



THE BATTLE OF MALDON

Millennium Re-enactment – 10th/11th August 1991

by Paul Vernon Lydiate of *The Vikings*

*In this year came Anlaf with 93 ships to Folkstone, and harried outside, and sailed thence to Sandwich, and thence to Ipswich, overrunning all the countryside, and so on to Maldon. Ealdorman Byrhtnoth came to meet them with his levies and fought them, but they slew the ealdorman there and had possession of the place of slaughter.*¹

Exactly One Thousand years later, to the very day, the clash of swords rang over this historic battlefield once more, in what is probably the most ambitious Dark Age re-enactment yet to be staged.

Although the Hastings re-enactment which Corridors of Time organised for English Heritage last year was bigger both in terms of audience and in the number of re-enactors taking part, at Maldon our brief was to provide two full days of Dark Age events – from 11am to 5pm – plus a further hour's entertainment each evening! Even more remarkable, the whole thing was organised in a mere 10 months by an amateur organisation (albeit with a professional approach) – **The Vikings**, aka The Norse Film & Pageant Society.

From the first it was clear that two things would be needed to successfully present a Dark Age event of the nature we envisaged: an established, large and well-disciplined re-enactment society with the manpower, resources and expertise necessary to undertake a project of this magnitude; and an active group 'on the

ground' able to accurately assess and report back on local conditions and react quickly to Society directives. The first we had already. The second was provided by the Colchester Historical Enactment Society (CHES), who initially sought our support with their own bid for the millennium re-enactment, then decided to join **The Vikings en block**. According to Keith Munnion, the Millennium Chairman, the success of our bid was due to our submitting a professional proposal at a somewhat less than professional price.

Filling the Programme

Obviously, the re-enactment of the battle itself would provide the climax to each day's events, but how to fill up the programme preceding the main battle without detracting from it or 'stealing its thunder'? Ideally, the audience should be teased along through the day with enough morsels to whet its appetite – but insufficient to satisfy it completely – so as to ensure the biggest crowd at the battle itself. The way we decided to do this was to stage three half hour presentations before the main event, consisting mainly of historical drama and pageantry rather than simulated combat, plus a couple of other related features – a falconry display and the arrival of some fully-manned Viking ship reconstructions.

The half-hour presentations were based

around the foundation of the *burh* at Maldon in the early 10th century; a possible interpretation of the events leading up to the battle; and an outline of the weaponry and armour of the period coupled with a drill display. Between them, these contained a stylised siege and battle, a brawl, battle training and a single combat, each giving a taste of what was to come without letting the magnificent spectacle of a full-blown Dark Age battle re-enactment out of the bag prematurely.

To keep the programme on track, despite the delays which invariably occur at events of this nature, a half-hour gap was purposely left between the key events mentioned above. These gaps were filled by the ongoing living history display based on a representation of Maldon Burh at the time of the battle, to which attention was purposely drawn at the end of each event.

Where the evenings were concerned, it was decided that an ideal way to round off the day would be to stage a performance of *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhtelm's Son*, a short play by J.R.R. Tolkien dealing with the aftermath of the battle, followed by a torchlit procession to the firesculpture of a Viking longship which we had commissioned for the event. On the Saturday the finale would be provided by an aerial firework display to the accompaniment of Wagner's *Ride of*

the *Valkyries* and on the Sunday by the torching of the firesculpture itself.

The biggest potential problem with an outdoor event such as this is that the proceedings are totally at the mercy of the weather. Consequently, as a final touch we arranged for a marquee-housed craft fair to be both present at the show and to contribute something towards the cost of staging it. The idea was later followed up by the Millennium Committee itself, who went on to let stall space in marquees of their own. I was particularly glad to be able to arrange a free space for *The Battlefields Trust*², which was founded earlier this year in an attempt to prevent what few verified battlefields we have left disappearing under concrete.

Arena Presentations – The Chosen Approach

Most of what we know about the Battle of Maldon comes from the Anglo-Saxon Heroic Poem of the same name, which tells how ealdorman Byrhtnoth goaded the Vikings into crossing the causeway from Northey Island to attack his forces and later let them all across to form up on the landward side. The battle seems to have been fairly evenly matched until 1) Byrhtnoth died, 2) a cowardly retainer named Godric escaped on Byrhtnoth's horse and 3) much of the Saxon force fled after him thinking it was the ealdorman himself. Byrhtnoth's hearthband decided to stay, however, and apparently died to a man avenging their lord's death in the heroic germanic tradition. It was obvious from the first that the poem, together with the two contemporary surviving sources, would form the basis of the script. But how best to get the story across to an audience weened on Hollywood and Television?

