

# **Hastings 2000**

## ***Our Experiences at the Battle of Hastings***

***October 14, 2000***



*Written by*

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*with*

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***Under the weight of my mail hauberk, helmet, sword and shield, my medieval turn shoes sank slowly into the rain soaked sod of this famous English battlefield. As I looked up I could see several Conrois of Duke William's finest cavalry charging up the hill on which we stood. I began to wonder if this was really such a good idea!***

***I always wondered what it would be like to be on the receiving end of a medieval cavalry charge, and I was about to find out. We faced the best armored cavalry in Christendom, led by the invading usurper, William, Duke of Normandy, called "the Bastard." We, the Saxon Huscarls, with our good and rightful King Harold Godwinson, waited for them to reach our shield wall.***

***As the Norman cavalry charged up the hill, I saw the tips of their spears gleaming. I heard their equipment clanging, and the sound of their horse's heavy breathing. Amongst these sights and sounds, the most memorable was feeling the vibration of hooves as they trampled the ground before me. Although this was just a show, and these Norman Knights were not going to run us down, the experience was still sobering. Facing a cavalry charge in the real Middle Ages must have been a very unnerving thing indeed!***

Eight months before this cavalry charge took place, my long time friend, Henrik Olsgaard, contacted me regarding an event called Hastings 2000. It was the biggest reenactment of the Battle of Hastings ever planned. It would be fought on the historical site, at the town of Battle, England. It would take place on the 934th anniversary of the battle.

Henrik and I both felt a strong affiliation with this time period and to this particular battle. In the early days of the Society for Creative Anachronism we both made mail hauberks and fought as Norman knights. (Henrik's was the first in the SCA, and mine was the first in Atenveldt.) We always dreamed of something like this. We had to go.

Hastings 2000 is described as the "premier re-enactment event in the UK." Press and TV coverage was expected from all over Europe. The event was possible due to the fine efforts of two organizations, *English Heritage*, the sponsor, and *The Vikings*, who were organizing the event. Both groups took authenticity seriously. We knew we had some work to do to get ready. We needed full authentic *kit* (as the British call it) in 11th century style. It needed to be made to very exacting standards. We would then have to figure out how to get all our kit (including Henrik's Norman horse saddle - which he made himself!) and ourselves to England. Once there all we had to do was to get to the battle site, pass all the requirements for participation and walk out on the field. "It can't be *that* difficult," we thought.

Both of us would be participating as Norman Miles, (though I switched over to the Saxon side at the end and experienced the cavalry charge.) The Miles were described as "the cutting edge of the Norman army," in the Hastings 2000 materials. The Miles, they said, were "supremely well armed, armored and trained . . . both mounted and on foot, and were regarded as the finest warriors in Christendom." That was for us! I would fight on foot; Henrik would fight on horseback.

The weapons in this type of reenactment are made of steel but they are rounded and dull but even rounded and dull, the weapons could still be lethal. The reason people don't really get killed is that one does not hit with full force. Participants are trained to pull the blow and to aim for the shield, or some of the least vulnerable portions of the body. Lots of theatrics are common. Loud shouts and vocal deaths are all part of the show. One other big difference between this type of reenactment, and the SCA wars I was used to was the dull thud of rattan striking shield or armor is replaced with the high pitched ting of metal striking metal.

As many SCA members are aware, there are all kinds of re-enactment groups in the world, and they all have their own approach. Some are very different from the SCA. I would describe the SCA as providing the big tent approach to reenactment. The SCA offers an enormous choice of interesting time periods and cultures. It also offers a wide variety of approaches to authenticity. This variety allows more people

to become actively involved. Our rather open authenticity requirements are instrumental in our ability to bring thousands of participants to our events. The trade off ( as we all know ) is that on the SCA battlefield one might see a line of first century AD Roman legionaries, fighting against three correctly armored medieval knights, a guy in football shoulder pads, two samurai and an Iroquois Indian! The big tent makes the SCA accessible to a wide variety of people, and interests, but it also makes us vulnerable to a criticism that we, at times, lack authenticity. We are, as the name implies “creative anachronists.”

