



## **MALDON BATTLE AND CAMPAIGN**

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## THE CAMPAIGN

War: Viking raids Campaign: Maldon Campaign Dates: 991

### *Summary*

Following Alfred's successful campaigns of the late 9<sup>th</sup> century the whole of England was finally recovered from Danish control by Edward the Elder in the early 10<sup>th</sup> century. With its new network of fortified burhs, connected by military roads as part of a national system of defence, England was not troubled by the Viking threat for more than half a century. But the raids began once more in 980, during the reign of Ethelred II (978-1016), better known as the 'Unready', a play on his name and meaning poorly advised. England by this time was a wealthy unified kingdom, but the period of peace had led to a weakening of its defences, while Ethelred himself proved unequal to the Viking challenge.

The raid in the summer of 991 was one of the first of the major new Viking incursions. It may have been led by Svein Forkbeard, the Danish king, although the contemporary accounts mention Olaf, presumed to be the Norwegian Olaf Tryggvason, who was an important Viking leader of the invasions later in the 990s.<sup>1</sup> Their fleet of 93 ships first descended upon Folkestone and devastated the area around it. Then they moved on to Sandwich and then to Ipswich, burning and pillaging in typical Viking fashion, if they were not paid to depart. They then advanced on Maldon. It is generally assumed that the Vikings moved along the coast with their fleet from Ipswich, as they did from Folkestone to Sandwich, drawing up their boats in a secure position in the Blackwater estuary before ravaging the countryside. It has been suggested that in fact their army ranged widely across south Suffolk and eastern Essex, but it seems unlikely that they would have advanced the 30 miles to Maldon by land.<sup>2</sup> As the Vikings approached Maldon their threat did not go unchallenged. By now a local leader, Ealdorman Byrhtnoth, had raised the Essex 'fyrd', the local militia, and advanced to meet the Viking army.<sup>3</sup> This was not a minor local response of an Essex lord after a few hours preparation to protect his estates. This was a regional commander raising the military forces of the East Saxons, possibly even more widely from East Anglia as a whole, under the system established decades earlier by Alfred and his successors for their reconquest of the east and north of England from the Danes.

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<sup>1</sup> Sawyer in Cooper. *The Battle of Maldon : fiction and fact*, London ; Rio Grande, Hambledon Press, 1993, 41.

<sup>2</sup> Loyn. *The Vikings in Britain*, London, Batsford, 1977, 83.

<sup>3</sup> Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Whitelock. *English Historical Documents: 500-1042*, London, 1968, 213.

**But the battle at Maldon culminated in the death of Eardorman Byrhtnoth and the defeat of his army. The battle revealed the true scale of the Viking threat and was an important factor leading the king to follow a strategy of paying tribute to the raiders to secure temporary respite. In future years Ethelred finally managed to divide the Viking forces, paying some to fight for him as allies, to defend against other raiders, while he reconstructed the defences and built up his navy. But the strategy was ultimately unsuccessful, for this king was no Alfred able to unit his people to defeat the invaders, though it must be admitted that Ethelred probably faced by a far more united and powerful military force than that which Alfred overcame. The Viking attacks, from both Denmark and Norway, continued on and off until 1017 when the Danish king, Cnut (more popularly ‘Canute’), finally conquered England.**

[Campaign plan](#)

### ***Background Campaign Consequences Further reading***

There are many books which deal with this period of Viking raids ending in the conquest of England by Cnut. For example:

Loyn. *The Vikings in Britain*, London, Batsford, 1977, 81-101.

Jones. *A History of the Vikings*, London, Oxford University Press, 1973, 354-386.

However all modern accounts draw heavily upon the sparse detail provided by the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and it is well worth reading that contemporary source in translation. It is published in various editions but the most useful, especially as it includes various other sources of the period, is:

Whitelock. *English historical documents, c. 500-1042*, v.1, London, Routledge, 1996

# THE BATTLE

## *Summary*

Ealdorman Byrhtnoth's army, mainly militia forces of Essex, at most perhaps 3-4,000 strong was raised following the Viking attack on Ipswich and marched to challenge the Viking forces as they advanced on Maldon. It is believed that the Viking boats landed on Northey Island to the east of Maldon and that the East Saxon army cornered them there. But it was high tide and so there was a shouted negotiation where Byrhtnoth refused to pay the invaders to depart but rather challenged them to battle. As the tide fell the Viking force attempted to cross the causeway but a small band of Saxons held them back. Needing to bring the enemy to battle and defeat them, if he was to protect East Anglia from further destruction, Byrhtnoth withdrew and allowed the Vikings to across to the mainland. Formed up in a shield wall the Saxon army waited for the Viking advance. After the bowmen fired their arrows and rest of the infantry let fly spears as the enemy came closer. Finally they were locked into hand to hand fighting, thrusting with spears and slashing with swords. The battle turned against the Saxons when their leader was killed. Many then fled to the woods behind them but Byrhtnoth's own retainers fought on killing many of the enemy before they too were cut down. So many of the Vikings were killed that though they were victorious, they did not attack Maldon and indeed are said to have had trouble even manning all their boats to leave.

Maldon was a significant battle, with important political results, but it was just one of many fought by regional forces against the Viking armies which marauded across the country in the decades of Ethelred's reign. Maldon is special because it is so well documented in the poem *The Battle of Maldon* and because its battlefield is believed to have been located with unusual accuracy for a battle of the Anglo-Saxon period.

## KEY FACTS

Name	<b>Maldon</b>
Type	<b>Pitched Battle</b>
Campaign	<b>Maldon</b>
War period	<b>Viking</b>
Outcome	<b>Viking victory; death of Byrhtnoth</b>
Country	<b>England</b>
County	<b>Essex</b>
Place	<b>Maldon</b>
Location	<b>probable</b>

Terrain	<b>Estuary &amp; open pasture land?</b>
Date	<b>10<sup>th</sup> (possibly 11<sup>th</sup>) August 991</b>
Start	<b>uncertain</b>
Duration	<b>uncertain</b>
Armies	<b>Vikings under Olaf Tryggvason or Danish king Svein Forkbeard East Saxons under Ealdorman Byrhtnoth</b>
Numbers	<b>Perhaps between 3000-6000 on each side</b>
Losses	<b>uncertain</b>
Grid Reference	<b>TL867055 (586700,205500)</b>
OS Landranger map	<b>168</b>
OS Explorer map	<b>183</b>

**For a location map follow this link:**

<http://www.multimap.com/p/browse.cgi?pc=&GridE=??????&GridN=??????&scale=500000&title=??????+battlefield&cat=h>

## **The Armies**

The primary sources suggest that the strength of the two forces deployed at Maldon was large for the period, but they do not provide any detail about the actual numbers involved, indeed they do not even agree as to whether the English had more or less troops than the Vikings.<sup>4</sup>

## **Vikings**

The Viking force that fought at Maldon was a substantial Danish army. Although the leader named as Olaf has been identified with the Norwegian adventurer, later king, Olaf Tryggvason, this is considered by some to be a later amendment. It has been suggested that the force was actually under the command of Svein Forkbeard, the Danish King.<sup>5</sup>

The only information on the possible size of the Viking force is where, earlier in the campaign, they are said to have arrived in 93 ships. The Viking ships were typically of two types, one carrying about 60 and another carrying about 30 men.<sup>6</sup> If all the ships were of the smaller type then this would give a minimum force of around 2790, while if all were the larger type then this gives an upper limit of around 5580.

