

# The Danelaw

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After being given a present of some burnt cakes, Alfred, King of Wessex raised a new army and eventually beat the Viking army under Guthrun. So comprehensive was the victory that Guthrun sued for peace and the boundary between English and Danish territories was stabilised some time around 886 to 890. This boundary follows the river through the Park.

From London, the border ran up the River Lea to its source at Leagrave. From here the obvious line is across to Watling Street, a distance of about 5 miles. Instead, it follows a direct line north to Bedford, then upstream following the River Great Ouse to the ford at Watling Street. Walking the ground today there is no definable boundary or topographic feature to be seen.

This puts Harrold, Carlton, Chellington and Odell in an interesting position. Bedford was clearly important enough to be mentioned in the treaty but the four villages here are clearly border outposts controlling river crossing or crossings. All four villages are built away from the river and not on a direct line of the present day crossing point. Thus, there had to be further fords along the river: to Felmersham; Harrold-Carlton and Harrold-Stevington.

It also follows that the modern main roads are a later addition as the villages are spaced out along the roads parallel to the river and running along the lowest terrace.

The villages grew up at crossing points on both sides to control trade and smuggling. Also this road would expedite the rapid deployment of defence forces protecting the border.

It would be reasonable to expect the place names of the villages to reflect this political reality. In fact the etymologies are somewhat complex with Old English and Old Scandinavian occurring on both sides of the river. Carlton (Viking Carl) is on the English side for instance

Although the concept of Danelaw survived into Norman times, the boundary was fluid and the Danes occupied Bedford intermittently from approx 886 to 1010.

As you walk the river meadow today there is no indication that an international boundary is present. It is just possible that the headland created by the backwater is an old part of England subsumed into Danelaw.

