



British Museum/Vikings Live

Routes, Combatants and Battle Location

Determine Cnut's most probable route back from Mercia

River estuaries / Roman roads / combatants / church support / place names

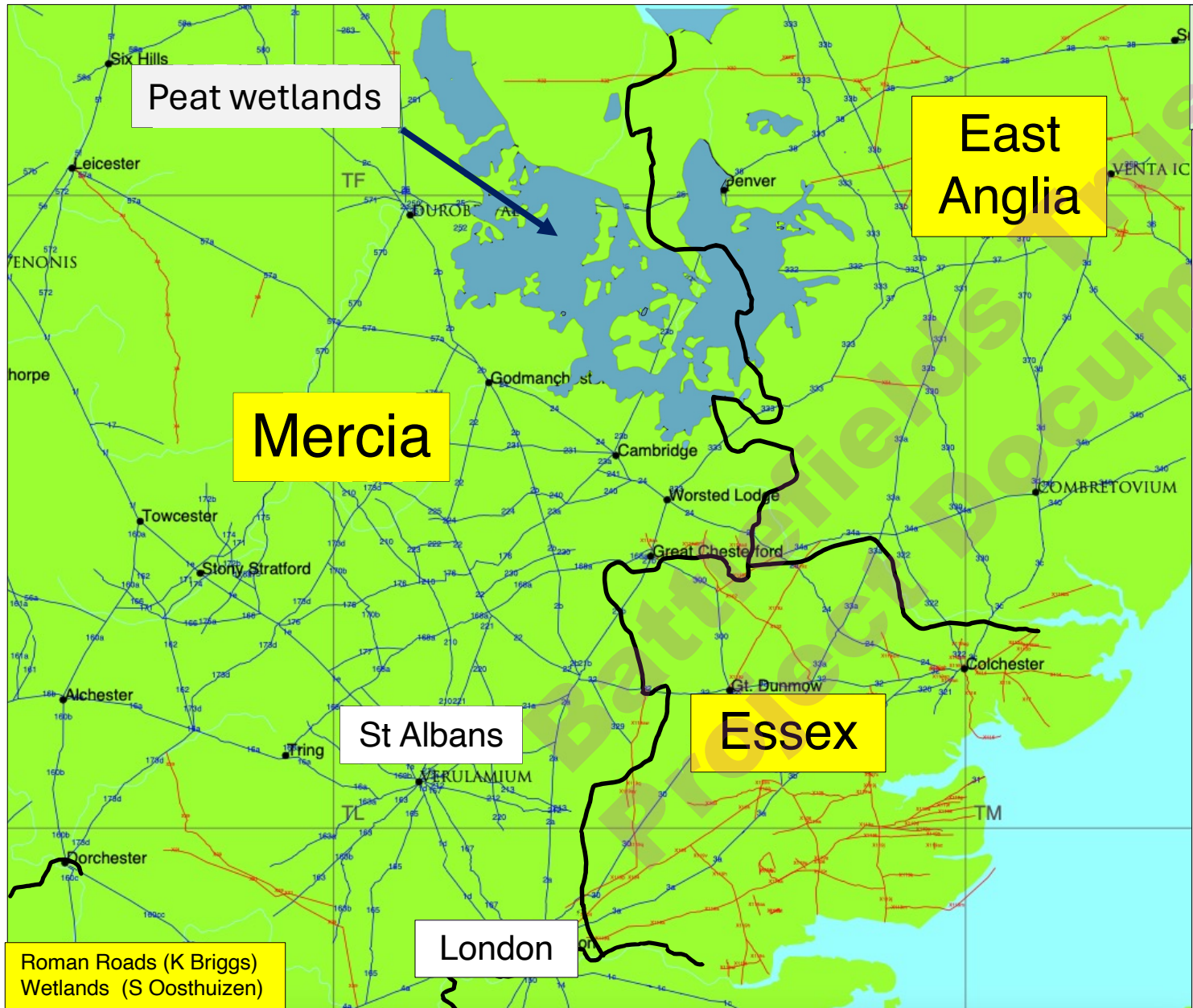
Determine the most probable battle site location in Essex

Four candidates / place names / people names / ancient woodlands / battle logistics



