

The Battle of Benfleet

Who were the Vikings?

From about 700C.E. many Vikings left their homes in Norway, Sweden and Denmark and travelled to other countries, like Britain and Ireland.

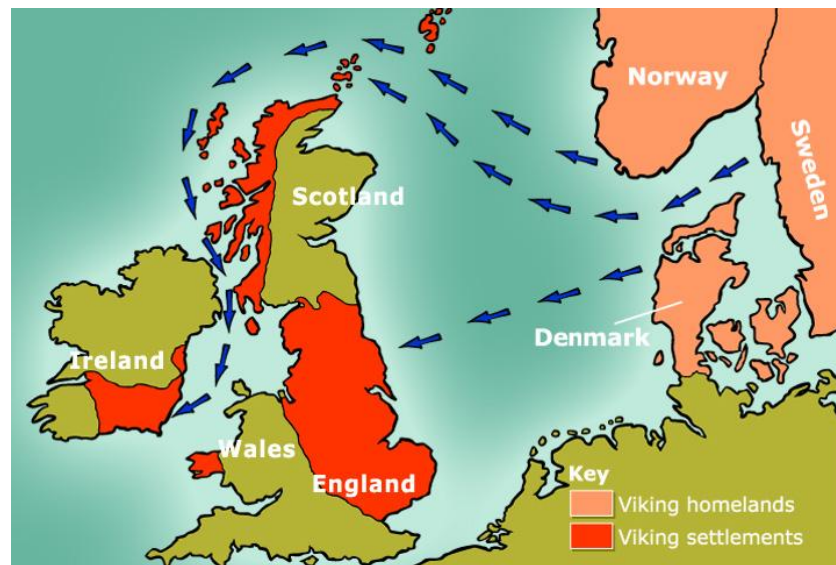
They travelled by longships and sailed the seas trading goods. They bought silver, silks, spices, wine, jewellery, glass and pottery to bring back home.



The word 'Viking' means 'a raid'. People who went off raiding in ships were said to be 'going Viking'. But not all the Vikings were bloodthirsty warriors. Some came to raid, but others came to settle.

The first Viking raid recorded was around 787C.E. It was the start of a fierce struggle between the Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings.

In 865C.E. an army of Vikings sailed across the North Sea. This time they wanted to conquer land rather than just raid it.



They fought through northern England and took control of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of Northumbria, East Anglia and most of Mercia. By 878CE, almost all the kingdoms had fallen to the Vikings except for Wessex, which was ruled by Alfred the Great. King Alfred beat the Viking army in battle but couldn't drive the Vikings out of Britain.

How do we know the Vikings were in this area?

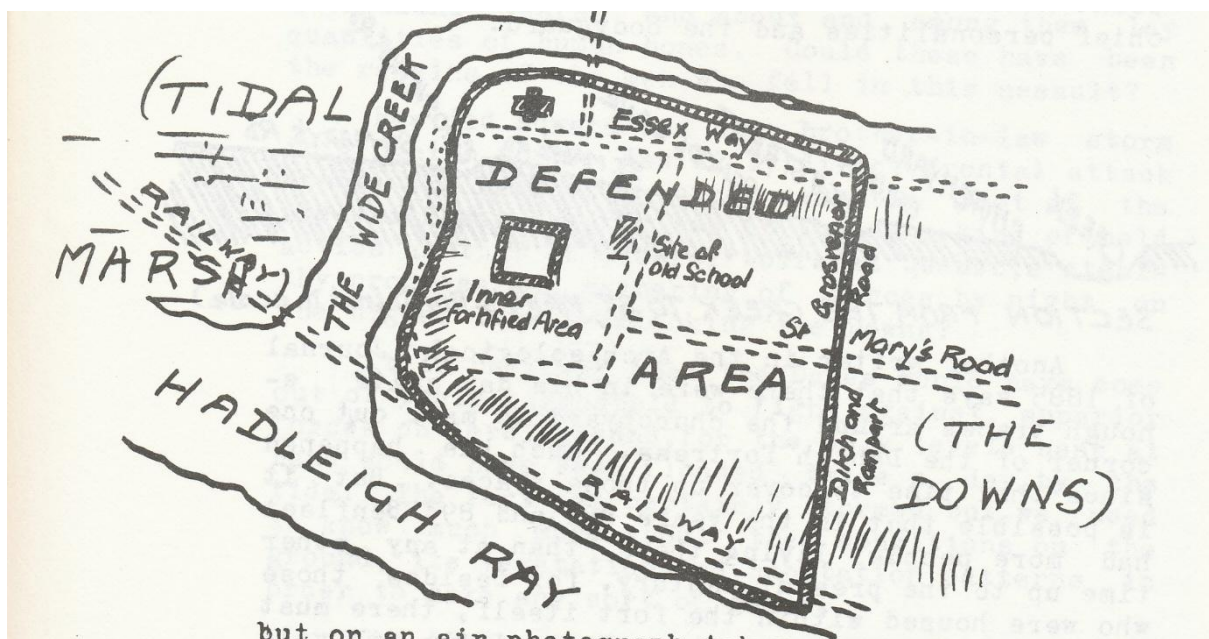
The areas of Britain the Vikings controlled was called the Danelaw. Viking families came to settle on these lands. There wasn't much good farmland in the Vikings' own countries, and they were looking for a better life.



