

# The Battle of Hastings 14<sup>th</sup> October 1066

## Harold Marches on William

William's savage attacks on the villagers in southern England had had the desired effect. Harold could not ignore this inhumane treatment of his people and he hurriedly left York with his tired and depleted army on the 1<sup>st</sup> October. Harold was falling into William's trap. By 10<sup>th</sup> Oct Harold felt that he had enough men to contain William in the South. He marched south arriving at Senlac Hill, late in the afternoon of 13<sup>th</sup> October, with 3,000-3,500 men; 1000 of these being Housecarls and 2,500 fyrdmen. There he was met by about 3,500 more fyrdmen, swelling his ranks to 7,500-8,000 men. Immediately Harold began placing his army along Senlac Hill. This hill was approximately 1,000 metres long and was flanked on both sides by marshes.

## William gathers His Army and Moves to Telham Hill

Harold's sudden appearance at Senlac Hill caught William completely by surprise. His men were out scavenging for food, and pillaging and ravaging when Harold's army arrived and he had to quickly gather them together to meet the English, while they were at their weakest, tired from the long and hard forced march, and not yet dug in. William decided to attack Harold as soon as possible the next day. By about 8 a.m., William's entire army had moved forward to a point approximately 200 metres from where Harold had positioned his army. By 9 a.m., William was ready for battle.

## **The Battlefield and the Armies**

- Using his Housecarls, Harold formed a shield-wall from one end of Senlac Ridge to the other. The front rank was composed of groups of Housecarls and thegns (nobles) who were placed between the inexperienced and ill-armed fyrdmen.
- All troops in this first rank held a large kite-shaped shield, and formed the shield-wall.
- There were up to ten ranks of troops of varying ability behind the first.
- The Housecarls and thegns were mainly armed with heavy, two-handed axes, spears and swords and were well armoured, just like their Norman opponents.
- The fyrdmen, on the other hand, were armed with home-made swords, maces, spears, javelins, daggers, and probably farm tools and clubs. Their armour usually consisted of straw stuffed under their shirts. The worst armed fyrdmen would be in the last ranks of Harold's defence.
- Both flanks of Senlac Ridge fell off steeply and were cut by deep ruts. Beyond this, numerous deep streams and marshy ground made it very difficult for infantry and cavalry to manoeuvre. Harold, therefore, did not have to worry about an attack on his flanks; all attacks must come from the front.
- The top of Senlac Ridge was approximately 100 feet above the bottom of Senlac Meadow, where William's army was formed.
- The distance between Harold's shield-wall and William's archers was about 100m. Therefore, the slope that William's army had to climb to reach the English was reasonably gentle.

William's army was about 8,000 strong and consisted of about 1,000 archers, 4,000 infantrymen, and 3,000 cavalry (knights). He formed the army into three divisions:

- The division on the left was composed of about 2,500 Bretons. .
- The division on the right was composed of about 2,500 French and Flemish troops.
- The central division was composed of 3,000 Normans and was under the personal command of William.

Each division was made up of three ranks. First were the archers, then the infantry and lastly the cavalry. The cavalry were armed with javelins, swords, axes and maces. The infantrymen were armed with spears and javelins and also swords. And, of course, the archers were armed with bows and each had a full quiver of arrows.

## Harold's Battle Plan

1: Harold's battle plan was defensive. Simply to remain on the ridge, with his shield-wall holding firm against the assaults of the Norman army.

2: Eventually, as the day wore on and William's army began to tire and his losses began to increase from the constant uphill attacks against the impenetrable shield-wall. Norman morale would begin to fall and then he expected an opportunity to counter-attack with his relatively fresh troops and scatter and wipe out William's army.

## William's Battle Plan

1: William planned a coordinated attack of hammer blows. He would begin with the **archers** sending a shower of arrows into the English. Then the **infantry** would pass through the ranks of the archers and enter into a short hand-to-hand combat with the English manning the shield-wall.

2: They would then fall back behind the archers and the **cavalry** would dash forward to take their turn against the English. Each of the three divisions would be attacking semi-independently and therefore could be in various stages of attack at the same moment in time.

3: William believed that a series of such attacks, repeated in quick succession, would eventually demoralize the English.