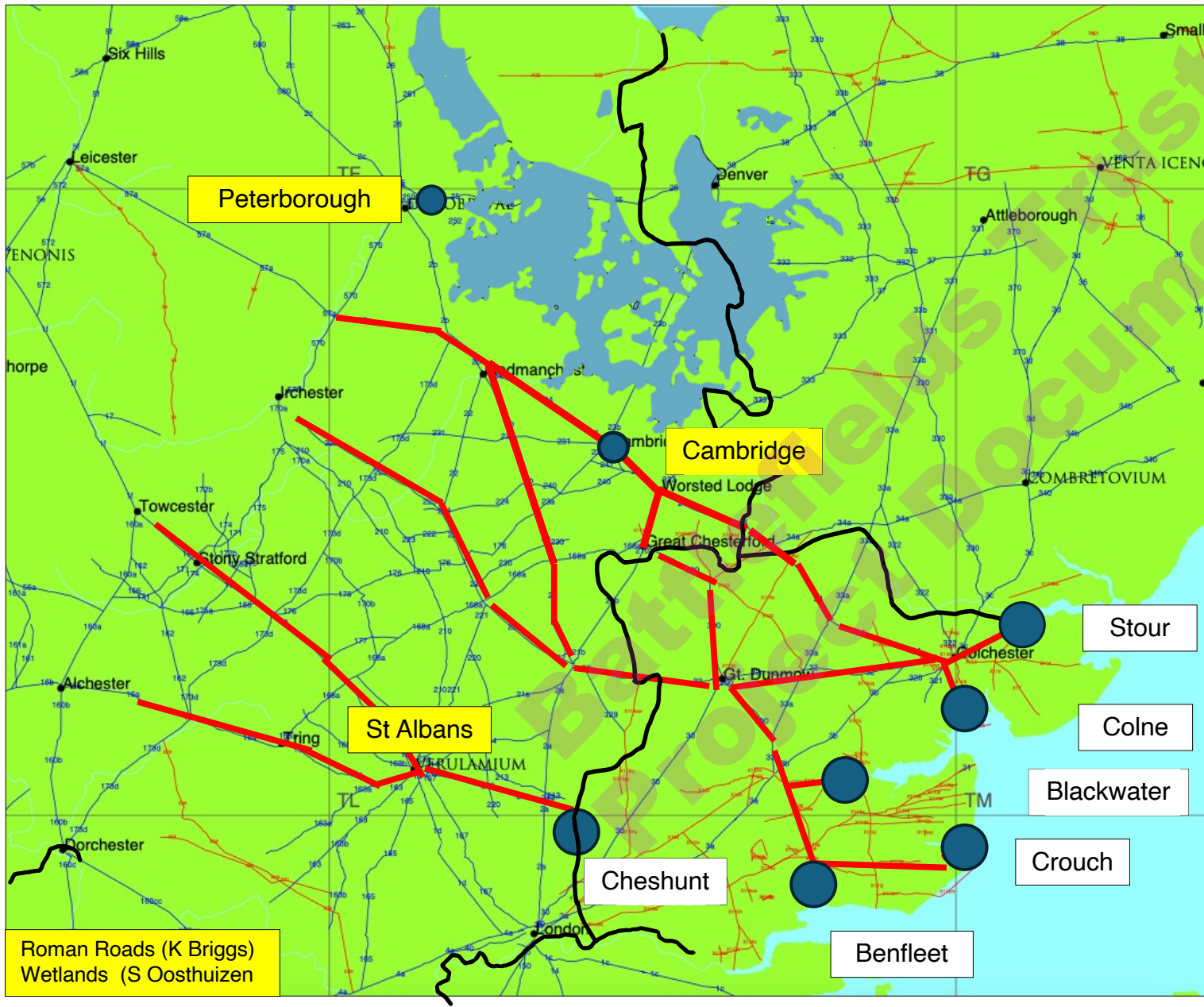
Cnut leaves Sheppey September 1016

- Cnut left for Essex to re-supply his main winter base in Sheppey/River Medway. His target estuary for mooring is not known.
- Fleet size is also unknown. 20 ships provided 500 troops. (160 ships landed on south coast in January 1016, 5000 troops)
- Secure mooring base was needed, guarded and provisioned for ships and ships repairs, allowing quick exit.
- The Chronicles say that Cnut reached Mercia, showing that looting of Essex was not sufficient for re-supply.



How and how quickly did Cnut reach Mercia?

- The extensive Roman road network would have helped Cnut. New roads are still being discovered by LiDAR.
- Mercian border about 70/80 miles from Essex coast.
- On horse, 20/25 miles trotting and walking per day, So 4 days to reach Mercian border.
- A raid to Mercia from the east coast and back was several weeks.



Which route did Cnut take to Mercia?

- Six possible mooring locations with easy access to the Roman road network are being studied.
- Tactically, southern road routes would take Cnut closer to Edmund Ironside's main garrison in London and a greater risk of a fifth battle.
- Northerly routes were safer for Cnut, but distances were greater. Fen wetlands were a natural barrier.
- What was Cnut's most likely route?



