

In the footsteps of
1066

Our writer goes on the trail of our most notorious battle,
which changed the course of British history

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*Below: the Coronation of King Harold on 6 January 1066.
Right: Battlefield, site of the Battle of Hastings*



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Mention Hastings and everyone thinks of the Bayeux Tapestry, with poor old King Harold clutching an arrow in his eye. Back in the time of the infamous battle the only way to travel was on foot or horseback, so I decided to set out on a walking tour to discover the region where those historic events took place in 1066.

All rolling countryside, gushing weirs and pretty footpaths, the 1066 Country Walk leads from the East Sussex town of Pevensey, to the pretty medieval resort of Rye. Keen to see the great battle's main sites, I decided to walk the 16-mile part of this well-signposted trail, which leads from Pevensey to Battle, following the route that the Norman Army would have taken when it headed out to defeat King Harold in a battle that would change the course of history.

A pale morning light shone off the cobbled streets, like the sparks of spur on stone, when I arrived in the charming town of Pevensey, from where the Norman Army embarked on its assault in September 1066 with thousands of men, horses and supplies.

Today the town is lined with Tudor cottages. When William Duke of Normandy, soon to be known as William the Conqueror, arrived here, legend has it that he leapt from his boat *Mora*, depicted on the Bayeux Tapestry with a carved dragon figurehead on its prow, and fell flat on his face. With a resourcefulness that was to serve him throughout his reign, the Duke grabbed two handfuls of soil and told his men: "I have taken possession of England with both my hands. It is now mine, and what is mine is yours."

Pevensey should have been defended – and had been only a month earlier – but England's armies had been called away to do battle with the Vikings near York and the port was deserted. Crossing the Channel from St Valéry-sur-Somme, the Duke established his headquarters behind the walls of Pevensey's ruined Roman fort surrounded on three sides by the sea.

The waters receded over the centuries and the Roman ruins, which were inherited by Williams's half brother Robert of Mortain after the conquest and converted to a castle, now stand a mile inland. Climbing the slope,

I wandered round the remains of this huge, moated medieval monument, which has survived countless sieges over the centuries, pausing to study the castle's large picture of the Bayeux Tapestry, on which the town of Pevensey is clearly marked.

Before leaving Pevensey, I bought some of the local speciality minced beef and onion pastries from the bakery, and then began the first leg of my walk.

Trudging out along a muddy track following the red 1066 signs, I mused on the events that led to the Battle of Hastings. Like the theory of synchronicity, which says that the flap of a butterfly's wings in one country has an effect on the weather elsewhere, Edward the Confessor's failure to produce an heir to the English throne was to set off a chain of events that would change the country forever.

When the old King Edward died in January 1066, his brother-in-law Harold Godwinson succeeded him to the throne. Hearing this news, William Duke of Normandy, who also had distant blood ties with the dead king, began gathering his



The Battle of Hastings



Below: Ye Olde Pump House pub, Hastings.
Below, left: Pevensey Castle. *Bottom:* King Harold's foot soldiers depicted on the Bayeux Tapestry





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**Above: the imposing Herstmonceux Castle.
Right: interior of Battle Abbey**



troops with a view to asserting his own claim to the English throne.

I continue my reverie as I cross the Pevensey Levels, imagining what this flat land of fields, marshes and soaring herons would have been like as William made his way towards Battle, then called Senlac.

After an hour of hiking along a muddy path, past fields of grazing sheep, I spotted the sails of Herstmonceux windmill standing on a hill. Passing the fluttering white sails of this pretty mill, used to grind flour until 1893, I arrived at Herstmonceux Castle.

The site of a Royal Observatory during the 1950s, this glorious moated castle derives its name from Drogo de Monceaux, William the Conqueror's great grandson, who owned the property in the 12th century. Nowadays this Tudor castle houses the Observatory Science Centre, with its wealth of interactive exhibits, restored telescopes and domes.