### Harold's Command Post ☒ SENLAC HILL

FYRD	HOUSECARLS AND THEGNS	FYRD
------	-----------------------	------

### Marshy ground

Archers	Archers	Archers
Infantry	Infantry	Infantry
Knights	Knights	Knights

BRETONS

NORMANS

FRENCH

(MERCENARIES)



William's  
Command  
Post

TELHAM  
HILL

## The First Attack

- The **battle began** shortly after **9 a.m.** on 14<sup>th</sup> October 1066
- William's **archers** in all three divisions moved forward to about 100 metres of the English and fired their arrows directly at the shield-wall, causing a few casualties among the English.
- The archers then retired as the **infantry moved forward** to attack the shield-wall in hand-to-hand combat. As they got within range of the English missiles (spears, javelins and rocks), many were killed or wounded. Those who made it to the shield-wall found the Housecarls and fyrdmen to be more than a match and quickly retreated.
- Next, the **cavalry came forward** for its first attack of the day but did no better than the infantrymen before them. This first attack almost ended in disaster for William. The unexpectedly high rate of casualties from this first attack coupled with the confusion and noise came close to causing a general panic throughout his army.

### First turning point

- The Bretons, being the left-hand division and on the most gently sloping ground, had reached the English well ahead of the centre and right and were overwhelmed by the unexpected fierceness of the Harold's army. The Breton cavalry were quickly beaten off and galloped back to their starting position to regroup.
- The sight of the Bretons fleeing in disorder caused a great number of Harold's less disciplined fyrdmen to burst through the shield-wall and follow them down the hill. With this mass of English streaming down the hill.
- William quickly ordered his knights to attack the exposed flank of the fyrdmen and cut them to pieces. The knights quickly herded all but a few of the unfortunate fyrdmen onto a small hill and there slaughtered them.

### **There was now a pause in the battle.**

- William regrouped the Breton division. He told them not to panic.
- William's archers refilled their quivers from the supply wagons in the rear.
- Harold warned the fyrdmen against committing such a foolish act again.
- The English dead were moved to the rear of the shield-wall and the gaps that they left were filled by the best and most experienced troops that were left.
- The dead and wounded of William's army who were within the shield-wall were moved in front of it to provide an obstacle to attacking Normans.

## The Second and Succeeding Attacks

- William commenced his second attack **shortly before noon**. It was a **repeat** of the first attack; first archers firing their arrows straight at the shield-wall, followed by the infantrymen slogging up the hill to fight hand-to-hand with the English, then the cavalry in an attempt to break through the shield-wall with their sheer weight and superior stance. This time, however, the Breton division did not recoil and the attack came off smoothly, as planned.
- William maintained this pattern through the early afternoon. The repeated attacks were causing him a great number of casualties but he could clearly see that the English line was thinning and that it would only be a matter of time before he would finally breach it and win the battle.
- **William** joined his knights on a charge and was **unhorsed** when a Housecarl axed his horse. His knights protected him until he was again mounted. A **rumour spread that William had been killed**. He had to reassure his troops by taking off his helmet and ensuring them that he was very much alive!
- As the day progressed, all of the fighters were becoming exhausted. Harold's only hope now lay in the arrival of nightfall, at about 6 p.m., or William's inability to continue the battle due to the heavy losses he was taking. It was now shortly before 5 p.m. and the armies had been fighting for about seven hours.

## The end of the battle

- William had a **brilliant idea** that would prove decisive. Instead of his archers firing directly at the English shield-wall, which had been having little effect, he directed them to **aim very high** so that their arrows would arc over the shield-wall and plunge into the ranks behind them. All of a sudden, the protection that the shield-wall had given was gone. William sent in his knights under the protection of the 'rain of arrows'.
- Harold's army began taking tremendous casualties, even among those at his command post. The shield-wall collapsed as casualties mounted and as men decided to try to save their lives rather than die on the spot.
- At about 5 p.m., with the shield-wall fast disintegrating, a band of Norman knights passed through it, penetrated to Harold's command post, and killed him. One of these knights, Ivo of Ponthieu, mutilated Harold's body by hacking off his limbs. William was furious when he heard this news that he sent him back to Normandy in disgrace.
- Harold's death signalled victory for William. Harold's body was so mutilated (cut up) that only his girlfriend, Edith Swanneck could identify his body.