

# Anglo-Saxon Isle of Wight:

## (Saxon period approximately AD-410-1066)

449 - Here Martianus and Valentinian succeeded to the kingdom and ruled 7 years. In their days Vortigern, King of the Britons, invited the Angle race under Hengest and Horsa here and they then came here to Britain in three ships at the place called Ebba's Creek. The King Vortigern gave them land in the south-east of this land on condition that they fought against the Picts. They then fought against the Picts and had victory wheresoever they came. They then sent to Angeln, ordered them to send more help and ordered them to tell of the worthlessness of the Britons and of the excellence of the land. They then at once sent here a larger troop to help the other. These men came from three tribes of Germany: from the Old Saxons, from the Angles, from the Jutes. From the Jutes came the Cantware and that race in Wessex which they still call the race of Jutes and the Wihtware - that is the tribe that now lives on Wight.

The date 449 is a very rough guide to the start of the Anglo-Saxon occupation. What is known is that in 410 AD Roman Armies withdrew from Britain for the last time. Roman Britain had over the last century faced increased invasion threats, both from the Saxons and from the Picts and Scots of Scotland and Ireland.

After the Roman withdrawal, Romano-British aristocracy ruled what is now England and Wales for the 40 years before the Anglo-Saxon invasion. They became increasingly troubled by raids by the Picts and Scots, and Vortigern employed Anglo-Saxon mercenaries to fight the Picts in exchange for what was the Isle of Thanet. The Anglo-Saxons, after defeating the enemies they had been paid to fight, then chose to conquer England. A peace-treaty was arranged around 455, in which the Saxons betrayed the attending Britons, killing the majority of the country's leaders.

After this, many surviving Romano-British fled Britain, crossing to France and founded the province of France now known as Brittany. These actions began the Anglo-Saxon invasion, but slowly, over a period of over a hundred years. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles are vague, and probably inaccurate, about the exact events of this time, as they were written 400 years later. What is certain is that the invasion did indeed involve Angles, Saxons and Jutes, and that the Jutes settled on the Isle of Wight before the majority of the Anglo-Saxon invasion had started.

### Cerdic and Wihtgar

*514 - Here the West Saxons came to Britain with three ships at the place that is called Cerdic's Shore, and Stuf and Wihtgar fought against the Britons and put them to flight.*

*530 - Here Cerdic and Cynric took the Isle of Wight and killed a few men at Wihtgar's stronghold.*

*534 - Here Cerdic passed away, and his son Cynric continued to rule 26 years. And they gave all Wight to their two nephews Stuf and Wihtgar.*

*544 - Here Wihtgar passed away and they buried him at Wihtgar's stronghold.*

Cerdic is believed to have come to Britain in around 495 AD. He is viewed as the founder of what became the Kingdom of Wessex, and so is a distant ancestor to Britain's current Royal Family. It is believed that his force of Saxons was allied with the Jutes who settled on the Island, and that for a time Cerdic and his nephews Stuf and Wihtgar ruled the Island's Jute population.

Cerdic's Shore is believed to have been somewhere on Hampshire's south coast.

Wihthgar's Stronghold - or Wihthgarsburgh - is thought to have been at the site of what is now Carisbrooke Castle - which shows remains of a Saxon Burh <sup>5</sup> clearly visible. There has been discovered at Carisbrooke the remains of a rich Anglo-Saxon male from this period which many believe to be Wihthgar.

An alternate view is that much of this period was distorted before it was recorded in the 890s. Many historians believe that many people mentioned in the chronicles at this time are symbolic, with their names taken from the places associated with them. One view is that Wihthgarsburgh - meaning "The Stronghold of Wihthgar" – was originally Wihthwaresburgh - "The Stronghold of the People of the Isle of Wight", and that Wihthgar and Stuf were myths created around how the Jutes captured the Island. What the truth is may never be known.