This map shows the area covered by Danelaw and you can see it includes Essex.

The Thames Estuary and access to the sea made this part of the county a good place to settle and a small Danish community was established at Benfleet which would have acted as a retreat and 'repair shop' dominated by a fort built by a Viking leader named Haesten.

Benfleet was perfect, it could only be reached by a narrow strip of land and, because the creek came much further inland then, was surrounded on all other sides by water. There were woods, water and everything else needed to support a community and supply the timber needed for ship repairs.



This map shows where the fort would have been.

The Battle



Haesten in Italy around 859

In 892C.E. Haesten had been unsuccessful in his attempts to conquer land in France and had decided to attempt to raid and take land in the South of England where he hoped for support from Vikings who were already there.

Haesten had brought two armies from France planning to unite them in Kent and take lands here. However, Alfred the Great, the king of Wessex placed his armies to keep them apart, so he couldn't carry out his plan.



Statue of King Alfred the Great

The Viking armies, surrounded by the Saxons, were forced to agree terms with Alfred. They crossed the Thames and made for Benfleet.

Those who got back to Benfleet, exhausted from fighting and marching, and having lost most of their equipment, were probably only a fraction of the original number, some of whom had been killed and others who deserted to join their friends elsewhere in the Danelaw.

Haesten, in need of supplies, had taken his force on a plundering expedition, leaving Benfleet manned by a garrison to guard the women and children, including his own wife and family, and with only around eighty of the two hundred ships he had brought from France.

Alfred's son, Edward, and his son in law, Ethelred of Mercia, gathered their army in London. The morale of the English force was high; they were at the peak of their strength. They knew the Danish survivors were weakened by their recent defeats.



Edward son of Alfred the Great

London to Benfleet was around thirty miles. At that time, apart from the well-trodden road through Ilford, Romford, Brentwood, Billericay and Wickford, the country was difficult to cross because of thick forest and marshland.

This was to their advantage as it allowed them to launch a surprise attack. The woods around North Benfleet, Hadleigh and Thundersley and the desolate fens along the river Thames provided good cover.



Their tactics were successful, and the garrison was taken totally unawares. Edwards's army stormed the fort, burnt their longships in the creek and took the women and children to London, including Haesten's family.

The Danes who survived fled further up the estuary and set up another fortified camp at Shoebury.

Very little evidence remains of the fort or the battle but in 1855 when the London, Tilbury and Southend railway line was being built, they came across fragments of burnt ship's timbers and some human bones, the remains of those who fell in the battle, that had been buried for almost a thousand years.

The Battle of Benfleet was important because at the end of thirty years of war it marked "the beginning of the end" for the Danes. Alfred died five years later but the pressure on the enemy was kept up by his son Edward from London and by his son-in-law Ethelred from the West Midlands.

Not a huge battle then, but when added to the whole campaign it was a turning point for the Saxons, who went on to reclaim the whole country by 917C.E. followed by fifty years of peace.



A plaque on the wall near the site of the battle



Two sculptures created by a Benfleet artist in 2007 were placed near the site of the fort to commemorate the battle.