



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY

THE BATTLE OF GATE FULFORD

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The Battle of Gate, Fulford. 20th Sept 1066

Introduction

Of the 3 major battles of the momentous year of 1066, the battle which took place at Fulford is the least known, yet it was a fierce engagement and one that must have weakened the Viking army led by their infamous leader, King Harald Hardrada of Norway.

WA and Chas Jones

Before we tell the story of the battle, it must be mentioned that Wirral Archaeology have a close relationship with Chas Jones, who has for the last seventeen years, conducted archaeological digs and exploration of the Fulford battlefield and who has made some amazing discoveries.

Chas has categorically proven that in the aftermath of the battle, that the victorious Vikings reprocessed broken weapons and recycled metal objects in the near vicinity of the actual battlefield.

It was our contact with Chas and his subsequent examination of the artefacts which have emerged from the Wirral that demonstrated that a similar process of post battle recycling appears to have occurred on the site discovered by Wirral Archaeology.

Many of the objects from each site have remarkable similarities and in many cases mirror each other. Currently, artefacts from both sites are in the process of undergoing isotopic analysis at Nottingham University. The results will not be available for several months but the hope is that the source of the iron ore in each of the artefacts can be identified.

This is very much an experimental project but it is hoped that it will be the catalyst for building up a database of Viking age iron artefacts.

Other samples from other sites will also be tested in due course.

Back to the battle

Harald Hardrada and the traitorous brother of the English King, Tostig Godwinson are now believed to have utilised the seasonal bore on the river Ouse in order to have made a rapid advance to the outskirts of the city of York.

In an area which today is called the Fulford Ings, the Norse fleet came to anchor on flat ground near to Tostig's palace. A 18th century house now stands on the site of the ancient palace.

(A SHORT DESCRIPTION OF TOSTIG'S TREACHERY IS COVERED IN THE ARTICLE, 'THE BATTLE OF STAMFORD BRIDGE', ON THIS WEBSITE).

The Anglo Saxon defenders within York were taken completely by surprise by Hardrada's lightning advance. The Anglo Saxon leaders were the Earls of Northumberland and Mercia, namely Morcar and his brother Edwin. Both Earls were the nephews of the famed Lady Godiva.

Morcar, according to the Norse King Harald's saga was the senior Commander.

A stream called Germany Beck runs across the Fulford Ings and empties into the river Ouse. Hardrada and Tostig deployed their army on the southern side of the beck looking towards York. King Harald Hardrada positioned his command along Germany Beck nearest to the river Ouse whilst Tostig covered the area where the Roman road forded the beck.

The Battle begins

The battle began at about 10.30 am. Edwin engaged with Hardrada's command whilst Morcar forced the Ford and attacked Tostig. The Anglo Saxon army may have numbered about 5000 men and it is thought that men from the Fyrd of Cheshire Staffordshire, Lancashire, Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire, Derbyshire and Yorkshire formed the Anglo Saxon army.

Edwin had arrived from Chester a few days before the battle, a distance of some 125 miles, so it appears that he had led a speedy forced march to come to the aid of his brother.

Both the northern Earls had their own professional bodyguard with them. These were the feared and deadly Huscarls, Anglo Danish warriors armed with the huge Danish battle axes that would reek havoc at the coming battles of Stamford Bridge and Hastings.

It is unclear as to how many warriors the Vikings brought to the fray. It is believed that Hardrada's invasion force numbered about 10000 men but it is unlikely that he deployed all of them at Fulford. We know that the Vikings lost about 8000 men at the battle of Stamford Bridge, five days later on the 25th of September and that about a 1000 survivors were allowed to sail back to Norway.

The Vikings would suffer significant losses at Fulford so if the figure of 10000 is correct for the invasion force it appears that a 1000 men would die on the banks of Germany beck.

Earl Morcar led his contingent across the Roman ford at Germany beck and charged into Tostig's command. It appears that Morcar's charge pushed Tostig's men back and that they took heavy casualties. The ford is relatively narrow but Morcar's rapid attack initially gained success and the Norse right wing began to buckle.

Hardrada was also struggling against Edwin's force who had successfully repulsed a number of Viking attacks. Hardrada, himself, eventually led a final assault against Edwin's men and this time they broke the Mercian defences. Edwin ordered a retreat but the result battle was still in the balance.

At the ford, Morcar was getting the upper hand. Hardrada realised the danger that Tostig was in and instead of pursuing Edwin's men he led his men to reinforce Tostig at the ford. This tipped the balance in the favour of the Norse, Morcar, however, was able to extract a significant number of his troops from the battlefield as he led them to safety towards the north east.

Fulford was a fierce and hard fought battle and one that came close to inflicting a defeat upon the Vikings. Though the Norse secured the victory, it must have effected them both physically and psychologically. Losses had been considerable and unbeknown to them, king Harold Godwinson was leading an incredible forced march from London with an army intent on destroying the Vikings. He advanced along the Great North road, the great highway built by the Romans and known to us as Ermine street.

Hardrada moved his army to Stamford Bridge on the 24th of September. It appears that he had no idea that Harold Godwinson was so close. Hardrada based himself at Stamford Bridge in order to receive the expected submissions from York and the surrounding areas. 3000 of his men were also based at Riccall, with the ships, some 15 miles to the south of Stamford Bridge.

The following day, the Anglo Saxons destroyed the Viking army. Taken by surprise, Hardrada and Tostig died along with 8000 of their men. The Viking age in England had finally come to an end.