One of the things which most impressed me about the Corridors of Time presentation of Hastings last year was their use of the Public Address System. Rather than resort to the usual technique of having a narrator giving a commentary on the battle, they had two actors verbally taking on the roles of a Norman Knight and a Saxon peasant spearman, and alternated between the two throughout. This worked so well that, as I had access to two members of a mediaeval theatre group based in Durham, I decided to adopt it for *Prelude To The Battle* presentation and for the re-enactment of the Battle of Maldon itself. Consequently, Colin Clark took on the role of Ulf the Red, recorded as being Olaf Trygvasson's standard bearer at the battle of Svold in 1000 AD, whilst Gordon Bond became the voice of the author of the poem, whom I named Wulfnoth and made a bard in the following of Byrhtnoth – later to become a monk upon the death of his lord. As I intended to use a number of scene changes, however, especially in the *Prelude*, I also needed a narrator to speak to the audience in a 20th Century context – a post ably fulfilled by Dr Glenys Lloyd-Morgan, FSA. This meant, of course, that the narrators' script had to be written out fully, with little room for ad-libbing. In the event the script ran to over 20 closely-typed pages and, by the time I'd finished it and arranged the musical soundtrack I felt as though every one of Byrhtnoth's fol-



lowers was a close personal friend.

Another purpose of the script was to help control the action – each phase had a particular verbal cue for the unit commanders to familiarise themselves with. As a failsafe I took all those members of my own group of *The Vikings*, Rochdale Herred, through the script well before the event and arranged for at least one of them to accompany each unit, in case a cue was missed or the PA couldn't be clearly heard at some point. I'm told that they kept things from going badly off course on more than one occasion – especially Chris Hughes and Jeff Johnson who played Ulf the Red and Wulfnoth respectively 'on the field'. As a final resort, from my position in the PA caravan I could speed up/slow down or even cut sections of the script if necessary so as to keep the narration in sync with the action.

I wanted to avoid radio communication if at all possible due to the amount of educational filming which was bound to occur – I didn't want to be responsible for a generation of schoolchildren growing up to believe that the Vikings won at Maldon because they had more walkie-talkies than the Saxons!

Authentic Personnel

From the first, because of the unique nature of the Maldon Millennium re-enactment, it was decided to open it up to other Dark Age groups who requested to attend so long as they fulfilled certain criteria – their gear must be in line with the guide prepared for the show, they must agree to follow the directives of *The Vikings* at all times, and they must fight to our standards of safety for the duration of the event. Consequently, although we were only contracted to provide 200 warriors for the battle (which we could easily manage from our own members in a 'worst case' scenario), we actually fielded around 350 thanks to the support of Wolfguard, SCUM, Wychwood Warriors, MOLE, Volund's Sveiter, Northern Mercenaries, Dark Age Crafts, Danelaw Mercenaries, Valhalla Vikings and six groups from *Regia Anglorum*.

The authenticity of gear was especially

important at this show due to the amount of media coverage of one sort or another which could be expected – the credibility of Dark Age re-enactment in general, and that of *The Vikings* in particular, would be under the spotlight. One of the things which marred the video shot at Hastings last year, for example, was that virtually every shot of King Harold had some character wearing a badly made vendel helm (by then, 400 years out of date) in the foreground – this was the kind of anachronism I wanted to avoid. Consequently, the gear check held on the Saturday morning was very tough indeed. No individual was actually barred from taking part – only certain items of inappropriate gear (though admittedly in a couple of cases this would have entailed people going on virtually naked . . .). Most of the complaints received concerning the gear check centred upon the apparent inconsistencies, however, in that people saw gear identical to their own banned items on the field afterwards. There were three reasons for this: Russell Scott, the authenticity officer, was asked to go easier on helmets for reasons of safety about half way through the check; some individuals snuck their banned gear on with them rather than remove it as requested; and others didn't arrive until after the gear check, when we were all up to our eyes in keeping the show on the road.

Most people seemed to take it in good part, however. A new parody of *All Around My Hat* appeared over the weekend: . . . And if Russell should ask me The reason why I'm wearing it, It's MY bl**dy willow And it's MY bl**dy hat!

Falconry Display

The early section of the poem tells how 'Offa's kinsman' frees his hawk as a symbol that he is leaving the pleasures of peace behind and turning his thoughts to war. In order to recreate this we had to find a falconry display team amenable to the idea of letting one of our members, Sue Tatman, release one of their hawks from the arena before the battle commenced. *continued on page 27*

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We were very lucky to find one so close by – at Silver End, Essex. Lorraine Thomas and Paul of the Company of the Hawk came highly recommended by English Heritage, and their arena display proved to be superb.

