Around Battle, but mainly Hastings from 900-1450

This is an overview document to set the geographic scene of Battle as apart from speculation that there was nothing at Battle itself before 1066 apart from a crossroad and a tiny population at Uckham the area around it was far from empty.

Firstly the non-entry for Hastings within the Baldslow hundred in the *Domesday Book* causes some consternation. This was not a unique situation in *Domesday.* There are a number of similar blank spaces at the start of other counties in *Domesday*, and blank spaces for Winchester and London. Where these spaces contain entries, such as for Dover in Kent, the first entry is a borough. It has been conjectured that in virtually every county there were boroughs, requiring different treatment to the standard *Domesday* recording. These were either never finally recorded, or were too big for the space left for them, or they were recorded separately and the recordings have been lost.

There is a recording of a 'new', but obviously small, Hastings in the adjacent hundred of Guestling within the manor of Rameslie and this is probably our first hint all was not well with 'old' Hastings or Haestingaceastre, which it his believed lay more on a hill to the west, between the Priory Valley, now the main commercial centre of Hastings, and Bulverhythe that would have clearly been in the different hundred of Baldslow, and that a 'new' Hastings was developing in the shelter of the small Bourne valley.

Places in the Baldslow hundred, now subsumed into Hastings and St Leonards, are named in *Domesday*, such as Filsham, Hollington, 'Cortesly' and Bulverhythe**.** It should be noted that Filsham was a very large manor with 15 hides (1800 acres/730Ha) of productive land, and was formerly held directly by King Edward himself. Post conquest, about half this manor was directly held by the count of Eu and the rest held from him by 11 others. Filsham would appear to have supported over 100 households, and there were another 70+ families in adjacent manors, which might suggest a population of nearly 1000 in the area of the presumed Haestingaceastre. *Domesday* has the additional information that 20 burgesses are recorded paying rent for three virgates (90 acres/36Ha) of land directly held by the Count of Eu at Bollington, which was in the area of Pebsham/Worsham, on the other side of Bulverhythe. Most of the rest of Bollington belonged to the abbey of Tréport. Were these the town burgesses of Hæstingaceastre, paying rents for nearby land?

Bexhill/Bollington between them had a recorded population of about 150 families; say 700 people; Ninfield plus Hooe had about 100 households, say 500 people. Battle pre-1066 was in the adjacent hundred of Hailesaltede (later Netherfield) with no recorded population, but there were only a few dwellers in the area of present day Battle, at Uckham (4 households), Mountfield (11), Whatlington (9), Catsfield (13) and Ashburnham (24). So taking into account other nearby small manors and some undercounting by *Domesday* agents the whole population of the Hastings/Bexhill/Battle area at that time may have been approximately 3000.

Harold was the main holder of Godwin lands in eastern Sussex , which included land at Ninfield, Crowhurst, Hooe and Whatlington but his brother Leofwine held one manor and his sister Edith held some of the peripheral Royal lands. It has been noted that the Godwinsons as a whole held more English manors and estates than the king at this time.

We know that in 1086 other areas around Hastings such as Wilting and Crowhurst were still waste or recovering after the predations of 1066, also that the *'castellaria de Hastinges'* – castelry of Hastings (its direct jurisdiction) was given to the Count of Eu in 1069. The castelry of Hastings must have been most of the Rape of Hastings, minus some defined holdings – for example the banlieu (estate) of Battle Abbey and also the lands held by Fécamp and Tréport abbeys. Also the castelry must have initially included Bexhill hundred as bishop Alric (of Selsey [pre-cursor to Chichester]) held Bexhill both before and after 1066 until 'the gift', after which 'Osbern' held it from Eu. This land was returned to the bishop of Chichester by King Henry II in 1148.

