



DECISIVE BATTLES OF THE WORLD

(5) The Battle Of Hastings

THE one date everyone remembers in English history is 1066. It was the last time any enemy crossed the shores of England. By now it may seem to have receded into the minor status of an incident of history, most famous for the fact that the commander of one of the armies was shot in the eye by an arrow.

But it was much more than this. It was the last of several fusions of different racial stocks into the element that grew up into the British Commonwealth of Nations, with ships sailing all the seas between its possessions, with its banks and trading houses keeping the books of the world, with its navies and armies protecting the passage of its offshoots as they spread over the whole Earth; the most vigorous people in the history of mankind.

Picts, Scots, Gauls inhabited the islands and suffered invasion from the Angles, Saxons, Jutes. Danish conquerors added their leaven of spirited blood. By 1066 there were already the foundations of sturdy nationhood in Britain. Still, however, something was lacking. The English were strong, hard in battle, but without riches, without much in the way of culture, and in general a little too dull to take the part in world affairs that came to them later.

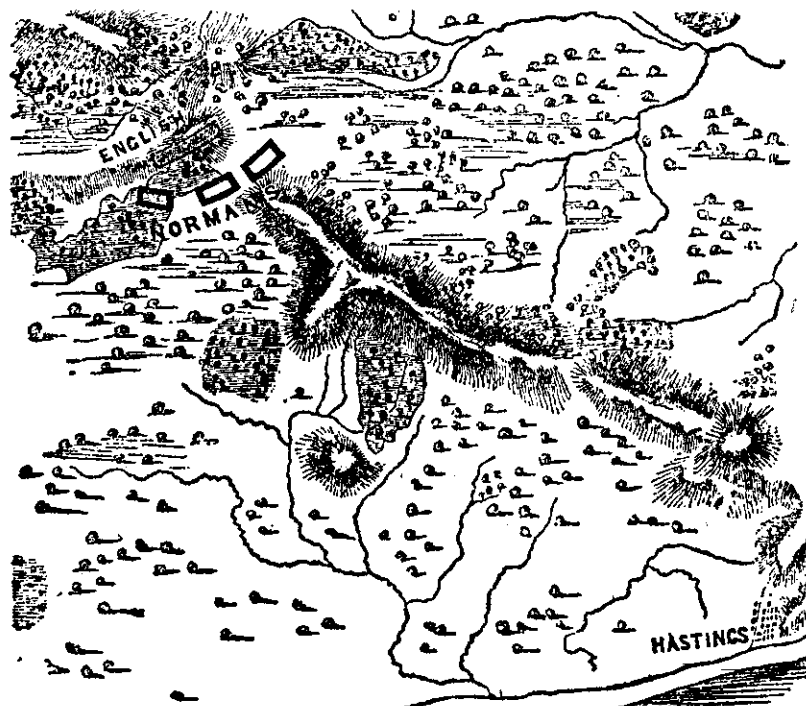
Fusion of Races

Over the Channel from their coasts another fusion of races had been going on. Duke Rollo had brought his Scandinavians down to establish their supremacy over all other Gothic stocks. When they came to carve out their Dukedom of Normandy in the part of Northern France still called by that name, these Northmen were already a hardy race and well organised. To France they brought a facility for retaining whatever was useful from the victims of their conquests, and in France they secured a language and the advantage of social and military theories of discipline inculcated by the empires of Rome and Charlemagne. They found new arts, new laws, and to these new things they added their own vigorous spirit. They were cruel, often contemptuous of any whom they considered to be less than themselves, but their mettle was high.

After Hastings it was not immediately obvious that two peoples with different characteristics, each incomplete, had achieved at last the union which would make the breeding strain of both more nearly perfect. For a hundred years or more the Saxon was almost lost under the heel of an oppressor. The Norman was a race apart. His home was Normandy. England was a colony, thoroughly

defeated in battle, and governed with a firmness that was often savage. England was the home of two peoples, the one dominant, the other oppressed.

