Lincolnshire and the Danes

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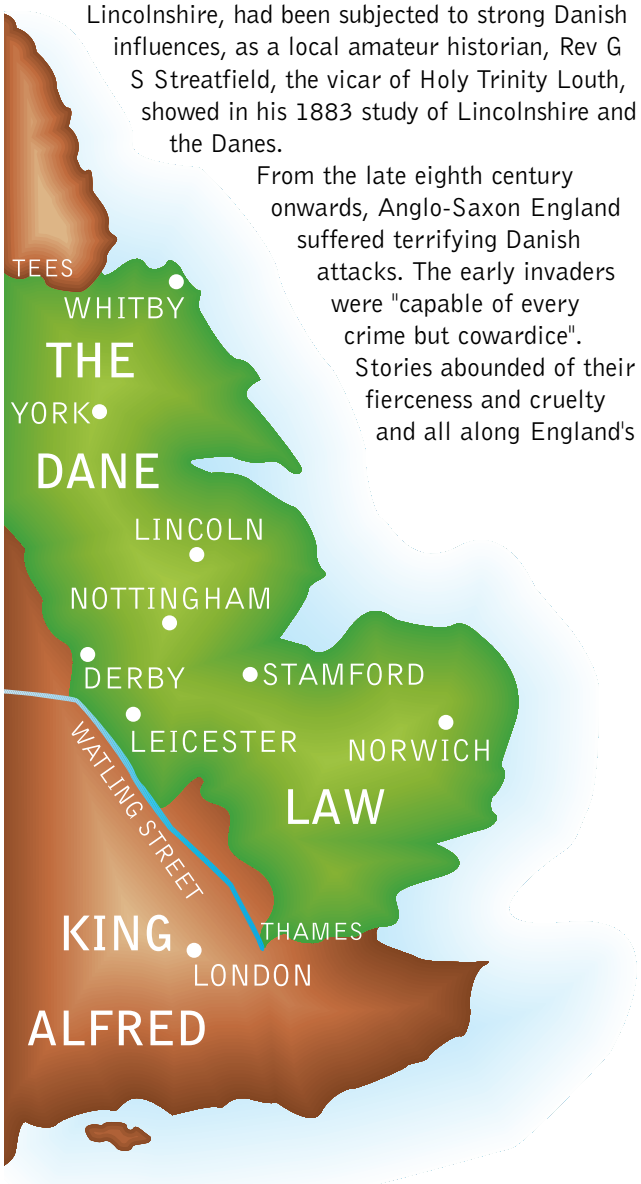
Initially the victim of raiding parties our county soon established settlements which can be easily identified to present day.

English historians of Victorian times were often very interested in the emergence of Englishness in the period before the Norman Conquest, which many regarded as an unwelcome interruption in the history of their country. Except for certain western areas, the Anglo-Saxons (Angles, Jutes and Saxons all of German origin) peopled the whole of England and Lowland Scotland. But Eastern England, and especially Lincolnshire, had been subjected to strong Danish influences, as a local amateur historian, Rev G S Streatfield, the vicar of Holy Trinity Louth, showed in his 1883 study of Lincolnshire and the Danes.



From the late eighth century onwards, Anglo-Saxon England suffered terrifying Danish attacks. The early invaders were "capable of every crime but cowardice". Stories abounded of their fierceness and cruelty and all along England's coast panic was caused when the cry went up "the Danes are here!". Their ships, with hideous figureheads on their prows frightening their victims, would suddenly land on the coast or up some river and, after an orgy of pillage and slaughter, would disappear before effective resistance could be mounted. With growing confidence, the invaders began to attack further inland. Monasteries and churches were special objects of attack for the valuables they contained and also because the pagan invaders were sworn opponents of Christianity. Bardney and Crowland Abbeys were destroyed by fire and their monks killed. At Stow, Lincolnshire's mother-church before the building of Lincoln's Cathedral, the bishop was murdered and the church burnt down. And there, as at the Humberside churches of Grainsby, Clee and Scartho, Streatfield noted on the old stones as still visible after a thousand years the red marks of fire which he and other Victorian historians blamed on the Danes. Also to be seen at Stow is a representation of a Viking ship scratched on the stonework by some Danish marauder of those tumultuous days.

