

Vikings in London: Alfred's Lundenburg

During the 9th and 10th centuries London suffered waves of attacks from Scandinavian raiders. Today we would call them Vikings, but during the period this group included a range of people from the Scandinavian countries of Sweden, Norway and Denmark, and were called Danes, 'Norsemen' and even the 'Heathen Army' by Anglo-Saxon writers.

Although infamous for attacking British towns and monasteries, they were also traders, farmers and settlers. Eventually they became the last group to successfully invade Britain in AD 1066 as the Normans (a shortened version of 'Norsemen').

However, although we have historical records confirming the Vikings attacked London in the 9th century and settled there during the Danelaw from the 10th century, it's often difficult to identify them from the archaeology uncovered across the city.

This pocket history explores what evidence does exist from the 9th-11th century, and what this tells us about the Vikings in London.

Why did the Vikings attack London?

Anglo-Saxon London, called Lundenwic, was an important trading town on the River Thames. Its centre now lies under Leicester Square and the Strand (the Anglo-Saxon word for 'beach'). This location along the river was chosen to be a hub for merchants and overseas traders.

It also sat at the boundary of three of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms; Mercia, Wessex and East Anglia, making it a major trading place on land as well as water.

It was this wealth that prompted the Vikings to attack. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles tell us that from the 830s onwards Lundenwic suffered assaults from Viking raids, plundering the wealth of the port. Lundenwic, like many Anglo-Saxon trading ports, was not walled and the buildings were wooden so it was vulnerable to attacks.

This mount was part of a drinking horn and was discovered during an excavation in Holborn. It was probably lost by a Viking celebrating a successful raid on Lundenwic, perhaps camped in the Holborn area. It's a rare example of Vikings in the area as their camps were temporary and little was left behind when they returned home.



A mount from the bottom of a drinking horn, mid-9th century

Mounts like this were popular in Norway

There is evidence that suggests Viking raiders were not just men, there might also have been female Vikings who attacked Lundenwic.

What impact did the raids have on London?

The raids made Lundenwic almost uninhabitable by the mid to late 9th century. By this time, Vikings were no longer just raiding the lands of Britain, they had begun to make winter camps to rest (known as 'overwintering'). Eventually Viking raiding parties banded together to invade parts of Britain under the rule of the Viking king Guthrum.

By the 880s almost all Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were under the control of the King Guthrum. Only the Kingdom of Wessex, under King Alfred, remained free. King Alfred fought back, and set up a system of defensive forts, called 'burhs'. These burhs used the land and existing structures to create defensible vantage points.



Coin with the inscription 'Aelfred Rex', c. 880

Alfred set up two burhs in the London area; one within the still-standing 700-year-old stone walls of the Roman city, and another in Southwark protecting London Bridge. The city burh became Lundenburg. It was one of the jewels of the burh system, and Alfred had a new town built inside it so that the important trading activities would be protected. People began to resettle in the new London 'burh' as early as AD 880-90.

This silver penny is from c. 880, around the time Alfred recaptured London from part of the 'Great Heathen Army' who had wintered within the walls. The minting of coins celebrated that Alfred controlled and protected London and all the wealth that went with it, establishing his 'burh' there as a stronghold for defence. The coin names him 'Aelfred Rex', meaning King Alfred in Latin.

'Burh' is the Anglo-Saxon word for a fortified settlement. King Alfred's network of 'burhs' helped defend against Viking raiders.

What did Lundenburg look like?

By the 10th century, Lundenburg had become a major town. The buildings were built of wood with shallow foundations. None survive standing today but postholes, some timbers and artefacts associated with them, survived underground. This fragile evidence makes it difficult to know exactly what was happening where in Lundenburg, however we have tantalising glimpses.



This is an oak post carved from a single tree. It was once part of a large building that stood in Lundenburg.

Judging from floorplans discovered, the buildings would probably have been a mix of small workshops and houses, with grander buildings for the wealthier people in the town. The size and use of buildings would have varied, often with shops at the front and living areas at the back.

This large piece of timber is an amazing archaeological find. It would have been used in a huge building from around AD 956-79. The building would have been at least 11 metres tall (that's over twice the height of a London bus!). It was possibly a large hall or a church. The timber survived because it was then reused as a support for a riverside wall.

What was life like in Lundenburg?



A Saxon bone comb showing great craftsmanship

Lundenburg was full of houses, shops, markets and workshops. Daily life would have centred on trade and crafts like woodworking, cloth making, metalworking and boneworking. Near the river Lundenburg would have buzzed with activity as boats were unloaded and loaded with traded goods.

This comb was probably made by a Lundenburg craftsman and used by a resident. The beautiful decoration of this comb shows the artisan's skill and the tastes of the residents.

Did Vikings live in Lundenburg?

King Alfred defeated King Guthrum in AD 878, which started a fragile period of peace. The area north of Lundenburg was ruled by the Danes, and was called the Danelaw. Many Danes and Norsemen settled in the Danelaw and in the trading towns of Britain, like Lundenburg, under this unsteady peace.

However the archaeological evidence for Vikings living in Lundenburg is sparse and difficult to interpret. The fact that by this stage, the Viking lifestyle would have been very similar to that of the Anglo-Saxons makes it difficult to identify archaeological evidence for Vikings living there. Their dress and livelihoods would have appeared much the same. Even their religion was the same. Part of the peace treaty meant King Guthrum and his army had to convert to Christianity. There is currently no evidence that Viking gods like Thor, Loki and Freya were worshipped in Lundenburg.



A 'Ringerike' style runestone, early 11th century

This runestone is a key piece of evidence that Vikings settled in Lundenburg and made it their home. It is a grave slab that was found in the St Paul's area of the city and is carved in the Norse 'Ringerike' style with a lion fighting a serpent. Around the edge are Viking runes, which translate as 'Ginna and Toki had this stone laid'. This rare find shows that Viking traditions and customs occasionally continued within a broader Anglo-Saxon way of life.

The stone above was found just outside St Paul's Cathedral and probably marked the grave of a follower of the Danish king Cnut, who ruled England from 1016 to 1035.

What happened to Lundenburg?

By 889, King Alfred's Lundenburg had been established as a trading harbour and market. The old Roman walls and fortifications, including London Bridge, were restored and new street grid systems and houses with plots of land attached for rearing animals were established. Lundenburg became more and more important as a centre for trade, but also as a centre of government. By the end of the 10th century it was the favoured capital of the Anglo-Saxon kings.

The Vikings soon resumed their regular attacks, this time under the direction of Swein Forkbeard of Denmark and between the end of the 10th century and 1066, the control of Lundenburg passed between Danish and Anglo-Saxon rule. Despite this, Lundenburg continued to be a hub of bustling trade.

Archaeological finds from the period continue to show Scandinavian influence in the lives of Londoners. By the end of the Anglo-Saxon period, and the beginning of Norman reign in 1066, Lundenburg had become a real mixture of cultures, laying the foundation for Norman London and the London of the future.

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