A clue comes from the combatants in the English army

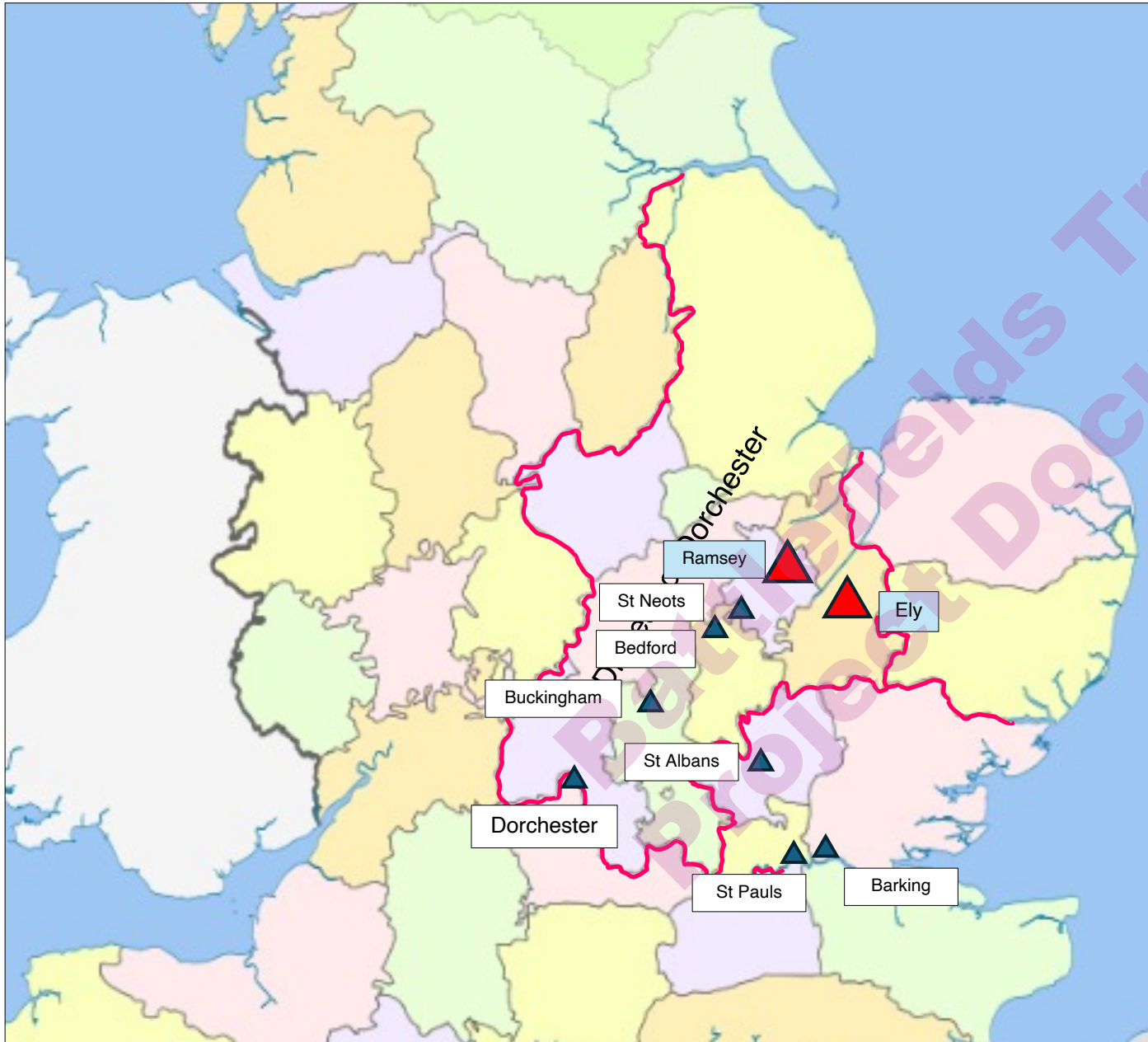
- We know from the names of senior ealdormen present or killed, at least 4 regions supplied men to Edmund Ironside.
- Monks from Ely and Ramsey Abbeys were also at Assandun, supporting with relics and prayers.
- And senior clerics were reported killed, including the Bishop of Dorchester, Eadnoth, and the current Abbot of Ramsey, Wulfsige.

Why were the clerics from Ramsey and Ely Abbeys called to the battle?



Many abbeys could have supported the English army

- There were 2 Dioceses (Dorchester and London) and 12 abbeys that could have provided relics/prayers if summoned.
- Crowland, Peterborough and Thorney Abbeys were north of Ramsey and Ely - no evidence they were at the battle.



