

## Maldon History

Railway posters in the 1930s advertised Maldon as "The Pearl of the East Coast Estuary Towns." Its situation at the western end of the wide Blackwater Estuary, on a spur of high ground jutting out over the marshy coast of Essex caused much earlier visitors to identify it as the site of a Roman or even earlier Celtic town; its English name, they argued, must be a corruption of the Roman CaMALoDONum and if so then here was the earliest recorded town in Britain.

### Anglo-Saxon Maldon

Intensive occupation of the steep-sided hill, on which all the town lay until c.1900, began in Anglo-Saxon times. The early form of its name, "Mael-dun," is two Old English words for a stone or monument (Mael) on this hill (dun). East Saxon tribes occupied the area from the 4th century A.D., giving their name to the present county of Essex, which was a tribal kingdom until about 900 A.D., and the district south of Maldon is still called Dengie after the Dean-ingas, "Woodland Folk," who colonised it during the 5th Century.

We know that there was also a market -a defined area within which supervised trade could occur- because there was a royal Mint there issuing coins for the later Anglo-Saxon and the Norman kings of England from at least 958 A.D. The quayside where most of the wares exchanged in that market arrived and left the town retains its Old English name, the Hythe, and until the 17th Century the town's Customal (bye-laws) included regulations specifically for bargains made at the waterside. as well as those governing trade in the market place.

### Viking Invasion

The economic significance of 9th and 10th Century Maldon as the only town other than Colchester in the old kingdom of Essex, and also its strategic importance, is indicated by the construction on its hill top of a huge royal fortification, a "burgh," in 912. Here King Edward the Elder lived whilst campaigning against Danish settlers who had overrun parts of northern Essex and East Anglia. The town's prosperity was sufficient also to attract two Viking raids.

In the first, of 924, the raiders laid siege to the burgh but were beaten off. But the second and more famous attack in 991, succeeded. In this Brihtnoth, a powerful English nobleman who had gathered an army and had trapped the Viking war band on the banks of the Blackwater, was slain along with most of his household warriors when he let the enemy cross the river in full force.

The local significance of the two episodes is that this was a town sufficiently rich to be selected for raids by experienced plunderers. Both were so notable that they were recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles; the second was the subject of a major epic poem, later to be known as The Battle of Maldon.

### Changes in the Industrial Revolution

From early times also the Hythe had provided warehousing for goods in transit, Maldon merchants being middlemen: colliers were bringing coal from Newcastle from the 14th Century; pig iron, lime (to make Essex clay more workable), salt, grain, canvas, and wine, were other staple imports.

They were mostly redistributed by river transport because the inland of the county was almost barred from Maldon by the gravely hills to west, north and south whose steep inclines made road transport slow and difficult until turnpiking in the late 18th Century created better surfaces.

So for centuries the chief anxiety of merchants was that the silting of the river, preventing deep-draught vessels from reaching the town quays. By 1600 coasters mostly unloaded onto lighters a mile downstream of the Hythe (in Colliers' Reach.) The Freeman kept control of trade and heaped their tolls into the borough chest until, in 1768, their charter was suspended -after allegations of illegal election activities. Soon after that the transport revolution reached the town.

A canal from the neighbouring village of Heybridge inland to Chelmsford and central Essex was completed in 1797. It by-passed Maldon completely, for earlier plans for it had been opposed by the Corporation. Then the Eastern Counties Railway began, by 1840, to distribute goods to and from central Essex by way of London and Colchester Hythe, re-routing a substantial portion of Maldon's traditional trade.