

## **Anglo Saxon Runcorn**

**Books specifically about this subject in this area –**

**None**

### **Extracts from books :-**

**Bagley                      The Story of Merseyside Part I - From the Romans to the  
Tudors   Pub. 1969  
Pages 28/9**

As the years went by, Norse settlement in the whole of the north west of England became heavier. Ethelflaed of Mercia, fearing for the safety of her kingdom, took the precaution of building forts in a number of strategic places. She built one at Eddisbury in 914 and another at Runcorn late in the following year. Eddisbury Hill commands a good view of the surrounding country – it is the natural site for a fortress – and Runcorn controls the Mersey at a narrow point. Ethelflaed built this second fort on the sandstone rocks which now form the foundation of the southern end of the Runcorn railway bridge.

**Beamont                      An Account of the Ancient Town of Frodsham in Cheshire  
Pub. 1881  
Page 3**

In the Anglo Saxon Chronicle, under the year 913, after an account has been given of certain works of King Edward the Elder, we read as follows :- “This year by the favour of heaven, Elfleda, the lady of Mercia, went with all the Mercians to Tamworth, and there built the burgh in the early part of the summer; after this, and before Lammas, she built that at Stafford; and in the year 914 she built that at Eadesbyrig in the beginning of the summer, and that at Warwick towards the end of autumn; and after Christmas, the year following (915), she built the burgh of Cyricbyrig (Chirbury in Shropshire); and afterwards at Weardbyrig, and again, before Christmas the same year, that of Runcofan (Runcorn). Elfleda, the noble lady who thus founded Edisbury, in the forest of Delamere, and made it a city, and built also the neighbouring town and port of Runcorn, where she built a strong castle, well calculated to resist a foe coming up the Mersey to invade her territory by water, and who, after her husband’s death, ruled with consummate skill the great province of Mercia, was the worthy daughter of an illustrious sire, our own immortal Alfred”.

**Beamont                      A History of the Castle of Halton and the Priory or Abbey  
of Norton.   Pub. 1873  
Pages 2/3/146/47**

In the Saxon times, however, Halton became a sort of central point to the surrounding neighbourhood, and the four towns of Norton, Aston, Sutton and Weston, or as the people call it from the blasts which sweep on it from the Mersey “Windy Weston”, received their names from the direction in which they stand relatively, north, east, south, and west to the hill of Halton. We hear nothing, however, of any fortress erected here by the Saxons. The danger they apprehended seems to have been principally from the west, either from the Strathclwydian Britons, or the Danes, those invading foes who made the river their highway for plunder and used it as their gate of entrance into the interior of the country.

To curb the advance of these invaders who made so lawless a use of our noble river, the heroic Elfleda built a strong and solid stone fortress on the Castle Rock at Runcorn, at the point where the river is narrowest and the situation most commanding, and where an invading navy might best be held in check.

Ethelfleda, with all the Mercians went to Tamworth, and built the fort there in the fore part of the summer; and before Lammas that at Stafford. The next year (914) that at Eddisbury in the beginning of the summer, and late in the autumn that at Warwick. Then in the following year (915), was built, after mid winter that at Cyricbyrig and that at Weardbyrig, and the same year before mid winter, that of Rumcofan.

It [Runcorn] is believed also to have attained to the dignity of having a mint, for there are some Saxon coins which have on the obverse, "Eadred Rex" and on the reverse "Othbrim on Ring" which Camden, who give a print of them, thinks may probably have been coined at Runcorn, or as he says, Ringhornan, which by mistake he tells us is in Lancashire. And in Mr. Thoresby's Catalogue of Saxon Coins there is one (No.102) which has on the reverse the inscription "Leodmer on Rine", which he conjectures to have also been coined at Runcorn about the year 1017. if these coins were really from a Runcorn mint, the credit of establishing it must be ascribed to Elfleda.

### **Brownsword-Hulland    The Legendary Tribes of Cheshire - Stone Age to the Normans    Pub. 1996**

#### **Page 195**

Aethelflaed started by organising her first fortress at Bremsburgh in 910 AD, this was followed by Scergeat and Bridgenorth in 912 AD and then Tamworth and Stafford in 913 AD.