## **English**

The English army was largely if not wholly an East Saxon force, under the command of Ealdorman Byrhtnoth. Byrhtnoth was one of a small group of nobles appointed as ealdormen, one responsible for each region of England, through whom the Saxon kings of the 10<sup>th</sup> century governed the kingdom. The core of Byrhtnoth's force was formed by his thegns', retainers who held estates from him and in return fought for him.<sup>7</sup> However, although well trained, equipped and motivated, Byrhtnoth's retainers will have been a small force. The main body of the army was essentially a militia, comprising part or all of the 'fyrd' of Essex. The English fyrd was raised according to strict rules in which every five 'hides' of land were responsible for supplying and equipping one trained soldier for the army for a fixed period.<sup>8</sup> There is no information as to numbers involved but one may assume a similar order of scale to that fielded by the Vikings, because otherwise one side or other would be expected to have chosen not to fight at that time.

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<sup>4</sup> English Heritage. *Battlefield Report: Maldon 991*, English Heritage, 1995

<sup>5</sup> Sawyer in Cooper. *The Battle of Maldon : fiction and fact*, London ; Rio Grande, Hambledon Press, 1993, 41.

<sup>6</sup> Griffith. *The Viking Art of War*, 1995, 122-6.

<sup>7</sup> Stenton. *Anglo-Saxon England*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1947, 359, 361, 479 et seq.

<sup>8</sup> English Heritage. *Battlefield Report: Maldon 991*, English Heritage, 1995

## Arms & Equipment

It is likely that the two armies were equipped in a broadly similar way and that they followed similar military practice. That is with one exception, for some at least of the English force had approached the battlefield on horseback, but all English and Viking troops are believed to have fought on foot in the late Anglo-Saxon period. In the poem the riders dismount to fight and send their horses away.

The main weapon was the spear, used both for thrown and for thrusting. Some of the troops at least wore armour in the form of mail corselets while many if not all carried a shield. The troops were formed up into a shield wall, with shields probably overlapping to provide a solid defence. Swords were a weapon particularly of the upper classes and were carried by at least a proportion of troops at Maldon. Bows were a lower class weapon, perhaps explaining why their role in the battle, although mentioned at the beginning, they are not given any prominence as the poem concentrates on the deeds of Byrhtnoth and his retainers. The battle axe was an important weapon of the period in both English and Scandinavian armies but it is not specifically referred to in the poem as a significant weapon at Maldon.<sup>9</sup>

## Losses

There is no indication of the losses, but the sources tend to agree that this was a hard fought battle in which a significant proportion on both sides were killed, the Vikings being said to have found it difficult to man their ships to sail away.

## The Story of the Battle

The Viking force is thought to have landed in the Blackwater estuary on the coast of Essex. At the head of the estuary is the town of Maldon. After Ipswich this was a logical target for the Viking raids. It was a port and town of sufficient commercial importance to have a royal mint. Moreover, the estuary, with its various undefended islands and safe anchorages, has always represented a potential site for temporary raids and full blown invasion. 750 years after the Battle of Maldon, in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century under Louis XV, the French would plan their invasion landing here at Maldon, though in the end this never materialised.<sup>10</sup> To protect against just such a threat from Viking raiders, Maldon had been defended as a burh by Edward the Elder in 917, and so in 991 it will still have been of some strategic significance.

To counter the threat the Ealdorman Byrhtnoth, accompanied by his retainers, raised the Essex fyrd. This must have taken days to achieve, probably at news of the approach of

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<sup>9</sup> English Heritage. *Battlefield Report: Maldon 991*, English Heritage, 1995

<sup>10</sup> Newark. *War in Britain: The Military History of Britain from the Roman Invasion to World War II*, 2000, 107.



the Viking forces or in response to the attacked on Ipswich. It is suggested that on the 10<sup>th</sup> August the English forces marched to the mainland side of the causeway facing Northey Island where it is believed that the Viking force had drawn up its boats, safe from surprise attack.

## Deployment

### [Battle deployment map](#)

Those in the Saxon army who had ridden to the field now dismounted and formed up in a continuous 'shield wall' of overlapping shields. Byrhtnoth's retainers, with their leader, stood in the centre of the battle array, while the men of the fyrd were deployed on either side.

For a very approximate calculation of the frontage of the shield wall one can perhaps draw upon 17<sup>th</sup> century pike block deployments for comparison, where at close order the frontage was 18 inches (0.45m) per man while at closest order, with every man turned to his side, the frontage was 9 inches (0.23m) per man.<sup>11</sup> With shields of up to 39 inches (1.0m) in diameter<sup>12</sup> this would give a double overlap of the shields at close order. If one assumed they were deployed three deep then 1000 men would give a frontage at close order of 150 metres. For 3000 men 3 deep the frontage would be 450 metres. At six deep this would reduce to 225 metres. However one also perhaps needs to take account of some forces being held back in reserve, though this might not be necessary in a deployment 6 deep. These are crude calculations but in the absence of better evidence they enable an order of scale to be determined for the frontages of the two armies.

A simplified deployment has been depicted here using the frontages calculated above. However, given the uncertainties about the identification of the battlefield it is pointless at this stage to attempt a detailed reconstruction of the action.

## Action

The two sides could not approach each other immediately for the tide was rising and had covered the causeway or ford across the channel of the Blackwater, then called 'Pante', that separated the two armies. It was now, in a shouted exchange, that Byrhtnoth refused the Viking request that the English pay them to withdraw.

Once the tide began to fall a handful of warriors held the causeway against the Vikings. But Byrhtnoth's objective was to force the Vikings to give battle and this is surely why he drew his troops back from the causeway and allowed the enemy to cross unopposed. He had to engage and defeat them if they were not to raid the coasts of East Anglia with

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<sup>11</sup> E.g.: Ward. *Animadversions of Warre*, 1639, Book 2, esp. p.102.