Many abbeys could have supported the English army

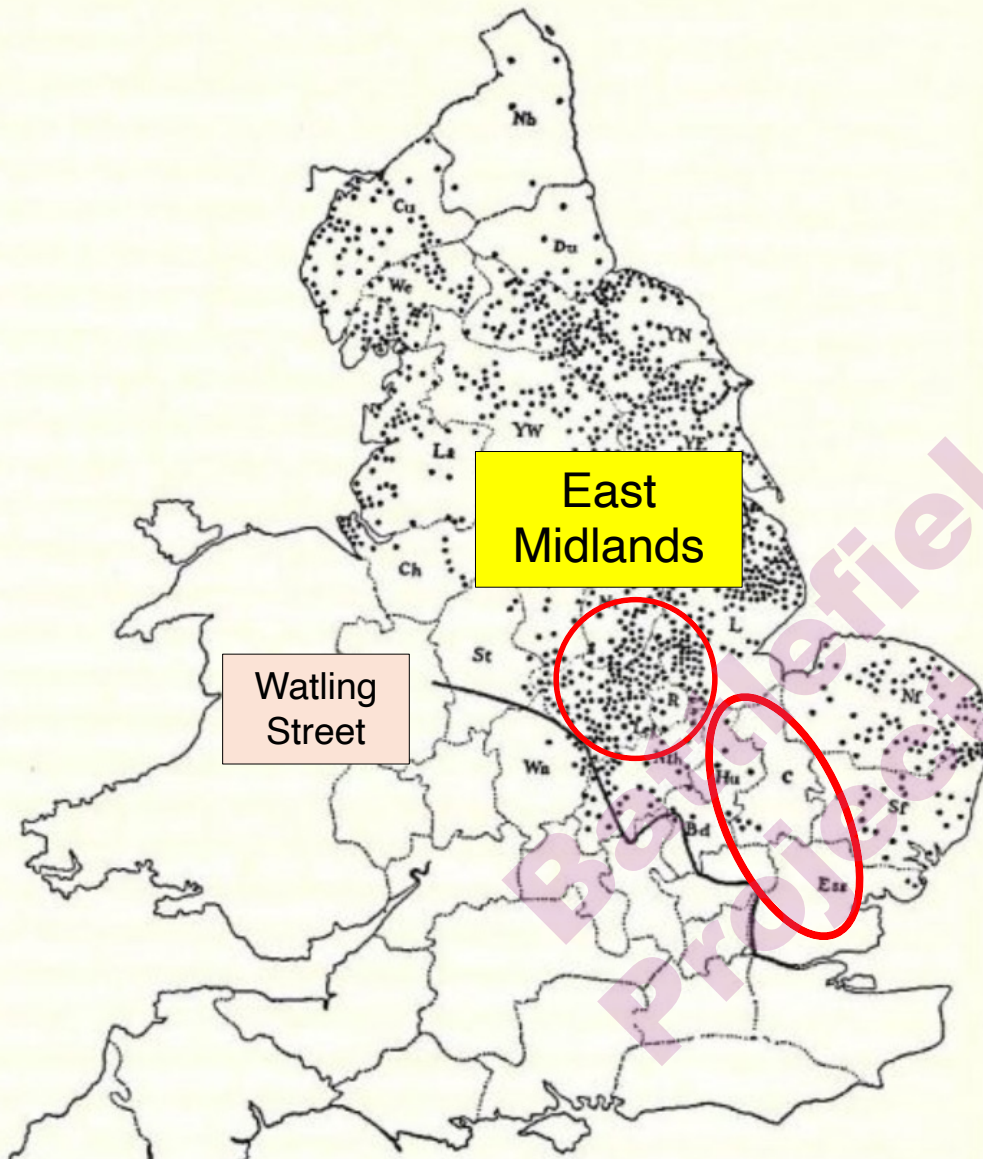
- There were 2 Dioceses (Dorchester and London) and 12 abbeys that could have provided relics/prayers if summoned.
- Crowland, Peterborough and Thorney Abbeys were north of Ramsey / Ely - no evidence they were at the battle.
- In the south, no clerics were recorded as present from Bedford, St Neots, Buckingham, St Albans, Barking, St Pauls or Dorchester Abbeys.

This suggests that that Edmund learned that Cnut's route back from Mercia lay close to Ramsey and Ely abbeys.