## Mercia, Sussex and Wessex:

### Wulfhere and Wilfrid

*661 - And Wulfhere, Penda's offspring, raided as far as Ashdown. And Wulfhere, Penda's offspring, raided on Wight and gave the inhabitants of Wight to Æthelwald, king of the South Saxons<sup>8</sup>, because Wulfhere had received him as god-son at Baptism. And Eoppa the mass priest at the command of Wilfrid<sup>9</sup> and King Wulfhere, was the first of men who brought baptism to the inhabitants of Wight.*

Wulfhere was king of Mercia, which in the late 7th and early 8th Centuries was one of the strongest of the Saxon kingdoms, along with Northumbria and Wessex. He reigned Mercia between 657-674. This was a time in which the Kingdom of Mercia expanded, mainly by fighting against the descendants of the Britons (now known as "Welsh"), but also fought against the Kingdom of Wessex - Ashdown is in the Berkshire Downs.

It is believed that Mercia did, indeed, capture the Isle of Wight from the Kingdom of Wessex, and it became part of the Kingdom of Sussex. The biggest result of Wulfhere's invasion of the Island lies in the name Wolverton - essentially, Wulfhere's Town. Although the town of Wolverton was destroyed around 1340 by a French Invasion, the name survives along with Wolverton Manor, Shorwell.

Bede, however, states that Eoppa<sup>10</sup> baptised the people of Sussex and not the Island:

*"So he [Wilfrid] turned to the Kingdom of the South Saxons... At that time, it was still in the bonds of heathen practices. Here Wilfrid taught them the faith and administered the Baptism of salvation. The king of this people was Æthelwald, who not long before had been baptized in the kingdom of Mercia at the suggestion and in the presence of Wulfhere, who, when Æthelwald came forth from the font, received him as a son. As a token of his adoption Wulfhere gave him two provinces, namely the Isle of Wight and the province of the Meonware<sup>11</sup> in the land of the West Saxons. So, [Eappa] baptised the rest of the common people."*

### Cædwalla

*686 - Here Cædwalla and Mul ravaged Kent and Wight.*

Bede writes much more about the events of 686 AD:

*"Cædwalla, a young and vigorous prince of the Gewisse<sup>12</sup>.. came with an army and slew King Æthelwealh, wasting the kingdom with fierce slaughter and devastation... After Cædwalla had gained possession of the kingdom of the Gewisse he also captured the Isle of Wight, which until then had been entirely given up to idolatry, and endeavoured to wipe out all the natives by merciless slaughter and to replace them by inhabitants from his own kingdom, binding himself.. by a vow, though he*

*was not yet Christian, that if he captured the Island, he would give a fourth part of it and of the booty to the Lord...*

*Among the first fruits of the Island who believed and were saved were two young princes, brothers of Arwald, King of the Island, who were specially crowned with God's grace. When the enemy was approaching the Island they escaped by flight and crossed over into the neighbouring realm of the Jutes.*

*They were taken to a place called Ad Lapidem where they thought they could remain concealed from the victorious king; but they were betrayed and condemned to death. On hearing this Cyneberht, an abbot came to the king, who was living secretly in those parts while he recovered from the wounds he had received during the fighting on the Isle of Wight. The abbot asked the king whether, if the boys must be killed, they might first be instructed in the mysteries of the Christian faith. The king agreed, so Cyneberht instructed them in the word of truth and baptized them in the fount of salvation and thus made sure of their entry into the eternal kingdom. When the executioner arrived, they gladly submitted to temporal death through which they were assured that they would pass to the eternal life of the soul.*

*In this way after all the kingdoms of Britain had received the faith, the Isle of Wight received it too, yet because it was suffering under the affliction of alien rule, it had no bishop nor see"*

Essentially, the Isle of Wight was recaptured from the Kingdom of the South Saxons and became part of the kingdom of the West Saxons. A local tradition maintains that Æthelwald and his son were killed on the Island and buried on Shalcombe Down. Saxon burials have been found on Shalcombe Down, so that is not impossible. The tale that the Jutes of the Island were taken to Brading Haven to be baptized, and then executed, has also survived the centuries, perhaps in part based on Bede's narrative.

Cædwalla himself, in 688, abdicated and travelled to Rome, where he was baptised by Pope Sergius on Easter Saturday 689, and died a few days later on the 20th April. He was buried in St. Peter's.

## 688-987

In the centuries that followed, the Kingdom of Wessex grew in size and strength. At the time of Bede's writing, England was still controlled by three large kingdoms - Wessex, Mercia and Northumbria, after his death in 735 Wessex grew in power. From 860 onwards, though, Viking raiders started to attack and conquer more and more of England, in the reigns of King Æthelred I and King Alfred The Great. After having defeated the Vikings on land in 878, he made preparations to defend his kingdom from further attacks. This was just as well, for in 897 he was threatened by sea.