<sup>12</sup> Pedersen. David Nicolle, *Scandinavian Weaponry in the Tenth Century: The Example of Denmark*, David Nicolle, Companion to Medieval Arms and Armour, Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2002, 32.

impunity. Thus the Vikings were allowed to advance westward across the causeway and form up in battle array on the mainland.

After an initial exchange of arrows the two forces, deployed in their shield walls, came to close range, first throwing their spears and then finally, in hand to hand combat, thrusting with the spears and hacking with swords. After the battle had raged for a while, Byrhtnoth himself became the focus of a Viking attack. He may have stepped forward at the advance of a Viking 'strong in battle', thinking this was an individual challenge. Byrhtnoth was soon cut down, felled by spear thrust and killed by sword blows. If one believes the otherwise dubious account in the *Liber Eliensis* he was finally felled and his head severed by a sword blow.

With the death of their leader the majority of the Saxon force, presumably including most if not all of the fyrd, fled to the relative safety of the nearby woods. The collapse of an army at the death of its leader appears to have been a major factor in medieval battles, as is seen in the Bayeux Tapestry where great play is made of the fact that William had to reassure his troops that he was still alive at a critical stage of the Hastings battle. Indeed, as late as 1485 one can see Richard III, at Bosworth, attempt to reach and kill the rebel Henry Tudor in one last desperate attempt to save the day. Such personal influence can only have been possible in battles where only a few thousand troops were involved. It was certainly a far less significant influence on major later battles, where troop numbers reach ten thousand or more.

It is not clear how much of the detail of the personal combat and shows of courage depicted in the poem, at Byrhtnoth's death or in what followed, should be attributed to poetic licence. But after his death his retainers are said to have stood, fought and died to avenge their leader. Despite no longer having any chance of victory they are said to have inflicted great casualties upon the Viking army.

## **The Aftermath**

Maldon itself does not appear to have been attacked, despite the Viking victory. However in the following months the raiders forced the rulers of Kent, Hampshire and West Sussex to pay them. Indeed the defeat had dramatic implications nationally, for it led King Ethelred to raise £10,000 by a new tax in order to buy off the Vikings. 'The precedent then set was followed on several occasions during the next twenty-five years, and these emergency levies were the prototypes of the recurrent Danegelds imposed by the Anglo-Norman kings.'<sup>13</sup>

## **Assessment of the Battle**

**Despite the significant political outcome of the defeat, the events at Maldon in 991 might have faded into a footnote of history but for the survival of the major contemporary poem *The Battle of Maldon*. It would have been treated as just one of**

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<sup>13</sup> Stenton. *Anglo-Saxon England*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1947, 371.

a series of battles in the conflict with the Vikings in the late 10<sup>th</sup> and early 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. It certainly passed unmentioned in northern verse and saga, and it is indeed also ignored by various major works on medieval warfare, such as Oman's influential study.<sup>14</sup>

It has been argued that Maldon was one of the largest of the battles of the period and yet in 994, just three years later a fleet of 94 ships once more attacked the south east of England. Indeed there were many other engagements large and small during Aethelred's reign. Other battles were fought across England, the Ealdormen of other regions raising their fyrd, sometimes of one county sometimes several together. The importance of Maldon is that it is the best documented of battles of this dramatic period which ended in the subjugation of England under a Danish king.

Only a handful of battles from before 1066 have been located and Maldon is the only one of these for which the battlefield has, supposedly, been identified with confidence. However significant doubts do still remain, and too much should not continue to be built upon the current interpretation until and unless archaeological evidence is retrieved to confirm the location. If however the site can be confirmed archaeologically then the battlefield will become one of the most important in England, for its potential to contribute to the understanding of one of the most destructive periods of warfare in English history. This is because it has been demonstrated that buried evidence survives for the contemporary historic landscape. More important still, with such extensive burial of the earlier land surface beneath alluvium, there is a high potential for well preserved buried archaeological evidence of the battle itself. If intensively explored, such evidence might tell us a great deal about warfare in the Viking period in England.

## ***Recommended Reading on the Battle***

### **Secondary works**

There are many studies of warfare and weaponry in this period, of which just one or two examples are listed here:

Nicolle. *Medieval Warfare Source Book: volume 1: Warfare in Western Christendom*, 1996, 53-102.

Pedersen. David Nicolle, *Scandinavian Weaponry in the Tenth Century: The Example of Denmark*, David Nicolle, Companion to Medieval Arms and Armour, Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2002

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<sup>14</sup> Jones. *A History of the Vikings*, London, Oxford University Press, 1973, 356. Oman Charles William and Beeler John. *The Art of War in the Middle Ages ... Revised and edited by John H. Beeler*, Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press, 1953.

**The importance of the poem ‘The Battle of Maldon’ in Anglo-Saxon literature means that there are a wide range of publications relating to the battle. The following is an extensive but not necessarily comprehensive list of the works relating to the battlefield, the battle and the poem. Most of these have not been consulted in the preparation of the account presented here, which draws heavily upon the English Heritage report. The latter provides a very good summary of the evidence and review of the analysis presented in the various other secondary works published before 1995. The most important single volume is the collection of papers presented at the anniversary of the battle in 1991: Scragg D.G. *The battle of Maldon: fact or fiction?*, 1993**

Abrams and Greenblatt. *The Norton anthology of English literature*, New York, Norton, 2001

Andersen Hans. *The Battle of Maldon : the meaning, dating & historicity of an Old English poem*, Publications on English themes ; v.16, Copenhagen, Department of English University of Copenhagen, 1991

Anderson E.R. *The Battle of Maldon: a Reappraisal of Possible Sources, Date and Theme*, Modes of Interpretation in Old English Literature: Essays in Honour of Stanley B. Greenfield, eds. BROWN, P.R.; CROMPTON, G.R.; ROBINSON, F.C. (Toronto, Buffalo and London, 1986), 1986

Ashdown. *English and Norse documents relating to the reign of Ethelred the Unready*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1930

Bessinger. S B Greenfield, *Maldon and the Olafsdrapa: An Historical Caveat*, S B Greenfield, Studies in Old English Literature, Eugene, 1963

Blake N.F. *The genesis of The Battle of Maldon*, Anglo-Saxon England, 1978

Brooks. D G Scragg, *On Dating the Battle of Maldon*, D G Scragg, The Battle of Maldon AD 991, 1991

Butterfield Frederic William. *The battle of Maldon : and other renderings from the Anglo-Saxon*, Oxford, J. Parker and co, 1900

CEI. *Maldon 991: Battlefield Landscape Report*, English Heritage, 1994

Clark. *On dating The Battle of Maldon: certain evidence reviewed*, Nottingham Mediaeval Studies, 1983

Clark. *The hero of Maldon: vir pius et strenuus*, Speculum, 1979

Collier W.E.J. *A bibliography of the battle of Maldon*, The battle of Maldon, AD 991, ed. SCRAGG, D. (Oxford, 1991), 1991

