

Heroes of Maldon by D. Cummings

Smoke and flames spewed up into the morning sky as Brihtnoth, the Eardorman of Essex, along with his forces, looked over the ruined town on the Gipping. Undefended and overwhelmed by the Viking marauders Brihtnoth's army was only a few hours too late to save Ipswich, but following the course of the long ships, 93 in all, along the coast with lookouts in high wooden towers.

The long ships entered the Panta (river blackwater) and made camp on Northey Island. Brihtnoth gathered the local militia along with peasants, farmers and anyone who could wield a weapon. Infact lads using slingshots came forward to help defend against the most feared furies of hell.

The key to the imminent battle was the causeway from Northey Island to the mainland and Brihtnoth gathered his troops in defence of the causeway and surrounding area.

It was at this stage that the Viking messenger made his demands to Brihtnoth "Send quickly rings for your safety; It is better you buy off with tribute this storm of spears, "we will establish a truce with that gold". Brihtnoth, a tall man of 60 years experience and still a hot headed version of his younger self, replied with "We will give you darts for tribute, poisonous spears and ancient swords to send you back to hell from whence you came".

The Vikings, not used to being stood up in this manner, and equally as hotheaded, had to wait for the tide to give way allowing the causeway to be uncovered. Charging forward they were met by three Saxon warriors, Wulfstan, well versed in warfare, Aelfhere and Maccus. They stood shoulder to shoulder and slaughtered many Vikings in hand-to-hand combat.

The sea raiders, seeing the defence was formidable, withdrew to the island along with cheers from the Saxon defenders. The Vikings called across again challenging the Saxons to fight like true warriors-in the open. This was too much for Brihtnoth who formed the traditional Saxon shield wall and thus allowing the most awesome force of 5,000 men to swarm across the causeway and group together ready to attack our brave hearts. Berserkers, wearing practically nothing but shield and sword, painted in vivid colours of gruesome beasts, ran forward taunting and mooning at the Saxon force, with no fear of death, indeed they looked forward to it. The Vikings charged forward to crush the Saxon wall. Arrows fell from the sky, spears plunged through armour defence and both Viking and Saxon fell. After what seemed like an eternity the Vikings withdrew to re-group and the Saxons stood proud in the knowledge that they could win the day.

The Vikings knew they were up against not just physical strength, but a battle spirit of defiance and bravery never before encountered. Battle weary Viking warriors tried to destroy the Saxon shield wall and then the turning point came when Brihtnoth was wounded.

With the fall of Brihtnoth some Saxons deserted the field, which was then led by Godric who mounted Brihtnoth's horse and rode to the forest (the coward). Now Godric was held in low esteem but unfortunately was mistaken for Brihtnoth and many untested broke the shield wall, fleeing into the safety of the forest.

Realising the end was near, seasoned officers such as Offa, Dunhere, Eadward and Aethelric, with many others, rushed forward into the fray killing as many as they could before dying themselves.

The battle came to a rest for a brief moment. With the Vikings saluting the bravery of the Saxon hearts. "You have fought well, tribute has been paid by those that are dead". "You may leave the field in peace".

The Saxon poet Wulfnoth was instructed to leave so as to tell the story of the brave warriors who stood against the sea devils. He reluctantly left and watched from the hill top as his comrades refused to yield and to the very end Oswald and Ealdwold, brothers in blood and soul, held the line along with their remaining kinsman until the battlefield was still.

The ancient script tells us today the Vikings barely had enough men to man their long ships. The men of Essex never paid their tribute to the Vikings. It was not so in other parts of the country where Danegeld was met in full.

So when you travel down the A12 and see the sign post to Maldon, think of the bravest heroes of the Saxon world and salute them for they are the heroes of Maldon.