

Hastings - not just any old hill.

There has long been speculation and debate as to exactly where the Battle of Hastings was fought.

In 2013, a T.V. archeology documentary team known as 'Time Team' investigated the area, intending to 'dig' for evidence of a battlefield. From the outset, it needs to be understood that the format of the programme is typically that they get limited time (usually three days) to investigate a site, at the conclusion of which they try to bring together the threads of their findings into a coherent narrative. It can be difficult to come to 'certain' conclusions in that time, but their work can open the door for others to follow, contributing to the ongoing process of both new discovery and re-assessment of our history.

The programme starts with the two main contenders for the battle site being Caldbec Hill and Senlac Hill, with a third location, Crowhurst, championed by a local amateur historian

Crowhurst has not gained traction as an alternative site. In support of the 'Caldbec theory' we are asked why would Harold leave a steeper and higher position for an inferior position of Senlac Hill? Support of the 'Senlac theory' draws on the commemorative building of the abbey being associated with the battle site and in particular the position of the altar that is claimed to be sited where Harold stood.

Time Team opened up an excavation at both the traditional site and at Caldbec Hill to look for artifacts - none were found at either site, though the dig at the Senlac Hill did only represent 1% of the traditional site. With the investigation stalling, the team turned to some pretty powerful technology - LiDAR, which is an aerial reconnaissance system that scans the ground and then is able to delete all of the features above ground and reveal the raw shape of the landscape with impressive precision. From this, their expert consultants studied the topography to identify likely areas for battle.

Three things became apparent to them. Firstly that Caldbec Hill itself though impressive was too big for the Saxon force to defend. Secondly that the traditional approach had low ground that would have been too boggy for an army to approach from that direction. Thirdly they saw a narrow piece of raised ground that looked ideal for defending and which fitted with the accounts of the battle. This piece of land was in fact the left shoulder of Senlac Hill (looking from the Saxon perspective). Time Team proposed that rather than the attack coming from the forward slopes of Senlac Ridge, it came in from the left (of the Saxon position), requiring us to turn the accepted position of the armies a full ninety degrees to face and contest the new proposed direction of attack.

It is a fascinating piece of technology based evidence and genuinely adds something new to the ongoing debate about the battle location, though at this relatively early stage in the discovery, academic caution has rightly not been thrown to the wind. The theory, based on topography alone needs to be given the time for wider evaluation and strengthening from critical analysis of the historical record and physical evidence from excavation. It is interesting to note in the documentary that John Grehan who begins the programme convinced that Caldbec Hill is the true battle site, evidentially supported, does by the end of the program seem to have embraced the new location as being correct and it is this sort of ease at which the evidence can fit a theory or two that makes caution and proper evaluation important. For the time being at least, English Heritage are staying with the traditional account of the battle, accepting that the new location suggests that the left flank of Harold's position was a focus of the battle.

Having originally designed my Hastings game some years ago on the traditional telling of the battle, the new edition gave an opportunity for me to re-consider a change to the orientation of the line of attack. It would certainly give players something new, particularly those who had bought earlier editions of the game, but removing that commercial consideration and just looking at the history, I was left feeling that the 'establishment' has not to date fully embraced the notion of a 'new

location' independent of the traditional line of attack and accordingly, I decided to stay with the traditional history as portrayed in the existing game.

There were some other considerations that helped me come to that decision. Firstly, my design took a tight crop of the battlefield to present the essential elements of the battle.

These being, the armies were constrained in terms of the area that they could deploy due to the boggy land. The Normans were forced into a frontal assault uphill against a position that had flanks fully protected by soft ground. There is a small rise of ground on the Norman left flank that the Bretons routed towards and there is a narrow ribbon of raised dry ground that the Norman army advance over before deploying below the Saxon army.

These in effect would also appear to be the basic elements at the new proposed site, so I felt that the general flow of play and even the 'look' of the game would have more similarities than differences, regardless of which location was actually chosen. Jim Bradbury, writing in 1998 (*The Battle of Hastings* - Sutton Publishing) sums it up when of Harold he says "but he did have time to arrange his army in a good defensive position on the crest of a hill, whichever hill".

Further, I was also swayed by a thought that the new approach seems too narrow to hold the armies. Allowing the Saxons to deploy in such depth, it is difficult to see how they would ever be successfully assailed, by the positionally disadvantaged Norman army. Also, the trackway on my map is a consolidation of a causeway crossing land around Astern Brook and leading up onto the slope of Senlac Ridge, to join other (not represented) trackways and this trackway is suggestive of a more direct line of march for the Norman army coming from Telham Hill than the suggested alternative route.

Two things remain unresolved to my mind. Firstly battlefield evidence taken from under the soil needs to be sampled over wide area if we are ever to understand the size of the battlefield and the positions of the forces involved, particularly the flanks and more interestingly the Norman left flank, that saw many casualties and which would help us interpret the extent of 'the line' around the base of the Senlac slopes. Secondly, knowing exactly and with certainty, what areas of ground were actually too boggy for the armies to operate on seems critical to understanding the battle, but difficult to ascertain. Knowing the ground level is one thing, but knowing what was actually bog or the limits of its influence is another. This was an eight hour battle during which time the flanks were not enveloped, the extent of the unusable ground and areas such as natural causeways would therefore be of vital importance in presenting the case as 'solved'.

I have gathered together some links that take differing perspectives in the debate, so that the reader can see both the complexity of the subject and come to their own conclusions. Will we ever know for sure? perhaps we have taken one step closer to a cogent interpretation of the battle becoming a reality.

YouTube link to the T.V. Documentary <http://m.youtube.com/watch?v=IhAXPI3ueW0>

National newspaper coverage (note the legal challenge mentioned in the final paragraph failed. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/history/10486441/Battle-of-Hastings-fought-at-site-of-mini-roundabout.html>)

Local newspaper coverage <http://www.hastingsobserver.co.uk/news/local/time-team-1066-special-new-battlefield-claim-disputed-1-5737079>

Nick Austin has written extensively on his theory of the **Crowhurst** site and though not gaining much traction, I thought his work would be of interest <http://www.secretsofthenormaninvasion.com>

Marc Morris supporting the traditional location of the battle <http://www.marcmorris.org.uk/2013/12/time-team-battle-of-hastings.html>