

# Why did William win at the Battle of Hastings? – A scripted drama

By Rich Kennett (with a lot of help from Ian Dawson and Helen Snelson)

## Actors needed:

1. Historian Narrator
2. William of Normandy (Norman)
3. Odo, Bishop of Bayeux (Norman)
4. Robert de Beaumont (Norman)
5. Eustace, Count of Boulogne (Norman)
6. William, Count of Evreux (Norman)
7. Geoffrey, Count of Mortagne (Norman)
8. William fitz Osbern (Norman)
9. Hugh de Montfort (Norman)
10. Ralph de Tosny (Norman)
11. King Harold (Anglo Saxon)
12. Gyrrh Godwinson (Harold's brother) (Anglo Saxon)
13. Leofwine Godwinson (Harold's brother) (Anglo Saxon)
14. Godric the sheriff (Anglo Saxon)
15. Thurkill of Berkshire (Anglo Saxon)
16. Breme (Anglo Saxon)
17. Son of Helloc (Anglo Saxon)
18. Gytha Thorkelsdóttir (Anglo Saxon)

## Teacher Notes:

- This was designed for our smallest GCSE class. If your class is bigger (like mine) just have more random Normans!
- To ensure this works the lesson before the students need to be given character cards and told to bring in the necessary props.
- To start push chairs and tables to the sides of the room so the cast can sit around on the tables facing toward the middle of the empty space.
- All stage directions are in ***bold and italics***. These could be said out loud by the teacher.
- Although the names of these people are real, their words and characters are entirely fictional. They are my interpretation of these people. It would be good to pick this apart after the play.
- The power of this play lies with what you do with it afterwards. A decent piece of extended writing after would be a great idea to consolidate their understanding.

## Scene 0: Historian introduces the enquiry

*Scene is empty except for the Historian.*

**Historian:** Welcome ladies and gentlemen to the story of the Battle of Hastings. I am a historian of the Norman Conquest and my job is to guide you through the story and introduce the key characters. All the people in this play were in the actual Battle of Hastings, all the events are real. The words they say and their characters are fictionalised and an interpretation. So let's begin..

## Scene 1: On the Norman coast 27<sup>th</sup> September

*Scene opens with the Historian, Robert de Beaumont, Eustace Count of Boulogne, William Fitz Osbern and Geoffrey, Count of Mortagne.*

**Historian:** Our first scene takes us to the northern coast of modern day France, to Normandy in fact. It is a blustery early autumn day where a band of Norman lords are discussing their plans.

**Robert de Beaumont:** Why haven't we left already?

**Eustace, Count of Boulogne:** The weather is finally doing what we need. After weeks the wind has turned towards England.

**Geoffrey, Count of Mortagne:** Hopefully this will be more successful than the disaster of the 12<sup>th</sup> of September. That attempt was a total failure. I don't know what William was thinking sailing into those winds. This time with an army of 7000 men we must surely be successful!

**William fitz Osbern:** Don't forget 2000 of them are on horseback! This will crush the English!

**Robert de Beaumont:** Shhhh here comes the Duke.

*Enter William of Normandy with Odo, Bishop of Bayeux*

**William of Normandy:** Good evening gentlemen, are we ready?

**All:** Yes!

**Odo, Bishop of Bayeux:** Before we go we must pray for God's good tidings.

*Places the bones of a saint in the middle of the group. All bow their heads and place their hands together in prayer.*

**Odo, Bishop of Bayeux:** With the relics of Saint Michel in front of us let us pray. Dear Lord, we pray for the success of our dear Duke William. With the support of Pope Alexander II, we pray for his successful invasion of England and the defeat of the usurper Harold Godwinson. Amen.

*All leave the stage*

## Scene 2: Landing at Pevensey 28<sup>th</sup> September

**Historian:** Right, let's skip forward a bit. A day to be precise. The Normans have had after an interesting night at sea where the fleet temporarily lost contact with William's ship to finally land at Pevensey a short while ago, a small village near to Hastings on the south coast. Surprise has struck the group!