At Hastings 2000, authenticity came first. No plastic armor, no aluminum, no modern athletic equipment, no glasses, no tattoos (showing) and removal of any nose piercings. (Luckily, neither Henrik nor I had any piercings - at least that *I* have ever seen - so we were fine in this department!) Everything in our kit had to be authentic right down to the width and design of our belts, the type of trim on the linen or wool tunic, and the socks worn with handmade medieval shoes.

To participate, we knew we had to make some new equipment, and modify some of the old. We both had the hauberks we made many years ago. I removed some edging at the bottom of mine, as it was not period for 1066 AD. For some reason, both Henrik and I found that over the years, our steel linked mail hauberks shrunk. (I think it must have been this Arizona heat.) Thirty years ago, when I was in my 20's, my hauberk fit fine. Now, it was a bit snug. (Well, to be truthful mine was *more* than snug, I had to add several inches around my . . . well let's call it girth.) Henrik had to add some, but not as much as I.

Soon we reworked everything we needed and our kit was ready. With kite shields, hauberks, Norman helmets, turn shoes and the rest, we flew to London. When we landed in London, we found out it had been raining heavily. Sussex, the part of England we needed to get to, was flooded and they were closing down trains from London to Hastings. We weren't sure if we were both going to make it to the site, let alone our equipment. The equipment almost didn't, but everything eventually worked out, and we finally arrived at a rain soaked Battle Abbey.

Arriving at the site, the first thing that stuck me was how much the procedures at Hastings 2000 were like every large SCA event I had ever attended. The first thing to greet us was a large white rental tent with a queue (line) of folks in front of it. People came from all over the world. Some were already in their kit or were wearing parts of it. They all had to register. I filled out my paperwork and watched as the line slowly inched forward. Soon I could see a line of overworked volunteers on the other side of the folding tables. They were frantically looking through computer printouts and lists. I heard them ask people, “What group are you with?” and “Are you in the authentic camp?” and so forth. “Just like Estrella or Pennsic,” I thought, except that here, almost everyone spoke with a strange accent. Soon they had us stamped, stapled and properly signed in and we were on our way.

After the registration tent, my next stop was to find the authenticity check-point. There, while dressed in full kit authenticity experts walk around making comments as they closely examined your kit. Some participants were told to remove machine made trim from their tunic in order to pass the authenticity check. My tunic trim was questioned later, because someone thought it might have been machine made. I assured them it was from my ladies inkle loom and I saw her make it! (Perhaps she did *too* good a job?)

Having marshaled many events in the SCA, the authenticity check reminded me of what happens to fighters waiting for their helmet sticker. One big difference is that here the emphasis is on presenting an authentic appearance, though they do provide a reasonable level of safety. They do check that your broadsword is dull, and rounded off at the tip, but they also look closely to see that you look right. No one asked me if I had my cricket box (baseball cup) on! The cricket box and a few mouth/teeth protectors were the only modern safety equipment people used. I wore a clear plastic mouth protector. I heard that losing your front teeth by having someone smack a shield into your face (remember, we're using open-faced helmets) was not uncommon. Looking around, I saw that I was not the only one.

During my authenticity check, a strange thing occurred. I was getting checked out with a group of fighters from around the world. I was listening to French, German, and other languages when I heard a conversation behind me. My American accent was definitely in the minority at this event and I found that I picked up on other such familiar accents very quickly. I heard someone not only speaking with an American accent, but in a voice that I found familiar! I turned and, to my surprise, found Sir Gareth, of the Kingdom of Atenveldt. It was great to find another member of my Kingdom's chivalry, at this somewhat out of Kingdom event! (Of course, it goes without saying, Sir Gareth and I fought side by side in the battle.)

At registration, I was given a large yellow card. On it were listed categories that needed to be signed off before I could enter the battlefield. After authenticity was checked off, I went to the next category; fighting authorization. At the fighting authorization, we were put into small groups with about a dozen fighters on a side, and we fought melees. While doing so, we were being observed by a group of marshals. I don't know what else to call them. In the SCA, they would be called marshals but I found that "marshals" at Hastings 2000 (at least the people who had "Marshal" on their T-shirts) mostly kept people back behind the ropes and off the battlefield. No one was marshalling the fighting on the field in the SCA manner.

