

# English Heritage Battlefield Report: Hastings 1066

**Hastings (14 October 1066)**

**Parish:** Battle

**District:** Rother

**County:** East Sussex

**Grid Ref:** TQ 748154

## Historical Context

Harold Godwinson's accession to the throne of England in January 1066 was seen by Duke William of Normandy as both a direct political challenge and as a deep personal insult. As recently as 1064 Harold had sworn an oath of fealty to William at Bonneville-sur-Touques, albeit in difficult circumstances, and in 1051 Edward the Confessor had designated William as his heir. William decided to use force to take the crown that he had been denied, and he assembled an invasion fleet which landed at Pevensey on 28 September 1066. When this news reached Harold, who was returning from his victory over the Danes at Stamford Bridge in Yorkshire, he pressed on to London arriving there about 6 October.

Rather than wait to gather his full strength from the surrounding shires and from troops returning from the North, Harold quickly marched from London and arrived near the modern town of Battle in Sussex during the night of 13-14 October. Learning of his enemy's advance, William was determined to seize the chance of action and by 8 O'Clock on the morning of 14 October he had brought his army to Telham Hill, barely a mile from Harold's position on a ridge crossing a spur of the Downs running south from the forest of Andredsweald.

## Location and Description of the Battlefield

There is little argument as to the location of the battlefield of Hastings. Indeed some historians have espoused a degree of certainty which is rarely met when dealing with battlefields: '...for nothing in history is surer than that the high altar of Battle Abbey was erected before 1074 by King William's express order on the precise spot where King Harold fell.'<sup>1</sup>

The battlefield lies 6 miles north-west of Hastings in the immediate environs of the town of Battle. Battle Abbey, founded about AD 1070 at William's express command to atone for the slaughter of the battlefield and largely completed by AD 1100, stands on the ridge (Santlache or Senlac) where the Anglo-Saxons deployed. Harold's choice of ground offered an excellent defensive position with the rear protected against mounted assault by ravines and forest, the flanks guarded by sharply falling ground, and the front bolstered by short, steep slopes and marshy conditions. The Normans would thus have to launch a frontal assault across the unpromising ground between Senlac Ridge and Telham Hill.

The tradition that the high altar of Battle Abbey marks the precise spot where Harold raised his standard and was subsequently killed, represents the main evidence for siting the Anglo-Saxon deployment on Senlac Ridge. The chronicle record provides only an approximate location of the fighting. William of Poitiers, in the earliest and most detailed account of the battle, simply states that Harold's army 'took up their position on higher ground, on a hill abutting the forest through which they had just come.'<sup>2</sup> The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* mentions that Harold confronted William at 'the hoary apple tree'<sup>3</sup> which is usually identified as on Caldbec Hill to the

north of the ridge and Battle Abbey. The assumption made is that Harold then ordered his troops forward, deployed them in an east-west orientation along the crest of Senlac Ridge, and waited for the Normans to attack.

The extent of the Anglo-Saxon deployment depends in large measure upon the strength of their army at the start of the battle. The size of the armies engaged at Hastings has been the subject of considerable research and conjecture, but it is now accepted that chronicle estimates ranging from an Anglo-Saxon host of between 400,000 and 1.2 million men and a Norman army of 60,000 can be ignored. It is in fact probable that neither side exceeded a figure of approximately 8,000 fighting men. Clearly Harold was forced to leave a significant proportion of his infantry and archers in the north after Stamford Bridge, and he may have fielded the smaller force at Hastings with perhaps no more than 5,000-7,000 men under his command.<sup>4</sup> There is, however, no reliable evidence of exactly how many men fought in the battle.

The Anglo-Saxon deployment on Senlac Ridge was necessarily dense since their front rank, running east to west, barely occupied 700 yards. This rank was probably formed by in the region of 1,000 men. Its centre was positioned at the later site of the high altar, and it was supported by perhaps a further five or six ranks deployed behind. William of Poitiers described the Anglo-Saxon line as being 'on foot and in very close order', and their ranks during the battle as 'so closely massed together that even the dead had not space in which to fall'.<sup>5</sup> To the south, William deployed his army at the foot of the slope leading down from the ridge in three main groups.

