



WIRRAL ARCHAEOLOGY

THE HARRYING OF THE NORTH.

THE REAL END OF ANGLO SAXON ENGLAND.

Versioning

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The Harrying of the North.

Introduction

After Duke William's victory at the battle of Hastings on the 14th of October 1066 there is a general acceptance that England was completely subjugated by the Normans and that the English population was totally pacified. This was not the case and the Normans would pay a high price in both blood and treasure to finally establish dominance.

Hastings

Hastings was such a close run battle that if the English had held the Normans at bay for just another half hour, then it was likely that William would have been defeated and that his invasion would have failed. For the Anglo Saxons, the loss of the battle had serious consequences, not because they had suffered a military defeat but because virtually all the capable commanders and nobility who could have organised a significant resistance, perished at Hastings.

After the battle, William would move his army to London but he faced a determined attack by the English at Southwark bridge, led by one Ansgar. The Normans initially took control of London Bridge but the Saxons regrouped and their counter attack was so ferocious that the Normans retreated, burning the suburb of Southwark as they did so.

After negotiations, William was allowed to enter London and occupy the city. He would subsequently be crowned as King of England on Christmas Day in Westminster Abbey.

What a tumultuous year 1066 had been. Two great battles fought in the north at Fulford and Stamford bridge, with the latter effectively bringing the Viking age in England to an end and cumulating in the game changing battle of Hastings. Two Kings and a Duke fighting for supremacy and the right to rule England. The results could have been so very different.

William

Following the Crowning of William the Normans set about the distribution of land amongst themselves, stripping the Anglo Saxon nobility of their estates. Very few Anglo Saxons were permitted to keep their lands, but two of the very few were the Northern Earls Morcar and Edwin. These brothers and, incidentally, the nephews of Lady Godiva, controlled Northumberland and Mercia respectively, with Edwin based in Chester, had faced Harald Hardrada at the battle of Fulford and both were experienced and capable warlords.

The North

The north of England's population was a mix of Saxon and Viking peoples who had developed their own regional culture. They considered themselves to be independent from southern rule and they would prove to be hostile to the Normans.

Although the Vikings had suffered a catastrophic military defeat at Stamford bridge, they still had close ties of kinship with many Northumbrians and the Anglo-Scandinavian population of the north would have accepted Viking overlordship rather than that of the Normans. War was virtually assured and war there would be.

William had seen the potential for rebellion and he tried to curry favour with both Edwin and Morcar and also, with another powerful Saxon Lord, Waltheof, a powerful Northumbrian Earl.

After the death of Harold, there was one remaining Anglo Saxon claimant to the throne, Edgar the Atheling. He was the last remaining male belonging to the Royal Anglo Saxon line of Cerdic of Wessex and immediately after Hastings he was declared King by the Witanagemot, though he would never be actually crowned.

Morcar and Edwin

Morcar and Edwin, at this point were still 'sitting on the fence' so to speak. They'd retained their positions solely because they had not been at Hastings. They had each held some hope that either one of them would have been elected as King but though they gave their support to Edgar, they were hesitant in organising a military response against the Normans and they both initially submitted to William which also ensured that Edgar the Atheling had to do the same.

William kept Edwin, Morcar and Edgar at his court and appointed two Anglo Saxon Earls as his representatives in the North. The first 'Governor' was one Gopsig who was assassinated in 1067, whilst the second was one Gospatric, who turned on William and support a rebellion in the midlands.

Edwin, Morcar and Edgar all remained at William's court until 1068 before they fled to the north where they would join the rebellions against the King.

William had been forced, as early as 1067, to deal with uprisings in Kent and on the Welsh Marches. By 1068, the West Country had rebelled and in 1069, two surviving sons of Harold Godwinson arrived from Ireland with an army and a full scale battle took place at Northam in Devon. This battle was a long fought one but the Normans, supported by the fyrd of Exeter defeated Harold's sons who fled back to Ireland. Much of England was simmering with resentment against the Normans who had imposed heavy taxation and who were treating the Anglo Saxons as a conquered people.

It exploded in the winter of 1069. Several uprisings across the English Midlands had been quickly suppressed but a full scale battle took place at Stafford, where the Normans defeated a Mercian and Welsh army. William is believed to have led the Norman army himself.

In the north there was open hostility so William sent an army led by a Norman Lord called Robert de Commines. The Normans were ambushed at Durham and slaughtered. Robert de Commines was said to have taken refuge in the bishop of Durham's house but the Saxons set fire to the building and he was burnt alive. His whole army, including some 500 Norman knights died during the ambush.

