How confident was William of Normandy before the Battle of Hastings?

The skeletons found at Riccall show that England was a difficult country to conquer. King Harold had destroyed the Norwegian army but only days later he heard that William, Duke of Normandy, had landed in the south. Who was William and how confident was he that he could conquer England?

William was born around 1027, the son of the Duke of Normandy. His father died when William was just seven. So, from an early age, he had to fight for his Dukedom against rebels and rival lords. He quickly learned his skills as a soldier and how to be ruthless in war.

During the 1030s William met and helped an Englishman living in exile in Normandy while England was ruled by Danish kings. This man’s name was Edward, and he remained grateful to young Duke William for the rest of his life. In 1042 Edward was able to return to England and was crowned king. Later, in 1051, Edward showed his gratitude to William by promising that he would be his successor as king.

William’s hopes of the crown grew stronger in 1064 when Harold Godwinson arrived in Normandy. Harold was the most powerful lord in England. While he was in Normandy, according to William’s story, Harold promised that he would help William become the next king of England.

William must have felt anxious on the night of 1066 – the invasion of England. He recruited an army to invade England and punish Harold. He promised English land and riches to the men who joined him. He built ships which he stocked with weapons and food. Finally, just before the ships were ready to sail, the cavalry horses were taken on board.

But all that summer of 1066, William’s invasion was delayed by the wind blowing strongly against his ships, stopping them sailing for weeks. Would William’s men abandon the invasion? Was the delay giving Harold the chance to strengthen his defences?

Eventually, in late September 1066, the wind changed and William set sail. The Normans did not know what to expect. Would there be a Saxon army waiting to throw them back into the sea? Would they be fighting a battle within hours of landing? William did not know that King Harold had marched north to fight the Norwegian army.

It was 13 October when William’s scouts finally brought news that Harold and his army were approaching. William ordered his men to spend the night wearing their armour, weapons close at hand. Now 38 years old, a very experienced soldier, he knew that the next day he would be fighting for the crown of England.

1066 – the invasion of England

In January 1066 King Edward died but William did not become king. Instead it was Harold who took the crown, chosen by the Saxon lords. William said that Harold had broken his word. He recruited an army to invade England and punish Harold. He promised English land and riches to the men who joined him. He built ships which he stocked with weapons and food. Finally, just before the ships were ready to sail, the cavalry horses were taken on board.

But all that summer of 1066, William’s invasion was delayed by the wind blowing strongly against his ships, stopping them sailing for weeks. Would William’s men abandon the invasion? Was the delay giving Harold the chance to strengthen his defences?

Eventually, in late September 1066, the wind changed and William set sail. The Normans did not know what to expect. Would there be a Saxon army waiting to throw them back into the sea? Would they be fighting a battle within hours of landing? William did not know that King Harold had marched north to fight the Norwegian army.

With no Saxon army to stop them, the Normans landed safely but did not move far from the coast for fear of being cut off from their ships. The Bayeux Tapestry shows them looting, stealing food, setting fire to local houses and building a castle.

Was the Norman Conquest really so significant?

Think

Why do you think the Norman sources give plenty of detail about Harold’s promise to William but the English sources do not mention it at all?

Activity

A) Decide on William’s level of confidence at that moment. Add the box to the graph at the level you have chosen.

b) Complete the sentence in each box to explain why William felt more or less confident.

c) Connect the boxes by drawing a line a line between them. This will show the rise and fall of William’s confidence.

William must have felt anxious on the night before the battle but also confident that he and his army could beat Harold. Why do you think he was confident of winning? Think about:

- the events leading up to the battle (as shown in your graph)
- William’s previous experience
- William’s knowledge about what Harold had been doing.
Before the battle
In the summer of 1066, King Harold expected that Duke William would invade. But as the summer wore on, the Normans did not arrive as the wind held them back from sailing (see page 00). Harold had to disband his army because his men needed to go home to collect the harvest. Not long after, events began suddenly to change as you can see from map B.

Why did William win the Battle of Hastings?

It was the evening of 14 October 1066. The fighting had begun early in the morning and was now finally over. The Normans had achieved a hard fought victory and the victims of the slaughter lay all around. Amidst the horror, King Harold’s mistress, Edith Swan-Neck, finally identified his body.

Meanwhile, William, Duke of Normandy, vowed to thank God for granting his victory by building a fine church on the spot where Harold had planted his standard (flag). William held true to his promise and you can visit Battle Abbey today. But what were the more earthly reasons for William’s victory that day?

Your enquiry
In this enquiry you will discover the reasons why William won and learn to think like a historian when dealing with causes. You will show your understanding with an essay – but don’t worry, you’ll get plenty of help on how to write this!

Think
Look at illustration A above.
1. What does it show you about the winners and losers of the battle?
2. What questions does it make you want to ask about the battle?

Enquiry step 1
First evidence: A modern reconstruction of the end of the Battle of Hastings.