Conrad-O'Briain, et al. *Text and gloss : studies in insular learning and literature presented to Joseph Donovan Pheifer*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 1999

Cook and Tinker. *Select translations from Old English poetry*, Boston ; London, Ginn & Company, 1902

Cooper. *The Battle of Maldon : fiction and fact*, London ; Rio Grande, Hambleton Press, 1993

Crossley-Holland. *The Battle of Maldon and other Old English poems*, London ; New York, Macmillan : St. Martin's Press, 1965

Crow. *Maldon and Brunnanburh : two Old English songs of battle*, 1897

Deegan and Rubin. D G Scragg, *Byrhtnoth's Remains: a Reassessment of his stature*, D G Scragg, The Battle of Maldon AD 991, 1991

Dodgson John McNeal. *The site of the battle of Maldon*, The battle of Maldon, AD 991, ed. SCRAGG, D. (Oxford, 1991), 1991

English Heritage. *Battlefield Report: Maldon 991*, English Heritage, 1995

Frank. *The ideal of men dying with their lord in The battle of Maldon: anachronism or nouvelle vague*, People and places in northern Europe, 500-1600: essays in honour of Peter Hayes Sawyer, eds. WOOD, I.; LUND, N. (Woodbridge, 1991), 1991

Frank. *The battle of Maldon and heroic literature*, The battle of Maldon, AD 991, ed. SCRAGG, D. (Oxford, 1991), 1991

Frank. *The battle of Maldon: its reception, 1726-1906*, 1993

Fulk. *Interpretations of Beowulf: a critical anthology*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press c1991, 1991

Gneuss. *Language and history in early England*, Variorum collected studies series ; CS559, Aldershot, Great Britain ; Brookfield, Vt., USA, Variorum, 1996

Gordon E.V. *The date of Aethelred's treaty with the Vikings : Olaf Tryggvason and the battle of Maldon*, Modern Language Review, 1937

Greenwood and Pollington. *Maldon 991-1991 : reflections on a battle*, [England?], [s.n.], 1991

Griffiths. *The Battle of Maldon : text and translation*, Pinner, Anglo-Saxon Books, 1991

Griffiths. *The battle of Maldon : a response to Donald Scragg*, Seaham, Co. Durham, AMRA Imprint, 1993

Hall. *Judith ; Phoenix : and other Anglo-Saxon poems*, London, Harrap,

Hall Joan, et al. *Old English and new : studies in language and linguistics in honor of Frederic G. Cassidy*, Garland reference library of the humanities ; vol. 1652, New York, Garland Pub 1992, 1992

Hirst Lloyd. *Britons at Maldonado*, Montevideo, 1975

Holland Kevin and Mitchell. *The Battle of Maldon, and other Old English poems. Translated by Kevin Crossley-Holland and edited by Bruce Mitchell*, [Papermac. no. 196.], 1967

Hoover David. *A new theory of Old English meter*, American university studies. Series 4, English language and literature ; v. 14, New York, Lang, 1985

Hough Carole and University of Glasgow Department of English. *The battle of Maldon : a student edition*, Glasgow, Dept. of English Language University of Glasgow, 1996

John Eric. *War and society in the tenth century : the Maldon campaign*, Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 1977

Kennedy Alan. *Byrhtnoth's obits and twelfth-century accounts of the battle of Maldon*, The battle of Maldon, AD 991, ed. SCRAGG, D. (Oxford, 1991), 1991

Keynes Simon. *The historical context of the battle of Maldon*, The battle of Maldon, AD 991, ed. SCRAGG, D. (Oxford, 1991), 1991

Laborde. *The site of the battle of Maldon*, English Historical Review, 1925

Laborde. *Byrhtnoth and Maldon*, London, William Heinemann, 1936

Lewis Peter and University of Nottingham Theses. *A grammatical analysis of the battle of Maldon : with special reference to surface structure at the rank of Clause and group*, 1969

Locherbie-Cameron M.A.L. *The men named in the poem*, The battle of Maldon, AD 991, ed. SCRAGG, D. (Oxford, 1991), 1991

Lund. *The Danish perspective*,

McKinnell John. *On the date of The Battle of Maldon*, Medium Aevum, 1975

McSween. *Byrhtnoth : Anglo-Saxon warrior*, Ely, Ely Cathedral, 1991

Metcalf D.M. and Lean W. *The battle of Maldon and the minting of crux pennies in Essex : post hoc propter hoc?*, 1993

Muir. *Leod : six Old English poems : a handbook*, New York, Gordon and Breach, 1989

Orr and Crossley-Holland. *Beowulf*, Say ; 73, [London], Argo, 1970

Petty and Petty. *A geological reconstruction of the site of the battle of Maldon*, 1993

Petty G.R. and Petty S. *Geology and The Battle of Maldon*, Speculum, 1976

Philpotts. *What happened at Maldon? : the story of the Battle of Maldon, August 991*, London, Blackwater Books, 1991

Pope John and Fulk. *Eight Old English poems*, New York ; London, W.W. Norton, 2001

Pyle and Scattergood. *Literature and learning in medieval and Renaissance England : essays presented to Fitzroy Pyle*, Blackrock, County Dublin, Irish Academic Press c1984, 1984

Rayner. *The Battle of Maldon, AD 991*, Battlefield, 2002

Rebsamen Frederick. *Beowulf is my name : and selected translations of other Old English poems*, Rinehart editions, 146, San Francisco, Rinehart Press, 1971

Robinson Fred. *God, Death, and Loyalty in 'The Battle of Maldon*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1979

Rodrigues. *Three Anglo-Saxon battle poems*, Felinfach, Llanerch, 1996

Rodrigues Louis. *The Battles of Maldon and Brunanburh*, Felinfach, Lampeter, Llanerch, 1991

Rowles. *The battle and song of Maldon*, Colchester, [s.n.], 1930

Sabin Philip. *Maldon, AD 991 : read the poem and fight the battle*, [s.l.], Society of Ancients, 1995

Schwab Ute. *The battle of Maldon: a memorial poem*, 1993

Scragg. *The Battle of Maldon, AD 991*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell in association with the Manchester Centre for Anglo-Saxon Studies, 1991

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Sedgefield. *The Battle of Maldon : and short poems from the Saxon chronicle*, The Belles-lettres series. Section 1 : English literature, Boston ; London, D.C. Heath, 1904

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Woolf H.B. *The personal names in 'The Battle of Maldon'*, Modern Language Notes, 1938  
Woolf. *The ideal of men dying with their lord in the Germania and in The battle of Maldon*, 1976  
Wyatt. *An Anglo-Saxon reader*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1919

## Contemporary Accounts

**The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and the *Life of Oswald* are near contemporary sources and provide reasonably reliable information but the detail they provide about the battle is very sparse. However the poem *The Battle of Maldon* provides a wealth of detail, far more than for any other battle from the period. Indeed the location of the battlefield and most of the story of the battle in modern studies are built around the evidence in the poem. There are also several medieval sources for the battle but they add little or are considered highly unreliable.**

### *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*

**This provides only the most minimal information about the battle and does not even enable accurate identification of the battlefield. It is the most reliable source but even this exists in several manuscript versions and these are at least two stages removed from the original record, in places carelessly transcribed.<sup>15</sup>**

### **Manuscript A, AD 991**

‘In this year Olaf<sup>16</sup> came with 93 ships to Folkestone, and ravaged round about it, and from there went to Sandwich, and so from there to Ipswich, and overran it all, and so to Maldon. And Ealdorman Byrhtnoth came against him there with his army and fought against him; and they killed the ealdorman there and had control of the field.’