*Enter Eustace, Count of Boulogne, William Fitz Osbern and William Duke of Normandy*

**Eustace, Count of Boulogne:** Where are they? Where is the magical fyrd we have been hearing about? The English force that was supposed to be waiting for our attack?

**William Fitz Osbern:** Our scouts tell us that Harold is in the north dealing with another Viking invasion. Let's advance towards London!

**William of Normandy:** Steady now Fitz Osbern. Steady. It is time to consolidate before the invasion. See the Roman fort in the distance. That is where we shall make camp. Build up the walls and protect the men. The battle can wait.

**Eustace, Count of Boulogne:** But Duke William should we not march to London? We can burn their houses as we go. We can steal their property!

**William of Normandy:** No my friend, we do not want to be cut off by forces getting between us and our ships on the coast. Consolidate, wait, build up our strengths. Allow the men to raid the surrounding lands. Keep them happy. Time is on our side. Let Harold come to us and tire himself out.

*All exit the scene*

## Scene 3: Harold in London 11 October

*Scene opens with just the historian.*

**Historian:** While the Normans built their defences at Pevensey news of their arrival spread north to Harold a week later. Normally it might have taken two weeks to ride south from York but gathering his army around him Harold knew he did not have the luxury of weeks. In four or five days Godwinson arrived in London where he met his mother and brother.

*Enter King Harold, Gyth and Gytha.*

**King Harold:** I must kill the bastard!

**Gytha:** Wait my son, wait.

**Gyth Godwinson:** We currently hold London. Stay and protect the city. If you lose London, you lose the kingdom.

**Gytha:** Wait for God's sake. You know this man, you have been to Normandy, you know how much he desires the throne. Wait and collect fresh troops. Give the fyrd time to build up once again. Choose your own battlefield near to London and wait for him to approach.

**King Harold:** This is not how a Godwinson behaves. We are not scared of a Norman! We do not wait and hide, we walk straight into the battle to face our foes. We faced the Viking horde at Stamford Bridge and we will do the same with these imbeciles!

*Harold walks out as Gytha and Gyrth look sad.*

#### **Scene 4: William's troops, 14 October dawn**

**Historian:** The day of the battle has finally approached. After departing from London King Harold reassembled the army and marched south. Two Normans on the edge of what would become the field of battle see the English army approaching.

*Enter Ralph de Tosny and Hugh de Montfort*

**Ralph de Tosny:** The English have arrived!

**Hugh de Montfort:** They thought they'd catch us off guard. Ha. Idiots. Our scouts spotted them coming long before.

**Ralph de Tosny:** And that army looks small and knackered!

**Hugh de Montfort:** He's taking position on Senlac Hill

**Ralph de Tosny:** Building a shield wall on that ridge will make life difficult for us!

**Hugh de Montfort:** But it's not great for them either. With that forest behind them retreat is impossible.

**Ralph de Tosny:** Clearly some English think so too. Look some are deserting him!

*All exit the scene.*

#### **Scene 5: Harold at the top of the hill**

**Historian:** Meanwhile at the top of Senlac Hill...

*Enter King Harold, Gyrth Godwinson, Leofwine Godwinson, Godric the sheriff, Thurkill of Berkshire, Breme and Son of Helloc*

**Son of Helloc:** We are screwed.

**Thurkill of Berkshire:** Definitely. The Norman army might be the same size as ours but they've got archers, infantry and men on horseback. We have no horses.

**Leofwine Godwinson:** Come now Thurkill, the day is young. The battle is not even yet begun. We shall prevail.

**Gyrth Godwinson:** Our army is 7000 strong and the housecarls are professional fighters who have shown their bravery in battle in York.

**Thurkill of Berkshire:** But the housecarls only make up a small percentage of the army. We are mostly thegns. We are not skilled fighters. Those Norman bastards look the complete opposite.

