the Great Ouse.⁸ Originally, it would have been an agricultural community like many others along the river. It is probable, however, that before the *burh[s]* were built Buckingham had a minster church, though there is no evidence prior to a brief mention in Domesday Book.⁹ In 1086 the church was held by the bishop of Lincoln as part of the prebend assigned to King’s Sutton (Northants.; Rumwold’s first resting-place). (The see was transferred from Dorchester (Oxon.) to Lincoln after

1072.) Buckingham church was a valuable asset, worth half as much as the borough and with its own tenantry.¹⁰ The *Vita* of the seventh-century child prodigy St Rumwold states that Buckingham was his third and final resting place.¹¹

Buckingham church remained a chapel-of-ease to King's Sutton until 1445. At 5,000 acres, Buckingham parish is more than twice the county average. It lies on both banks of the Ouse, with the largest part, including Bourton, Lenborough and Gawcott, to the south. Only the *burh* and its hinterland were to the north, surrounded by Stotfold Hundred. Stowe, 'a religious site' and Lampport, 'the long trading-place' have names indicative of functions later assumed by Buckingham. They lay on or close to the Roman road from Towcester to Silchester known as *Buggildestret*, which crossed the Ouse at Water Stratford. Although this route was almost certainly in use in the tenth century, the choice of Buckingham for the new *burh* reflects its easily defensible location.¹²

Æthelstan continued the work of Edward the Elder, extending and consolidating Anglo-Saxon control in the Midlands and Northern England, employing a mixture of force and diplomacy.¹³ On 12 July 927 at Eamont near Penrith, he received the submission of Constantine II king of Scots (900–943), Hywel king of Deheubarth in south and central Wales and Ealdred of Bamburgh, successor to the Anglian kings of Northumbria. After this event, one or more of the Celtic rulers appear in charter witness-lists as *subreguli*, 'under-kings', with Æthelstan as *monarchus* or *rex totius Britanniae*.

Constant travel was a fact of medieval royal life, although most West Saxon and early-English kings seldom travelled beyond the south Midlands, except during military campaigns.¹⁴ We have occasional glimpses of Æthelstan's itinerary, including meetings of the *witan* at Exeter (April 928), Lyminster (Sussex, April 930), Colchester (March 931), Worthy (Hampshire, June 931) and Luton (November 931).

ÆTHELSTAN'S CAMPAIGN OF 934

It is the generally southern bias of royal itineraries that makes Æthelstan's summer campaign of 934 especially noteworthy. In this, the army reached the Pictish royal centre at Dunnottar near Stonehaven and the navy as far as Caithness.¹⁵ (The

furthest recorded since Ecgfrith of Northumbria's ill-fated expedition against the Picts in 685.¹⁶) The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle provides only sketchy details of the 934 campaign, which took place between late-May and early-September. Version C, probably produced at Abingdon, states that 'In this year King Athelstan went into Scotland with both a land force and a naval force, and harried much of it'.¹⁷ (It is during this period that the words *Scotland* and *Scottas* routinely appear in English sources.)

The campaign was presumably a reaction to Constantine king of Scots having reneged on his submission of 927.¹⁸ Clearly, a ruler based in southern England was unable to exercise direct control of eastern Scotland, a weakness readily exploited by Constantine, by then in his late-fifties and at the height of his power. After the campaign, Constantine travelled south with Æthelstan, presumably to ensure compliance with the agreement ending the Scottish foray. He is described as *subregulus* ('under-king') in a charter issued at the Buckingham *witan*.