### **Manuscript C (also D & E), AD 991**

‘In this year Ipswich was ravaged, and very soon afterwards Ealdorman Byrhtnoth was killed at Maldon. And in that year it was determined that tribute should first be paid to the Danish men because of the great terror they were causing along the coast. The first payment was 10,000 pounds. Archbishop Sigeric first advised this course.’

Whitelock. *English Historical Documents: 500-1042*, London, 1968, 213.

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<sup>15</sup> Whitelock. *English Historical Documents: 500-1042*, London, 1968, 213 n.1.

<sup>16</sup> Probably Olaf Tryggvason, King of Norway AD 995-1000. English Heritage. *Battlefield Report: Maldon 991*, English Heritage, 1995.

*Life of St Oswald*

**This is a near contemporary source believed to be independent of the poem and, although it survives in an incompetently transcribed copy, provides important supporting information on the battle.**

‘During his (Aethelred’s) reign the abominable Danes came to the Kingdom of the English, and laying waste and burning everything, did not spare men, but, glorying in flashing blades and poisoned arrows, armed themselves in bronze helmets, in which they fought and were wont to terrify beholders..... When not many months had passed, another very violent battle took place in the east of this famous country, in which the glorious Ealdorman Byrhtnoth held the front rank, with his fellow soldiers. How gloriously, how manfully, how boldly he urged his leaders to the front of the battle, who, relying on an elegant style, can make known? He himself, tall in stature, stood conspicuous above the rest; his hand was not sustained by Aaron and Hur, but supported by the manifold faithfulness of the Lord, since he was worthy. He smote also on his right hand, unmindful of the swan-like whiteness of his head, for alms-deeds and holy masses strengthened him. He protected himself on his left hand, forgetful of the weakness of his body, for prayers and good deeds sustained him. And when the beloved leader in the field saw his enemies fall, and his own men fight bravely and cut them down in many ways, he began to fight with all his might for his country. An infinite number, indeed of them and of our side perished, and Byrhtnoth fell, and the rest fled. The Danes also were wondrously wounded, and could scarcely man their ships.’

Whitelock. *English Historical Documents: 500-1042*, London, 1968

*The Battle of Maldon poem*

**The poem is the only substantial account we have of the battle, but even it is not complete. 325 lines of the poem have survived, but the original copy was destroyed in 1731 so we have to depend upon a transcript made by Thomas Hearne and published in 1726. The origin and date of the poem are uncertain, although it does appear to be near contemporary to the events. It has been suggested that it was compiled for Byrhtnoth’s widow, who also gave to Ely abbey a textile hanging depicting the battle, an early precursor to the Bayeux Tapestry’s record of the battle of Hastings. There is also some dispute over the accuracy of the poem as an historical record of the events of the battle. What is certain is that the poem cannot be taken as a simple historical account and that the truth has to be distilled from the literary embellishment.<sup>17</sup>**

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<sup>17</sup> See for example: Brooks. D G Scragg, *On Dating the Battle of Maldon*, D G Scragg, The Battle of Maldon AD 991, 1991. Cooper. *The Battle of Maldon : fiction and fact*, London ; Rio Grande, Hambledon Press, 1993.



A digital copy of the poem 'The Battle of Maldon' can be found at:  
<http://www.maldon.gov.uk>

The copy of the poem present here is that published by Ashdown. *English and Norse documents relating to the reign of Ethelred the Unready*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1930

*Calendars of Abbey of Ely, Winchester and Ramsey.*

The calendar of Ely, which Byrhtnoth had close associations, gives the 10<sup>th</sup> August, the currently accepted date, while the other two give 11<sup>th</sup> August for Byrhtnoth's death and hence for the battle.

*Medieval sources of limited value*

**John of Worcester** and **Symeon of Durham** both just record that the battle took place in 991 and that Byrhtnoth was killed along with many from both armies.

John of and McGurk. *The chronicle of John of Worcester*, Oxford medieval texts, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998

Rollason. *Libellus de exordio atque procursu istius, hoc est Dunhelmensis, ecclesie = Tract on the origins and progress of this the Church of Durham*, Oxford medieval texts, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2000, 2000

### **Henry of Huntingdon**

'Ealdorman Byrhtnoth indeed opposed them with great forces and fought them, but was defeated. He was killed, cut down by swords, and his troops were driven back and destroyed.'

For Henry of Huntingdon see:

Forester. *The chronicle of Henry of Huntingdon, comprising the history of England, from the invasion of Julius Caesar to the accession of Henry II*, Felinfach, Llanerch, 1991

### **Liber Eliensis**

This medieval source from Ely, possibly completed as late as 1169-74, conflicts with the earlier accounts and is not considered an accurate record:

(AD 987)

'Accordingly, at one time, when the Danes landed at Maldon, and he (Byrhtnoth) heard the news, he met them with an armed force and destroyed nearly all on the bridge over the water. Only a few of them escaped and sailed to their own country to tell the tale.'

(AD 991)

‘When Ealdorman Byrhtnoth returned quickly to Northumbria after this victory, the Danes, greatly saddened by the news, fitted out another fleet, hastened to England, and landed at Maldon again four years later to avenge the killing of their men, with Justin and Guthmund, the son of Stecta, as their leaders. When they reached the harbour and learned that it was Byrhtnoth who had done these things to their men, they at once sent word that they had come to avenge them, and that they would hold him a coward, if he would not dare join battle with them. Moved to boldness by their messengers, Byrhtnoth summoned together his former comrades for this matter and, led by the hope of victory and his excessive boldness, he set out with a few warriors on the road to battle ... On arrival there, he was neither shaken by the small number of his men, nor fearful of the multitude of the enemy, but attacked them at once, and fought them fiercely for fourteen days. On the last day, with few of his men remaining (and) realising that he was going to die, he did not fight the less actively against the enemy, but almost put them to flight after inflicting great slaughter on them. In the end, heartened by the small number of his men, the enemy made a wedge and, grouping together, rushed with one resolve upon him and with great effort, just managed to cut off his head as he fought. They took this away from there with them as they fled to their native land.’