Collapsing on a bench in the castle's lovely rose-studded Elizabethan gardens, I tucked into my minced beef and onion pastries, and then set out on the last stage of my walk, past traditional thatched roof houses and stunning sea views, to Battle.

A few hours later I arrived in the town, where that famous battle took place nearly 1,000 years ago. On 14 October, 1066, after covering the distance I had just walked with

his Norman army of 15,000 infantry, cavalry and archers, William of Normandy attacked Harold Godwinson and his 5,000-strong Saxon army on Senlac Hill. Clearly depicted on the Bayeux Tapestry, an image shows Harold at the top of this steep hill surrounded by his troops.

Forced to fight a defensive battle, Harold's troops created a shield wall to defy their attackers. Outnumbered three to one, Harold's army seemed doomed to lose the battle, but their shield wall proved almost impenetrable to the Norman soldiers and when a rumour spread among the Norman troops that William had been killed, many fled in terror. Narrowly avoiding disaster, William lifted his helmet to show he was alive and his troops rallied round again. ▶



This was to be the battle's turning point. As the English defences gradually weakened, the Normans poured into attack and Harold received that legendary arrow in the eye – although some historians believe that England's King was in fact drubbed to death.

Consecrated in 1094, Battle Abbey, the monument William the Conqueror had built on Senlac Hill to commemorate those who died, still stands today. After strolling around the atmospheric ruins of this historic building, I watched a fascinating film about the battle, and then stood by the altar, which is said to mark the actual spot where Harold, the last Anglo-Saxon king, was killed. After crossing the countryside in the wake of William's army, it was moving to stand here and imagine Harold's tragic defeat.

That evening I took a taxi from Battle to Hastings, where I checked into Swan House, a luxurious bed and breakfast in a restored 15th-century building along a 'twitten' (alley) in the resort's old town.

The next day I set out to explore Hastings. A few years after his triumph, William had the town's wooden castle rebuilt in stone. Destroyed by King John, then rebuilt by King Henry III in 1225, part of the castle then fell into the sea during a storm in 1287. Later still, Hastings Castle was targeted during the Hundred Years' War, and then bombed by the Germans during WWII.

The ride on the town's old funicular railway up to the ruins of England's first ►

Above: at Battle Abbey, which is owned by English Heritage, you can see the site of the historic battle.

Left: William the Conqueror was a ferocious leader

EDITOR'S PICK

Here are some other castles and places that have significant links to the infamous battle of 1066



ROUGEMONT CASTLE, EXETER

After subjecting Exeter to an 18-day siege, William entered the city here in 1067 and built this impressive castle.

LINCOLN CATHEDRAL, LINCOLN

One of the first Norman churches to be built in 1072, this magnificent edifice, partly renovated in the 13th century, has several Norman architectural details.

WINCHESTER CATHEDRAL

Winchester was the capital of Anglo-Saxon Wessex. Following the Battle of Hastings, William the Conqueror built a Norman cathedral on the site of the Saxon one and Norman relics can still be seen, such as the crypt. William Rufus, William the Conqueror's son is buried here.

WESTMINSTER ABBEY, LONDON

The historic venue where Edward the Confessor was buried, and both Harold and William were crowned.