Enquiry step 2
Now it’s time to identify some of the reasons that helped William to win the Battle of Hastings.

1. Use map B above to copy and complete the cards below. You are making cards so that you can group your ideas and support your thinking later. The first one is done for you.

   ![Card Example](image)

   Some of Harold’s men were exhausted after marching north, defeating the Vikings and travelling back south as quickly as possible.

   William had made excellent preparations. His army was made up of …

   Harold lacked some of his most experienced men at Hastings because …

2. Find more reasons that might have helped William win the battle. Make a card for each one. Remember to write in full sentences.

3. Which of your reasons so far do you think was the most important in helping William to win? Why?
Was the Norman Conquest really so significant?

The Battle of Hastings began around 9 a.m., 14 October 1066. Some historians say William had kept his men ready throughout the night in order to prevent a surprise attack. King Harold’s army had taken position at the top of the hill. The English lacked archers, which meant they could not attack the Normans from distance.

Here, on foot, they drew close together and formed a shield wall to protect them from Norman arrows and attacks.

William's army advanced steadily, archers at the front, then foot soldiers and finally his knights on horseback. William carried the banner given to him by the Pope, a sign to him and his men that God was on their side.

William sent his knights to try and smash through the shield wall. However, riding uphill soon tired the horses and the Normans failed to make a breakthrough. The fighting continued for another couple of hours, both sides hacking away at each other as the Normans made continued attacks on the shield wall.

After a few hours a rumour went round that William was dead. Some Normans began to flee. Just at that moment William appeared and rushed towards them shouting, ‘Look at me! I am alive and with God’s help I will conquer!’ Bravely he led his men in another attack.

William encouraged his men to use the trick of retreating. They pretended to run away and some of Harold’s less experienced soldiers left the shield wall to chase them.

Away from the safety of the shield wall, these men were quickly surrounded and hacked to death by the Norman knights on horseback.

Enquiry step 3

The storyboard on pages 20–21 outlines the events of the Battle of Hastings. Read it to find as many reasons as you can that helped William to win.

1. Copy and complete the two examples below.
   - William’s men must have felt confident that God was on their side because ...
   - William showed he was a good leader when ...

2. Make cards for the other reasons you found in the storyboard. Remember to write in full sentences.

3. Now look at the reasons collected so far in Enquiry steps 2 and 3. Which do you think was the most important in helping William to win? Why?
Was the Norman Conquest really so significant?

Enquiry step 4: Pulling your enquiry together

Over the last few pages you have discovered a lot of reasons why William won the Battle of Hastings. You produced cards in Enquiry steps 2 and 3 to show these. Now you are going to sort these cards in different ways to help you think about how they link together and which were the most important.

Making links

Historians need to be good at seeing how reasons for events can link together.

1. Go through your cards and find one reason that led to or caused another. Find as many pairs as you can. Make sure you can explain how one reason led to another. An example is given below.

Organising the causes

Historians also like to understand the reasons for events by putting them into groups.

2. Put your cards under the following big headings (group of reasons):
   a. Harold’s weaknesses and bad luck
   b. The strength and skill of the Norman army
   c. William’s leadership

3. Now it is time to decide on your answer to the enquiry question. Which of the three big headings above do you think was the most important reason why William won the battle? Explain why you chose it. Use your answers to questions 1 and 2 above to help you. Discuss this with a partner or as a class.

Communicating your answer

Now you can use the work you have done in Enquiry steps 1–4 to write an essay in answer to the enquiry question:

Why did William win the Battle of Hastings?

Your essay should contain the following things:

- Introduction – this is where you outline the question and grab the attention of the reader.
- Paragraphs – this is the main part of the essay where you examine the reasons William won.
- Conclusion – this is where you give a judgement about which reason was most important.

Writing an introduction

An introduction should grab the attention of the reader and briefly outline what the question is about. Have a look at this one we have written:

In 1066 two armies met. The battle lasted most of the day. King Harold of England was killed and the winner became the new king of England. We need to look at the reasons why William was able to win.

I. Rewrite our introduction in order to improve it. Think about the following before you rewrite it:

- What factual details could you add to it?
- Does it grab the attention of the reader?
- What words and phrases could you use to make this better? Below are some ideas.

   - bloody
   - violent
   - dramatic
   - Duke
   - William of Normandy
   - brave
   - Hastings
   - Harold’s weaknesses and luck
   - William’s leadership
   - the strengths and skills of the army
   - 14 October 1066

Writing paragraphs

A good essay is structured into paragraphs. Your big headings will each become a paragraph in your essay. A good paragraph is like a good burger; both have key ingredients (see the diagram on page 23). Without a top bun (opening point), there is nothing to hold the meal together. If you miss out or don’t add enough meat (evidence) the burger is tasteless. If you forget the bottom bun (the explanation) the meat / evidence falls out and is useless!

\[
\text{Evidence that supports your opening point:} \quad \text{William’s weaknesses and luck} \\
\text{Explanation:} \quad \text{Because some of Harold’s men were very exhausted after marching north, defeating the Vikings and travelling back south as quickly as possible, this allowed William to win the battle.}
\]

A good paragraph starts with an opening point that sums up the argument of the paragraph and links it to the question.

