



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY

THE BATTLE OF NORTHAM

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The Sons of Harold Godwinson invade Devon.

Introduction

The battle of Northam took place between the north Devon villages of Appledore and Northam in 1069. Two sons of Harold Godwinson, the English King killed at Hastings on the 14th of October 1066, namely **Godwin and Edmund**, returned to England with the intent of initiating an Anglo-Saxon rebellion to overthrow the Norman King, William.

The Brothers

The two brothers were the sons of Edith Swanneck, Harold Godwinson's unofficial wife and together with a third son, **Magnus**, they had continued to resist the Norman King in the west country. They did so under the control of Harold's mother **Gytha** who encouraged the brothers to resist the Norman occupation.

The centre of resistance and the powerbase of Harold's sons was the city of Exeter. In January 1068, King William personally led a Norman army to the city and besieged it. The siege lasted for some 18 days before the city yielded. Harold's sons and his mother managed to escape by sea to Ireland.

They took refuge with the Irish High King, Diarmait. The Irish High King had been a long - term ally of the Godwinson family and had supported their father and Grandfather, Godwin, when they were exiled by King Edward the Confessor in 1051.

Diarmait, King of Leinster and the Irish High King was one of the most important Kings in Ireland prior to the Norman era. He had defeated several Irish factions and had gained significant victories over the Vikings, including having captured Dublin in 1052.

Diarmait gave the Godwinson brothers a fleet of 52 ships and several hundred troops and they started to raid the coasts of Devon and Cornwall. Sometime in 1068, the brothers and their raiding force of Anglo-Saxons and Irish were brought to battle at Bleadon, possibly in Somerset. Details of this engagement are very sparse but it is believed that a Saxon called **Eadnoth the Staller** led a combined army of Normans and Saxons against the brothers. (Staller was a title introduced by King Cnut and given to the wealthiest thegns who were favoured by the King. Basically, it equated to being a Constable).

Eadnoth

Eadnoth the Staller had served both Edward the Confessor and Harold Godwinson. He is named in the later Domesday book as having held 30 manors throughout Devon, Wiltshire, Somerset and Dorset before the Norman conquest. It also appears that the men of these counties had now given their allegiance to King William and that the sons of the last Anglo-Saxon King would now face the county fyrds and their Norman allies. Little is known about the battle of Bleadon other than Eadnoth the Staller was killed during the fighting. You would have to consider Eadnoth as being a quisling, given that he'd served two Anglo-Saxon Kings and was now serving a Norman conqueror and that he was willing to fight against his own people. **Magnus Godwinson** is not known to have fought in the battle and he is not mentioned again in any records of what was about to take place so there is a presumption that he may have died by 1068, but it cannot be confirmed either way.

The Godwinsons

The two remaining Godwinson brothers, **Godwin and Edmund** continued with their raiding after the battle, so the inference is, is that they were victorious at Bleadon or that they had been able to extract themselves with little loss to either men or reputation.

It is known that they returned to Ireland where they overwintered but they returned to Devon in June 1069 with a fleet of 64 ships.

After raiding several villages, the Godwinson's were confronted by a Norman army at Northam. The Norman army was led by Brian of Brittany, a second cousin of King William, and a Norman noble called William De Vauville. Brian led a large contingent of Breton Knights.

Forced Retreat

It appears that the Saxons were forced to retreat to their ships which were beached on the sand at Appledore. They needed to hold their position until the tide came in. It is known that they formed a shield wall in front of their ships and that they held the Normans at bay for several hours. The shield wall was not broken by the Normans though the Saxons took heavy casualties. As nightfall approached the tide came in and remaining Saxons were able to make their escape. It is recorded that the Anglo-Saxons had 1700 men killed in the battle. The Norman casualties are unknown.

Other sources suggest that the Norman army was supported by Anglo-Saxon troops from Exeter. The Godwinson brothers returned to Ireland where Diarmait told them that he could no longer give them refuge or supply them with any further military assistance. The brothers went to Denmark where they sought the help of King Sweyn II Estridsson. It would appear that they never got any assistance and the two brothers then disappeared from history and their fates remain unknown.

The Godwinson's had a sister, also called Gytha after King Harold Godwinson's mother. All we know about her is that she was married to Vladimir Monomakh, Prince of Smolensk in or about 1075. Most people think that Anglo-Saxon England ended at Hastings and that the battle resulted in the submission of the English. This is simply not true. Resistance was both violent and prolonged as can be seen by reading our account of the 'Harrowing of the North' on this website.