

Queen Ethelfleda and 1100 years since the founding of Warwick

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Queen Ethelfleda

Queen Ethelfleda, or Æthelflæd, Lady of the Mercians, was the daughter of the Anglo-Saxon king, Alfred the Great. At the time of her birth in the late ninth century, England was composed of several kingdoms and was under attack from the Vikings, whose successful campaigns were demonstrated by their conquest of substantial territory to the north and east of Warwickshire known as Danelaw. Ethelfleda is famed for ruling the English Kingdom of Mercia for 34 years and leading its army to victory against the Danes.

Conquest of Mercia and settlement in Warwick

After the death of her husband, Ethelred, Lord of Mercia, who had driven the Vikings out of part of Mercia, Ethelfleda became the Lady of the Mercians and was accepted as ruler. Alongside her brother Edward, she set about establishing 'burhs', or fortified settlements to consolidate the defence of English territory and provide bases for attacks on Danelaw settlements.

In 914, what we now know as Warwick was chosen as one of these burhs and was established on a hilltop site. 2014 marks the 1100th anniversary of the founding of this settlement.

Ethelfleda died in Tamworth in 918 and was buried in Gloucester. A statue of her stands in the grounds of Tamworth Castle and was re-dedicated last year to commemorate 1100 years since she built the burh in Tamworth.

Ethelfleda and the Warwick Pageant of 1906

While there are no surviving records directly related to Ethelfleda in the Record Office, she did feature as one of the tableaux selected in the Warwick Pageant of 1906. Clearly there was a certain amount of historical licence employed in terms of dates, as the pageant was promoted as a “Celebration of the Thousandth Anniversary of the Conquest of Mercia by Queen Ethelfleda”. In Episode three of the pageant, she is shown sparing the lives of Danish prisoners in favour of their conversion to Christianity. The photograph depicts Ethelfleda, appropriately dressed as a warrior queen with armour and a spear.

The Warwick Pageant, 1906

The Warwick Pageant, held from July 2-7 1906 was arranged and invented by the dramatist, Louis N. Parker. Taking place on the grounds of Warwick Castle, it followed the early 20th century trend for historical pageants. The leading principle of the pageant was that as far as possible, everything used should be designed and made in Warwick. As a result 300 local women made 1,400 of the costumes for the 2000 performers, as well as much of the set being made in Warwick too. The cost of the pageant was estimated at around £12,000 (over £1 million at today's rate).

It was suggested that another pageant should be planned for 1914 to mark 1000 years since the founding of Warwick; however the close proximity to the 1906 pageant and the Great War put a stop to further discussion.

References

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