For Liber Eliensis see:

Blake. *Liber Eliensis*, Camden third series ; . 92, London, Offices of the Royal Historical Society, 1962

## THE BATTLEFIELD

### Location

Maldon is the only battle from before 1066 for which the battlefield has been identified with some confidence. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle states that the battle took place near Maldon. This is clearly Maldon in Essex because Byrhtnoth was Ealdorman of Essex, while the earlier plundering by the Viking force took place at Ipswich, 30 miles to the north east. The exact position of the battlefield has been identified using strong topographical evidence within the poem, *The Battle of Maldon*.<sup>18</sup> The current interpretation is that the battle was fought on the mainland immediately opposite Northey Island, in the Blackwater estuary just to the east of the town of Maldon. However the current identification of the site has been challenged by Bessinger<sup>19</sup> and, unless and until substantial archaeological evidence is recovered for the battle, the identification of the battlefield must remain open to question. Even if the Northey Island site is the correct one, the exact location of the action has yet to be identified within the general area.

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<sup>18</sup> Laborde. *The site of the battle of Maldon*, English Historical Review, 1925, 161-73.

<sup>19</sup> Bessinger. S B Greenfield, *Maldon and the Olafsdrapa: An Historical Caveat*, S B Greenfield, Studies in Old English Literature, Eugene, 1963

## Historic Terrain

The key topographical facts are that the Viking force landed or marched to a position on one side of a channel of the Blackwater estuary or a tidal section of the river, then called 'Panta'. At high tide they were unable to cross but it was a sufficiently narrow channel to allow the opposing forces to negotiate by shouting across the water. When the tide fell and they were allowed to cross they did so, across a causeway (brycg) or ford, in a westerly direction.

There have been three main candidates for the Maldon battlefield. One lies immediately north east of Maldon at the place now known as Heybridge, now completely built up as a suburb of Maldon.<sup>20</sup> The Viking force was suggested as having crossing north eastward from just outside the Maldon defences to attack the East Saxon army on the north east bank. The case for this site has been comprehensively demolished by more recent authors, because it does not apparently meet the criteria relating to the tides while the poem makes no reference to Maldon town which would have been immediately to the back of the Viking force.<sup>21</sup>

The second candidate was Osea Island, which lies in the north of the estuary and is connected to the mainland by a causeway. But the distance between the island and the mainland, at circa 1 km, is too great, even when sea level rise is taken into account, to fit the events in the poem which has the two sides communicating by shouting across the water.<sup>22</sup>

The strongest candidate is that of Northey Island, which has been shown to fit very closely the topographical features described in the poem, including the way in which the rising tide flows around both sides of the island to meet at the causeway.<sup>23</sup> While today the distance from mainland to the island might be considered too great for a shouted exchange, it has been shown in this region of England the land has been sinking since the last ice age and that since the 10<sup>th</sup> century sea level has risen by about 6ft. As a result there are now saltings<sup>24</sup> where there was dry land in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, making the channel no more than about 110m wide at that time. The adjacent land was dry pasture ground dipping gently to a steep river bank. In 991 the causeway will have been covered by 6-8 ft of water at high tide, while silts similar to those seen today will have made crossing the channel impossible except by a causeway.<sup>25</sup>

According to the poem there was a wood nearby for one Englishman let his hawk fly to the wood before he advance to battle, while later others fled to the woods after

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<sup>20</sup> Freeman. *The history of the Norman conquest of England : its causes and its results*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1869.

<sup>21</sup> E.g.: Burne. *The battlefields of England*, London, Greenhill Books, 1996.

<sup>22</sup> English Heritage. *Battlefield Report: Maldon 991*, English Heritage, 1995

<sup>23</sup> Laborde. *The site of the battle of Maldon*, English Historical Review, 1925.

<sup>24</sup> Land that is regularly covered by the sea but which is not marsh.

<sup>25</sup> Petty G.R. and Petty S. *Geology and The Battle of Maldon*, Speculum, 1976. Petty and Petty. *A geological reconstruction of the site of the battle of Maldon*, 1993.

Byrhtnoth's death. The parishes to the west of Northey Island have woodland related names, Woodham and Hazeleigh and Purleigh.<sup>26</sup> However no detailed reconstruction of the distribution of woodland in this area in the medieval period has apparently been attempted so it is unclear how closely the woodland might have extended towards the battlefield.

As a result of sea level change Maldon is very unusual amongst English battlefields in that not only human but also natural agencies have dramatically transformed the character of the landscape since the time of the battle. A good deal of the area of the presumed battlefield is now slightly below sea level. This has long been protected by a sea wall, although as late as 1881 some of the area was still subject to periodic flooding.<sup>27</sup> The flood banks are today a dominant feature of the landscape while at the northern end of the presumed battlefield a landfill site, now completely fenced in, has completely altered the ground levels and character of the area.

## Archaeology of the Battle

No archaeological finds which might relate to the battle have been reported from the battlefield as currently identified.

The only physical evidence which may relate to the battle is the apparently discovery in 1769 of a headless corpse with the head replaced by a ball of wax, excavated in Ely Cathedral. This is where Byrhtnoth was said to have been buried.<sup>28</sup> It is the one 'fact' that may lend any credence to the otherwise highly individual account of the battle recorded in the Liber Eliensis.

## Research information

### *Historic administrative areas*

County: Essex

Township (Parish): Maldon (Maldon St Mary)

### *Sites and Monuments Record*

For information on the local Sites and Monuments Record follow this link: <http://demo.battlefieldstrust.com/resource-centre/battlefieldsuk/periodpageview.asp?pageid=234&parentid=184>

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<sup>26</sup> Dodgson John McNeal. *The site of the battle of Maldon, The battle of Maldon, AD 991*, ed. SCRAGG, D. (Oxford, 1991), 1991

<sup>27</sup> Ordnance Survey 6inch mapping, 1881.