Later in 913 AD, from a base that can be assumed to be Cholmondeley, she built her first Cheshire fortress at Chester. It is most likely that she fortified Wirswall on the hill, Marbury and Norbury during this time. These defences were followed by Eddisbury during the following year. .... At the same time fortresses were being built in Cheshire, one at Warwick was completed. The next year, the settlement at Runcorn guarding the Mersey was fortified along with Chirbury, Weardburgh, (Warburton or Wareurytune), part of which was the marshland caused by the boundary of the Rivers Mersey, Bollin and Red Brook.

### **Bu'Lock                      Pre-Conquest Cheshire 383 – 1066.    Pub. 1978**

#### **Page 53**

By 914 a new line of Mercian burghs had been extended as far as Eddisbury; in the following year this was supplemented, or perhaps replaced, by one at Runcorn overlooking the Mersey ferry. Chester and Runcorn were intended to block both river routes from the Irish Sea into Northern Mercia, and to control at least the easiest route between Dublin and York.

### **Carter                      Warrington and the Mid Mersey Valley    Pub. 1971**

#### **Page 1**

The fortification along the river Mersey in the Mid Mersey Valley between Runcorn and Manchester by Edward the Elder and his sister Ethelfleda are described in the Anglo Saxon Chronicle.

After recording that Ethelfleda fortified Tamworth in the year 913 the Chronicle then records under the year 915 "Then – (was built) that fortress at Chirbury (Shropshire) ... and in this same year before Christmas that at Runcorn. ....

At the western extremity it is easy to understand the fortification at Runcorn where the Mersey narrows considerably before widening again between Runcorn and Warrington.

**Darby & Maxwell    The Domesday Geography of Northern England**  
**Pub. 1962**  
**Page 335**

That some of the places not mentioned in the Domesday Book must have existed, or any rate been named, in Domesday times, we may assume from the fact that Runcorn and Thelwall were unmentioned in Domesday, and yet they appear in the Saxon Chronicle under years as early as 915 and 913 respectively.

**Estry                      The Story of Cheshire    Pub. 1908**  
**Page 30**

There is a map on page 30 depicting Cheshire under the Saxons on which are shown, amongst others, Runcorn, Eddisbury and Thelwall, Frodsham and Helsby.

**Finn                      Cheshire    Pub. 1928**  
**Page 39**

Traces of Saxon religious houses can also be found at Runcorn and Prestbury.

**Halton Borough Council    Brief History of Runcorn    Pub. 1975**  
**Page 2**

During the reigns of Alfred the Great (871-899) and his son, Edward the Elder (died 925), the Vikings invaded Cheshire: the Irish Norse upriver from Ireland and the Isle of Man, the Danes overland from the East. Alfred's daughter, Aethelfraeda, the lady of the Mercians, who was governing Mercia for her brother, granted lands on both sides of the river to the Danes. She rebuilt Chester's city walls and erected a number of forts in North Cheshire, including one at 'Runckhorn'. She visited the area in 916 to inspect her new castle, the Parish Church was founded about the same time. .... Castle Rock retains in its name the only memorial of Aethelfraeda's castle, the railway bridge was built on the site, and a further large piece of rock was removed when the Ship Canal was cut. But the Lady of the Mercians was not forgotten last century when the bridge was built – they named it after her.

**Higham                      The Origins of Cheshire    Pub. 1993**  
**Page 107**

[In 893] ... In the aftermath the Danes withdrew into Wales, starved out of the Dee valley. When they returned to Viking territory, they did so via Danish Northumbria, and so probably crossing the Mersey at Runcorn or Warrington, for fear of the Mercian army. Neither side forgot these crossings thereafter.

**Porteous                      The Canal Ports    Pub. 1977**  
**Page 57**

Runcorn Gap, the paramount physical feature of the area, was early exploited by travelling man. It is possible that the Romans, with their base on Halton Hill, used Runcorn as a shipping place. During the conquest of the Danelaw, Runcorn became the site of one of a series of fortresses erected by the Mercian Princess Ethelfleda. Sited on Castle Rock, close to the shore, it was in a superb position to dominate the boundary river. The first church was

probably coeval with the castle, for an extensive Runcorn parish existed long before the second Baron Halton sought salvation in 1133 by founding at Runcorn a house of the Canons Regular of the Order of St. Augustine.

