

## **THE EARLY HISTORY OF BEXHILL'S COMBE VALLEY**

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From an archaeological and historical perspective, the valley of the Combe Haven river is nationally significant and contains elements of international importance.

### **Pre-history and History Overview**

Archaeologically Combe Valley already has national status as a proven place of continuous human occupation since the end of the last Ice Age as confirmed to me by Casper Johnson, County Archaeologist and Palaeontologist for East Sussex County Council.

The area is one of four significant flood plains on the south coast of England:

Pevensy Levels, Combe Valley, Brede Valley, Romney Marsh

Combe Valley was originally the sea bed but the longshore drift piled up shingle and the land turned to salt marsh. When sea levels changed it became a valley prone to seasonal flooding. It has the largest area of Neolithic flint knapping sites in Europe currently under investigation, with flints found as arrowheads, axes and scrapers. Long barrow burials chambers have been found. In so-called 'Stone Age' times, whole families would walk from Lewes or from sites now under the sea with high quality flints they had picked up and packed into animal skin bags, trudging for hours until they could sit down and skilfully work on the material on the banks of the Combe Haven stream.

The shape of the valley, with its hill slopes and floodplain, is the result of large-scale land movements during the Cretaceous and Tertiary geological periods. The most recent Ice Age ended around 14,000 years ago (give or take an icicle). The Neanderthals slowly died out or interbred and Homo sapiens sapiens (namely us) became the only widespread human hominid.

The early Holocene and Mesolithic cultures transferred from 'hunter-gatherer' to settled agricultural production. Combe Valley was covered in trees (alder, birch and hornbeam, salt marshes and carr – (wetland trees in marsh such as willow).

At the beginning of the Iron Age, Belgic tribes moved into the Valley, finding and mining large iron deposits. The Romans invaded partly because of the presence of this iron and many Roman remains have been discovered. Then Saxons took the Valley and built farms and manors some of which remain at Worsham and Wilting.

Vikings (Danes) did invade the area, attacking all the local ports from the Isle of Wight to Sandwich and beaching their dragon-prowed longships when challenged at sea by the Anglo-Saxon Navy. A Viking called Haesten settled near here and still owned land marked in the Domesday Book.

Eventually following Saxon inter-tribal rivalry, the Valley had a settled farming existence – but by this time nearly all the trees had been stripped from the Valley sides for iron smelting, charcoal and weapon making.

At the edge of the Valley at Crowhurst the great yew in the churchyard predates Christianity at 2,300 years old and Crowhurst Church was built in 771 AD. The Normans took the area by force, killing whole families and laying some of it to 'waste'. William the Bastard's cousin Robert Count of Eu built a church at Bulverhythe (then a harbour) where the Combe Haven river emerges to the sea.

## More details about the area

The Combe Haven river flows out to sea at Bulverhythe, once an ancient port. During the low sea-level of the last glaciation this river was a feeder stream for the massive river Rhine/Seine/Somme/Thames outflow which eventually formed the English Channel.

The shape of the valley with its hill slopes and floodplain is the result of large-scale land movements during the Cretaceous and Tertiary geological periods as a result of tectonic folding activity within the Mediterranean basin. 2.5 million years ago in the Quaternary more than one hundred climatic changes affected the valley, alternating between warm and cold periods. In the Cretaceous, a land uplift began, lifting the sea bed of this coast 40 metres higher with consequent raised beaches.

When the last cold period ended around 14,000 years ago rapid global warming led to an increase in human activity as the Valley entered the Holocene. During this last period from around 10,000 years ago Combe Valley was at times a flooded salt marsh lagoon cut off by shingle banks produced by the longshore drift, but often overtopped and re-flooded by the sea during periods of tidal surge and storm - similar to the effects experienced by Pevensey Levels a short distance along to coast towards Eastbourne.

**Tree coverage:** Rapid warming brought increasingly dense tree coverage. Plant pollen surveys reveal silver birch, hornbeam and pine in the early stages and a mix of salt marsh, reed beds and swamps with willow and alder carr and hill slope forests of deciduous trees including lime and oak. Around 5,000 years ago, as trees died and fell in storms so a peat development phase began, the sea withdrew and the huge shoreline forest at Glyne Gap, running all the way to Pevensey and Rye Bay became fossilised. As well as oak and alder, yew, beech and ash became regular woodland trees in the valley.

**Landscape:** The valley bottom is divided up by a central river - the Haven, side streams such as Powdermill and Watermill and drainage ditches, marshy grassland and extensive reed beds some of which have turned to carr with willow encroachment. The hill slopes are of grassland with farming effects from grazing cattle and a large segment is occupied by a redundant waste tip which is covered by a gas blanket and earth and is being turned back over the next seven years to a grass-covered hill. Both on the hillsides and the valley floor there are stands of trees - most notably Combe Wood with glorious and extensive spreads of English bluebells.