<sup>28</sup> Deegan and Rubin. D G Scragg, *Byrhtnoth's Remains: a Reassessment of his stature*, D G Scragg, The Battel of Maldon AD 991, 1991

### ***Portable Antiquities Officer***

For information on how to contact the local Portable Antiquities Officer follow this link:

<http://demo.battlefieldstrust.com/resource-centre/battlefieldsuk/periodpageview.asp?pageid=234&parentid=184>

### ***Record Offices***

For information on relevant Record Office(s) follow this link:

<http://demo.battlefieldstrust.com/admin/periodpageview.asp?PageId=311>

### ***Local Studies Collections***

## ***Further reading***

### **Secondary works**

The main works on the historic terrain are:

Petty G.R. and Petty S. *Geology and The Battle of Maldon*, Speculum, 1976

Petty and Petty. *A geological reconstruction of the site of the battle of Maldon*, 1993

### **Primary sources**

#### ***British Geological Survey maps***

1:50,000 Sheet 241

#### ***Historic Maps***

##### Historic Ordnance Survey Maps

1<sup>st</sup> edition 6 inch mapping 1881

##### Other Historic Maps

#### ***Historic Documents***

## ***Management Assessment and Strategy***

## Assessment

### *Military History*

The battle is the best documented of any before 1066. However the uncertainties about the site of the action remain a major problem that can only be addressed archaeologically. Too much should not continue to be built upon the current interpretation of the site of the battle until and unless archaeological evidence is retrieved to confirm the location.

### *Military Archaeology*

It is important that an archaeological survey is conducted on the site to establish if there is evidence to confirm the identification. This may however prove to be a difficult task as no battle of such an early period in England has yet been studied archaeologically and so the nature of any archaeological record for battles of the period is unknown.

However, because of the substantial rise in sea level there is a good chance that part of the battlefield adjacent to the waters edge has been buried by the mud of the saltings while just inland the build up of alluvium on part of the area behind the flood bank has also occurred since the battle. If the battle did indeed take place on the mainland adjacent to Northey Island, and if the action spread over more than just the highest ground, which today remains unaffected by alluviation or the build up of salt flats, then Maldon may prove to be one of only a handful of battlefields so far recognised in England where there is a high potential for a buried battlefield land surface. If this has taken place then artefacts and burials from the battle may have been protected from the damaging effects of cultivation over the last millennium. Given the rarity of such potential, it is important that the archaeological potential of the site is investigated as it may offer an exceptional opportunity to determine the character of undisturbed battle deposits of the Anglo-Saxon period. Given the continuing encroachment of development on the north side of the battlefield it is important that the archaeological issues are addressed before there is unknowing destruction of important battlefield deposits.

### *Historic Terrain*

Important work on the historic terrain has been conducted, particularly by Petty. If positive results were achieved then a far more extensive study of the historic terrain of the battlefield and its environs should be considered.

### *Access*

#### Rights of Way

There are a number of rights of way across the battlefield and its immediate environs. These are depicted on the Ordnance Survey Explorer map extract. They give good access to the battlefield and no initiative is currently needed to improve access.

### ***Interpretation***

A leaflet is available from the TIC but there is no significant interpretation on site. However no further work on interpretation of the battle should take place until there has been an effective archaeological survey of the battlefield to confirm the location.

## **Research Agenda**

Archaeological survey is essential to confirm the identification of the battlefield.

## **Conservation Strategy**

### ***Existing Designations***

The majority of the battlefield, as currently understood, is in the ownership of the National Trust.

### ***Threats***

### ***Management priorities***

As one of the few battlefields in England in the ownership of a conservation organisation it is important that a Conservation Management Plan is produced for the battlefield and that this is underpinned by the appropriate level of archaeological survey work, as discussed above.

### ***Modern administrative areas***

County: Essex

District: Maldon

Parish: Maldon St Mary

### ***Local Archaeological curator***

The local archaeological curator is the County Archaeologist, Essex County Council.

For contact information for the relevant local and the national archaeological curator:  
<http://demo.battlefieldstrust.com/admin/periodpageview.asp?SectionId=5&ItemId=21&pageid=235>

## **VISITING THE BATTLEFIELD**

The majority of the battlefield, as currently understood, is in the ownership of the National Trust. Special arrangements can be made with the National Trust to visit Northey Island itself and to use the private lane to Northey Island from the B1018, which runs past South House Farm to a small private parking area next to the sea wall. However the recommended way to visit the battlefield is on foot along public rights of way.

### *The value of a site visit*

Maldon is the only battlefield in England from before 1066 which is believed to be accurately located. However uncertainties remain and so a visit must be made knowing that it may eventually be shown that the battle took place on a different site. This having been said, a visit is still well worthwhile. There are several key landmarks which allow one to appreciate very easily the currently accepted interpretation, as long as one has a basic understanding of the ways in which the landscape have been transformed since 991. When on the battlefield the visitor can consider possible alternative interpretations as to the deployment of the troops during the main action and the extent of the area over which fighting may have taken place.

Although lying in close proximity to the rapidly expanding town of Maldon, with housing development and a landfill site encroaching quite closely on the north side, the battlefield has not yet been affected directly. Once one has passed the landfill site one feels very much in open country when walking around the battlefield.

### *The Battlefield Monument*

There is no battlefield monument, only a small plaque adjacent to the small private car park near the causeway. However the real monument to the battle is the famous 10<sup>th</sup> century poem *The Battle of Maldon*.

### *Interpretation on site*

Apart from the small plaque by the car park there is no on site interpretation.

## **Other locations to visit**

### *All Saints Church, High Street, Maldon*

On the exterior of the church, immediately to the right of the south door, is a large statue of Ealdorman Byrhtnoth, carved in 1907. As with all such images of early military leaders it is a rather fanciful representation, but it is the most significant monument to the battle that currently exists.



### ***St Peter's Church, High Street, Maldon***

This houses the town's Heritage Centre and contains the Millennium Tapestry, which includes modern representations of the battle of Maldon.

### ***St Mary's Church, Church Street, Maldon***

An abstract modern stained glass window, which may not be to everyone's taste, representing the Battle of Maldon will be found in one of the south aisle windows of St Mary's.

### ***Museums***

No significant local museum exhibition about the battle has been identified.

Despite the scale of warfare in England in this Viking period there are relatively few collections of Viking period military artefacts in England. Not surprisingly the museum collections which allow one to gain the best overall impression of the Viking forces in this period are those in Scandinavia itself, from the Gokstad ship in the Viking Ship Museum in Oslo to the major collections of Viking artefacts in places such as the Historika Museet in Stockholm.

For a listing of museums in England:

<http://demo.battlefieldstrust.com/admin/periodpageview.asp?PageId=313>

### ***Nearby battlefields***

The nearest featured battlefield is Barnet, almost 40 miles away.

### ***Other nearby sites of historic military interest***

Although Maldon is a long distance from any of the featured battlefields, there are two important Anglo-Saxon sites in the region which can be combined with a visit to Maldon:

Sutton Hoo (near Woodbridge, Suffolk): In 2003 the National Trust opened a major new permanent exhibition on the Anglo-Saxon burial site of the warrior nobility, including the famous 7<sup>th</sup> century ship burial. There are original artefacts of the period and access to view the burial mounds themselves.

