

1066—The Battle of Hastings

The year 1066 is one of the most famous dates in history. It was in the spring of that year a French duke, William of Normandy, began his preparation for the conquest of England. Because William was a cousin of a former king of England and because he was married to an English noblewoman, Matilda of Flanders, he felt he had a just claim to the English throne. When September came, William felt his troops were ready. In crowded longboats filled with men, horses, and armor, the Normans crossed the channel and landed on the shores of England.

King Harold, leader of the English, had been alerted by his scouts weeks beforehand. He gathered his troops and took his position at the top of a hill, near a twisted apple tree. From there he commanded his men to build a defense of tree trunks and branches. From the top of the hill, he flew his standards, one a dragon and the other the gold embroidered figure of a fighting man. His army, which consisted of row after row of warriors armed with double-edged axes, settled themselves on the hillside.

William also had scouts, and they were eagerly waiting for him when he landed to inform him of Harold's position. Duke William rested his men several weeks until he was sure they were ready before advancing toward the English. Early on October 14th William ordered his troops forward. When the Norman troops were about a mile away in their march to do battle, they stopped to put on their coats of mail and make their final preparations. The Normans, who were used to fighting on horseback, called themselves chevaliers, from the French word *cheval*, meaning horse. The chevaliers were their main striking force composed of knights and other men called sergeants, who were soldiers on horseback. They also had foot soldiers armed with bows and arrows to protect the men on horseback. The English did not battle on horseback; their forces were composed mainly of foot soldiers armed with spears and axes.

The battle took place on October 14, 1066. William and his Norman knights charged bravely up the hill. King Harold's men struck back with heavy blows against them and their horses. Wielding their large double-edged axes, Harold's forces turned back the Norman attacks again and again. Casualties were so heavy it was written that the hill was slick from blood, but both sides fought on. Two of Harold's brothers were slain; still he ordered his men to hold their ground. Exhausted as they were, the Saxons found courage in their standards flying in the wind and their king urging them on. Leading his men, King Harold was suddenly struck in the face by an arrow. The wound put out his eye and he fell to the ground in pain. Shortly thereafter, the disheartened English began to break ranks and flee into the surrounding woods. The Normans soon broke through their lines and Harold was slain. The dragon and the fighting man were cut down. Without their leader, their standards, their hope, the rest of the Saxons ran for their lives. The Battle of Hastings was over; the Normans had won.

William was crowned King of England on Christmas Day in Westminster Abbey. He spent much of his remaining life crushing revolts against him and waging military campaigns. William the Conqueror, as he became known, died in 1087 at the age of fifty near Mantes, France. He died as he had spent much of his life, fighting, but unlike King Harold, not from the wound of an arrow or the blow of an ax; William was killed when his horse fell and crushed him.

1. After the Battle of Hastings the women of Bayeux (pronounced buy-you), France, embroidered a piece of linen cloth over two hundred feet long and about twenty inches wide. This tapestry gives us a detailed description of the battle, arms, costumes and manners of the Normans. The information for the tapestry was supplied by the returning Norman knights. Research the Bayeux tapestry and sketch a scene from it.
2. In 1066 the Battle of Hastings was a stunning victory for the French soldiers on horseback. In 1346 English soldiers proved that they could withstand the charge of chevaliers at the Battle of Crecy (pronounced Cray-see). Research the Battle of Crecy and contrast it to the Battle of Hastings. Tell about the new weapon introduced at Crecy and its effect on armor.