The expedition of 934 involved Æthelstan in a thousand-mile round-trip, not to mention the logistical challenges of raising land and sea forces. It clearly indicates a serious belief on his part that he was indeed 'ruler of all Britain'. The expedition would have been finalised at the *witan* at Winchester on 28 May 934. This gathering included four Welsh *subreguli*, two archbishops, seventeen bishops, four abbots, twelve ealdormen (*duces*) and fifty-two king's thegns (*ministri*). Most of them proceeded first to Nottingham where a *witan* was held on 7 June – an average of around fifteen miles per day. The pious Æthelstan may have visited the shrines at Beverley and Ripon, and possibly also York. He certainly did visit Chester-le-Street, the seat of the bishop of Lindisfarne from 883 to 995, where he made substantial and costly gifts at the shrine of St Cuthbert.¹⁹

The composition of the king's retinue doubtless changed as he moved north across the former Danelaw, but we have no indication of where he raised troops, nor how the maritime campaign was organised. Logistical constraints would suggest that most levies were arranged in the north by local ealdormen notified in advance of the king's coming. Provisioning an army and navy that would be operating far beyond the bounds of Æthelstan's realm for many weeks probably indicates numbers

not exceeding the low thousands, with a significant proportion of them mounted.²⁰ The fleet was also likely to have been drawn from Northumbria.

There is even less evidence of Æthelstan's itinerary beyond Chester-le Street, including his rendezvous with the naval force. Lothian was still under English control then, so the army may have proceeded overland to Dunbar, an important royal stronghold, before taking ship. Two clues are provided by the place-names *Elstanburg* and *Athelstaneford*, respectively Æthelstan's fortification and ford. The former is on the cliff-top immediately north of Berwick, the latter a few miles from Dunbar. The name Æthelstan, first recorded in the early-mid ninth century, is largely restricted to Wessex and Mercia and unlikely to have occurred in north Northumbria prior to the 930s.²¹

Æthelstan probably reached north-east Scotland in mid-June or early-July, the ideal campaigning season. Although there is no record of any land and sea battles, he was apparently successful in pursuing his claim to overlordship. The campaign in the north probably lasted for five or six weeks, leaving Æthelstan and his forces, accompanied by Constantine, around a month to reach Buckingham by 12 September.

THE WITAN AT BUCKINGHAM

The final stages of the journey from Scotland would have approached Buckingham either by way of *Buggildestret* from Towcester, or Watling Street as far as Old Stratford. This event is known only through a charter issued there in favour of the thegn Athelm [*recte* Æthelhelm] of a fifteen-hide estate in Wiltshire. The only witnesses named in the surviving fourteenth-century copies are Æthelstan and Constantine, along with *multis aliis*. By analogy with earlier *witans* in 934, we may infer that originally there were several dozen bishops, ealdormen and thegns in attendance.²² This charter, an example of the 'imperial' style calls Æthelstan *rex anglorum per omnipotentis dexterem totius Britanniae regni*, 'king of the English by omnipotent right ruler of all Britain'.

Why Æthelstan chose to travel via Buckingham is unclear in the absence of any other documentation. It seems unlikely that the recently-erected *burh* would have offered more than rudimentary accommodation, though the minster may well have had ancillary buildings. Perhaps he wished to

visit Rumwald's shrine.²³ By mid-December 934, Æthelstan was at Frome. Constantine had already returned to Scotland, leaving only the Welsh ruler Hywel as a 'foreign' witness to a charter.

Apart from its appearance in the list of saints' resting-places (known as *Secgan*), Buckingham has left no documentary trace between 934 and 1086. Domesday Book reveals a small borough with a valuable church and twenty-odd burgesses, who may or may not be identical with those listed as belonging to various rural estates.²⁴ The rest of the large parish was given over to agriculture.

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FOOTNOTES

1. A.H.J. Baines, 'The Danish Wars and the Establishment of the Borough and County of Buckingham', *Recs Bucks.* 26 (1984), 11–27; 'The Development of the Borough of Buckingham 914–1086', *Recs Bucks.* 27 (1985), 53–64.
2. H.J. Higham & D. Hill (eds.), *Edward the Elder* (Routledge, Abingdon, 2001), especially L. Abrams, 'Edward the Elder's Danelaw', 128–143 and D. Hill, 'The Shiring of Mercia – again', 144–160.
3. See D. Whitelock (ed.), *English Historical Documents Vol. 1 c.500–1042* (2nd ed., London, 1979), 213. Various dates are given in the different versions of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (hereafter ASC), ranging from 915–918. The correct dating for the Buckingham entry is 914.
4. J. Haslam, 'King Alfred and the Vikings: strategies and tactics, 876–886 AD', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* [ASSAH] 13 (2005), 121–153; 'The two burhs of Buckingham: territorial imperatives in the central Midlands in the early tenth century', ASSAH forthcoming. I am grateful to Dr Haslam for discussion on this topic and for sight of his final draft paper. Our views on Buckingham and its *burhs* continue to differ.
5. D. Hill, 'The Burghal Hidage: The Establishment of a Text', *Medieval Archaeology* 13 (1969), 84–92.
6. ASC s.a.
7. R.H.M. Dolley et al., 'The Buckingham Mint', *British Numismatic Journal* 34 (1965), 46–52.
8. A. Mawer & F.M. Stenton, *The Place-Names of Buckinghamshire* (Cambridge, 1925), 1, 60;