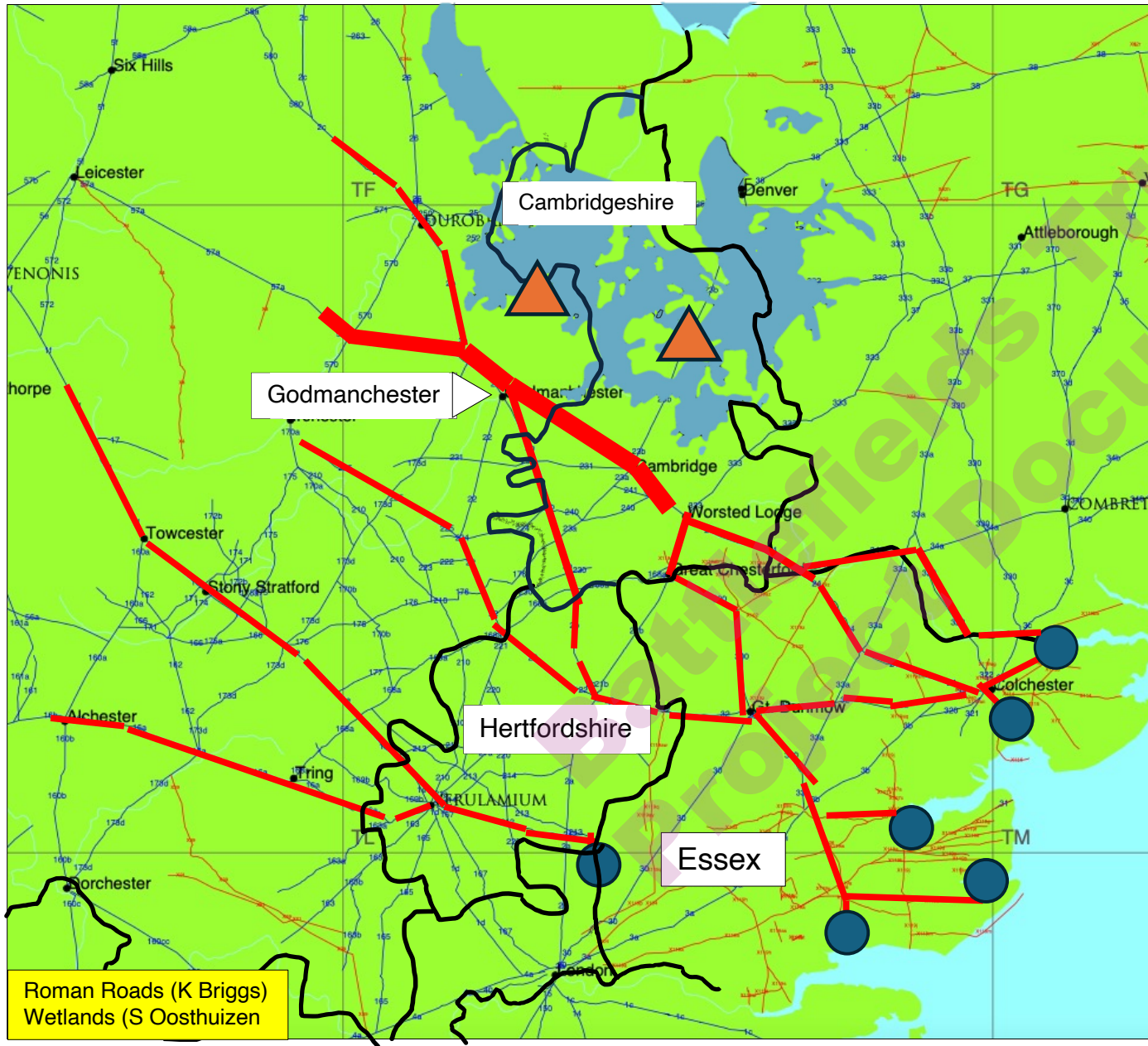
How far did Cnut reach into Mercia?

- This shows the distribution of English place names which include the Scandinavian elements
-by and -thorpe (Domesday 1086)
- c40,000 Danes settled in the Danelaw Counties 900-1030AD. The Midlands was well populated with Danes, who would have welcomed Cnut.
- Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire were still dominantly Anglo-Saxon. Both were the closest Mercian Counties to the coast.

It seems likely Cnut was targeting East Mercia and Essex for supplies and livestock.



Distribution of Scandinavian place names (A Smith)



Cnut's most likely return route

- Returning from Huntingdonshire, close to Ramsey and Ely, Cnut was probably travelling through Cambridgeshire on the A14 !
- From Godmanchester, his army would have passed through Cambridge and entered Essex from Cambridgeshire, not Hertfordshire.
- His intended route through Essex to his ships remains uncertain. Research continues into mooring sites.

The evidence points to Cnut returning from Huntingdonshire and Cambridgeshire and entering NW Essex.



