

# What happened at Hastings? – Knowledge Organiser

## 1. What happened at the Battle of Hastings?

- *Harold did not achieve surprise* – William's scouts informed him about Harold's advance in time for him to leave Hastings and threaten Harold's army as it was gathering together on a wooded hilltop. There was a rush to gain control of the high ground of the battlefield, which Harold won, organising his shield wall along a ridge. There was marshland either side of the hill.
- *William sent his foot soldiers in first* - the battle lasted 8 hours which was longer than a typical medieval battle. William first sent his archers forward, but the English caught the arrows on their shields. Norman foot soldiers then went up the hill towards the shield wall. The heavy axes of the English did a lot of damage. The Norman cavalry then laboured up the hill, but failed to break the wall. The battle started in Harold's favour.
- *William showed his face* – Waves of Norman attacks continued throughout the day, with the Anglo-Saxon shield wall standing firm. At a difficult stage for the Normans, a rumour went round William's army that he had been killed or wounded. William tipped his helmet back to show he was still alive and rallied his troops.
- *Harold's shield wall worn down* – a portion of Harold's army disengaged from the shield wall to chase William's men down the hill. They were cut off at the bottom and slaughtered. The Normans gradually reduced the Saxon forces until the shield wall began to break up and became much less effective against cavalry charges.
- *The last stand* – Harold, his brothers Gyth and Leofwine, their Housecarls and the remaining fyrd troops held their position at the top of the hill, probably in rings of men around their standards. But they were now heavily outnumbered and unable to hold off the Norman cavalry charges. Harold and his brothers were killed, and their Housecarls fought to the last man while the remaining fyrd tried to flee. William was victorious.

### Harold's Housecarls

- Shields were round, hide covered with metal. They formed shield walls, with troops two or three lines thick behind it.
- Wore chain mail armour or metal plates sewn onto leather
- They were highly disciplined and could endure. They were elite foot soldiers and would fight to the death to defend their King.
- Javelin, long axe and a sword were common weapons. They were trained to wield their axes with such force.



## 2. Why did the Normans win the Battle of Hastings?

- *Weakening of the Shield Wall* – possible that this happened due to a lack of discipline in Harold's army. When Harold's foot soldiers broke ranks, the shield wall began to be badly weakened.
- *Feigned Retreat* - a body of troops would pretend to flee in panic, hoping that their opponents would lose their discipline and chase after them. It was very risky because there was a good chance that a pretend flight could turn into a real one.
- *William's leadership* – William made all the right decisions. All of William's risks paid off and for Harold they did not. William's long wait in the summer of 1066 was not because of bad weather, but because he was waiting for Harold's fyrd to disband. As soon as this happened, William set sail. Keeping his army and fleet together took strong leadership. The crossing for William's men was highly ambitious – special boats were constructed to transport the horses. When William and his troops arrived at Pevensey Bay, he showed strong strategic awareness – William organised a pre-fabricated castle which gave them security from attacks. Once in England, William allowed his men to ransack and pillage surrounding areas for food.
- *Harold's leadership* – Harold's military leadership was well renowned throughout England. Calling out his southern army in May was a problem as he had to maintain it for four months, before finally disbanding it. Deciding to rush down to fight William in the South was not Harold's only option. He could have waited for William to come to him in London. If Harold had planned on surprising William, in fact it was the other way around. William learned of Harold's muster point from his scouts and arrived there after a long, early morning march from Hastings, before Harold's army were ready. In the chaos of the battle anything could have happened. Getting an arrow in the eye could have easily have happened to William.
- Luck, or God's will did play a significant role in William's victory, which easily could have gone in Harold's favour. William's time he sailed was very dangerous and he could have easily have been destroyed and so he was very lucky.
- Medieval battles were often chaotic. Despite the differences in tactics, the two sides were easily matched. William was also very lucky that he did not lose and perhaps owes his victory to the indiscipline of the fyrd.

### William's Knights

- Years of training to fight on horseback
- Wore chain mail armour
- Shield was kite shaped to protect left side and leg
- Lance, javelin, sword and mace were common weapons
- Horse was specially bred to be strong enough to carry an armoured knight and trained for battle
- Knights saddles held them tightly in their place on their horse so they could use their arms freely. Their stirrups allowed them to stand in the saddle for a lance thrust.