- A.H. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements* (revised ed. 2 vols. in 1, Nottingham 2008), 229–231.
9. K. Bailey, 'The Church in Anglo-Saxon Buckinghamshire', *Recs Bucks.* **43** (2003), 61–76.
 10. In 1291 the prebend of Sutton-cum-Buckingham was assessed at £180, including the chapel of Horley (Oxon). See *Taxatio Ecclesiastica* (Record Commissioners, 1802); database on-line at www.dhi.ac.uk/taxatio; Buckingham remained a chapelry of Sutton until 1445.
 11. R.P. Hagerty, 'The Buckinghamshire Saints reconsidered: 3 St Rumwold (Rumbold) of Buckingham', *Recs Bucks.* **30** (1900), 103–110.
 12. See K. Bailey, 'The Life & Times of Burghild of Mercia: New Light on Anglo-Saxon Buckinghamshire', *Recs Bucks.* **56** (2016), 43–53.
 13. S. Foot, *Æthelstan The First King of England* (New Haven & London, 2011).
 14. D. Hill, *An Atlas of Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 1981), 87.
 15. Foot (note 12), 164–169; Simeon of Durham (attributed), *Historia Regum* (ed. T. Arnold, London 1885), relevant sections translated in D. Whitelock (ed.), *English Historical Documents Vol.1 c.500–1042* (2nd ed., London 1979), 278–279.
 16. Until recently, the general consensus amongst historians had located the battle at Dunnichen near Forfar in Angus. Alex Woolf has suggested however that Dunachton provides a better context, see 'Dun Nechtain, Fortriu and the Geography of the Picts', *Scottish Historical Review* **85** (2006), 182–201.
 17. *Her for Æthelstan cyning in on Scotland, æper ge mid land here, ge mid scyp here, ond his micel ofer hergode.* This brief notice is in stark contrast to the report on the battle at *Brunanburh* on the Wirral in 937, where Æthelstan's defeat of the Vikings is commemorated by a lengthy poem in the Chronicle.
 18. For a detailed account of the life and reign of Constantine II, who in many ways can be regarded as the first king of Scots see A. Woolf, *From Pictland to Alba 789–1070* (Edinburgh, 2007), 126–176.
 19. T. Johnson South (ed.), *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto* (Anglo-Saxon Texts 3, Cambridge 2002), 64–67, 108–109.
 20. See R.P. Abels, *Lordship and Military Obligation in Anglo-Saxon England* (California, 1988) and *ibid.*, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (London, 1998).
 21. W.G. Searle, *Onomasticon Anglo-Saxonicum* (Cambridge, 1897), 51–53.
 22. J.M. Kemble, *Codex Diplomaticus Ævi Saxonici* (vol. 2, London 1840), no. 365; W. de G. Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum* (vol. 2, London 1887), no. 703.
 23. D.W. Rollason, 'Lists of Saints' Resting-Places in Anglo-Saxon England' *Anglo-Saxon England* **7** (Cambridge, 1978), 61–83.
 24. DB I fols.143a, 144a, 144d, 147d; Baines, 'Development of the Borough of Buckingham (note 1); E.M.J. Campbell, 'Buckinghamshire' in H.C. Darby & E.M.J. Campbell (eds) *The Domesday Geography of South-East England* (Cambridge, 1962), 177–179.