After having us fight in a small melee we were broken up into pairs and fought one-on-one. The officials watched us to see if we could control our weapons, and hit only the shield or the legal parts of the body. They also watched to see if we could

pull the blows as one is supposed to, and avoid *really* killing people. (I suspect they were looking to see if you could pass the subjective assessment known as the, "Is this person insane?" test.) I guess I did. The official signed off on my yellow card. I was assigned to the Norman right flank.

While I was going through the hoops to be a Norman Knight, Henrik was trying to find a horse. After bringing his equestrian gear all the way from California, he found they ran out of horses! One problem was that people (especially people with horse vans) were having difficulty getting into the site because the roads were flooded. The mud was slowing everything down. The organizers had a large tractor working all morning to pull vehicles in and out of the site. It was pretty easy to get stuck in such slippery mud which was almost a foot deep in places. I didn't see any of the typical SCA autocrat golf carts that we are used to. Instead, the organizers had some small, but fairly serious looking, four wheel drive vehicles. One of them thankfully helped us get our gear from one part of the field to another. Eventually, more horses arrived, and Henrik got one of them. Not only did he get one, he actually got Mel Gibson's horse. (Well, the horse Mel Gibson rode in the movie Braveheart.) How cool does it get? There were one hundred mounted cavalry, at the event, and Henrik was one of the most authentic looking in his thirty-four year old mail and helmet.

To produce a total of one hundred cavalry the Hastings 2000 organizers loosened the authenticity requirements a little to let in more riders. More than anything they needed people who could actually ride. Some able horsemen/women came from other reenactment societies and did not have authentic 1066 AD armor. So they gave them helmets, and hauberks of knitted mail, which looked okay at distance, but were less convincing up close.

Henrik like a few others, stood out from the crowd as all his kit was authentic. His saddle appeared to be one of the few that were truly Norman style like those depicted in the Bayeux Tapestry. Most of the saddles were either English style or other some other modern saddles altered to look medieval. Even Henrik's stirrups were period. He was definitely looking good.

I doubt that the actual battle which took place here on October 14, 1066 AD, was so much fun. Some historians place Hastings in the category of one of the most significant battles fought in history; and it is certainly one of the most celebrated in English history. It was fought on a ridge, called Senlac.

An invasion force of Normans (descended from Vikings who had settled in northern France) defeated an army of Anglo-Saxons. In doing so, they created the roots of modern England. The results of this battle formed a more central European based England, and ended a period of Scandinavian domination. It would change the

English social and political systems and even, to some extent, written language. The outcome of this battle would, directly or indirectly, even affect all the places touched by the British Empire as it expanded across the world.

The Battle of Hastings is important, but why was it fought? There is a short answer and a long answer to this question. The short answer is for the Throne of England. The long answer involves a complicated set of circumstances involving the heirs to the throne of England, and a lady named Emma.

In 976 AD Ethelred (whose name means “wise counselor” but was often derisively called the un- counseled or unready) became King of England. He married Emma, who was the daughter of Richard I, Duke of Normandy. *(OK, you in the back row, wake up, this will be important later on and there might be a quiz!)* Normans had been happily raiding, and settling in England for years.

In 1016 AD Ethelred died, and King Canute of Denmark took the throne of England and married Ethelred’s widow, Emma, to help support his claim. When Canute died his offspring each took the throne. At one point Harthaknut, ruled both England and Denmark with the help of his mother Emma. Harold Harefoot, one of the offspring, (from a previous marriage), eventually succeeded, but died without leaving an heir. His surviving half brother, Emma’s last surviving son, Edward, (called the Confessor), left exile in Normandy and returned to England, to become King. Late in his life, the pious Edward married Harold’s sister, a much younger woman, but took a vow of chastity (not a great idea for a dynastic family) and died childless. The question was, “Who is going to get the throne now ?”