William Advances North

As William's army advanced north, they burnt every village that they came across, killing thousands and even slaughtering all livestock, another serious incident arose at Gateshead. A delegation of Saxons appealed to the Bishop of Durham, namely Walcher of Lorraine, to redress all the wrongs that they had suffered under his rule and that of his supporting troops, namely Normans, French and Flemish soldiers. The greedy Bishop demanded the sum of £400 before he would listen to any complaints. On hearing this a Saxon reputedly yelled out " short rede, good rede! Slay ye the Bishop, whereupon the Saxons fell upon the Bishop and the garrison, slaying them all.

William was faced with another problem too. Edgar the Atheling had allied himself with the Danes and a huge fleet of 240 ships led by King Sweyn the second's brother Asbjorn arrived in the river Humber. The Danes attacked York having joined forces with Edgar and Gospatric. The Norman castles were destroyed and much of the city was burnt.

This was the heaviest defeat that the Normans would suffer during their conquest of England.

The Danes returned to the island of Axeholme with many prisoners and much loot.

William approached the Danes and brought them off with a huge sum of money and then ordered his army to ravish the land. The Danes, even though they had accepted William's gold, overwintered on the Humber. William ought to have known them better!

At the same time, Eadric the Wild, a Saxon Earl from Shropshire rebelled in the south west. He'd led a previous rebellion in 1067 when he had destroyed Hereford castle and burnt down Shrewsbury. He was supported by men from both Shropshire and Cheshire as well as by the Welsh. Eadric may have been present at the aforementioned battle of Stafford.

It is not believed that these revolts were coordinated. If they had have been, it's possible that the Normans would have had a full scale war on their hands but there is insufficient evidence which would suggest that

this was a planned national uprising. More likely, it demonstrates that the occupying Norman army was both ruthless and rapacious and that their behaviour sparked a series of violent acts of resistance.

The north was treated brutally by the Normans. Their destruction and brutality was especially festered on Yorkshire and Northumberland. These areas would remain desolate and under populated for a quarter of a century.

The last act of the Harrying was the subjection of Cheshire. William defeated the rebellion and it is likely that there was a pitched battle in the vicinity of Chester, though we do not know either its name or location. The city submitted and by Easter 1070, William disbanded his army at Salisbury. He believed that the Kingdom was secure. It was not.

The Final Battles

In the May of 1070, King Sweyn led a Danish fleet to Lincolnshire and his army then attacked Ely. He had allied himself to the Anglo Saxon rebel, Hereward the Wake. The two sacked the abbey at Peterborough in a deliberate act designed to provoke William.

William, again, negotiated with the Danes and paid them a huge sum to leave.

Hereward was still resisting and he was joined at Ely by Earl Morcar with a small army. They were attacked by the Normans and were able to drive them off. Legend has it that the Normans managed to bribe the monks on the Island of Ely to lead them across a secret path through the marshes and that they were able to successfully drive Hereward from the Island. Morcar was captured and imprisoned whilst Hereward escaped to continue his guerrilla warfare. His actual fate is unknown and many different stories abound, probably more legend than actual fact.

Earl Edwin was killed in 1071. He was fleeing to Scotland in order to seek refuge with King William III Canmore. He was betrayed by his own retinue and cornered and slain by a party of Norman knights.

Edgar the Atheling had also sought sanctuary with king Malcolm in Scotland but William sent an army against him in 1072. Edgar fled to Flanders. Malcolm submitted to William.

Edgar went on to have an adventurous life, having given up hope of gaining the English throne. He commanded a fleet during the first crusade and even served in the Varangian guard. He lived to an exceptionally old age and is believed to have spent his last days in Scotland.

Eadric the wild eventually submitted to William after the capture of Chester. His fate is disputed. One source stated that he was imprisoned for life whilst another states that he fought for William in a campaign in Scotland and in another one in Maine, France.

Earl Morcar was granted his freedom and release from prison by William as the King lay on his deathbed, but the new King William Rufus did not honour his father's wish and Morcar remained incarcerated. His eventual fate is unknown.

The Saxon Earl Waltheof, who had supported Edwin and Morcar in their revolt against William was the only high ranking Saxon noble executed by the King. His actual role in the rebellion is not known with certainty but William's decision to kill him suggests that he had been a significant influence in the said revolt.

He was beheaded on St. Giles' hill near Winchester on the 31st of May 1076.

Waltheof's great grandfather had been Uhtred the bold, Earl of Northumbria whose stronghold was Bamburgh castle.

Uhtred had been murdered by a certain Thurbrand in 1016 on the orders of King Cnut.

Waltheof had continued a blood feud with the descendants of Thurbrand and had slaughtered some of them just 4 years before his own death and 60 years after the killing of Uhtred.

In a violent and ever eventful period of history, these characters played their part in full and it is right that they are remembered. As shown, William's victory at Hastings was just the start of the costly and painful conquest of Anglo Saxon England.