The location of an encounter between Norman horsemen and English infantry, supposedly during the latter's flight from the battlefield, has given rise to considerable speculation. The incident was referred to by William of Poitiers:

But some of those who retreated took courage to renew the struggle on more favourable ground. This was a steep valley intersected with ditches. These people, descended from the ancient Saxons (the fiercest of men), are always by nature eager for battle, and they could only be brought down by the greatest valour. Had they not recently defeated with ease the king of Norway at the head of a fine army?

The duke who was following the victorious standards did not turn from his course when he saw these enemy troops rallying. Although he thought that reinforcements had joined his foes he stood firm. Armed only with a broken lance he was more formidable than others who brandished long javelins. With a harsh voice he called to Eustace of Boulogne, who with fifty knights was turning in flight, and was about to give the signal for retreat. This man came up to the duke and said in his ear that he ought to retire since he would court death if he went forward. But at the very moment when he uttered the words Eustace was struck between the shoulders with such force that blood gushed out from mouth and nose, and half dead he only made his escape with the aid of his followers. The duke, however, who was superior to all fear and dishonour, attacked and beat back his enemies. In this dangerous phase of the battle many Norman nobles were killed since the nature of the ground did not permit them to display their prowess to full advantage.<sup>6</sup>

The location of this temporary setback for the Normans has become identified as a deep fosse or ravine into which their horsemen rode in the failing light of evening. Although described by the Battle Abbey Chronicle of the late twelfth century as 'an immense ditch'<sup>7</sup> then known as the *Malfosse*, the chronicler failed to specify its position in relation to the battlefield. He also appears to have developed an independent detail of the pursuit (supported elsewhere only by the earlier writer Ordericus Vitalis), for William of Poitiers makes no mention of Norman horsemen plunging into a ditch or of the *Malfosse*. Its supposed location has been identified as being some 900 yards to the north-west of Battle Abbey, but the story as a whole may relate to an incident during the course of the battle itself.

## Landscape Evolution

The slopes of Senlac Ridge and Telham Hill in 1066 were probably uncultivated heathland. The clay valley between was swampy and undrained. To the north, behind Senlac Ridge, was the dense forest of the Weald.

In c1070 William had ordered an abbey to be built on the Battlefield site with the church's high altar on the spot where Harold had fallen. To achieve this, the top of the hill (Senlac Ridge) had to be levelled, with the earth being pushed down the slopes into the swampy valley. William also endowed the abbey with estates, including all land within a one and half mile radius of the high altar of the abbey church. Over the following five centuries, this land became a well managed estate, with the marshes dammed for a series of fishponds and the rest of the battlefield a peaceful part of the abbey's park. Outside the gatehouse, the town of Battle grew to accommodate all the servants, estate workers and suppliers that were required by the abbey.

After the Dissolution of the abbey in 1538, the estate passed into private hands. The abbey buildings were much changed in later years into more comfortable domestic residences. During the 17th to 19th centuries the fishponds were adapted to provide water power for the gunpowder mills on the southern boundary.

## The Battle: its sources and interpretation

There is not another battle in English History which can lay claim to a bibliography even approaching the length of that generated by Hastings and the subsequent Conquest. Secondary sources, whether in the form of monographs or journal articles are legion, and the longest single work, E A Freeman's *The History of the Norman Conquest, Its Causes and Its Results* (1867-79) runs to six volumes and over a million words. Original and contemporary sources are, however, far fewer in number.

Although there is no eyewitness account of the Battle of Hastings, there are six leading sources which have been regarded as contemporary and, in all but two cases, independent: the *Gesta Willelmi Ducis Normannorum et Regis Anglorum* by William of Poitiers, Archdeacon of Lisieux; a poem by Baudri, Abbot of Bourgueil addressed to William's daughter Adela; a poem on the battle attributed to Guy, Bishop of Amiens; the *Anglo Saxon Chronicle*; William of Jumièges *Gesta Normannorum Ducum*; and, of course, the Bayeux Tapestry.