For various reasons, an Anglo-Saxon Earl name Godwin gained great power during the reign of Edward. Godwin opposed Edward at one point and was even exiled from England, but he eventually regained his power and then some. Godwin had seven sons, the second one of which was Harold Godwinson (Godwin’s-son. Godwin had married a Danish princess who was a relative of Cnute. This connection gave Harold some claim to royal blood. When Edward died, Godwinson, (who was also Edward’s brother-in-law) claimed the throne. He said Edward had promised the throne to him. The Witan (wise men) of England approved. Soon Harold was crowned King of England.

But . . . according to Norman accounts, (and here in, as Shakespeare might say, “lies the rub,”) Harold, under considerable duress, had apparently also promised to support William of Normandy’s claim to the throne. Years before Harold had found himself in Normandy and had sworn an oath to support William’s claim. The oath, said the Normans, had even been taken over Holy Relics. The Anglo-Saxons said Harold was forced into the oath by threats, and he was tricked into swearing over Holy Relics - because they were hidden under the table! (I guess it doesn’t count

the same way that as children, if you held two fingers behind your back when making a promise, under all the laws of God and man, you were not bound by it! )

There is, of course, more to the story. There was also a good claim from a fellow named Edgar Atheling who was grandson to Edward the Confessor's half brother Edmund Ironside. Edgar was ignored as he was too young. (The Witan did, however, choose Edgar as the next king upon the death of Harold II but he was never crowned. ) It seemed clear that to stop William's invasion a strong leader, like Harold, would be needed to defend the country.

The big question was, "how to settle this disagreement?" Today such an issue might be settled with armies of lawyers fighting battles in court over counting and recounting "pregnant or dimpled chads." In modern times, at least in the US, we might eventually take the whole mess to the Supreme Court, and they would tell us who won. There are some advantages to this method; It requires no bloodshed. In 1066 AD, there was only one way to settle the question. That was for Duke William of Normandy to cross the channel with thousands of land hungry adventurers, ( some of whom took some convincing as the whole enterprise seemed a bit risky ) a few mercenaries and some of his closest friends, all armed to the teeth, ready to do battle.

In the year 1066, at Easter time, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle tells us that ". . . over all England there was seen a sign in the skies such as had never been seen before." The sign, a flaming star with a long tail, was Haley's Comet, and it was seen as an omen. Whether the omen would be good or not for either side was yet to be determined.

William prepared to invade England. By September he had around 7,000 men and hundreds of ships and horses, ready to cross the channel, when the weather permitted. On September 27, the winds were right and William sailed for England. At one point William was in the lead ship, lost sight of the other ships. His men got nervous (in the days before GPS and radios) and feared they would be lost and never make it back to land. William had his dinner put out before him and calmly ate it. Before long, the rest of the fleet sailed into view. His calm seemed to strengthen his men.

William landed at Pevensey. The story is told, which is perhaps apocryphal, that as William stepped out of his ship he fell forward onto his own hands and face! A quick thinking Norman shouted "Look William grasps the soil of England with his first step!" The Normans began to set up the pre-fabricated fortress they brought with them and reinforced the site of an old Roman fortress. They had come to stay.

In the meantime, Harold had his hands full up in the north. His brother Tostig (who had been Earl of Northumbria, and didn't do a very good job of it) joined with the King of Norway, Harald Hardrada (meaning "hard fighter" or "hard to deal with") to take England themselves. Tostig apparently thought he would be ruler of

the northern part of England (again), but under the rule of Hardrada. With a fleet of some 300 ships, Hardrada and Tostig landed in Scotland, and moved on to York. On September 20th, they defeated an Anglo-Saxon force under Morcar (who took over in Northumbria when Tostig left) at Fulford Gate. By the 25th of September, their army was at Stamford Bridge.

The bridge was along an established Roman road and the area had plenty of supplies for a hungry invading army. Harold heard of the Viking invasion about the twelfth of September and formed an army. With all possible speed he raced north and caught Hardrada's army by surprise. At first, Harold offered his half brother his old earldom back if he were to join with him. Tostig asked about what would happen to the Norwegian King, Hardrada. Harold's reply was that he could have "... six feet of English earth, or perhaps a little more as he is somewhat tall!" Soon the battle was on.