Most of the English lands were confiscated by the invaders and the English treated as mere labourers. Their language was displaced for all purposes of government, and the Normans took all positions of authority, secular and religious.



PLAN OF THE BATTLE OF HASTINGS

The real effect of Hastings was not to be seen until the discontent of both Norman baron and Saxon yeoman combined to push Magna Carta under the nose of King John at Runnymede. Without Hastings England might have avoided many years of misery for her native-born people; but she might well have missed also the flair for social organisation and the spirit to make use of it introduced by the proudly independent barons. They set up constitutional precedents which ever since have kept Britain united to a degree that is amazing when English history is compared with the history of revolution and strife through Europe in the same period.

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HAROLD came to rule in England on the death of Edward the Confessor, whose nearest direct heir was a puny boy. England had already had enough of weak minors on her throne and chose Harold. It was a fortunate choice in that

Harold was wise and strong in battle. It was unfortunate in that Harold in 1065 had visited the court of William, the Duke of Normandy, and under duress, had promised William to assist him to the throne of England. So when Harold was offered and accepted the throne himself, William determined to make good his claim by force.

A "Holy Crusade"

William raised his army — 50,000 knights and 10,000 soldiers of less degree — inspired them by making a Holy Crusade of the cause against the "treacherous" Harold, rallied them when their ships were dispersed in a storm during his first attempt at invasion, and finally landed them in Pevensey Bay in Sussex on September 29, 1066.

The storm which had caused him such trouble had actually been of benefit to him. It delayed his arrival until Harold, who had been ready and waiting for him with a force that might easily have turned the scales of battle, had been forced to march hastily northward to meet Harold Hardrada, a Norwegian invader, at Stamford Bridge.

staves and poles. In front of this again was a deep ditch to trap the Norman horsemen.

Harold had the advantage of position, but William could not delay his attack. Every day spent in England meant that he had fewer stores and material for his troops and already Harold's ships had come back from the north and cut off William's communications with Normandy. Accordingly, he advanced. There was a great deal of praying and exhorting on both sides. The leaders gave orations, and omens were studied.

"A Bloody Affair"

At last the actual battle began, and a bloody affair it proved to be. The English stood fast and the Normans charged their line with resolution. Many men on both sides fell to spear, arrow, or battle axe. The Normans would rush in and those who could would retreat as quickly, leaving many of their comrades battered to the ground by the heavy blows of the English.

Harold had adjured his men to stand fast and hold their line. It was their only hope; to exhaust the Normans in fruitless frontal attacks.

At nine o'clock in the morning the battle had begun. At three in the afternoon it was still raging. The Normans had made insufficient impression on the firm line of defending English. It seemed as if William was to lose the day, as if England was to continue to be Saxon England. Luck or superior strategy was all that could help William to conquer.

He had both.

William's Stratagems

His first stratagem was to direct his archers to fire in the air, so that their shafts came down on the heads of defenders holding their shields as protection from frontal attack. One descending arrow struck Harold above the right eye, and put it out.

But Harold was still alive and his men held together. So the Normans pretended to flee.

They were using exactly the same strategy by which Harold had overcome the Norwegians at Stamford Bridge, and Harold would surely have seen the significance of the manoeuvre had he not been too distracted by the pain of his wound. But his men were foolish and they were tempted out of their position and pursued the Normans, who rallied and turned on them when their formation was broken. The battle became an affair of fierce engagements between individuals and groups of men. Here the Englishmen rallied to present a united front against the charging Norman horsemen, and individuals among them fought it out in single combat.

Harold had remained by his standard, defending himself as best he might. A Norman found him and beat him to the ground. Another finished the killing; but the English still fought on, taking two Norman lives or more for each one of their own until at last the day ended. Those who could still stand fled the field when they learned the true extent of their losses.

Fifteen Thousand Slain

Some of them rallied afterward in a forest at their rear, and struck a last blow for Saxon England when they caught the pursuing Normans, but the best of their leaders had been slain,

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