William of Poitier is taken as the main authority for the course and events of the battle for, although he was not present at Hastings, he was William's chaplain and had been a comrade-in-arms with the men who fought there. He thus not only understood military matters but also had ample opportunity to discuss the fighting with the main Norman protagonists. In common with most sources documenting the battle, William tells his story from the Norman viewpoint and with a distinct bias, but his narrative, written between 1071-1076, is of fundamental importance to any appreciation of the Battle of Hastings.

Although the earliest and most detailed account of the battle is to be found in William of Poitiers, other writers also make a contribution to our knowledge of the fighting and the events which led up to it. There is doubt concerning the authorship of the poem (printed as *Widonis Carmen de Hastingae Proelio*) attributed to Guy of Amiens, and it is evident that Guy copied from William of Poitiers. The author may also have copied from William of Malmesbury, particularly concerning the fact that the Normans might have advanced into battle singing the song of Roland. If so then the poem must have been written after 1125 and it has latterly been deemed to be unacceptable as a contemporary or useful source for the battle. Baudri's poem, written between 1099-1102, also leans heavily on William of Poitier's narrative.

William of Jumièges history appears to have been written in 1070 or 1071 and thus may be regarded as both contemporary and independent. Unfortunately William deals with Hastings in the course of a few sentences, but he does record an interesting point concerning the death of Harold. Equally regrettably, the *Anglo Saxon Chronicle* makes no mention of the battle itself, although it provides evidence for the view that Harold was

taken by surprise. The Bayeux tapestry is a unique pictorial record of the battle, the events which led up to it, and the art of war practised by both the Saxons and the Normans. As such its value as a work of art is outweighed by its importance as a primary source for the Battle of Hastings and the history of England. It is now generally agreed that the Tapestry was commissioned by William's half-brother, Odo, the Bishop of Bayeux, who fought in the battle, and that it was embroidered in workshops around Canterbury. If an examination of the Battle of Hastings is based solely on the study of primary sources, such as the Tapestry and William of Poitiers, a number of the problems which have exercised historians over many years are removed or resolved.

Harold, spurred into action by news of Norman depredations in the country around Pevensey, was intending, according to William of Poitiers, to take the Normans by surprise, possibly launching a night attack upon their camp. He would then be able to trap them against the sea and the English fleet:

The king was the more furious because he had heard that the Normans had laid waste the neighbourhood of their camp and he planned to take them unawares by a surprise or night attack. Further, in order to prevent their escape, he sent out a fleet of seven hundred armed vessels to block their passage home.<sup>8</sup>

That Harold was seeking to surprise William is entirely consistent with his tactics at Stamford Bridge and also with the possibility that his force may well have been inferior to the enemy. It is more unlikely that the English were planning a night attack, and in the event Harold's plans misfired for William, as shown in the Bayeux Tapestry<sup>9</sup>, received news of the approach of the English force from his scouts on 13 October. William seems to have been determined to force a battle at the first opportunity, and instead of waiting to be attacked at Hastings he advanced to meet the English early on the morning of 14 October.

As William's army reached the crest of Telham Hill, the highest point between Hastings and modern town of Battle, it was already clear that his scouts had located the English bivouac on Senlac Ridge. Whether the English were ready for battle is open to question and the *Anglo Saxon Chronicle* (Manuscript D) states explicitly that William's appearance at Telham, only a little over a mile from the English position, took Harold by surprise:

...and William came against him unawares, before his people were set in order.<sup>10</sup>

If Harold was contemplating surprising the Norman camp, and if he in turn was surprised by William's advance, then the argument advanced by E A Freeman and his followers (see below) that the English erected a palisade on Senlac Ridge collapses. There would simply not have been time for such a fortification to be constructed.