**Flooding:** The valley floods each year. Rainfall peaks between October and January with 15 inches falling. The Haven is approximately four feet higher in the west than the east and drops across a sluice in the western valley, then flows slowly to Bulverhythe where the stream narrows sharply at Sheepwash Bridge (site of the drowning of criminals in days of yore) and then flows out to sea via a man-made canal, a gated sluice and, ignominiously, a large iron pipe onto the beach. A large caravan park has been given planning permission to build on the flood plain of the Haven and as a consequence, it periodically is threatened by flooding and has to be specially protected. The central and eastern valley floods last sometimes for seven months and often burst out onto the main A259 road and cover the Bexhill Road recreation ground in around one foot of water, flowing into the backs of the homes on Bexhill Road. There is an emergency flood plan.

## Aspects of Early History in the area

Combe Valley is connected to Battle Abbey and Bexhill via the 1066 Trail. There has been recent rivalry amongst historians concerning the possibility that in 1066 William the Bastard (as he signed himself) came with his fleet to Pevensey. The problem has been, which Pevensey? Because the land where Battle now stands was almost surround by water, having Pevensey Levels in the west, Combe Valley centrally and the Brede Valley in the east. Senior historians have proposed that in fact the whole flooded area was called 'The Island of Pevenise' and that the Normans sailed their ships up all three major flooded approaches. So the remains of these fleets are likely to be found across all three entrances. Furthermore, the current consensus is, despite the stance of English Heritage for Senlac Hill being the site of the Battle, that in reality it was on Caldbec Hill, north of Battle High Street.

I understand that English Heritage are to re-investigate the whole battle because no sword, shield, arrow point or axe or any physical evidence of it has ever been found and it was so important to English History that many people are unhappy with the status quo.

On 14<sup>th</sup> October 1066, at the time of the battle, Harold the son of Earl Godwine (who was a Sussex man through and through) was simultaneously:

- (1) Married uncanonically through right-handed handfasting to Edith Swan Neck the founder of the Shrine at Walsingham (also called Edith Swanessa or Richeldis) and had five, probably six young children.
- (2) Married canonically in the eyes of the Christian Church to the sister of Earls Morcar and Edwin – Queen Edith (Ealdgyth) of Wales. Harold had previously arranged for her former Welsh husband's head to be cut off and sent to Edward the Confessor. They had one child called Harold. The child called 'Ulf' shown in some records as belonging to Queen Edith was more probably born to Edith Swan Neck. No child born uncanonically would be acceptable as a legal heir to the throne, or so Harold thought. Since Harold did not marry Queen Edith until January 1066, their son was not born until November 1066 by which time their father was probably dead. (but maybe not - see later in this article).
- (3) Betrothed to Adeliza (aged 10) the daughter of William the Conqueror and also possibly betrothed to another daughter called Agnes who William was hawking around Europe for a husband.

Harold's mother Gytha and Edith Swan Neck were present nearby at Caldbec and probably saw or knew Combe Valley from having to pass it by on local journeys as it was full of marshes and 'waste'. The primary sources for the battle state that the Anglo-Saxons were defeated and 'fled into the waste'. So maybe Combe Valley has some gristly surprises in store.

## Shipwrecks

Along our section of the coast both before and after the Conquest, many hundreds of Saxon and Viking ships were wrecked and it may be possible to find some relics (iron bolts for example). To give you just one example:

Harold's grandfather was known as Wulfnoth Cild who owned much land in Sussex. It is not known who his grandmother was or if their marriage was handfasted or approved by the church. Harold's father Earl Godwine was born in 1001. In 1009, when Godwine was about seven years old his family was deeply affected by the accusations made to King Ethelred the Unready by the Brihtric, brother

of a notorious and vicious liar and traitor called Edric Streona. Godwine's father was accused of some sort of treachery. In 1008, the king had commanded that a new fleet of 300 ships be built made ready at the port of Sandwich in Kent because the Vikings were likely to attack England once again.

English ships were not much different in design from Viking ships but often had a raised central platform for 'doing battle from'. Because the 'Streona Family' were known to be capable of murder, Wulfnoth, as Thane of Sussex may have felt he had to act in a dramatic fashion to escape punishment, so took 20 ships from the king's fleet and began to attack the ports along the south coast. Streona's brother Brihtric went after him with 80 ships. These ships were caught in a storm and driven ashore. Wulfnoth then set light to these grounded ships and burned them all.

