

King Canute and the Fens

The most common tale of King Canute (Cnut) is of how he showed that he could not control the waves. Much lesser known are the tales of his time in the Fens:.

King Canute the Great ruled over a unified English kingdom as part of his North Sea Empire which also included Norway, Denmark and part of Sweden, from 1016 until 1035.

Canute had, after his success at the battle of Assendun on St Luke's Day 1016 been ruling most of the kingdom, but with the death of Edmund 'Ironside' on 30 November, he became king of the whole country. He was just 23 years of age.

The Anglo Saxon Chronicle records that at Assendun “all the nobility of the English race was there destroyed” and from then, the young king sought to help build up the goodwill of the people.

One way of doing this was by rebuilding and supporting the great religious establishments. He built a church at Assendun to commemorate his victory and rebuilt the church of St Edmund at Bury.

The king was also known for his patronage of storytellers, poets and minstrels, and was also a writer of poetry and song himself. The Liber Eliensis (Book of Ely) explains how one song was inspired:

"King Cnut was making his way to Ely by boat, accompanied by Emma, his queen, and the nobles of the kingdom, desiring to celebrate solemnly there, in accordance with custom, the Purification of St Mary, starting from which date the abbots of Ely are accustomed to hold, in their turn, their position of service in the royal court. When they were approaching the land, the king rose up in the middle of his men and directed the boatmen to make for the little port at full speed, and then ordered them to pull the boat forward more slowly as it came in. As he turned his eyes towards the church which stood out at a distance, situated as it was at the top of a rocky eminence, he heard the sound of sweet music echoing on all sides, and, with ears alert, began to drink in the melody more fully the closer he approached. For he realised that it was the monks singing psalms in the monastery and chanting clearly the Divine Hours. He urged the others who were present in the boats to come round about him and sing, joining him in jubilation. Expressing with his own mouth his joyfulness of heart, he composed aloud a song in English the beginning of which runs as follows:

*"Merry sung the monks within Ely
When Canute the King was rowing by;
Row, my men, near the land,
And hear we these monks' song."*

Another indicator of Canute's affection for Ely is found in the tale of how during another year, once again he wanted to celebrate the feast of the Purification (Candlemas – February 2), at Ely but the weather was very severe and the waterways were frozen.

The king's advisers suggested that he keep the holy feast at another house of God because to reach the abbey he would have to cross the treacherous fens where the danger of drowning under broken ice was very real.

But the king would take no notice of this advice such was the regard he held for the monks at Ely and he asked if anyone would like to walk ahead of his wagon across Soham mere, an immense body of water.

None of his men came forward as they all feared crossing the mere, but one standing in the crowd, a certain large and rugged man named Brithmar, stepped forward. This stout man, whose surname was Budde, on account of his bulk, was a local man and familiar with its waters.

The crowd watched as Brithmar spoke to the king and offered to go before him across the frozen

waters.

Without delay Brithmar went ahead and King Canute the Great followed him in the wagon at a fast pace. And behind the king came his followers, one by one, with gaps in between; and they all safely crossed the frozen mere safely, except perhaps from the odd bruise from slipping and falling on the ice.

After Canute had kept the festival of the Purification he rewarded the Brithmar by granting him perpetual freedom and giving him and his sons the freedom to enjoy their land holdings.

Canute was also generous to the commoners of the Fens:

“King Canute gave by command by Turkhill the dane that to every village standing about the Fens there should be set out a several marsh. Who so divided that ground that each village should have so much of the marsh as of the firm ground of each touched of that lying close against it. And he ordained that the pasture in the marsh should lie common for the preservation of peace among them.”

It is also said that Canute built a hunting lodge at Bodsey near Ramsey and that he would reach this by crossing Whittlesey Mere. It was also said that Canute's twin sons would travel across the Mere on their way to their schooling at Peterborough Abbey.

When the sons and servants of Canute were sailing over Whittlesey mere, and as they were cheerfully under sail and lifting up their voices with cheerful shouts, there came the most untoward and unhappy winds.

“At once, a turbulent storm arose that enclosed them on every side so that laying aside all hope they were in utter despair of their life. But such was the clemency of God that by his providence some of them were delivered safely out of those furious and raging waves. Others, again according to his just and sacred judgement, he permitted... to pass out of this frail life”

After the storm died down and the king realised that his sons had perished

“he ordered his soldier and servants with their swords ... to mark out a certain ditch in the marshes near between Ramsey and Whittlesey and afterwards that workmen and labourers should cleanse them..”

The causeway that the soldiers prepared with their swords became known as the King's Delph or Canute's Dyke.

The fact that the latter story stayed in people's memories is indicated by the following entry which was appeared in the Cambridge Independent press in February 1913

“Two tiny coffins have recently been found in the monastic burial ground of Peterborough, and have been placed in Peterborough Cathedral. One is 2ft 6ins in length, and the other 2ft 8ins. They are said locally to be the coffins of the twin children of King Canute (955-1035), who were drowned in Whittlesey Mere as they were crossing to be educated at Peterborough Abbey.”

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