Having descended from Telham Hill and deployed his army in the valley at the foot of the southern face of Senlac Ridge, William sent his lightly armed infantry and archers forward to assault the English line. The main body of the Norman army advanced behind them in three groups: the Breton auxiliaries on the left, the Norman contingent under William in the centre, and a more heterogeneous collection of French troops on the right. As a general principle of deployment the second rank was composed of the more heavily armed infantry, and the third rank of horsemen. At first the Normans were able to maintain the momentum of their movement up the slopes of the ridge:

The duke and his men, in no way dismayed by the difficulty of the ground, came slowly up the hill and the terrible sound of trumpets on both sides signalled the beginning of the battle. The eager boldness of the Normans gave them the advantage of attack, even as in a trial for theft it is the prosecuting counsel who speaks first. In such wise the Norman foot drawing nearer provoked the English by raining death and wounds upon them with their missiles. But the English resisted valiantly, each man according to his strength, and they hurled back spears and

javelins and weapons of all kinds together with axes and stones fastened to pieces of wood. You would have thought to see our men overwhelmed by this death-dealing weight of projectiles. The knights came after the chief, being in the rearmost rank, and all disdaining to fight at long range were eager to use their swords. The shouts both of the Normans and of the barbarians were drowned in the clash of arms and by the cries of the dying, and for a long time the battle raged with the utmost fury. The English, however, had the advantage of the ground and profited by remaining within their position in close order. They gained further superiority from their numbers, from the impregnable front which they preserved, and most of all from the manner in which their weapons found easy passage through the shields and armour of their enemies. Thus they bravely withstood and successfully repulsed those who were engaging them at close quarters, and inflicted losses upon the men who were shooting missiles at them from a distance.<sup>11</sup>

Although closely supported by mounted knights the Norman infantry failed to penetrate the Anglo-Saxon defence, and despairing of making any impression on Harold's line both foot soldiers and horsemen retreated back down the slope in disorder. A story spread that William had been killed and the Norman army began to falter:

Then the foot-soldiers and the Breton knights, panic-stricken by the violence of the assault, broke in flight before the English and also the auxiliary troops on the left wing, and the whole army of the duke was in danger of retreat. This may be said without disparagement to the unconquerable Norman race. The army of the Roman emperor, containing the soldiers of kings accustomed to victory on sea and land, sometimes fled on the report, true or false, that their leader was dead. And in this case the Normans believed that their duke and lord was killed. Their flight was thus not so much shameful as sad, for their leader was their greatest solace.<sup>12</sup>

It was the crisis of the battle and the moment at which Harold might have taken the initiative; for had he been able to launch a general advance and then control its forward movement the Norman retreat could have been turned into rout. Many of the English troops did indeed follow the Normans down the slope, but their advance was uncoordinated and ill-disciplined. William had time in which to take quick and effective action to restore his army's morale:

Seeing a large part of the hostile host pursuing his own troops, the prince thrust himself in front of those in flight, shouting at them and threatening them with his spear. Staying their retreat, he took off his helmet, and standing before them bareheaded he cried: "Look at me well. I am still alive and by the grace of God I shall yet prove victor. What is this madness which makes you fly, and what way is open for your retreat? You are allowing yourselves to be pursued and killed by men whom you could slaughter like cattle. You are throwing away victory and lasting glory, rushing into ruin and incurring abiding disgrace. And all for naught since by flight none of you can escape destruction."