Horses

We were less fortunate with the horses we needed for the show. The people we originally contacted raised all sorts of problems when we had less than a week to go: although we were originally promised between five and seven horses, now we were only going to get three; they refused to let Tony Sayer – an experienced rider who was to play Byrhtnoth – ride one of their horses; and maintained (in the teeth of written communication to the contrary) that they had only been engaged for the Saturday! Fortunately, I was able to contact a local equestrian family, the Carrs, who stepped in at impossibly short notice to save the day. The Carrs were an absolute pleasure to work with and enjoyed themselves so much that they asked for details of future events needing horses. The equestrian aspects of Sunday's shows went much more smoothly.

Viking Ships

The Viking ships we used were two of the Skuledev 3 replicas built by the York Archaeological Trust. The major cost in using these would be in transporting them from York to Maldon and back again, but fortunately a Maldon haulier, Alan Wiseman, offered to add them to the growing list of things he was transporting free for the Millennium.

Since I barely know one end of a ship from another and detailed lock knowledge of the Blackwater Estuary would be essential, all aspects of their handling and use were put into the capable hands of John Pullen-Appleby of CHES. It was decided that John would train the crews locally – initially on borrowed whalers then for a fortnight on the ships themselves – whilst the landing parties would be made up of volunteers from the rest of the Society.

The original idea was for the ships to arrive under oars and then for the landing parties to disembark and set fire to some mock-up fishermen's huts on the shore – specially constructed for the purpose by Tony Walmsley. When Dr E.W.H. Gifford – who subsequently joined the Society – arrived with the replica he had con-

structed of the Graveney Boat, he suggested that this could be used as the fishing boat which first brought news of the Vikings' arrival. This was duly incorporated into the programme.

Living History Display

It was decided that the setting for the living history display would be a representation of Maldon Burh at the time of the battle: a Saxon Hall, a few smaller wooden structures, and the tents of those who had fled from the Vikings to take shelter behind Maldon's stockade. Within it, the public would see a plethora of Dark Age crafts and domestic activities, in addition to being able to examine the gear of 'off-duty' warriors close up. As a final touch, the Rochdale, Manchester, Leeds and Durham groups would stage some tableaux outlining various aspects of the more peaceful side of life in the Dark Ages. The display as a whole would be organised by Jane Bensted, Living History Officer of **The Vikings**.

Responsibility for the building of the Saxon Hall was given to Mick Bensted, Cameron Stokes and Colin Owrid, together with their Canterbury, Tunbridge and Maidstone groups. In the event, the Hall Crew were the first to arrive and the last to leave – this 11m x 5m monster was constructed so that it could be taken down and used again at future shows.

The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth

According to J.R.R. Tolkien's *Tree and Leaf*, from which it was taken, this play had never before been performed, presumably because it needed a cast of 100+ bodies in addition to a group of chanting monks, three corpse robbers and the two main protagonists. So it was doubly appropriate that the premier performance should take place in the open air of the battlefield of Maldon, exactly 1,000 years after the events the play portrays. Colin Clark, playing Tidwald, and Gordon Bond, playing Torhthelm, were provided with small radio microphones and a Dark Age cart reconstructed by Mark Harrison, whilst three other members of the Durham group provided the corpse robbers. Our Vanaheim (Manchester) group kitted themselves out as monks but, according to the rest of the cast, playing a corpse was one of the most enjoyable parts of the weekend. Fortunately, the audience were too far away to hear the corpses singing 'Always Look On

The Bright Side Of Life' prior to the performance!

The Viking Funeral

For the finale of the weekend, immediately after the last performance of *The Homecoming*, a Viking funeral and ship-burning were planned along the same lines as those we've staged at the annual Largs Viking Festival for over 10 years – but on a bigger scale. The biggest 'ship' we could find at the most reasonable cost turned out to be a 15 metre firesculpture of a dragon ship constructed by Phil Bewes of Runcorn. Built on the edge of the arena, this also provided an impressive backdrop for all the weekend's presentations – before finally being put to the torch.

CHES provided a hundred torches for the procession, which consisted of around 250 men, women and children, all in appropriate costume. As the torchlit column slowly snaked its way across the arena to the monotonous beat of a bodran, the shoulder-borne whicker body in its midst, it was easy to imagine yourself back to the times of Byrhtnoth and Olaf, a thousand years ago. The column split to form a semi-circle around the ship; the body was placed on board; flames could be seen at two places under the ship; the torchbearers went forward and a hundred small flames joined the larger... For the first time in over a week I could relax.

