**Battle of Carham People**

**The Northumbrians**

**Cnut**

****

Cnut – unknown artist 14th century

We should start with the English king – who was Danish! It's King Canute, known to generations of schoolchildren who learned that he sat in a chair and commanded the waves to recede to show his power. Except that he didn't. The episode is recorded in a medieval chronicle but, if it happened at all, his point was to show that he couldn't command the waves - he was either showing that only God had that sort of power or he was rebuking his courtiers for overstating his power. These days we call him by his proper name, Cnut.

Cnut grew up at a time when the crown of England was being ferociously fought over by the Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings. In 1013, Cnut and his father, Svein Forkbeard, invaded England and deposed the king, Æthelred ‘The Unready’. (Technically, the translation of his name means 'Ill Advised' but 'Unready' has passed into common use). Svein was proclaimed as king, but he died just a few months later on 3 February 1014. The English nobles then invited Æthelred to return to the throne.

Upon learning of his father’s death, Cnut began planning an invasion of England to take the crown for himself. In 1015, Æthelred’s health deteriorated and England became divided over who should succeed the throne if he were to die. Some parts of the country allied with Cnut and the Vikings, while others showed support for Æthelred’s son, Edmund Ironside.

Following Æthelred’s death in April 1016, war broke out across southern England between Cnut and Edmund. After months of warfare, Edmund died on 30 November 1016, most probably after sustaining battle wounds. Cnut was now the undisputed successor to the English throne, and he was crowned at the Old St Paul’s cathedral in January 1017. Thus, for a while England was part of a Danish North Sea Empire.

But like all successful medieval kings, Cnut was ruthless in protecting his position. In order to secure his position as king of England, Cnut married Æthelred’s widow, Emma of Normandy, in 1017. He also had any remaining enemies killed, and he exiled members of Æthelred’s family who were possible threats to his position on the throne.

Amongst those who met this fate was Uhtred the Bold, the son of Waltheof I, ealdorman of Bamburgh. See below for more about Uhtred and how this affects the battle of Carham.

Cnut remained king until his death in 1035. Although his reign was brief, the legacy of King Cnut was considerable. He was the first king who had managed to unite not just the warring elements of England, but also to ally the country with Scandinavia. Under his stewardship, the arts flourished and people enjoyed a period of peace for the first time, literally, in ages. The concept of individual justice was introduced, and trade boomed.

**Uhtred the Bold**

We must stress that the real Uhtred has nothing to do with Bernard Cornwell’s fictional character in ‘The Last Kingdom’! There is no reliable image of Uhtred.

Uhtred, called the Bold, was the ealdorman of all Northumbria from 1006 to 1016, when he was assassinated. He was the son of Waltheof I, ealdorman of Bamburgh, whose ancient family had ruled from the castle of Bamburgh on the Northumbrian coast.

In 995, according to Symeon of Durham, when the remains of St Cuthbert were transferred from Chester-le-Street to Durham, Uhtred went to Durham with the monks to clear the site of the new cathedral. The new cathedral was founded by Bishop Aldhun, and Uhtred married Aldhun's daughter, Ecgfrida, probably at about this time. From his marriage he received several estates that had belonged to the church.

In 1006 Malcolm II of Scotland invaded Northumbria and besieged the newly founded episcopal city of Durham. At that time the Danes were raiding southern England and King Æthelred was unable to send help to the Northumbrians. Ealdorman Waltheof was too old to fight and remained in his castle at Bamburgh. Ealdorman Ælfhelm of York also took no action. Uhtred, acting for his father, called together an army from Bernicia and Yorkshire and led it against the Scots. The result was a decisive victory for Uhtred. Local women washed the severed heads of the Scots, receiving a payment of a cow for each, and the heads were fixed on stakes to Durham's walls. Uhtred was rewarded by King Æthelred with the ealdormanry of Bamburgh even though his father was still alive. In the meantime, Æthelred had Ealdorman Ælfhelm of York murdered, and he allowed Uhtred to succeed Ælfhelm as ealdorman of York, thus uniting northern and southern Northumbria under the house of Bamburgh. It seems likely that Æthelred did not trust the Scandinavian population of southern Northumbria and wanted an Anglo-Saxon in power there.

After receiving these honours Uhtred dismissed his wife, Ecgfrida, and married Sige, daughter of Styr, a rich citizen of York. It appears that Uhtred was trying to make political allies amongst the Danes. Through Sige, Uhtred had two children, Eadulf, later Eadulf III, and Gospatric.

When King Sweyn Forkbeard invaded England in 1013 Uhtred submitted to him there, as did all of the Danes in the north. In the winter of 1013 Æthelred was forced into exile in Normandy. After London had finally submitted to him, Sweyn was accepted as king by Christmas 1013. However he only reigned for five weeks, for he died at, or near, Gainsborough on 2 February 1014. At Sweyn’s death, Æthelred was able to return from exile and resume his reign. Uhtred, along with many others, transferred his allegiance back to Æthelred, on his return. Uhtred also married Æthelred’s daughter Ælfgifu about this time.