With these words he restored their courage, and leaping to the front and wielding his death-dealing sword, he defied the enemy who merited death for their disloyalty to him their prince.<sup>13</sup>

The Norman knights turned on their pursuers, who had so rashly surrendered their advantage of ground, and cut them down almost to a man. Despite the casualties suffered by the English their line still held, and the Normans created the impression of a second and third retreat to lure more of the enemy down the slope of the ridge:

Realising that they could not without severe loss overcome an army massed so strongly in close formation, the Normans and their allies feigned flight and simulated a retreat, for they recalled that only a short while ago their flight had given them an advantage. The barbarians thinking

victory within their grasp shouted with triumph, and heaping insults upon our men, threatened utterly to destroy them. Several thousand of them, as before, gave rapid pursuit to those whom they thought to be in flight; but the Normans suddenly wheeling their horses surrounded them and cut down their pursuers so that not one was left alive. Twice was this ruse employed with the utmost success, and then they attacked those that remained with redoubled fury.<sup>14</sup>

A savage battle of attrition now set in with Norman archers loosing their arrows skywards so that they fell beyond the shields of the English, and William's infantry and knights battering at the steadily shrinking enemy line. For William of Poitiers the Duke's contribution to victory was understandably of vital significance:

This army was still formidable and very difficult to overwhelm. Indeed this was a battle of a new type: one side vigorously attacking; the other resisting as if rooted to the ground. At last the English began to weary, and as if confessing their crime in their defeat they submitted to their punishment. The Normans threw and struck and pieced. The movements of those who were cut down to death appeared greater than that of the living; and those who were lightly wounded could not escape because of the density of the formation but were crushed in the throng. Thus fortune crowned the triumph of William.

There were present in this battle: Eustace, count of Boulogne; William, son of Richard, count of Evreux; Geoffrey, son of Rotrou, count of Mortagne; William fitz Osbern; Haimo, *vicomte* of Thouars; Walter Giffard; Hugh of Montfort-sur-Risle; Rudolf of Tosny; Hugh of Grantmesnil; William of Warenne; and many other most renowned warriors whose names are worthy to be commemorated in histories among the bravest soldiers of all time. But Duke William excelled them all both in bravery and soldier-craft, so that one might esteem him as at least the equal of the most praised generals of ancient Greece and Rome. He dominated this battle, checking his own men in flight, strengthening their spirit, and sharing their dangers. He bade them come with him, more often than he ordered them to go in front of him. Thus it may be understood how he led them by his valour and gave them courage. At the mere sight of this wonderful and redoubtable knight, many of his enemies lost heart even before they received a scratch. Thrice his horse fell under him; thrice he leapt upon the ground; and thrice he quickly avenged the death of his steed. It was here that one could see his prowess, and mark at once the strength of his arm and the height of his spirit. His sharp sword pierced shields, helmets and armour, and not a few felt the weight of his shield. His knights seeing him thus fight on foot were filled with wonder, and although many were wounded they took new heart. Some weakened by loss of blood went on resisting, supported by their shields, and others unable themselves to carry on the struggle, urged on their comrades by voice and gesture to follow the duke. "Surely," they cried, "you will not let victory slip from your hands." William himself came to the rescue of many....<sup>15</sup>

Both armies were close to exhaustion but the English with Harold now dead suddenly gave way, disintegrating in bloody flight:

Evening was now falling, and the English saw that they could not hold out much longer against the Normans. They knew they had lost a great part of their army, and they knew also that their king with two of his brothers and many of their greatest men had fallen. Those who remained were almost exhausted, and they realised that they could expect no more help. They saw the Normans, whose numbers had not been much diminished, attack them with even greater fury than at the beginning of the battle, as if the day's fighting had actually increased their vigour. Dismayed at the implacable bearing of the duke who spared none who came against him and whose prowess could not rest until victory was won, they began to fly as swiftly as they could, some on horseback, some on foot, some along the roads, but most over the trackless

country. Many lay on the ground bathed in blood, others who struggled to their feet found themselves too weak to escape, while a few, although disabled, were given strength to move by fear. Many left their corpses in the depths of the forest, and others were found by their pursuers lying by the roadside. Although ignorant of the countryside the Normans eagerly carried on the pursuit, and striking the rebels in the back brought a happy end to this famous victory. Many fallen to the ground were trampled to death under the hooves of runaway horses.