**King Harold:** Stand strong, gentlemen. Stand strong. Form a shield wall.

*All the Anglo Saxons form up into a shield wall.*

**Breme:** This 400 yard long beast will hold off any French bastard. No one shall break us!

*All stay put as a shield wall on one side of the stage.*

### **Scene 6: The Battle, 9am**

**Historian:** And then the battle began. We really aren't sure of the exact sequence of events that took place that day but this is the most likely sequence...

*Random Norman blows a trumpet. Enter random Normans.*

**Historian:** The archers flex their bows and send arrows zooming over the heads of the Norman infantry and knights and ploughing into the Anglo Saxon shield wall. The infantry tried to run up the hill towards the shield wall and to break their line. The Norman knights did the same but the horses struggled on the hill. Despite this onslaught nothing changed. The English predictably held their line. The shield wall held strong exactly as Harold had predicted.

*During this the random Normans lead the battle as directed by the historian.*

### **Scene 7: Battle, much later**

**Historian:** After hours of stalemate nothing had changed. The arrows flew. The infantry and knights attacked. The wall held. Things are going very well for the English. That is until it did not...

*On the stage are the random Normans, the shield wall and William, Count of Evreux, a knight on horseback.*

**William, Count of Evreux:** Normans, this is useless. Has anyone seen the Duke? Is he dead? We must retreat and build a better plan.

*William, Count of Evreux begins a retreat. One or two of the English (Son of Helloc and Breme) break ranks in the shield wall. The Normans begin to retreat.*

**Breme:** The Normans are retreating. We are victorious. Attack!

**Son of Helloc:** Attack!

*Then William of Normandy proudly walks onto the stage*

**William of Normandy:** I am not dead. Turn around. We are not yet defeated. By the end of this day England shall be ours. On this battlefield we have two choices, win or die. Normans turn around and give them everything you have got! Win or die! Win or die!

*The Normans turn around and launch a counter attack on the now broken English shield wall. Everyone freezes once the historian begins to speak.*

**Historian:** Now no one really knows if this is what happens. In fact both primary sources and historians have different interpretations. We can probably be fairly sure that a retreat and counter attack was used. But some people think it was always William's plan all along. The Normans had used this tactic at least one other battle already, although not one led by William. Other sources say the Normans used this technique multiple times before the shield wall broke. Either way the outcome was the same. The English were now on the back foot.

**Historian:** Now let's cut to the famous bit. Amongst all this chaos, the English were getting hacked to bits, a single arrow is fired from a single archer. Sweeping over the chaos the arrows go high over the remains of the shield wall and strikes Harold in the eye.

*IN SLOW MOTION: A random Norman can double as an arrow and walks through the scene. As they walk through the scene Leofwine and Gyrth are stabbed by Normans. The arrow continues and eventually jabs Harold (not literally) in the eye. Harold collapses and dies.*

**Godfric the sheriff:** The King! NO!

**Son of Helloc:** Quick, it is over. Run!

**Breme:** Run for your lives.

**Thurkill of Berkshire:** Quick while you still can.

*Son of Helloc, Breme and Thurkill of Berkshire exit the scene. Random Normans overcome the remaining Anglo Saxons and kill the lot.*

**Normans:** YEAH! VICTORY!

**William of Normandy:** I am triumphant. Victory is mine. I am truly the Conqueror!

**Historian:** Except it probably didn't happen like that. The only source that shows Harold getting an arrow in his eye is the Bayeux Tapestry and we aren't even sure it is Harold getting the arrow in the face! In fact some historians even doubt that it is an arrow in the tapestry and not just a 19<sup>th</sup> century repair!

Either way Harold did die in the battle, as did Leofwine and Gyrth but most historians think they were just hacked to death by the Norman soldiers. Not a pretty end to a good story. If you are a Norman, that is!