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CŪTHRÆD : COULSDON'S NOBLE NAMESAKE?

By Eric Jenkinson

It is generally accepted among local historians that Coulsdon derives its name from Cūthrædesdone which is Old English meaning Cūthræd's hill. It was the name of a hamlet which was first recorded in the Middle Ages.

Traditionally the name is attributed to an Anglo-Saxon warrior, Cuthraed. Cuthraed is now recognised in Coulsdon by a finial atop a signpost outside Pizza Express. Who was the man behind the name?



Coulsdon Art Trail finial recognising Cūthræd in Coulsdon

In the early Middle Ages, between the end of the Roman occupation in AD410 and the Norman invasion of 1066, Britain was an everchanging mosaic of small kingdoms which were vying for supremacy against each other. Britain suffered frequent invasions by tribes from the near European continent and Scandinavia each of whom attempted to establish their own territory. By the 6th century, what was to become England was dominated by the Kingdom of Northumbria, which had been established by the Vikings in the North-East, and by Celtic Britons in the West stretching all the way from Cornwall, throughout Wales and the North West as far north as Strathclyde. The Midlands, East Anglia and all Southern England was a patchwork of smaller Kingdoms occupied by Germanic invaders. These were predominately the Angles. Saxons and Jutes who had invaded from the Jutland Peninsular of what today is Schleswig-Holstein in north Germany and Denmark.



Map of kingdoms of Angles, Saxons and Jutes c.600AD

The religion of the Roman occupiers of ancient Britain was based on Christianity. After the Romans withdrew in the 5th century, Britain reverted to a form of Germanic polytheistic Paganism. The late 6th and early 7th centuries were a period of great religious change. Kent was one of the first of Kingdoms to convert to Christianity. Pope Gregory the Great sent a group of 40 missionaries under the leadership of the monk Augustine which landed at Ebbsfleet in 597AD.

Aethelbert, who was the Saxon King of Kent at that time, was married to a Princess of the mainly Christian Frankish region of Gaul (now France). The Pope's missionaries were therefore welcomed on arrival and King Aethelbert was later baptised by Augustine. Augustine eventually became the first Archbishop of Canterbury.

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In 686 Kent was conquered by Caedwalla of Wessex. Thereafter, although progress was slow, Christianity spread through Kingdoms in a process that was largely complete by the end of the 7th century.

By 600 the Kingdom growing in importance was Wessex whose King was Cenwalh (c.642-c.645 and then c.648-c.672). During his first reign, c.642-c.645, Cenwalh fell out with the more powerful King of Mercia which was a Kingdom further north. According to the writings of The Venerable Bede, who was an English monk and scholar in the Kingdom of Northumbria and author of the Ecclesiastical History of the English People (c.731), Cenwalh had married a sister of Penda, the King of Mercia. For reasons unknown, Cenwalh decided to reject Penda's sister and he took another wife in her place. Penda was less than impressed. He picked a fight with Cenwalh and defeated him in battle. Driven into exile, Cenwalh took refuge with the Christian King Anna of the East Angles. During his three-year exile, Cenwalh was baptised a Christian by Saint Felix of Burgundy, the first Bishop of East Anglia who is credited with introducing Christianity to the Kingdom.



King Aethelstan on the choir Screen of Ripon Cathedral

Cenwalh resumed the throne of Wessex in 648 and reigned there as King until his death c.672.. The circumstances of his return to Wessex are unclear. Cenwalh is said to have had help from his nephew, Cuthraed. Cuthraed was the son of Cwichelm, King of the Gewisse in North Wessex who died in c.636. Cenwalh is recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles as awarding Cūthrǣd 3000 hides of land near Ashdown, which was probably in present day Berkshire, in AD648. A hide was a measurement of land which varied in size according to location.

The history of England in the Early Middle Ages is not an exact science, but it is probably safe to assume that this is the Cuthraed who as the influence of Wessex expanded, gave his name to Cūthrædsdone and he could be said to have been of Royal blood through the House of Wessex. It was not until AD927 that King Alfred the Great's Grandson, Aethelstan, a distant relative of Cuthraed, also from the Saxon House of Wessex, ousted the Vikings to become the first King of all England.

Saxon Burial Grounds have been found on Farthing Downs and Saxon Remains have been found in Lion Green car park.