To search the National Trust website follow this link:

<http://demo.battlefieldstrust.com/admin/periodpageview.asp?PageId=313>

West Stow (near Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk): The reconstruction of an Anglo-Saxon settlement of the 5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> century and an associated visitor centre is open to the public. Although it is essentially a civilian site, it provides a very good context against which to set the military action of the period:

<http://www.stedmundsbury.gov.uk/weststow.htm>

## **Access Information**

It is possible to walk across the causeway at low tide, but access to Northey Island itself is restricted because it is a nature reserve. It is usually possible to arrange access if you contact the National Trust's warden in advance (01245 222669). Contact details can also be found on the National Trust website (search under Northey Island). For the National Trust website follow this link:

<http://demo.battlefieldstrust.com/admin/periodpageview.asp?PageId=313>

### *Finding the Battlefield*

For modern road mapping and links to other travel information online follow this link:

<http://www.multimap.com/p/browse.cgi?pc=&GridE=?????&GridN=?????&scale=100000&title=?????+battlefield&cat=h>

### *Rights of Way & other Access By Foot*

The battlefield can be adequately explored using existing rights of way.

For further information on Rights of Way or access to land through the Countryside Stewardship scheme follow this link:

<http://demo.battlefieldstrust.com/resource-centre/battlefieldsuk/periodpageview.asp?pageid=211&parentid=104>

### *Tourist Information Centres*

There is a TIC in Maldon town centre. This sells a Maldon Battle leaflet with details of a self guided trail. It also provides a wide range of information on sites of historic interest in the area.

For contact details for the nearby TICs follow this link:

<http://demo.battlefieldstrust.com/admin/periodpageview.asp?PageId=313>

## **Battlefield visit**

The battlefield itself lies on farmland to the south east of the town. The recommended walk starts from Promenade Park which can be approached south westwards from the town centre via High Street, Mill Road and Park Drive. There is pay and display parking at the furthest, north eastern corner of Promenade Park.

Maldon is a pleasant small town and there are several places to visit there which have 20th century exhibits relevant to the battle. It is possible to walk to the battlefield from the town. That walk, as outlined in the battle leaflet available from the Tourist Information Centre, takes one past St Mary's Church, with its modern stained glass window to the battle, and alongside the picturesque Hythe, with its historic and modern boats tied up at the quay. However this longer trip (4 miles) adds nothing to the

appreciation of the battle or battlefield and so it is recommended that the walk be shortened, starting from Promenade Park on south east side of the town.

### ***The Walk***

*2.5 miles on footpaths across grassland, metalled lane and arable fields. If you wish to see and to walk along the causeway linking Northey island to the mainland then you will need to check the tide tables on the web or with the local TIC. It is not necessary to enter Northey Island to fully appreciate the battlefield terrain, but if you do wish to do so then please remember prior permission is required from the National Trust.*

*There are toilets in Promenade Park while in Maldon town centre there are a wide range of shops, pubs and restaurants as well as car parks and toilets. The walk described here is meant to be used in conjunction with the Battlefield Explorer map, which can be downloaded from the Media Store.*

From the car park at the north east corner of Promenade Park take the footpath leading south eastward through the Park. You approach the edge of the saltings along the Blackwater estuary just across the access lane to the recycling centre. Continue along the clearly marked path by the edge of the saltings with the high chain-link fence of the landfill site on your right. The higher ground within the fence is a result of modern dumping. Once past the landfill site the path passes through a gate and then along the flood bank. There is now open farmland on the right and on your left Northey Island can be seen across the saltings and mud flats (or water if you have arrived at high tide). After a short distance you will reach the lane leading to the causeway to the Island. The flood bank was constructed many centuries after the battle, to protect the area from rising sea levels, but today it provides an excellent viewing platform to survey the whole landscape.

If it is low tide then it is possible to walk along the causeway to get a better feel for the landscape, but do not enter the island without permission. If you feel that the distance from the island is too great for the two sides to have carried out a shouted negotiation before the tide fell, then remember that when the battle was fought sea level was significantly lower. The channel dividing the Island from the mainland was somewhat narrower than it is today and little or no saltings between the land and the water. Return to the mainland and continue along the lane, over the flood bank and down onto the natural ground level. On the fence on the right hand side, at the corner by the small private car park, is the plaque commemorating the battle. Continue along the lane towards South House Farm. It is immediately apparent that the ground immediately to your left and that in the distance on which the farm stands is significantly higher than where the lane runs. The area on which you are standing and to your right is covered by alluvium deposited by the flood waters that still periodically affected this land as late as the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The alluvium has been deposited since 991, when this was perhaps all dry land, and it is therefore possible that it may preserve beneath it important evidence of the battle. Did the armies fight on this lower ground as the English Heritage Battlefield Register map suggests, or did they perhaps fight on the rising ground to your left as we have shown on our map or even where the farm now stands? There is really no evidence at present to answer this

question or to begin to suggest how extensive the fighting was. Indeed it has yet to be proved beyond doubt that this was actually the battlefield at all!

Continue towards South House Farm. It is highly unlikely that there was a settlement here in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, but note the way the ground rises as you approach the farm. Would such topographical features have been large enough to have a military significance in 991? Go through the farm yard and then pass a house on the right hand side. If this is indeed the area where the battle was fought then somewhere in front of you, in the distance, there must have been an area of woodland in 991, to which many of the English troops fled after Byrhtnoth's death. At the first hedgerow on the right leave the lane, turning right along the footpath. In the next field the path runs alongside the sports field and then joins Park Drive. Turn right along the road, past the Leisure Centre and the turning to the Recycling site, and enter Promenade Park where you drove in to the car park.

### **Further reading: Battlefield guides**

As usual Burne provides the most comprehensive discussion of the battlefield including a very concise demolition of the alternative candidate sites. Clarke provides good general background but, as so often, the walk is far longer than necessary. The Getmapping aerial view is excellent although unfortunately it was not taken at low tide and so part of the causeway is covered. Smurthwaite provides a good summary of the battle, but the perspective drawing of the battle provides a completely misleading sense of certainty about the character of the contemporary landscape when in fact it owes a great deal, even more than the famous poem about the battle, to artistic licence.

Anon. *The Battle of Maldon (leaflet guide)*, Maldon, Maldon District Council, 2003?

Burne. *The battlefields of England*, London, Greenhill Books, 1996, 61-69

Clark. *Battlefield Walks : The South*, 1996, 12-23

English Heritage. *Battlefield Hikes volume 1*, London, English Heritage, 2003

Fairbairn & Cyprien. *A Traveller's Guide to the Battlefields of Britain*, 1983, 18-21

Getmapping. *British Battles: Amazing Views*, 2002

Kinross. *Discovering Battlefields of England*, 1989, 10

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## **Acknowledgements**

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