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The most probable battle site location

Four candidates / place and people names / ancient woodlands / battle logistics

A Probability Table will help battle location assessment

	Ashingdon area	Ashdon area	Assington area	Essendon area
Located in Essex County				
Location name matches battle name				
Soils favouring ash tree woodland				
Hill belonging to Assa				
Probability of Ely monks supporting at the battle location				

"... overtook them in Essex at the hill which is called Assandun" (ASC E)



Battle area candidates

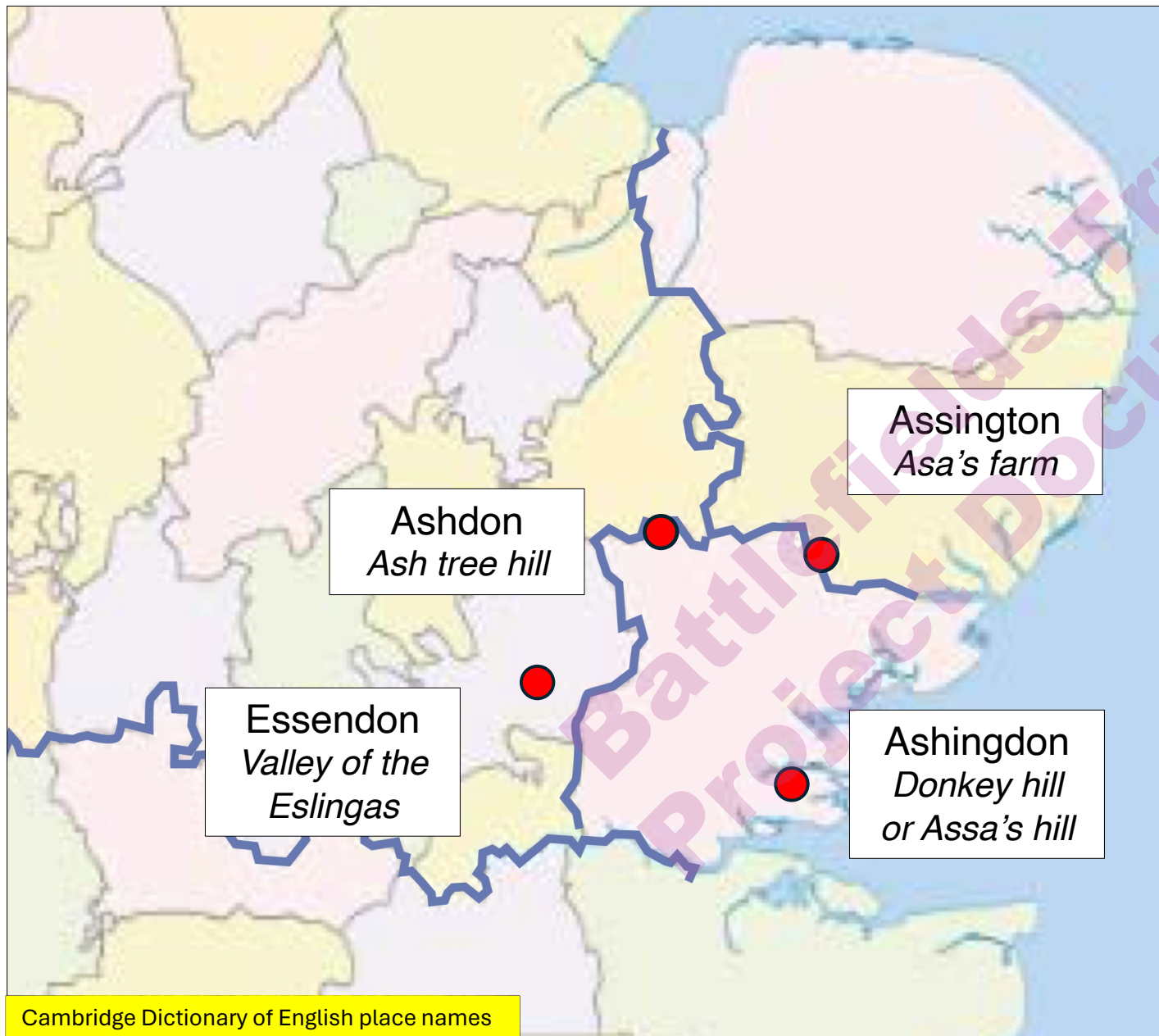
Is the location in Essex?

- Of the 4 candidate locations, Ashdon and Ashingdon are both in Essex, a county formed in the 10thC.
- Essendon is in Hertfordshire, but advocates argue that both Herts and Essex were once part of the Saxon Kingdom of East Seaxan, the area named by the Chronicles for the battle.
- Assington is in Suffolk.

On this issue Assington has the weakest case, while Ashdon and Ashingdon have the strongest.