THE THREE KINGS AT THREEKINGHAM

There were short-lived Anglo-Saxon successes in battle. According to legend, the village of Threekingham near Grantham is named after the three Danish pirate-kings who were buried there after being defeated by the local Anglo-Saxon leader Earl Algar, whose name is commemorated in the village of Algarkirk some miles away. Gradually, however, the Danish invasions ceased to be purely destructive and were concentrated on a policy of permanent conquest. From their favourite landing places, at the mouth of the Trent, at Tetney and especially on the smooth sandy shores between Theddlethorpe and Skegness, the Danes now moved in as settlers.

Little historical detail is known about the Danish settlements. But concentrations of Danish place names - with the typical endings 'by', 'thorpe', 'ness' and 'toft' - indicate the major settlement areas to have been up the Trent and around Torksey and Lincoln, around Grimsby and, perhaps above all, round about Alford and Spilsby. The Danes also settled widely in adjoining counties but


STOW CHURCH

Lincolnshire was their stronghold and Spilsby was considered by Streatfield probably to have been the most Danish town in the county.

Alfred the Great eventually managed to stem the Danish tide and to restrict the Danes by treaty to the north and east of the old Roman Road which the early English called Watling Street. Lincoln and Stamford were two of the Five Danish Boroughs (the others being Nottingham, Derby and Leicester) at the centre of their area, the Danelaw. This was nominally subject to English overlordship but Lincolnshire in particular largely assumed the character of a Danish province. Danish customary law applied and the county was for government purposes divided, like Yorkshire, into three ridings with sokes and wapentakes as subsidiary administration areas, the three county ridings surviving until some thirty years ago and the names of the wapentakes being perpetuated in many Church of England deaneries.

From time to time King Alfred's Anglo-Saxon successors felt strong enough to assert increased control over the area of the Danelaw and towns such as Stamford were frequently changing hands. But the Danes were a continual threat. Reinforcements could always be brought in from Denmark itself. Weak Anglo-Saxon leadership eventually felt obliged to pay Danegeld as protection money against Danish attack. And in 1013 a massive new invasion force headquartered at Gainsborough took the Danes into the Lincolnshire Fens, where their presence had previously been minimal, and Boston was burnt. Indeed shortly afterwards, as a result of a follow-up invasion, the Danish leader, King Canute, established himself as King of England and reigned successfully for some twenty years. Not long after King Canute died, the Anglo-Saxon monarchy was temporarily restored. But it was the continuous Danish threat which fatally handicapped King Harold in his resistance to the Norman invasion of 1066.

The parody history textbook "1066 And All That" contained its usual element of truth in saying that the Danes overran the country with fire and "invented a law called Danelaw, which easily proved that since there was nobody else left alive, all the right-hand part of England belonged to them". But there was actually no real 'ethnic cleansing' in the Danish conquest of Lincolnshire, as there had unfortunately been when the Anglo-Saxons had taken over from the Britons 500 years before. Streatfield's view that in no area, even in North Lincolnshire, were Danes ever in a majority, seems to have been endorsed by more modern historians. Most of the big Lincolnshire landowners right down to the Norman Conquest appear to have had Danish names. And, for a generation or two, Danish was probably spoken alongside Anglo-Saxon English. The Danes and the Anglo-Saxons were, however, closely related peoples and, over the course of the years, the Danish population was converted to Christianity and soon fully assimilated in the Anglo-Saxon majority. But though English remained Lincolnshire's language a large Scandinavian element in the local dialect must have survived for very many years and indeed quite a lot of words of Danish origin are still locally in use: the garthman, the crewe-yard, the gattrum, the beck, the gairing at the end of a field, the far-welting of sheep, the pyewipe and the breadloaf were among examples noted by Streatfield in 1883 which still survive today. And he also referred to the number of Lincoln streets called by the Danish name "gate".

Lincolnshire, together with Yorkshire, could certainly, Streatfield felt, be proud of the fact that there was no record in the 1086 Domesday Book of anyone living in those counties (unlike many others) being other than free men. The local assemblies, the wapentakes, were indeed so called to indicate free men attending taking their weapons there with them. So it is perhaps unsurprising that the most extended resistance to what those old-fashioned Victorian historians regarded as the exaggerated feudalism introduced by the Normans came from a Lincolnshire man, Hereward the Wake, and his Danish allies.