Having thus regained his superiority, the duke returned to the main battlefield, and he could not gaze without pity on the carnage, although the slain were evil men, and although it is good and glorious in a just war to kill a tyrant. The bloodstained battle-ground was covered with the flower of the youth and nobility of England. The two brothers of the king were found near him, and Harold himself stripped of all badges of honour could not be identified by his face, but only by certain marks on his body. His corpse was brought into the duke's camp, and William gave it for burial to William, surnamed Malet, and not to Harold's mother, who offered for the body of her beloved son its weight in gold. For the duke thought it unseemly to receive money for such merchandise, and equally he considered it wrong that Harold should be buried as his mother wished, since so many men lay unburied because of his avarice.<sup>16</sup>

Chroniclers compiling their works in the twelfth century in England also recorded details of Hastings, but with more brevity than writers such as William of Poitiers. William of Malmesbury, for example, although unable to resist applying the standard conventions of the battle chronicler, is both well informed and economical:

The courageous leaders mutually prepared for battle, each according to his national custom. The English, as we have heard, passed the night without sleep, in drinking and singing, and in the morning, proceeded without delay towards the enemy; all were on foot, armed with battle-axes, and covering themselves in front by the junction of their shields, they formed an impenetrable body, which would have secured their safety that day, had not the Normans, by a feigned flight, induced them to open their ranks, which till that time, according to their custom, were closely compacted. The king himself on foot, stood, with his brother, near the stander; in order that, while all shared equal danger, none might think of retreating. This standard William sent, after the victory, to the pope; it was sumptuously embroidered, with gold and precious stones, in the form of a man fighting.

On the other side, the Normans passed the whole night in confessing their sins, and received the sacrament in the morning: their infantry, with bows and arrows, formed the vanguard, while their cavalry, divided into wings, were thrown back. The earl, with serene countenance, declaring aloud, that God would favour his, as being the righteous side, called for his arms; and presently, when, through the hurry of his attendants, he had put on his hauberk the hind part before, he corrected the mistake with a laugh; saying, 'My dukedom shall be turned into a kingdom'. Then beginning the song of Roland, that the warlike example of that man might stimulate the soldiers, and calling on God for assistance, the battle commenced on both sides. They fought with ardour, neither giving ground, for great part of the day. Finding this, William gave a signal to his party, that, by a feigned flight, they should retreat. Through this device, the close body of the English, opening for the purpose of cutting down the straggling enemy, brought upon itself swift destruction; for the Normans, facing about, attacked them thus disordered, and compelled them to fly. In this manner, deceived by a strategem, they met an honourable death in avenging their country; nor indeed were they at all wanting to their own revenge, as, by frequently making a stand, they slaughtered their pursuers in heaps: for, getting possession of an eminence, they drove down the Normans, when roused with

indignation and anxiously striving to gain the higher ground, into the valley beneath, where, easily hurling their javelins and rolling down stones on them as they stood below, they destroyed them to a man. Besides, by a short passage, with which they were acquainted, avoiding a deep ditch, they trod under foot such a multitude of their enemies in that place, that they made the hollow level with the plain, by the heaps of carcasses. The vicissitude of first one party conquering, and then the other, prevailed as long as the life of Harold continued; but when he fell, from having his brain pierced with an arrow, the flight of the English ceased not until night. The valour of both leaders was here eminently conspicuous.<sup>17</sup>

Harold's death is seen by William of Malmesbury and other chroniclers as the ultimate turning point in the battle. While Harold lived, the English were able to sustain the ebb and flow of combat and maintain the integrity of their defence. Once Harold had fallen, and with the approach of night, his army lost the focus of its resistance and its belief in victory. It was then only a short time before the majority of the English sought safety away from the battlefield. The manner of Harold's death has proved a fertile ground for debate. William of Malmesbury, quoted above, stated that Harold's brain was 'pierced with an arrow'. William of Jumièges asserted that Harold died of multiple wounds:

Harold himself, fighting amid the front rank of his army, fell covered with deadly wounds.<sup>18</sup>