Point | Evidence | Explanation
--- | --- | ---
A second reason William won was the strength of the Norman army. | For example … | Therefore, William was able to win because …
A final reason William won was … | Firstly … | This meant …
 | Moreover … | This led to …
 | Furthermore … | This resulted in …
 | Secondly … | Lastly …
 | Finally … | Overall, I think the most important reason William won the Battle of Hastings was …

3. Now that you are feeling confident, write the next paragraph on your own. Remember to start with a point, back it up with evidence and then explain how this links to the question. Use the prompts in the table above if you need them to start your sentences.

Writing a conclusion

Your conclusion should let the reader know which reason you think was the most important in helping William to win the battle. You already thought about this in Enquiry step 4. The sentence starters below will help you:

Overall, I think the most important reason William won the Battle of Hastings was …

This is because …
Was the Norman Conquest really so significant?

Most people living in Britain have heard of the Norman Conquest and the Battle of Hastings. ’1066’ is one of the most famous dates in all history. Many people visit Norman castles or go to the battlefield near Hastings every year to watch the battle being re-enacted. Now it’s time to finish your work on the Normans by deciding whether the Norman Conquest was significant as well as being so famous.

There are two questions that need the answer ‘yes’ before we can agree that the Norman Conquest was a really significant event in history.

A Did the Norman Conquest make important changes to the lives of people at the time?

B Did the Norman Conquest continue to affect life in Britain for centuries afterwards?

You have already found out the answer to question A) when you investigated the ways that the Normans affected the lives of Thorkell, Alan, Bron and Edith on pages 30–35. Their lives did change, for good or ill, although some things (like farming, homes and medicine) did not change.

This page and activity helps you answer question B), using the diagram and cards on pages 36–37.

Activity

1. Draw your own version of the ‘ripple diagram’ below. Then decide where on the diagram each card on pages 36–37 should go. We have put one example on the diagram to show you how to fill it in.
2. Look at the pattern of cards on your completed diagram. Use it to write a short answer to question B) above.
3. Now think back over all your work on the Norman Conquest. In your opinion, was it a significant event in British history? To answer this question:
   - Think about how you would answer both questions A) and B) above with ‘Yes’.
   - Explain whether you think it was significant or not.
   - Choose three pieces of evidence to support your answer. These should provide evidence of the impact of the Norman Conquest both at the time and over later centuries.

---

The Big Picture

---

The Norman Conquests were significant because:

1. The ruling class and landowners
   - The Anglo-Saxon lords who advised the king and held most of the land in England were replaced by William’s Norman supporters. By 1087 England had a completely new ruling class of landowners. Some of these families continued to own these lands and play a leading part in government for hundreds of years after 1066.

2. Castles
   - The Normans built castles all over England to control the English. These castles were rebuilt many times and continued to be used as homes for hundreds of years after 1066.

3. The royal family
   - A new dynasty (royal family) became kings of England from 1066, replacing the Anglo-Saxon kings. The distant descendants of the Norman kings still reign in Britain today.

4. Links with Normandy
   - Before 1066 England had close links with Scandinavia (Denmark, Norway and Sweden) but in 1066 England became part of the Anglo-Norman empire. Kings of England were often away in Normandy and other parts of France, fighting to defend their French lands. This continued until 1204 when King John lost Normandy to the King of France.

5. Death and destruction
   - Many English people died in battle and in rebellions against the Normans. Homes, crops and animals were destroyed by the Normans to punish rebellions. Normans were destroyed to make space for castles.

6. Language and names
   - The language spoken in England changed after 1066. English words were the largest part of the English language but French words used by the new ruling class gradually became part of the English language. Examples are archer, baron, pavilion, duke, principality. Some French names such as William, Robert, Richard and Alice also became English.

7. One country, two peoples
   - After 1066, the English did not feel they were living in their own country any longer. They were treated as Norman soldiers on horseback, wearing chainmail and speaking a strange language. The new Normans saw themselves as Normans, not English. However, this changed gradually in the 1100s partly through marriages between the English and Normans. By 1200 the differences between Normans and English had mostly died out.

8. Religion and cathedrals
   - William and his brothers were deeply religious and determined to make England a more religious country. They rebuilt over half the cathedrals. These became much larger with the latest fashions in architecture from France. New monasteries were built too and by the 1130s (20 years after the Conquest) there were four times as many monasteries, monks and nuns. These new cathedrals and monasteries were still being used in 1200. Some cathedrals are still in use today.

9. The power of the king
   - William the Conqueror was the most powerful king England had ever had. He said that he owned all the land in the country and could give land (or take it away) from even his strongest barons. Kings remained extremely powerful until the seventeenth century when they first began to share power with Parliament.