In 1016 Uhtred campaigned with Æthelred's son Edmund Ironside in Cheshire and the surrounding shires. While Uhtred was away from his lands, Sweyn's son, Cnut, invaded Yorkshire. Cnut's forces were too strong for Uhtred to fight, and so Uhtred did homage to him as King of England. Uhtred was summoned to a meeting with Cnut, and on the way there, he and forty of his men were murdered by Thurbrand the Hold, with assistance from Uhtred's own servant, Wighill and with the connivance of Cnut. Uhtred was succeeded in Bernicia by his brother Eadwulf Cudel. Cnut made the Norwegian, Eric of Hlathir, ealdorman ("earl" in Scandinavian terms) in southern Northumbria.

Uhtred is often said to have led the Northumbrians at Carham but if the date of his death is correct then he could not have taken part at Carham in 1018. We are reasonably confident of the date of the battle but the date of Uhtred’s death is ambiguous in the sources and this demonstrates the problems faced by historians in dealing with such early events with very limited contemporary material to guide them.

**Cudel**

There is no reliable image of Cudel.

In the absence of Uhtred it is probable that the Northumbrians at Carham were led by his considerably less dynamic brother Eadwulf Cudel. 'Cudel' means cuttlefish and is not meant as a compliment. The cuttlefish reacts to danger by emitting a cloud of ink and swimming away very quickly. Symeon of Durham described him as 'a very lazy and cowardly man'. Little is known about him apart from losing at Carham and ceding Lothian to the Scots (who probably already controlled it in truth). He is said to have died in the 1020s.

**The Scots**

**Malcom II**

**A person in a dark room

Description automatically generated**

Malcolm II – by a Dutch painter 17th century

The Scots were led at Carham by Malcolm II. When Malcolm II (Máel Coluim mac Cináeda) came to power Scotland was still divided into separate kingdoms. The kings of Strathclyde ruled expanses of the south-west, the Mormaer of Moray controlled territories around the Great Glen, while most of the west coast and Hebrides were still in the grip of Norse and Gaelic rulers. Malcolm seized control of the throne in 1005 after defeating and killing Kenneth III, his own cousin, at the battle of Monzievaird, near Crieff. This means of taking control was not unusual at the time. It is not unknown today.

Malcolm's rule (1005 - 1034 AD) was characterised by two major aims. Firstly he wanted to secure his family's right of succession to the throne. Secondly he desired to expand the territory of his kingdom. Malcolm II's rule started badly, with a loss in battle against the English near Durham in 1006 but he put this right later at Carham.

Following his inauguration as king, Malcolm set about eliminating possible claimants to the throne to give his own offspring a better chance of succession after his death. Malcolm's murderous scheme to remove rival claimants to the throne appeared to be successful as the succession of his grandson, Duncan, was unchallenged.

After the battle of Carham, Malcolm managed to tighten his grip on the Lothian area, effectively securing it as part of his realm. Malcolm II was thus successful in defending and expanding the realm of his power during his lifetime. However, after his death when the throne passed to his grandson Duncan, things did not go so well. After ruling for only 5 years Duncan was killed in battle at Pitgaveny, near Elgin, by Macbeth (Mac Bethad mac Findlaích). Centuries later this episode of Scottish history would inspire a certain William Shakespeare to write a play loosely based on the events.

**Owain the Bald**

There is no reliable image of Owain.

Of the various leaders at the battle of Carham the most splendid name belongs to Owain the Bald, king of Strathclyde. Strathclyde covered the area from Loch Lomond to the Celtic kingdom of Rheged (Penrith – map) at its peak. The history of this period is shrouded in mystery and little is known of Owain. He may have been a son of Máel Coluim, son of Dyfnwal ab Owain, two other rulers of the kingdom of Strathclyde. Although some historians believe that he died in the battle at Carham, no source states as much, and it is uncertain when he died.

Owain and his people weren’t Gaelic-speakers like their Scottish allies. They were known simply as ‘Britons’, and their language was basically a northern dialect of Welsh. It gave us place-names we still recognize today, such as Rhyn-frwd(Renfrew), Llanerch (Lanark) and Glasgu (Glasgow). But the people of the Clyde weren’t ‘Welsh’ in the sense of being ‘from Wales’. Even when their English enemies referred to them as ‘Strathclyde Welsh’, this simply meant that their speech sounded similar (in English ears) to the language of Wales. The Britons of Strathclyde belonged firmly to the North, just like the Scots. They called themselves ‘Britons’, but they also used another word:  Cumbri (‘Cumbrians’) which translates roughly as ‘fellow countrymen’.

This East / West language divide was at least as important as the North / South divide.