The map below shows the possible coastline, pre-1066 holders of manors, hundred boundaries (dashed yellow) and the estimated population in the main centres of eastern Sussex at the end of Edward the Confessor's reign. The ownership data is taken from Domesday. The solid circle is an overlay to show the banlieu or leuga of Battle abbey post 1070.
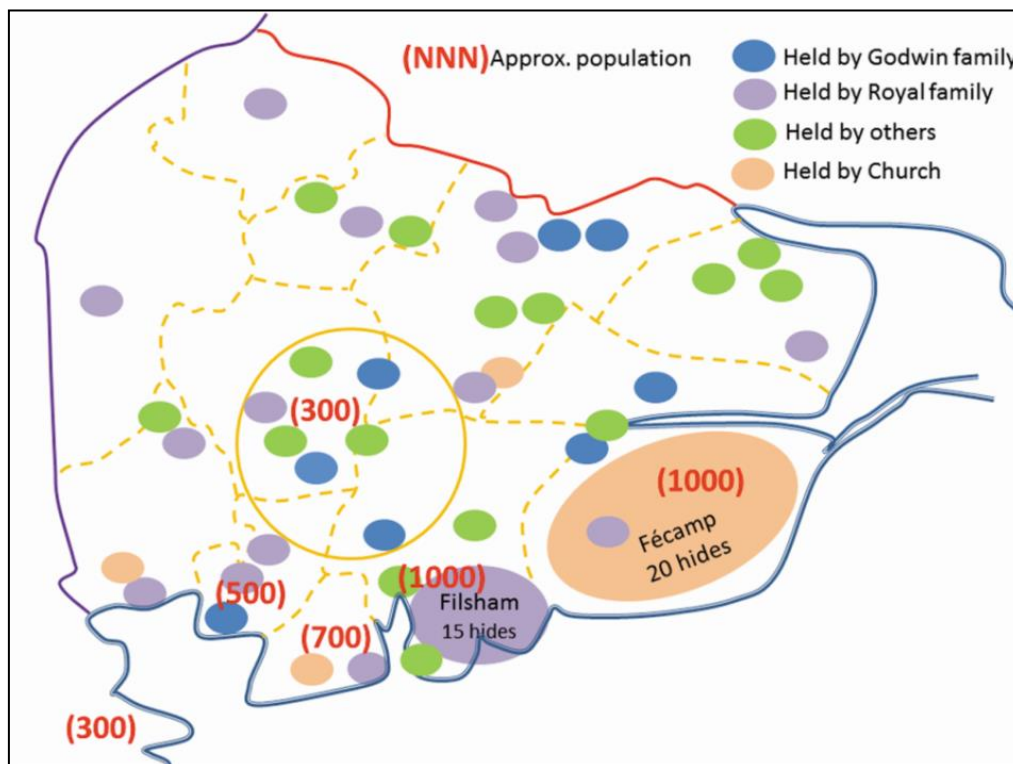
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The later subsidy rolls of 1296, 1327 and 1332 for both Baldslow and Guestling hundreds are unhelpful as by then Hastings was in the Cinque Ports Confederation, and the members of that set their own taxes, and Hastings' records have been lost.

It has been strongly argued that William's original pre-fabricated wooden castle at Hastings would have been somewhere nearer Bexhill, rather than on what is the present site of the

stone castle of Hastings on the West Hill. The latter site in its elevated position may not have been suitable for immediate defence of the landings. The wooden castle could have been erected on the site of the old burghal enclosure, and that is what we may be seeing in the Bayeux Tapestry. The place name Hæstingaceastre is found in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (D) entry for 1050, and the same name is also used once in the Bayeux Tapestry. This may be an alternative name for Hastings related to the old Alfredian 'burghal hidage' fort or township, for which there is sadly an absence of any known archaeological remains.

Burghal forts were established in the late 9th century as English defences against Viking raids, and were part of the Alfredian strategy to recover all of England from the Danes, with the coastal forts designed to deter further Viking raids. The burgh of Hæstingaceastre had the income and support of the people of 500 hides (94sq.miles/243sq.km) of productive land attached to it. The wall length of all the burghal forts correlated well with the supporting hidage and for Hæstingaceastre is estimated to have been about 625m (2060ft). If it was square, each wall would have been about 160m long and the contained area about 2.5Ha (6 acres). If the southern boundary was a cliff face it may have been larger. Often the OE 'ceastre' meant not a just castle or fort, but a town enclosed by an earthen wall topped with timber or sometimes of stone, and Hæstingaceastre appears to mean the walled or stockaded town of Hastings.

We cannot definitely say that a burghal fort was not on the site of the Norman stone castle that is still a prominent feature of the Hastings skyline, but it has been hypothesised that it is much more likely that this Anglo-Saxon burgh was actually a fortified township, akin to Wareham or Wallingford, somewhere to the west of the present centre of Hastings. In support of this, the name Bulverhythe, lying just to the west, derives from OE *Burhwara hyð* (the harbour of the people of the burgh). Some slightly later records have been found that support this. There is a record of a charter for a parcel of land in the parish of St Michael which was west of the Priory valley, dated approximately 1280, granting land north of a road leading from Hastings market place towards Battle, from which we can infer that the market place was also west of the Priory valley (Gardiner). The first mention of such a market at Hastings was in 900, i.e. well before the move to the Bourne valley. There was also a place name *Esthethe* (East Hythe) in the Bourne valley, with properties on each side of the stream (Gardiner). This suggests that a name differential was being made between places in 'new' Hastings in the more eastern Bourne valley (East Hythe?) and those that had developed in the more western Priory valley adjacent to the even more western 'old' Hastings/Haestingaceastre.