The popular tradition of Harold's death is that he was struck in the eye by an arrow and died almost immediately from this wound. Indeed, the Bayeux Tapestry<sup>19</sup>, under the legend 'Hic Harold rex interfectus est', appears to show Harold attempting to pluck an arrow from his eye. But the evidence of the Tapestry is ambivalent. The word 'Harold' appears over the knight who has been struck by an arrow, and the phrase 'interfectus est' above a figure falling backwards as he is cut down by the sword of a horseman. Is Harold represented by both figures or only one? In the 1960s it had been suggested<sup>20</sup> that the figures were in two quite separate scenes, and that the individual clutching the arrow was a housecarl who was still very much alive, and who is part of the scene depicting the defence of the standard. The figure which has just been slashed by the horseman was in fact Harold. By the 1970s, in contrast, it had been inferred<sup>21</sup> that the Tapestry did intend both figures to represent Harold, and that he was first mortally wounded by an arrow and then attacked by a mounted knight. What is clear is that nineteenth-century restorers of the Tapestry, ignoring original stitch holes which showed that the arrow had struck the housecarl's/Harold's helmet, repositioned the arrow so that it accorded with tradition by striking the figure in the eye.

Two further aspects of the battle have given rise to historical controversy: the question of the English shield wall or palisade, and the practicality of the feigned flight. Harold's army fought on foot and the English host deployed in a constricted area in a necessarily tight formation. They were facing a trained force that was well supplied with horsemen and archers, and Harold therefore choose to fight from a naturally strong defensive position. For some historians this was not enough; surely the English would have taken steps to reinforce their position with some kind of barrier that would impede both horsemen and archers? This argument was presented at its most extreme in England by A E Freeman<sup>22</sup> and in Germany by General G Köhler<sup>23</sup>. Freeman asserts that the English constructed a palisade across the front of their position with three exits for the passage of slingers and archers. Whereas Freeman believed Harold's palisade to have been a solid wooden barrier, Köhler describes it as 'a series of posts at certain intervals, dug in around each unit, which were inclined obliquely forward with their iron points directed toward the chests of the enemy horses. ...The posts were joined together by interwoven material up to a height of 3 or 4 feet apparently as a protection against the enemy's mounted troops, so that the horses, in order to get into the unit, first had to jump'.

Neither William of Poitiers nor the Bayeux Tapestry mention a structure of this nature and it seems fanciful to suppose that Harold's troops, exhausted by their march from London, would be able to summon up the energy required to construct such an edifice during the night before the battle. The only reliable evidence for Harold's deployment is William of Poitiers' statement that the English 'drew themselves up on foot and in very close order'. The Tapestry shows groups of housecarls standing side-by-side with their shields overlapping, and this



has given rise to an interpretation which reduces Freeman's obstacle from a solid barrier to a 'shield wall'. This is more acceptable though it should not be taken to imply that such a shield wall was a continuous feature of the English line. Each section of the Tapestry includes only a limited number of figures, and the fact that six housecarls are shown with shields interlinked does not prove that they were, or were not, part of a single line stretching along the entire English front. There would perforce be gaps in such a line to facilitate the advance and retirement of archers and slingers, and in close combat the line would tend to open to enable the housecarls to wield their weapons.

It is generally accepted that although Harold's death was the immediate cause of the English collapse, their resistance was seriously weakened by the advance of portions of Harold's army down the slope in front of the English position. This enabled the Norman horsemen to ride down isolated groups of English warriors. According to William of Poitiers this happened on three separate occasions: once when William's troops were pushed back into the valley in near rout, and twice when the Normans apparently made a concerted but feigned retreat. For many historians, such as A E Freeman and J H Round, this was a deliberate tactic employed with calculated precision by the Normans. At the other extreme, historians such as Wilhelm Spatz have argued that a sham flight would have been impossible due to the minimal presence of command and control in a medieval army. Yet there are other instances of feigned flights being used to sound advantage in medieval warfare, and it is possible that small groups of Normans would have been able to simulate flight effectively. This would have pulled probably equally small numbers of Harold's troops down the slope, but cumulatively this was all that would have been required to create a penetrable gap in the English defence.