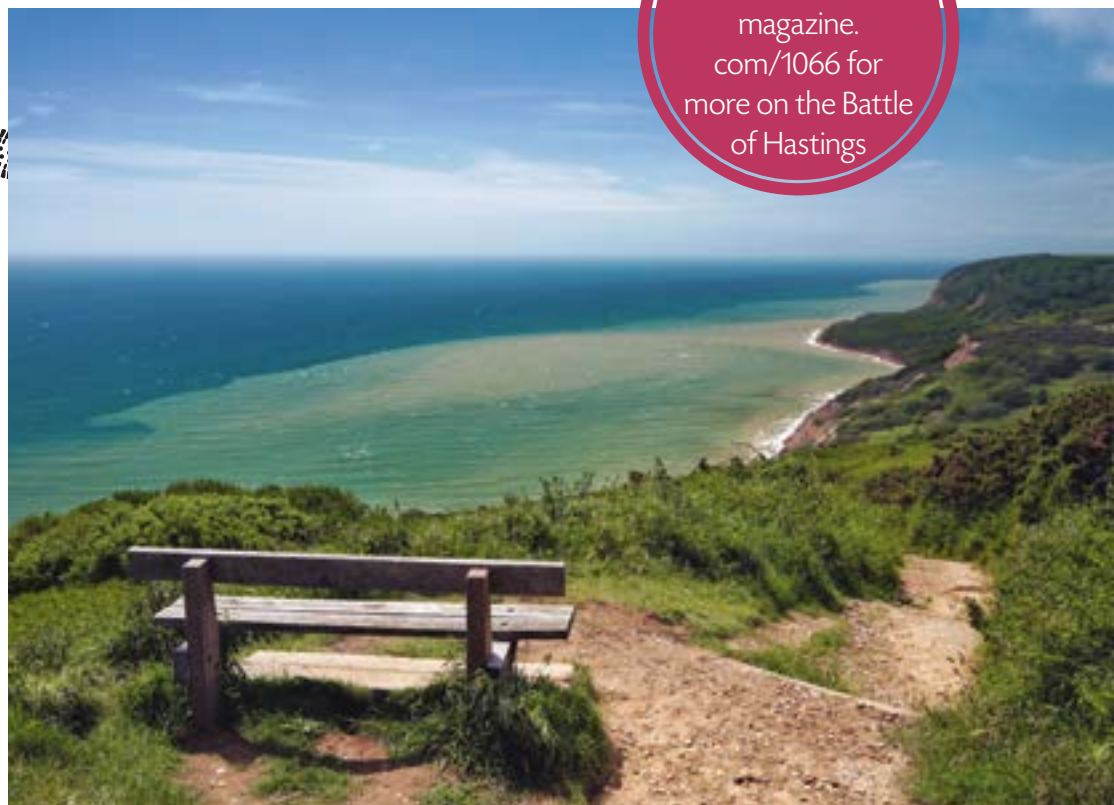
The Battle of Hastings



Norman motte-and-bailey castle, high on its cliff, was thrilling and the views over the Channel breathtaking.

During the Norman Conquest, Hastings was a thriving fishing centre and today this pretty seaside resort still has the largest beach-launched fishing fleet in Europe.

Although the ghosts of 1066 still hang over Hastings, William and Harold would have a hard time recognising this cosmopolitan town, which is often cited as one of the UK's coolest places. With its strong local arts community, this laidback seaside resort is home to the Jerwood Gallery; a stunning art space housing a collection of contemporary artworks, whose vast glass windows overlook that historic stretch of shingle where fishing boats have been launched for over 1,000 years.



Go to www.britain-magazine.com/1066 for more on the Battle of Hastings

Top right: as you gaze out across the English Channel, think of that fateful crossing in 1066. This picture: fishing boats on the Stade shingle beach, Hastings, home to the funicular railway



After visiting the Jerwood Gallery I bought home-cooked sausage rolls and jam tarts at Judges, the town's award-winning bakery, and then munched them as I explored the fishing net huts, a unique collection of narrow, black-slatted wooden buildings that have been used for storing nets on the beach since the 19th century.

I finished my historic trip that evening at Webbe's Rock-a-Nore, the best seafood restaurant in town. Enjoying my battered cod, I gazed out over the Channel that William crossed and it occurred to me that England would have been a very different place today, if the Saxons had won that historic battle. **B**

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DID YOU KNOW?

- During the Battle of Hastings both armies took a break for lunch.
- According to historical reports, the first man to be killed at the Battle of Hastings was William the Conqueror's jester, Taillefer.
- According to some genealogists, more than 25 per cent of the English population is distantly related to William the Conqueror.

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