**Starkey**

**Old Runcorn Pub. 1990**

**Pages 4/5**

The Anglo Saxon invaders had reached Cheshire by the end of the sixth century when the foundation of the Saxon kingdom of Mercia was taking place to the south of the county. Within a hundred years the power of Mercia increased and Cheshire was absorbed into the kingdom. Mercia, in its turn, was conquered in 829 AD by Wessex, one of whose kings, Egbert, is usually acknowledged to be the first king of all England.

Throughout the Dark Ages the landscape changed little and for the most part, large areas of the county remained uncultivated woodland and marsh but a study of Anglian place names gives some indication of English colonisation. Halton, Sutton, Stockham, Norton and frodsham are names of Anglo Saxon origin. Runcorn was 'ruman cofan' – a spacious cove or bay. The Mersey derives its name from the old English 'maeres ea' meaning boundary river. Daresbury is a personal name and a fortified place 'Deore's burgh'. Walton 'means the farm of the Welsh'. The former pre-eminence of Halton is obvious from the naming of the settlements which surrounded it. Norton is the 'north farm'; Aston the 'east farm'; Sutton 'south farm' and Weston 'west farm'.

During the reigns of King Alfred and his son, Edward the Elder, the Vikings invaded Cheshire. The Norse came from the west from their bases in Ireland and the Isle of Man, whilst the Danes attacked from the east. In order to frustrate a Norse-Danish amalgamation, King Edward and his sister Ethelfleda built a line of forts or 'burghs' from Chester to Manchester. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle tells us that Ethelfleda reinforced the defences of the Iron Age fort of Eddisbury in 914 and in the following year she built a burgh at Runcorn. These strongpoints were the responsibility of the local population. The settlements had to provide the garrisons and maintain the defences. It was expected that the men of the burghs would take quick action against Viking raiding parties without calling for help from the King's army. From the burghs attacks could be launched to destroy small mobile enemy parties before they could join with others to become a larger force and a more serious threat. Action could also be taken to block the enemy's line of retreat. The Mersey became the boundary river between English Mercia and Scandinavian Danelaw.

Runcorn burgh was the most ancient structure on the Mersey and traces of it remained into the nineteenth century. From a description of the site made by a Mr. Mousdale in 1819, we learn that the defences occupied an area of land about 40 metres by 30 metres on a rocky promontory which jutted out into a deep channel in the river. The landward side was protected by a ditch six metres wide and cut through the rock. Behind the ditch there was a rampart which was about two metres in height when Mousdale made his observations. The burgh was a simple fort, hastily constructed and it probably consisted of the ditch with an embankment topped by a wooden palisade. Certainly it bore no resemblance to 'Runcorn castle', the ornate stone citadel which is depicted on a popular postcard issued on the occasion of the thousandth anniversary of Ethelfleda's foundation.

Whilst the strategic position of Runcorn fort is obvious, its importance was certainly overrated in a comment of 1574, which has been attributed to Sampson Erdeswicke. Writing some 660 years after the foundation of Ethelfleda's castle, Erdeswicke says "*By west Halton upon the river of Mersee a myle from halton, standeth Runcorne, which in tymes past was a great towne and had a strong castell called Runcolan which was kept with a strong garrison for the scourge of the inhabitants of Northumberland*".

Apart from the brief contemporary comment in the Anglo Saxon Chronicle we know nothing of the history of the Runcorn burgh. No doubt its defences were destroyed when Danish rule finally embraced Cheshire early in the eleventh century. The site then remained undisturbed until the Duke of Bridgewater carried out excavations in order to improve the navigation of his canal and the last vestige of Castle Rock disappeared when the railway bridge was being constructed in 1863. When the foundations were being built an ancient well was discovered but the railway company would not permit archaeological exploration in case it delayed work on the bridge and no artefacts were found on the site of Ethelfleda's fortress.