The Proof of the Pudding

In the event, the weather was with us all the way: bright sunshine all day Saturday; dull but dry on Sunday until a spot of drizzle after the battle, followed by a beautiful sunset and a dry evening for the ship-burning. All the peripheral factors – stands, toilets, Public Address System and re-enactors' campsite adjacent to the show area – were of an extremely high standard too: the Millennium Committee, in particular Brian Larwill the 'Site Manager', had obviously done their homework.

Overall, things went remarkably smoothly – the few glitches manifesting themselves on the Saturday being more or less hammered out for the second day's performances. Apart from a few grumbles about the authenticity check, the only criticism I heard from a re-enactor was that she was getting tired of being pestered by film and TV crews, radio and newspaper journalists, photographers and so on – the ultimate accolade for a PR

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Officer! As for the rest, I've lost count of the number of people – both warriors and living history enthusiasts – who have told me that it was the best show they have ever been to and will set the standard for Dark Age Re-enactment in the future.

The audiences were very appreciative too – Gill and Sarah on the Society stall received more than 100 enquiries about membership over the weekend – and the TV and film people went away equally happy. The show proved to be a veritable treasurehouse of opportunity regarding show organisers and media people from which the Society will benefit for years to come. Finally, although the dull weather on Sunday seemed to put off some potential visitors, overall the Millennium Committee thought the weekend a great success.

There are one or two things I'd do differently if given the chance to stage the Maldon Millennium again but, as Kim Siddorn of Regia Anglorum said to me over the free beer we provided on Saturday night: 'The re-enactors are happy, the audience is happy and the clients are happy – what more could you want?'

One of the best things about the weekend was to see so many different re-enactment societies putting their differences behind them and working together so well. Most people seemed to be putting in 110%. I'd like to thank all of those who took part, particularly all those mentioned above, the unit commanders on the field (especially Ritchie Angove, who played Olaf Tryggvasson), Sandie Gillbanks (who marshalled the horses) and Dee Hanson the chauffeuse for helping to make the

event such a success. Finally, I'd like to thank my wife Penny, who had to put up with the preparations for as long as I did, and Chris Robinson, Chieftain of **The Vikings**. Chris had the hardest job of all – giving me a free hand to get on with the organisation knowing all the while that he'd end up carrying the can if things went wrong!

*This was a piece of living history – the re-enactment of an episode in Maldon's past which shaped the future of this ancient borough.*³

The Aftermath

The worst thing about organising a show on this scale is that it involves spending most of the time sitting in a PA cabin watching others do the things which attracted you to the hobby in the first place. I didn't get the chance to see the Viking ships all weekend, for example. Consequently, when I learned that they were being towed back to Mersea Island on the Monday, prior to being raised from the water for their trip back to Jorvik, I asked if there was room for a couple of passengers.

When Dee and I boarded the Astrid as she stood off from Heybridge Basin I was surprised to see that, in addition to John Pullen-Appleby and Neil (who would steer the ships during the tow), Mark Herb and Jon – again from CHES – were also aboard. 'Actually, the tow won't arrive for a couple of hours,' said John, 'so we thought we'd have a row. It'll need everybody at the oars mind...'

The CHES people had had access to the ships for a fortnight and had just spent two gruelling mornings rowing them for the

show – this morning they were rowing for me... So, I got to take a turn at the oars and the steering oar after all. Thanks lads – I really appreciated that. Let's do it all again soon!

1 Extract from the Everyman Classics translation of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* by G.N. Garmonsway.

2 Further details of *The Battlefield Trust* can be obtained from Kelvin Van Hasselt, 2 Winton Close, Solent Avenue, Lymington, HANTS, SO41 9SU, (United Kingdom). Tel: 0590-671533.

3 Extract from the *Evening Gazette*, Monday 12th August 1991.

If you have an interest in the Dark Ages, time to spare at weekends, and want to meet a host of new friends with a similar outlook, then write to Nigel Tate, Flat 2, 16 Magdala Road, Mapperley Park, Nottingham NG3 5DF without delay. Minimum age for full membership of **The Vikings** is 18, though the children of members are always welcome and a junior section for 16-17 year-olds has just been instituted.

Anyone wishing to engage **The Vikings** for shows, filming or other events should contact the Society Chieftain, Chris Robinson, at the above address (Tel: 0602-609046) or the Special Events Co-ordinator, P.V. Lydiate, 119 Market Street, Broadley, Whitworth, Rochdale OL12 8SE. Tel: 0706-344773.

A professionally made video of the Battle of Maldon is available from:

Dept V, Anglia Plus, PO Box 1499, Chelmsford CM2 9UJ

The cost is £12.95 + £1.00 p&P, cheques made payable to Anglia Plus.