Unfortunately the king then ordered the remaining 200 ships of his fleet to pull back to London in the relative safety of the Thames thus negating the whole point of building and positioning them to guard the sea coast at Sandwich in the first place. The Vikings, seeing that it was undefended, promptly invaded Kent. The enraged king took Wulfnoth's family property from him.

It would be truly exciting to find some remnants of those ships in Combe Valley!

Later, on Christmas Day in the year 1017, King Canute ordered that Edric Streona should be 'given his just reward' and so another Earl called Eric took his axe and quick as a flash chopped off Streona's head as the assembled courtiers stood warming themselves in front of the King's fireplace at the court in Winchester.

Happy Days!

### **Did Harold Die at Hastings?**

The mystery surrounding the death of King Harold emerges from several sources. His mother Gytha pleaded with William the Bastard to be given Harold's body. In fact she offered his weight in gold but William gave her the rough end of his lip. It is said that Harold's handfasted wife, Edith Swan Neck, a very beautiful, rich, highly intelligence and skilled woman who had probably been educated at Wilton Abbey, was standing by what we now call, 'The Watch Tree' at Caldbec wood in Battle. She saw the whole terrible event and then was asked to walk through the thousands of dead to find and identify to the Normans, her husband's corpse. You might well ask where Queen Edith of Wales and now Queen Edith of England was during the battle – well she was feeding her one month old baby.

Historians examining the stitch marks have shown that the Bayeux Tapestry had been altered at some time maybe during repairs and the famous 'arrow' may not have been 'in the eye' but missed the helmet with a glancing blow. Yet it was said that Harold was hacked about the face, castrated and wounded in the legs.

A few years ago a tomb was opened at Bosham in Hampshire and there was the skeleton of a tall man with an eye socket wound and a leg cut in half. Some historians jumped to the conclusion that this was Harold.

They forgot that in addition to Harold's father Earl Godwine being buried at Bosham, Harold's brother Beorn was also buried there. Now it is know that Beorn had been murdered by Harold's elder brother Sweyn who was a crazy madman, always killing and being exiled, then pardoned, then sinning again. So it is likely that the mutilated body is that of Beorn, not Harold.

Harold was paralysed when young and monks at Waltham Abbey treated him and he recovered, so in 1060 he gave money and aid to the monks to improve the Abbey and on the way back from his victory against Harold Hardrada at Stamford Bridge to Hastings he stopped at Waltham Abbey to say prayers and obtain a blessing. So is his body buried there? There is a marked slab but there seems to be no body under it.

Yet In the British Museum, there is a unique manuscript called the Vita Haroldi written at Waltham Abbey and usually taken to be a 'romance' – a false story. However, more and more, historians are looking at what it says.

It claims that Harold was badly wounded early in the battle by a sword in the face, not an arrow, but was removed to safety critically ill – perhaps by Breton friends of Edith Swan Neck as she loved Harold so much. She then pretended to look for his body and deliberately identified another body of one of his brothers – maybe Leofwine or Gyrth, instead. Now the monks who wrote about this said that Edith knew Harold's body well – and the Anglo-Saxons of that time tattooed their skin much as many modern people do now. The person who wrote the Vita Haroldi says that Waltham ended up with the wrong body. They try to blame Edith Swan Neck – a mere woman's mistake, but Edith knew and made love to Harold for 20 years or more and she certainly was not stupid.

Whatever the truth of the way it was done, Harold was then taken to a safe place where a Saracen woman – a healer using herbs and Arab medical skills, slowly healed him. But he was so badly cut about the face that he was disfigured. He then fled to Germany to try and get help from his Saxon roots. This was to no avail so he went to the Viking settlement in Dublin, Ireland (which two of his sons had previously used as a base to launch ship-borne attacks on Exeter) but was rebuffed, then to Wales where he was understandably pushed out - and finally to a church in Chester, where he became a veiled monk.

Now at St John's, Chester outside the city walls there really is a tiny stone anchorite chapel where it is said Harold of England revealed himself to a priest as being the true king of England. Local legends confirm that a priest, a confessor and a witness all heard and saw this event. This anchorite chapel has been made into a private dwelling just recently.

Is it true? Well, King Henry the First – sometimes called Henry Beauclerc, visited this chapel and there are said to be documents recording him meeting an elderly veiled monk who said his name was Harold. Now Henry became king in 1100 AD and Harold Godwinsson was born about 1022. So a 77-year old veiled monk might well have been the legitimate king of England not William the Bastard.

The final part of this amazing tale is even more powerful – because one of Harold and Edith-Swan Neck's daughters was married into the early Russian royal family in Kiev and she had many children – and one of those children was the ancestor of our own Queen Elizabeth II and also to her husband the Duke of Edinburgh.

Truth is even more amazing than fiction!