**Stenton                                      Anglo Saxon England Pub. 1963  
Page 322**

In the meantime Aethelflaed, Edward's sister, was building new fortresses each year in English Mercia. ....Her works in 914 included the repair of a pre-Roman camp on Eddisbury hill in Delamere forest. .... In 915 she fortified two sites on the extreme border of her country – Chirbury on a tributary of the Severn, which commanded the easiest road from Shrewsbury into central Wales, and Runcorn on the Mersey.

**Victoria County History      Cheshire Vol. I Pub. 1987  
Page 291**

**ANGLO SAXON FINDS –**

Preston on the Hill - St. Menas flask. Stray find of early medieval flask more likely to have been brought back in post medieval rather than Anglo Saxon period. At Norton Priory Museum.

Runcorn – Castle Rock. Earthworks and ditch, possibly remains of Aethelflaedan burgh. Destroyed in 1868.

**SOCIETY TRANSACTIONS  
Chester Archaeological and Historic Society**

**1<sup>st</sup> series  
Vol 2 Pt. VII                              On Some Anglo Saxon Coins  
(1864)                                      Page 293/94**

Ethelred died and was buried at Gloucester. .... His widow, Ethelfleda, was suffered by her brother to remain in charge of the Mercian province, which she governed solely for 10 or 12 years, and in such manner as to entitle her in history to the name of "the Saxon Amazon". .... In the summer of the following year, 915, says Florence of Worcester, "Ethelfleda, lady of the Mercians, built the town called Eddisbury, and at the close of autumn, another called Warwick"..... From Eddisbury it would seem her attention was directed to the erection of castles at Runcorn and Warburton. It will be noticed that these Cheshire fortresses of Warburton, Runcorn, and Bromborough, were all situate on the Mersey banks; and that their erection had apparently been forced upon her by the continued inroads upon her territories from the Danish settlements in Wirral.

The Bridgewater Trustees, with a view to improve the channel of the Mersey at this point, are about immediately (for the contract is actually signed) to remove the rocky promontory near Runcorn church as being a manifest hindrance to the navigation. In doing this they will totally obliterate the Saxon earthworks at Runcorn.

## **Chetham Society**

### **1<sup>st</sup> series**

**Vol. 8**

**(1845)**

**Notitia Cestriensis**

**Page 353**

An.[no] 916, Ethelfleda, or Elflida, relict of Ethelred, Duke of Mercia under Alfred, ye 8<sup>th</sup> Saxon King, built a Town here, as Florentius, Huntington, and other Histor.[ians] mention. A towne and castle 5 says Stow.

- 5    There are now no remains of the castle; its site is marked by a triangular piece of land opposite the gap which juts into the river by which it was defended. It was cut off from the land by a ditch six yards in breadth.

### **2nd series**

**Vol. 103**

**(1939)**

**Historical Geography of South West Lancashire**

**Page 20**

..... in 914 and 915 the Mercians, under Aethelflaed, sister of Edward the Elder, built the fortresses of Eadesbyrig (possibly situated at Eddisbury in Cheshire) and at Rumcofa (Runcorn) .....

## **Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire**

**Vol. 4**

**(1852)**

**The Barons of Chester**

**Pages 125/26**

In AD 910 Edward the Elder having defeated the Danes in a great battle at Wodensfield, fortified the confines of Northumbria and Mercia. In Chester he fortified Chester itself, Runcorn and Thelwall.

## **Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society**

**Vol. 85**

**(1988)**

**The Cheshire Burghs and the Mercian Frontier to 924**

**Pages 200/01**

Page 200 has a map of North-west Mercia and its assailants 907 – 924 on which the burghs are named and dated.

The so called “Mercian Register” recorded that burghs were constructed at Bremesbyrig in 910, Scergeat in 912, Tamworth and Stafford in 913, Eddisbury and Warwick in 914 and Chirbury, Weardbyrig and Runcorn in 915.

## **Lancashire and Cheshire Record Society**

**No references**

## **JOURNALS AND PERIODICALS**

### **Cheshire Sheaf**

**First series**

**No references**

**New series**

**No references**

**3<sup>rd</sup> series**

**No references**

### **Cheshire Life**

**No references**

### **Palatine Notebook**

**No references**

## **GUIDES AND DIRECTORIES**

**No references**