A Circular Walk to the site of The Battle of Maldon from Maldon Town Centre

Map
OS 1:50,000 Landranger map 168 (Colchester & The River Blackwater) or OS 1:25,000 Pathfinder map 176 (Blackwater Estuary)

Car Park
High Street East (see map).

Length of Walk
3 - 4 miles - allow 1½ hours.

Northey Island
An extensive area of salt marsh behind old breached sea walls, the island combines farming and nature conservation. It is managed by the National Trust.
Visits to the island may be made by prior arrangements with the resident Warden. Tel. (01621) 863142.

The Route
From the recommended car park, turn left and walk down the High Street. Take the 3rd left, Church Street, and go past St. Mary's Church, with its distinctive white spire which has been a navigational aid and landmark for sailors through the centuries.

On reaching the Thye Quay, part of the old port of Maldon, you may see one of the Thames Sailing Barges, originally used for transporting cargo but now used for charter trips.

Turn right and walk next to the river into Promenade Park. Stroll along beside the river then, after the 2nd lane, the smaller of the 2, turn right. Keep Maldon Yacht Club on your left, walk along following the line of trees.

Leave the avenue of trees and the Park and cross the driveway to the Yacht Club to join the sea wall path; after a short distance a wire fence will be to your right.

Stay on the sea wall, keeping close to the river, for about a mile until you reach the 2nd site with a "MMW" (Maldon Millennium Way) waymark sign on it. (map ref. 866057)

To the left is the causeway to Northey Island, visible for two hours either side of low water. Standing on the landward side of the causeway, it is not difficult to imagine that this was the scene of the Battle of Maldon in mid-August AD 991.

Turn right from the sea wall onto a gravel track. The plaque on a gate commemorating the Battle can be seen a few yards further on, on the right. Follow the track past South House Farm and turn right onto the edge of a field (map ref. 866055) signed with a "MMW" waymark.

Follow the edge of the field and at the end turn right and then left to follow the fence of Maldon Town Football Club to a stile. Once over the stile, cross the road, and turn right along the pavement.

Walk along the road, passing the Blackwater Leisure Centre. Then, after 200 yards, turn right through the gates of the Promenade Park.

Follow the driveway, then bear left round the edge of the playing field. Continue until you arrive at the marine lake. Retrace your earlier route to Thye Quay, and from there, back to town.

MMW - Maldon Millennium Way is a 22 mile way-marked walk set up in 1991 as part of the 1000th anniversary celebrations of the Battle of Maldon.

Other walks leaflets:
To further explore the 'watery' side of Maldon on foot, ask for the leaflet MALDON MARITIME TRAIL.
To explore the town, ask for the MALDON TOWN TRAIL.
The leaflets THE BLACKWATER TRAIL and DENGIE COASTAL AREA offer walking around other parts of the estuary.

These and other leaflets and information about the area are available from the Maldon District Tourist Information Centre.
Tel 01621 866503 (24hr answerphone)
E mail tic@maldon.gov.uk
Website www.maldon.gov.uk

Open all year:
Monday - Saturday 10.00am - 4.00pm
(Saturdays in Winter 10.00am - 1.30pm)

This guide has been produced to raise awareness and interest in the Battle of Maldon in AD 991. It outlines the circumstances at that time and gives information about the Battle itself. A circular walk to the Battle site is also given.
Introduction

In the 9th and 10th century, the increasing prosperity of East Anglia began to attract the attention of the Vikings (also called Danes or Norsemen) who, in their efficient longships, were coming down from Scandinavia to rob and pillage along England's eastern seaboard. Many raids were made by the Norsemen, but the one at Maldon in AD 991 was one of the largest; the Saxons decided that here they must stand and fight.

The story of the Battle is recorded in detail in an epic Saxon poem, considered to be one of the finest pieces of early English literature.

The accepted site of the Battle, which has probably changed little since AD 991, is the oldest recorded in the English Heritage register of battlefields.

It was not long before the menacing sight of a large Viking fleet appeared in the Blackwater estuary, commanded by Olaf Tryggvason, already famed for his military exploits and soon to take the throne of Norway. The ships beached on the far side of Northey Island which offered a safe anchorage and means of rapid retreat.

The news of the Viking arrival spurred the waiting Byrhtnoth into action. He marshalled his men on the opposite side of the island and confronted the foe. There could be no immediate battle. The tide was high and swirled across the causeway that linked the island to the mainland. Byrhtnoth drew up, his men in battle order, giving them advice and encouragement, and then took his place among his household warriors. A Viking spoke from among the warring parties, offering peace in return for gold. Byrhtnoth's voice rang out promising not gold but spears. Some men were struck down by arrows as the two sides stood facing each other, tense and expectant, waiting for the tide to ebb. When it did so sufficiently for the first Viking to attempt to cross the causeway, he was struck down and killed by Wulfstan who, with two other warriors, barred the way. Thrashed by the Saxons for认定 that the causeway, the Vikings began to plead to cross in order to give battle.

Byrhtnoth, confident that he could deal the Vikings such a blow that they would flee the land, cleared the causeway for them to cross. The savage foe waded across and formed up in battle array.

Byrhtnoth rode back and forth along the lines of his men exhorting them to stand firm before the coming onslaught. Then came the swirl of swift, sharp spears seeking the flesh of adversaries. As blood began to flow the Vikings with swords unshathed rushed forward to clash with Byrhtnoth's valiant men in fierce and bloody conflict.

