

What Happened in 1066?

AS THE PLACE where the Saxon leaders offered William the Conqueror the crown of England, Berkhamsted is already making plans to celebrate the 900th anniversary in 1966.

Do not be surprised if you read or hear that Little Berkhamsted, our village namesake in East Hertfordshire, was the scene of this historic encounter. The argument began many years ago, and claims made on behalf of either Great or Little Berkhamsted have never been disproved, only disputed. We shall probably never reach an absolutely clear decision, for the evidence is vague, contradictory and incomplete. Before reaching the end of this article, however, I hope you will share my view that William the Conqueror came to our Berkhamsted.

ON THE MARCH

After the decisive victory at Hastings in mid-October, 1066, the Normans moved through Kent towards London, where an advance guard was repulsed with heavy losses. After burning Southwark, the invaders started a movement to encircle London and proceeded as far west as Wallingford before crossing the Thames.

From Wallingford they continued along Icknield Way, and at a certain point—perhaps at several points—turned towards London.

Great destruction was caused by the Normans, and historians have sought to trace their route by studying depreciated manorial values in Domesday Book. The existence of depreciated manors many miles north and east of Berkhamsted has suggested a wide encircling movement on London, and some writers, such as F. H. Baring in 1898, thought that Little Berkhamsted must have been the place where the submission to William took place.

IN SIGHT OF LONDON

Some support for this theory came from an 11th century chronicler, William of Poitiers, who said that the Saxon leaders met the Conqueror at a place where the army had just come in sight of London. Little Berkhamsted, admittedly, is on a hill and some ten miles nearer London than Great Berk-

hamsted, but I think William of Poitiers needed very good eyesight indeed to see a small Saxon capital city seventeen miles away on a short day in December. He probably did not intend his words to be taken literally.

As for those depreciated manors, it is highly probable that small foraging bands caused heavy damage over a very wide area. In any case, as the Thames had been crossed and as opposition was slight, it seems unnecessary to have gone very far east before heading for London. Akeman Street was probably as good a turning off Icknield Way as any other road or track, and Berkhamsted, small but not insignificant by Saxon standards, seems a more likely place for the rendezvous than a very tiny village on a hilltop.

ROOM FOR SPECULATION

I cannot do better than quote our fellow townsman, Professor H. C. Darby, who, in 'Domesday Geography of South-East England,' writes:

'The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, under the year 1066, briefly summarises these events by saying that William "harried all that part which he over-ran, until he came to *Beorh-hamstede*." Writers before and after Baring have thought that this was not Little Berkhamsted but Great Berkhamsted (called simply Berkhamsted today) in the extreme west of the county, and that William's forces came there more or less direct from Wallingford. Great Berkhamsted is some 27 miles from London Bridge, and it does not as conveniently fit either the statement of William of Poitiers nor the postulated wasting of northern Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire and eastern Hertfordshire. But it has been said that *Beorh-hamstede* obviously refers to the greater rather than the smaller place, and that William of Poitiers' word must not be taken in too literal a sense. The evidence of the chronicles, which might have thrown light upon the distribution of the depreciated valuations, has instead left room for speculation. We can only venture the opinion that the importance of Great Berkhamsted certainly suggests an almost overwhelming probability that this is the place intended.'

It is unfortunate that no clear-cut decision can be given, but identical place-names are often troublesome to historians, and it is rare for a Great and a Little to be so far apart as the two Berkhamsteds.

REBELLIOUS ABBOT

J. W. Cobb, when he wrote his 'History of Berkhamsted' over 100 years ago, was well aware of the 'curious and often contradictory incidents related by the old chroniclers.' He refers to the 'fair words and promises' passed on both sides before the Conqueror left Berkhamsted for his coronation at Westminster on Christmas Day, 1066, and adds:

'Much disaffection still remained throughout the land, and in this county Frederick the Abbot of St. Albans was found daring enough to oppose the claims of the newly-made king. William seems to have resolved to proceed to St. Albans after his coronation, but the abbot is stated to have rendered an approach impossible, by causing trees to be felled and placed across the highways. William, therefore, disappointed of his visit, came again to his old quarters at Berkhamsted, and invited Frederick to an amicable meeting . . .

'Angry words soon passed between Frederick and the monarch, the abbot declaring that if all the clergy had manifested the same spirit as himself the Conqueror would never have set foot in England, and William, on the other hand, uttering such severe threats in reply that the abbot's voluntary withdrawal from St. Albans to the Isle of Ely was the immediate consequence.'

PAGEANT MEMORIES

If you saw the historical pageants of 1922 and 1931, you will not need reminding that the '1066' scene was one of high drama. Burgesses, farmers, women and children sought refuge from the Normans who had 'fired thatch and walls of pine.'

The godless horsemen, sword and torch in hand,

Ride round the town, and cry like fiends of hell.

I heard them laugh. All is to them a jest, Berchehamstede is burnt down.

So cried a Saxon refugee. And then, to the sound of horn and trumpet, William the Conqueror made a majestic entrance to meet the Saxon bishops and magnates.

It was a splendid scene, and I look forward to William's re-entrance in 1966.

'BEORCHAM'

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