For awhile a giant Norwegian held back the entire Saxon army fighting on the wooden bridge over the Derwent. No one seemed to be able to dislodge him. Eventually some of Harold's men found a small boat. With it they rowed under the bridge and with a spear, they "brogged him from below." Soon the Saxons had pushed the Norwegian's back and had won the day.

Tostig and Hardrada were both killed at the Battle of Stamford Bridge, and England had been saved from invasion! (Only twenty-four of the original three-hundred ships were needed for the survivors to head back to Norway.) If not for the Battle of Hastings, this important battle would probably be more well known but within days, Harold got word that William's army finally landed at Pevensey.

Harold was waiting all summer for William. Believing that the season was now too late for him to invade, and since there was a limit on how long he could require his men to serve, he had already withdrawn his men from the coast. The channel winds which helped Hardrada and Tostig invade the north had also kept William in France. The winds were now changing in William's favor.

We stayed in the town of York for several days, in October 2000, and I loved it. One day we took a taxi ride out to Stamford Bridge. The bridge at Stamford today is not the original bridge from the battle. There have been several Stamford Bridges over the centuries, and each were in different locations. The bridge from the battle in 1066 AD was a wooden bridge, which replaced a Roman stone bridge, which replaced a rock ford, which had been used to cross the river since the last ice age.

One reason Hardrada was not successful at Stamford Bridge, was that having already won a smaller fight at Fulford Gate, he assumed the fighting was over, and was simply waiting for the agreed upon hostages to be delivered to him. The story goes that his men were out looking for food and plunder when they saw sheep across the Derwent River. They crossed to get them without taking their hauberks,

not expecting any battle that day when suddenly Harold showed up. During our visit to Stanford Bridge, I saw sheep grazing in a field, across the Derwent river just as Tostig and Hardrada's men had seen in 1066 AD.

On Saturday, October 14th, 2000 we were ready for our Battle of Hastings. The site began to fill up. People, both spectators and re-enactors came from all over the world. Busses with spectators began to arrive at the little town of Battle. Everywhere you looked you could see groups of Norman and Anglo-Saxon warriors on horseback, and on foot, riding, and marching. That morning I saw many sites that I will always remember like a group of Saxons marching, down a tree lined road, in full armor, being passed by a Conroi of Normans on horseback. Every one of them looked totally authentic. Most re-enactors looked the part of a wealthy 11<sup>th</sup> Century Knight, but some others had no shoes. A few actually fought with farm implements. In at least one case in the battle, I literally came in contact with a fellow who fought with a log of wood! (Most experts seem to doubt that many peasants participated in the Battle of Hastings.)

Soon the Saxon army, led by Harold assembled on the top of the hill. Estimates of the length of the 1066 AD Saxon battle line, vary from about 600 to 800 yards across and maybe ten men deep. Most likely, the feared Saxon Huscarls were placed in front to hold the shield wall together. In 2000 AD, our 1,500 re-enactors filled up about 200 yards, at most, on the same ridge, and that shield wall was only one or two men deep. Since the Battle Abbey today sits on top of the hill where the last stages of the battle took place, our Saxon line was also about fifty yards down from the top of the hill.

Henrik and I waited in the Norman army's holding area. As a foot soldier I saw Henrik and the rest of the Norman cavalry ride by us. They headed down the road that was blocked by the Saxon army. Before long we too were signaled to move out. We began to march and assembled at the bottom of the hill facing the Saxon army, who were above us. The Saxons, on top of the hill, looked like miniatures as I looked up at them. Once assembled at the bottom of the hill (which was very soggy and wet and where my medieval shoes slipped and slid with abandon we were greeted by monks who blessed us with Holy Water. (At least I think it was Holy Water!). They walked in front of us, tossing water here and there, blessing our rightful cause. Soon they got out of the way as the battle was about to begin.

Our reenactment attempted to follow the actual events of history, as closely as possible. First, Norman archers marched to our front and began to rain arrows down on the Saxon line. The arrows were real, made of wood, with feathered fletching, and had small game blunts at the tip. The bows were standard wooden

self bows (too early in history for the English longbow) of up to 65 pounds pull. A few Saxon archers returned fire at us. I noticed that some of the arrows actually stuck upright in the soft muddy ground, when they hit! "When the arrows come in, don't look up," I heard someone say. (I thought that was very good advice.)

