

Cambridgeshire - 1000AD



effective barriers.

At the end of the first millennium, Cambridgeshire had hit bad times again just when it was beginning to carve an identity.

In the roller coaster of the previous few hundred years, it had been a sort of no-man's land of forest, fen and chalk ridge where control ebbed and flowed during the regional (pre-Viking) wars. Only the ridge was easily travelled - it carried the Icknield Way from Wiltshire to Norfolk - and the East Anglians had built four separate dyke defences against the Mercians, to no great effect as it turned out, but the thick forest to the south and, particularly, the fens to the north were anyway more

For there was something other-wordly about fenland in those pre-drainage days. Thinly settled and only along the rivers, it was at best mostly bandit country and of little other use, until, that is, Christianity usurped paganism in the 7th and 8th centuries.

Then, this pestilential place, 'oft-times clouded with moist and dark vapours' as St Guthlac put it, suddenly offered quiet contemplation with plenty of faith-testing harshness. Almost any patch of ground likely to remain above water all year got a monastery or a nunnery or a hermitage because solitude among those treacherous swamps was guaranteed.

The monastery at fen-edge Peterborough, then known as Medeshamstede, was established by a monk named Sexwulf around 655. He added a hermitage at wild and remote Thorney in 662. A certain Tatwine who told St Guthlac about Crowland over the Lincolnshire border is commemorated on the west wall of Crowland Abbey which St Guthlac established in 716.

The big island, Ely, got its monastery through Etheldreda, an East Anglian princess, who fled there in 673 when her second husband Egfrith, King of Northumberland, insisted that she lose her virginity after thirteen - unlucky for some - years of marriage. It was unisex - not unusual at the time - but run by women, including her sister, St Sexburg.

Meanwhile, Cambridge, originally a Roman settlement, would become a thriving trading town and port, although the quiet contemplation of the University would take a few hundred years more.



The ninth century saw all this swept away by the Vikings. Having captured and killed King Edmund in 869, they sacked Peterborough and Thorney in 870, occupying Cambridge in 875 and laying waste large tracts of country.

But things came good again. Halted by King Alfred in Wessex, they settled for the eastern part of the country - the Danelaw - and gradually forsook carnage for farming. Their leader, Guthrum, was baptised. So well did they settle in East Anglia indeed that when Alfred's son Edward retook the Danelaw in 921, the Christianised Danish didn't resist.

The ensuing peace, which also saw the formation of present-day counties, allowed the resurgence of faith and religious houses, particularly under King Edgar (959-975).



There was a new nunnery at Chatteris and an abbey at Ramsey to which Edgar granted huge estates in Huntingdonshire, its founder being his foster brother, Aylwin. At Ely, he was so impressed by secular priests who had stayed on after that monastery was wrecked that he funded its revival. Ealdorman Bryhtnoth, the king's governor and troop raiser in the region, also threw gifts after being better entertained there than at Ramsey. Among them were holy relics including the bones of St Alban which he had acquired by taking them into protection during Danish raids and then returning different ones when danger passed.

But Viking raids resumed in the 980s when a new generation saw that under Ethelred the Unready, England was again for the taking. After a few probing sorties, they arrived at Maldon with 93 ships, annihilating Bryhtnoth and his troops and then overrunning much of East Anglia. They spent a couple of decades moving around the country living by the sword, withdrawing only

occasionally to join in concurrent Scandinavian wars.

The Danes under Sweyn Forkbeard were particularly nasty. In a three month rampage after the battle of Thetford in 1010, they burnt Cambridge and, at Balsham, threw children into the air and caught them on spears. But neither was their internal discipline too enlightened, even under the relatively humane Cnut. At Hadstock, now in Essex, a lone Viking was flayed alive after plundering the church and his skin apparently remained nailed to the new church door until Victorian times. (That door is now certified by the Guinness Book of Records as the oldest in the country, dating from 1017).

Although things were better after Cnut became king, a thousand years ago, Cambridgeshire was again under the Viking cosh and suffering.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, not much survives from those times although most of today's towns and villages are of Saxon origin if not appearance. Pagan burials - which ceased in the 7th century - have been found in Cambridge and cinerary urns dredged from the Cam near Magdalen Bridge. But unlike Suffolk and Norfolk, Cambridgeshire doesn't have many Saxon churches, only thirteen retaining pre-Conquest features.

The best known is probably St Bene't's in Cambridge with its west tower and lion carvings on the tower arch. Great Paxton, now substantially 15th century, has 11th century clerestory windows and part of its nave, built probably by Edward the Confessor who held the local manor. Barnack church tower has the distinctive Saxon 'long and short' stonework and a sun dial and decoratively carved



slabs.



But there is another Saxon relic at Barnack because the village stands on limestone, one of East Anglia's few sources, and the grassy humps and dips which are now the Hills and Holes nature reserve are the former quarry. In use before the Conquest, its stone would be shipped increasingly down the Welland for use throughout East Anglia even if the Normans themselves initially found it easier to bring stone from France.

Barnack provided some of the oldest surviving building fabric in the region and this place to watch wildlife is now also, on a quiet morning, that Cambridge speciality, a slightly other-worldly place for contemplation. Visitors might perhaps contemplate what was going on around it a thousand years ago.

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