Essentially, Harold lost the Battle of Hastings because he was forced to adopt the defensive throughout. The Normans were willing to fight on horseback and to combine their knights, archers, and foot soldiers in concerted attacks. The English were only able to counter these tactics by maintaining a close and compact formation on a position of geographical advantage. If they abandoned the defensive the Norman tactics would overwhelm them. Harold was unable to wear down his opponent to the point where the English could safely adopt the offensive, and battles are seldom won by defensive action alone.

### **Indication of Importance**

Few, if any, English battles rival the importance of Hastings. It is celebrated in both academic and popular history as the scene of the death of the last Anglo-Saxon king of England, and as the last battle which led to the conquest of the nation. The loss of Saxon lives at Hastings and in subsequent rebellions, particularly among the land-owning class, undoubtedly facilitated the Norman settlement of England. Many of England's surviving thegns sought exile in Scotland, Scandinavia, or with the Varangian Guards at Constantinople, and the defence of the kingdom became the monopoly of a foreign power. Militarily, the innovation of the Norman Conquest was feudalism and its warlike expressions, the castle and the mounted knight.

In a wider context the Battle of Hastings decided the nature of England's relationship with Latin Europe and Scandinavia for much of the Middle Ages, and it also influenced the development of the ecclesiastical and political institutions of Western Christendom.

At the personal level Hastings was a battle which brought to resolution the personal rivalry of two of eleventh-century Europe's most exceptional leaders. Harold Godwinson's defeat of the Norwegian army at Stamford Bridge demonstrated the Anglo-Saxon king's considerable military skill. Hastings destroyed everything that he had achieved in the north, but his death and defeat at the hands of the Normans did not undermine his military reputation. In an era when superiority in battle tended to be decided relatively quickly, the outcome of Hastings was still finely balanced after six hours of punishing combat. William did not overawe Harold or out-manoeuvre him tactically and the generalship on both sides showed courage and fortitude. It can be said, with the advantage of hindsight, that Harold acted unwisely and impetuously in rushing to defend his earldom on the south coast but, in the last analysis, he commands respect as a soldier for the very fact that he

was able to confront William at Hastings at all after his trial of strength with Hardrada and Tostig at Stamford Bridge.

Hastings impressed contemporaries as a battle in which the tactics of the English defence represented something of a new departure in European warfare. The static solidity and integrity of Harold's battle line was something which appeared to be new to the experience of William's troops. Certainly William of Poitiers regarded it as an innovation in warfare: 'Indeed this was a battle of a new type: one side vigorously attacking; the other resisting as if rooted to the ground.'

Much of the battlefield of Hastings is under the guardianship of English Heritage and the course of the fighting is interpreted on site. It is thus an exceptionally rewarding battlefield for the visitor, and the character of the landscape is unlikely to alter from its present rural condition.

### **Battlefield Area**

The battlefield area boundary defines the outer reasonable limit of the battle, taking into account the positions of the combatants at the outset of fighting and the focal area of the battle itself. It does not include areas over which fighting took place subsequent to the main battle. Wherever possible, the boundary has been drawn so that it is easily appreciated on the ground.

The battlefield boundary incorporates the remaining open areas of Senlac Ridge and the grounds of the former abbey in the north, and the valley bottom in which the Norman army formed up in the south. To the east, the railway embankment makes a pragmatic boundary, while on the western side sufficient room has been allowed for the retreat and subsequent return of the Normans. The battlefield area does not include William's initial forming up point on Telham Hill, since there is no record of any fighting on or near the hill, but the area could be reasonably considered as an important part of the wider setting of the battlefield. The action at the Malfosse has not been included because the differing interpretations of this location cannot be assessed with the currently available evidence.

## Notes

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14. *Ibid.* p241
15. *Ibid.* p241-42
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