After the Norman archers fired their arrows, we started up the hill. Trodding up that hill was something the Norman army would do five times that day. Upon reaching the top we began to cut and slash at every Saxon we could find. Though it was legal to hit the opponent's torso, I decided to only strike shields. I was sure I could do that without hurting anyone. Soon we got the order to retreat back down the muddy slope, which we did.

One of the things I noticed was the complexity inherent in having an army made up of people speaking different languages. Walking along the Norman battle line, I heard many languages: English, French, German, Italian and some I didn't recognize. It occurred to me that it must have been like this in medieval times. There must have been pockets of soldiers who couldn't understand the fellows to their right or left in strong need of having someone translate their orders. It very interesting and it was something I had never experienced in the SCA.

After marching up and down the hill, swinging a sword, smacking people's shields, and retreating to the bottom of the hill three times, I was ready to take a rest. I died and joined the Saxon's. (The Saxon heavy infantry and Norman heavy infantry looked much alike so this was no problem.) This also allowed me to face the Norman cavalry charge. It also meant that I was changing to the losing side at the last minute, and would soon be amongst the dead.

The battle continued, with Normans marching up the hill and then retreating down the hill. At one point William's men lost heart when they heard a rumor that he was killed. He took off his helmet, and rode around the field to show them he was still alive. Unfortunately for the Saxon King, at one point his right flank followed a Norman retreat down the hill, only to be cut off and annihilated. After many bloody attacks, and at the proper time, our King Harold fell from an arrow to the eye. (Though there is some historical debate on this arrow question.) Harold and his Huscarls, were then overwhelmed. Soon his Fighting Man banner was taken by the Normans and the battle ended. Both sides were then resurrected, and took a victory lap around the battlefield to the cheers of the crowds (mostly cheers for the Saxons and boo's for the Normans however).

After the battle the armies retreated and began to *attack* all the restaurants and pubs in the town of Battle. We ate and drank and told stories about the events of the day. That night large and small groups of men and women, some still in their armor, some in tunics, others in mundane clothes, were eating, drinking and telling their

stories. This was another aspect of the event that was reminiscent of an SCA war, sitting around the camp at night, re-fighting the events of the day. It was magnificent.

We made new friends with some truly wonderful SCA members that we had not met before, like John Lambert (Baron Lambert de Sur, OP) and Rick Allison (Laird Seanne Alansyn esq.). The instant friendliness and warmth offered from these fine people reminded me again of one of the most important things which draw many of us to the SCA. It is truly one of the magic things that can happen in our organization; you can travel thousands of miles and find yourself at home! Even the people I met from the other European organizations reminded me very much of people I knew in the SCA. There are some distinct differences between the organizations but I found them to be kindred spirits indeed.

The next day we continued our tour of England. There were many armor museums, battlefields and historical sites yet to see.

With regard to getting to and from England with swords, armor and shields I should mention a couple of things: 1. It's really expensive to air freight several hundred pounds of kit across continents; 2. It's also really expensive to check luggage (with armor in it) when it is over the maximum weight limit; 3. Re-enactors should probably bring paperwork to show that they have a good reason to have a sword in their luggage; 4. Expect customs at a place like Heathrow Airport to be interested in your mail hauberk, (and they will insist on you unrolling it for inspection), but they don't act as though it is the weirdest thing they have seen that day!

We are now looking forward to the next time that October 14th will fall on a Saturday, and they do it all again.

On to Hastings 2006!

[2007 - Comment: "We made it! On October 14, 2006 Henrik and I, and 22,000 other people were at Hastings for the 2006 re-enactment of the battle!"]

*Henrik of Havn* is also known as Henrik Olsgaard, is an engineer in the Bay Area of San Francisco. Henrik began his life in the SCA at its first event, held May 1, 1966, and helped found the organization.

*Arthur of Lockhaven* is also known as Michael Cady, a history teacher in Phoenix, Arizona. Michael began his life in the SCA in 1969 and was one of the founding members of the Kingdom of Atenveldt.

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