Wulfstan, Byrhtnoth's nephew, fell early in the battle, but for a time the Saxons more than held their own. Byrhtnoth was clearly the object of the Vikings' fury, and after suffering several wounds his sword fell from his hand and he sank into the arms of two warriors. As he lifted up his eyes and his voice, commending his soul to the mercy of God, he was finally slain. The turning point of the battle had come. Godric, to whom Byrhtnoth had shown favour, seized his lord's horse and fled the battlefield. He was followed by others who chose dishonour rather than loyalty to their fallen leader. Some however, were determined to fight to on averge their dead lord. Invoking the name of Byrhtnoth and their unshakeable allegiance, they took up the fight with renewed vigour. One man fell, but another rose, until, deft to the last, they yielded victory to the Viking foe.

The triumphant enemy hewed off the head of Byrhtnoth and departed from the corpse strewn battlefield. Later, monks from Ely took the body of Byrhtnoth and buried it in their great cathedral.

The Battle

The early days of August, in the year AD 991, the people of Maldon and its surrounding district must have heard with foreboding the news of the Vikings ravaging the coastal towns of the South East. Perhaps they drew comfort from the thought that the venerable earldorman of Essex, Byrhtnoth, had quickly gathered together the East Saxons leves and was preparing to defend their homeland.

The Battle of Maldon in AD 991 would have received little attention had it not been the inspiration for the celebrated poem on the subject. The poem as a work of fiction has received a great deal of attention from scholars of Anglo-Saxon literature.

The historical existence of some of the participants named in the poem has been supported by evidence elsewhere and the poet's acquaintance with them suggests an early date for the composition. Furthermore, it has been shown that the spelling of Byrhtnoth's name underwent a permanent change quite early in the 11th century and the poem uses the original form. The likelihood, therefore, that the poem was composed shortly after the battle, enhances its value as an historical source. It seems reasonable to accept the general accuracy of the poet's account of the defence of the ford or causeway and Byrhtnoth's decision to allow the Vikings across. It is also plausible that the Vikings would choose an island as a base for an attack on Maldon.

Much has been written about the battle tactics of Byrhtnoth. In particular, his decision to allow the Vikings to cross the causeway onto the mainland has been exhaustively discussed, both from the literary point of view as to the exact meaning of the poet's words in relation to that decision, and also whether it could be justified on military grounds. The words the poet uses to comment on Byrhtnoth's decision have been variously interpreted as meaning "over confidence", "arrogance", "excessive pride" and "courageous". Commentators have generally preferred the critical interpretation. The poet, like the historian, had the benefit of hindsight. Byrhtnoth clearly made the wrong decision for the wrong reason because he lost. However, a good case can be made for Byrhtnoth. Although it appears the Vikings could have been prevented from landing by continued defence of the causeway, Byrhtnoth would, one assumes, have been well aware that they would have sailed round to demoralise other regions.

A decisive defeat of the enemy was only possible there and then if the Vikings could be brought to battle. Such a victory might have altered the course of the war by reversing the series of defeats suffered by the Saxons. Ultimately, Byrhtnoth's actions can only sensibly be judged on the basis of military calculation as to whether or not his forces were likely to defeat the Vikings.

It has to be said that realistically, there is little chance of discovering any further evidence which will clarify the events that made Maldon, briefly, a place of national importance. However it is one of the fascinations of history that certainties are always in danger of being overthrown.

Byrhtnoth, Earlorman of Essex

Byrhtnoth must be one of the few military commanders whose name rests on defeat rather than victory. Without that defeat he might have remained an obscure footnote to the history of the period. It is probable that he was born about the year AD 930. To suggest a much earlier date would make his age at the battle impossibly old. To make it later would have made him somewhat too young for marriage with Aelfthryth, a daughter of Aelfgar, earlorman of Essex. Aelfgar in his will refers to Byrhtnoth as his son-in-law. Aelfgar's other daughter, Aethelhryth, was married to King Edmund, and so it is clear that Byrhtnoth must have been a man of some standing, even, perhaps claiming descent from the Mercian royal house.

He became earlorman of Essex, probably in the year AD 956, because it was in this year he first signed documents in that position. The defeat and death of Byrhtnoth at the Battle of Maldon must have been, not only a severe military setback, but a psychological one as well. It may have well seemed that payments to the Vikings to prevent invasion, (Gnægode), was the only alternative.

This account and analysis of the Battle of Maldon has been abridged by Ken Cook from a chapter by Derek Parnell in 'MAELDUNE' published by Maldon Archaeological Group.

Further information about the Battle

The 42ft long Maldon Embroidery, created for the millennium of the Battle, is on permanent display in the Maldon Heritage Centre. It depicts the ford and 1000 years of Maldon's history. A book, 'The Battle of Maldon', by Bill Griffiths (published by Anglo Saxon Books) contains the original text of the poem and a translation into modern English. It is available in Maldon.

The Battlefields Trust has published a paper on the Battle of Maldon, price £2.00. It is available from the Trust, Tel: 01505 655145. There is a local project to raise a statue to Byrhtnoth.

Visiting the Battle Site

The accepted site of the Battle of Maldon in AD 991, where the causeway to Northey Island meets the mainland, is only accessible on foot.

A pleasant way to approach the site is to walk along the sea wall from Maldon (see walking route and map).

The site is also accessible from Munford Road by walking down the footpath (a public footpath) to South House Farm, passing the house, and continuing along the footpath (see map). Park with care on Munford Road.

The site of the Battle is marked only by a small plaque, placed at the site by English Heritage. The plaque is on a field gate on the landward side of the sea wall where the sea wall meets the causeway to Northey Island.