What is the battle site name?		
Assandun	Anglo Saxon Chronicles C/D/E c1017-20 Common source	OE donkey hill OE Assa's hill OE ash tree hill
Assatun	Knutsdrapa 1027	ON Assa's enclosure or hill OE ash tree enclosure or hill
Aescenedune	Encomium Emmae 1040	OE ash tree hill

Battle names and location
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All 3 names have been documented once only and therefore are equally reliable and admissable (Hart). Thus, the battle name Assandun, although widely used, may not be the correct name.
<p>To help decide credible battle locations, we have checked the candidates for:</p> <p><i>A name match to the battle</i></p> <p><i>Nearby ash tree woodlands</i></p> <p><i>If 'Assa' is a recorded Anglo-Saxon name</i></p>



Battle area candidates

Is there a name match to the battle?

- The place name meaning for Essendon has no similarity to the battle site name (Assa or Ash tree hill).
- The place name meaning for Assington has similarity to the battle site name but is a different personal name.
- There is a close match in the place name meanings of Ashdon and Ashingdon with the battle site (Assa or Ash tree hill)

Based on etymology, Ashdon and Ashingdon are the most likely candidate areas for the battle.



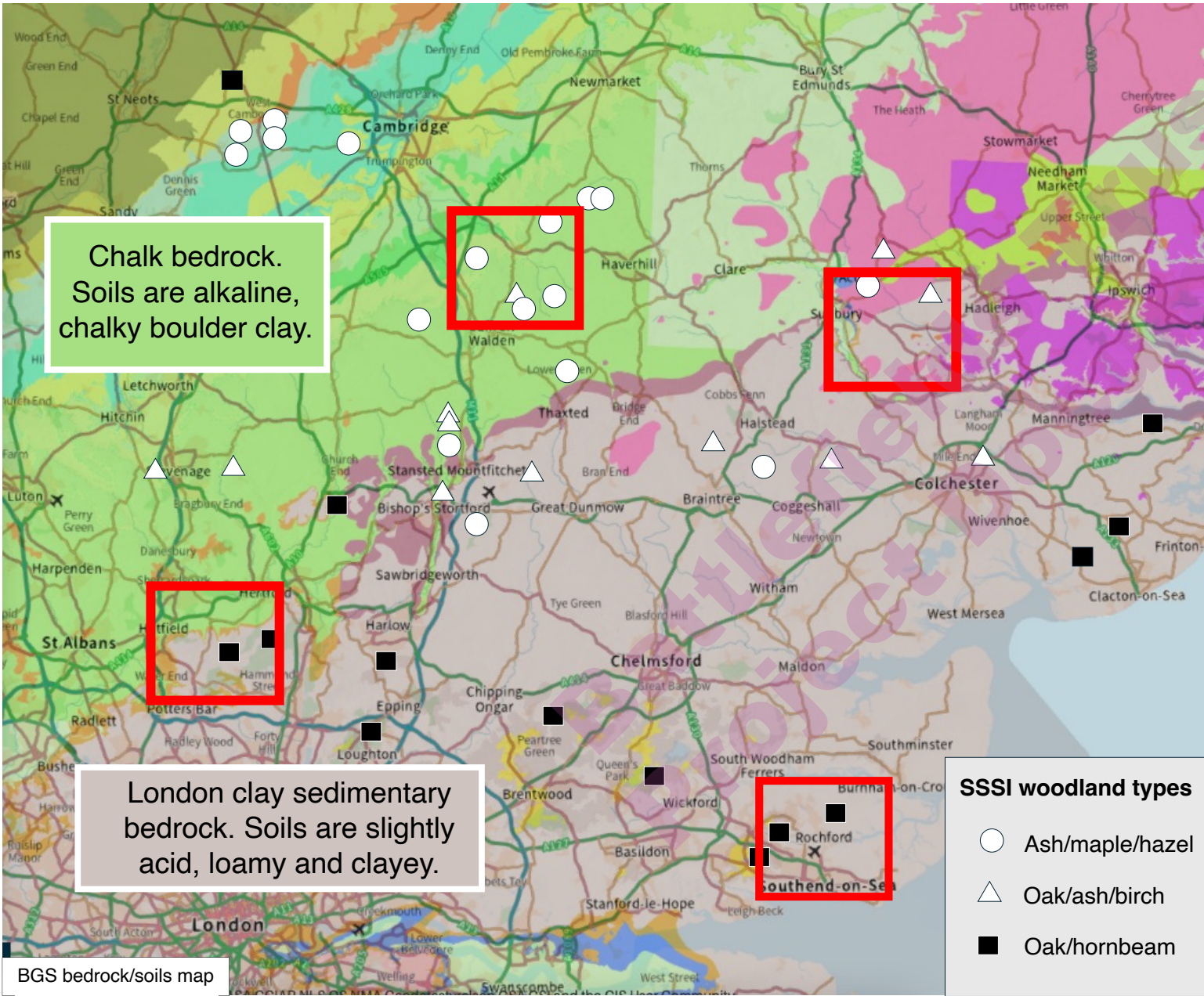
- Ash is the second most common woodland tree to oak.
- Ash trees like chalky soil but also grow on slightly acid soils
- Natural England SSSIs define 3 types of ancient woodland across South-East England:

ash/maple,
oak/hornbeam.
oak/ash/birch (mixed)

Battle area candidates

Are there ash tree woodlands at the candidate locations?





