

The Battle of Hastings

The Norman conquest of England, led by William the Conqueror, began in 1066 and is one of the most legendary and bloody battles in English history. The battle was fought between the Anglo-Saxons and the Normans and is famously known as the Battle of Hastings. It took place on the south-east of England in Hastings, Sussex, over 950 years ago and changed the course of English history and culture forever.

In January 1066, the English king (Edward the Confessor) was dying. Three men now laid claim to the throne of England: William of Normandy from France; Harold Godwinson from England and Harald Hardrada from Norway. They all believed that they were the rightful King of England.

However, on 6th January, one day after Edward's death, Harold Godwinson (previously the Earl of Wessex) was crowned King of England. As news spread of Harold's coronation, William and Harald prepared to invade England, planning to kill King Harold and contest the throne.

Harald Hardrada invaded first from the north of England on 25th September. However, his army were easily defeated by the Saxons at the Battle of Stamford Bridge and he and his brother were both killed. King Harold was then notified that the Normans (William's army) had travelled to Pevensey on the south coast of England in 700 ships and were attacking the surrounding countryside. King Harold was infuriated and marched his exhausted troops 300 kilometres back towards the south to stop him.

Harold and his fatigued men reached London eight days later where they were finally allowed to rest. William sent an envoy to King Harold with a message demanding that he concede the throne and declare William as the true King of England. Harold refused and was angered by William's treacherous and arrogant request.

Harold's troops were weary and unprepared for a battle. Whereas William had an army of 15,000 soldiers, King Harold had just 5,000. Harold was advised to wait and allow his army to recover. However, Harold ignored this advice and on the eve of the battle, his troops arrived in Hastings ready to fight. They set up a fortress at the top of a hill, now known as Battle Hill, and formed a shield wall; they stood in a long line and overlapped their shields to form a line of defence. The shield wall provided the best kind of protection from the Norman's flying arrows.

The Battle

On 14th October, at dawn, the battle commenced. Norman infantry raced up the hill on foot to attack Harold's miniscule army. However, they were at a disadvantage as it was hard running up hill. Despite their efforts, they could not break the Saxon shield wall. The battle lasted for approximately thirty minutes. William's forces were held back and they suffered heavy losses.

In the second prong of attack, William ordered his cavalry to charge up the hill. They too were unsuccessful and, even though the Saxons lost many men, they did not manage to break Harold's wall.

Approximately nine hours after the battle began, the Normans attacked once again and eventually managed to break through the Saxon shield wall and the two sides fought hand to hand. William ordered Eustace of Boulogne and some of his best knights to find Harold and kill him. As dusk fell, Harold was dead, the battle was over, and William was victorious.

William apparently fell off his horse at some point during the battle. He got back on quickly so as not to deflate the enthusiasm of his soldiers. If they thought that he was dead, they were likely to retreat or surrender.



On Christmas Day 1066, William of Normandy (now known as William the Conqueror) was crowned as the new King of England. The town of Battle and an abbey that William built after his conquest have both taken their name from this famous battle.

Did You Know...?

The story of the Battle of Hastings was sewn onto a piece of cloth called the Bayeux Tapestry. The tapestry is nearly 70 metres long and 50 centimetres tall and is held in a museum in Normandy. It is considered a very important piece of historical evidence that has provided a lot of information about the battle.