## Alfred The Great's Sea Battle:

### The Battle as Reported in The Chronicle

*897 - ..The raiding army, by the Grace of God, had not altogether crushed the English race; but they were a great deal more crushed in those three years with pestilence among cattle and men, most of all by the fact that many of the best of the king's thegns were in the land passed away in those three years.*

*The same year the raiding-armies in East Anglia and Northumbria greatly harassed Wessex along the south coast with predatory bands, most of all with the askrs they had built many years before.*

*Then King Alfred ordered long ships to be built to oppose the askrs; they were well-nigh twice as long as the others, some had 60 oars, some more, they were both swifter and less flexible, and also more responsive than the others; they were neither of Frisian design nor of Danish, but as it seemed to himself that they might be most useful. Then on a certain occasion the same year there came six ships to Wight and did great harm there, both in Devon and everywhere along the seacoast. Then the King ordered nine of the new ships to go there, and they got in front of them at the river mouth towards the open sea. Then the Danes went out with three ships against the English, and three ships stood on dry land at the upper end of the river mouth - and the men were gone up inland. Then the English captured two of the three ships at the entrance to the river mouth, and killed the men; and the one escaped: on that also the men were killed, except for five; that got away because the ships of the others were grounded: they were also very inconveniently grounded. Three were grounded on the side of the channel where the Danish ships were grounded, and the others all on the other side, so that none of them could get at the others. But, when the water had ebbed many furlongs from the ships, the Danish went from the three remaining ships to the other three which were stranded on their side, and then they fought there.*

*There were killed Lucumon, the king's reeve, and Wulfheard the Frisian, and Æbbe the Frisian and Æthhere the Frisian, and Æthelfrith the king's geneat, and of all men Frisian and English 62, and 120 of the Danish. However, then the tide came first to the Danish ships, before the Christians could shove out theirs, and therefore they rowed away out to sea. They were then so damaged that they could not row past the land of Sussex but there the sea cast two of them up onto land; and the men were led to Winchester to the king, and he ordered them to be hanged there. And the men who were on the one ship came to East Anglia very much wounded.*

Many places along the south coast have been considered possible sites for this battle, including the Hamble River or Portsmouth in Hampshire, Poole Harbour, Dorset, the Exe Estuary in Devon, or Newtown, Isle of Wight, yet Brading Haven, Isle of Wight seems the most likely.

## **The Battle At Brading?**

Evidence to support this can be found in the phrasing of the report, which was written at the time of the attack. Brading Haven was, at the time, much larger and deeper than it is today, and was in many ways a channel separating Bembridge from the rest of the Island as not only did it open into the Solent in the north, as it does now, but also had a southern arm into what is now Sandown Bay. This existed until 1388, when Sir William Russell built the Yar Bridge and Causeway.

The narrative states how the Viking ships went into the river first, and further into the river, while the English ships "*got in front of them at the river mouth towards the open sea*", in other words, waited for them at the river mouth to come out. After fighting and defeating 3 of the Danish ships, the English ships entered the river, yet not as far in as the Danish ships. Despite this, the tide came first to the Vikings. This would seem to be because they were nearest to the other end of Brading Haven's channel and escaped that way.

Another point in Brading Haven's favour is its proximity to Sussex. Ships travelling from Poole Harbour and the Exe would, when persuaded by stronger ships, naturally try and head into the Channel, out of sight of land. Yet to land in Sussex would mean rounding the Isle of Wight, and then heading North.

Sussex is directly between Brading Haven and Denmark, and it is likely that any wounded vessel travelling that route would land there.

## The Bloodstones

There is a local legend that relates to this very battle. Near Brading Haven, (584,879) lies a wood known as Bloodstone Copse, next to Eaglehead Copse between Ashey Down and Brading Down. There lies a spring, in which the water has a reddish hue, said to have be the blood of the Saxons and Danes which fought here - presumably when the Danes "*were gone up inland*". The truth behind the red colouring is, similar to many other British streams, red algae attached to pebbles and flints in the water. Yet the existence of this legend perhaps reveals that there this famous battle was indeed fought at Brading Haven.

### **Anglo-Saxon Isle of Wight**