Chalk bedrock.
Soils are alkaline,
chalky boulder clay.

London clay sedimentary
bedrock. Soils are slightly
acid, loamy and clayey.

SSSI ancient woodlands, *bedrock and soils*

- The bedrock geology and soil are major factors deciding the type of woodland.
- Plotting Essex and Cambridgeshire SSSI woodlands shows:

London Clay favours
oak/hornbeam.

Chalky boulder clay favours
ash/maple.

SSSI woodland types

- Ash/maple/hazel
- △ Oak/ash/birch
- Oak/hornbeam

On this issue, the Ashdon area has the best conditions for ash woodlands

BGS bedrock/soils map



Index of personal names in place names

(Pick) (YN); Aslockton (Nt).
Aslákr (ODan) *Oselokeswey* 1334, *Oselokeszwong* 1250 (Nth).
Asli PASE1.
Asloc DLV.
Asmoth PASE1 DLV.
Asmund (ODan) *Osmoundesdikys* 1467×84 (Le).
Ásmundr (ME, ODan, OE, ON, Sc) (↔**Ósmund**) ?*Osmanthorpe* (Nt); ?*Ossoms Hill* (St); *Asemondecroft* 1313, *Osemundewong* 1253 (Nth); *Asmundemere* 1279 (BdHu); *Asmundesrugge* (Gl); *Osmans Dene* 2.89 (Ch); *Aismunderby* (YW); *Osmotherley* (YN).
Asne DLV.
Asrothr PASE1.
Assa Asham (Sx); Ashingdon(?) (Ess); Assendon (O).
Asser PASE2.
Ast PASE1.
Asten (A-Sc) *Alstonby*, *Astinhole* 1261 in *Rottington* (Cu).
Asterius PASE1.
Astin (ME) *Astinriding* 13 (YW); *Astenthwaite* (We).
Asulf PASE2 DLV.
Ásúlfr (Sc) *Aislaby* (WhitbyS) (YN).

Battle area candidates

Is 'Assa' a recorded Anglo-Saxon name?

- In 2023, an index of 12,651 'personal names in place names' was created from records dating from 597-2000AD.
- There are 3 locations for which the personal name 'Assa' could be behind the place name.
- However, the data show no record of the name 'Assa' for documents covering just the Anglo-Saxon period, 597-1066.

Thus, Ashingdon has a low probability of being derived from the personal name 'Assa', despite previous expert views.



Battle area candidates

Would Ramsey/Ely monks have supported Edmund's army at the location?

- Ashdon was in the London diocese although close to Diocesan border. 30 miles from Ely. 1.5 days travel
- Assington was in the East Anglian diocese. 50 miles from Ely. 2 days travel.
- Essendon was in the London diocese. 60 miles from Ely. 3 days travel. St Alban's Abbey was only 10 miles away.
- Ashingdon was in the London diocese 80 miles from Ely. 4 days travel. Barking Abbey was 30 miles.

On this issue, Ashdon has the strongest case and Ashingdon the weakest.

Summary Probability Table for Battle Location

not including Minster church consideration

	Ashingdon area	Ashdon area	Assington area	Essendon area
Located in Essex County	H Yes	H Yes	L Suffolk	M Hertfordshire
Location name matches battle name	H	H	L	L
Soils favouring ash tree woodland	L Slightly acid, clayey	H Lime rich, clayey	L Slightly acid	M Slightly acid, chalk nearby
Hill belonging to Assa	L	L	L	L
Probability of Ramsey/Ely monks at the battle location	L 80 miles from Ely	M 30 miles from Ely	L 50 miles from Ely	L 60 miles from Ely

Summary Probability Table for Battle Location

not including Minster church consideration

	Ashingdon area	Ashdon area
Located in Essex County	H Yes	H Yes
Location name matches battle name	H	H
Soils favouring ash tree woodland	L Slightly acid, clayey	H Lime rich, clayey
Hill belonging to Assa	L	L
Probability of Ramsey/Ely monks at the battle location	L 80 miles from Ely	M 30 miles from Ely

Questions please?

Next.....Cnut's Minster Church

Ian Yearsley