Churches called St Michael, St Margaret, St Peter and St Leonard all existed west of the Priory valley from before 1291 when a return was made to the pope. This return also included St Andrew sub Castro on the east side of the Priory valley, and St Clement and All Saints in the Bourne 'new Hastings' valley. The earliest records were of St Margaret in 1205 when Simon de Waltham was appointed priest; of St Michael in *c*. 1195 when its advowson was given by Roger of Crotteslege to the newly formed Priory of Hastings; and of St Peter 1240 when its advowson was transferred from Combwell Priory near Ticehurst to Hastings Priory. In 1294 the hospital of St Mary Magdalen was gifted land of over 5 acres (2 Ha) between what is now Warrior Square and Bohemia Road. At least part of this still existed as a wall of an old barn when drawn in 1815, and the sketches show 12th century Norman features. it was partially excavated in 1862, when the mayor reported that *'the centre of the building was found full of bones'*.

In 1340 there is a record from the canons of the collegiate church of St Mary in the Castle that respite from payments was given to St Michael, St Peter and St Margaret because their buildings and those of their parishioners had been burnt by the French in the previous year. St Clement had to be rebuilt in 1286 as it 'had been broken and destroyed by the force of the sea' and again in 1377 after French raids. Similarly, All Saints was also rebuilt in the early 1400s. Both of these churches still stand in Hastings Old Town. But St Michael was the town 'saint' before the 14th century and appeared on early town seals.

The important part of all the above conjecture, as far as early Hastings or Haestingceastre is concerned, is that the fortifications that William established were likely, but not certainly, to have been on top of the burghal fortifications of Haestingaceastre, which may have used the cliffs as part of its protection.

After 1066, Hastings briefly continued to thrive as a significant port, to the extent that it appears between Shoreham and Dover on the world map made by the Arabic geographer al-Idrisi for King Roger II of Sicily (a Norman outpost) compiled in 1153/1154. In its descriptive text, Hastings is described as *'a town of large extentand many inhabitants, flourishing and handsome, having markets, work people and rich merchants'.* In 1155/6 King Henry II granted a royal charter to the Cinque Ports, as long as they provided 57 ships for 15 days each year. Hastings was still a major provider of ships at that time, but only just, as by 1191 the struggle to maintain a good port at Hastings led to Rye and Winchelsea becoming 'limbs' of Hastings, and they between them provided five times more ships than their 'parent'.

After that Hastings continued its decline, the decline accelerated by the great storms of the 13th century which finished off Old Winchelsea and the most unwelcome attentions of the French particularly during the 100 Years' War. The French were enthusiastic pillagers and arsonists, to the extent that they even attacked Hastings Castle which was already dilapidated and falling into the sea. They would not have got much from what was left of the College of St Mary in the Castle as apparently relations between town and gown were not good and the people of Hastings burgled it and imprisoned the clergy in both 1343 and 1366!

Hastings Priory of the Holy Trinity was established in the reign of Richard I (1189–1199). This was sited near the junction of Cambridge Road with Cambridge Gardens. Sometime later, 192 acres (78 Ha) of land were transferred to it from St Michael's parish. This land was all on the west side of the Priory valley, and some of it would have been a typical water meadow so beloved of monastic institutions. The sea encroached until the priory was in danger of being swept away, and in 1413 Sir John Pelham gave them a site at Warbleton, and king Henry IV licensed them to remove to an inland site well away from Hastings. St Andrew sub Castro on the eastern side of the Priory valley was also first mentioned in the return of 1291, and again in 1372. Probably plundered by the French, and also threatened by sea flooding, St Andrew sub Castro fell into disuse by 1440, although there is evidence that some ruins were still visible in 1610, and the graveyard was still in use after that time.

St Michael's parish and the Holy Trinity land was still marked on a Boundary Commission map of 1832, and St Michael's ruins were discovered when building Prospect Place. During the construction of an electricity sub-station in 1970 in St Michael's Place bones from 22 to 35 bodies were found in a single grave. Hastings museum believed that they came from the

original graveyard of St Michael's Church and had been re-buried after the cutting of a new road in 1834.

St Margaret's stood on top of the small cliff behind 50 Eversfield Place behind which its ruins were found and its name is preserved in St Margaret's Road. Its parish was the same as the newer St Mary Magdalene. St Leonard's was in the area of Norman Road, west of London Road, nowhere near the present St Leonard's church. St Leonard was valued at £4.13.4d in 1291 and in 1334 belonged to the Abbey of St Katherine of Rouen. Old St Leonard's graveyard was disturbed when building the former Methodist Church there. The modern St Peter's church is at Bohemia, nowhere near the presumed location of the 1240 St Peter's which has disappeared, the suspicion being that, as its name suggests, it might have been the 'fishermen's and sailors' church, it would have stood nearest the sea, and went over a cliff.

Hastings in 1291 - A township would have enclosed St Michael's, St Margaret's and St Peter's plus a market place (grey square). A site (triangle) mentioned by Gardiner is north of the market. Light buff shows the 25m contour, the darker buff the 70m contour. Thick lines show possible cliff positions in 1291 © BDHS

This cluster of four chapels west of Priory valley is not insignificant, and does suggest that they were serving a community of reasonable size which had not sprung up overnight. Of these only St Leonard is mentioned after 1372, although a parson for St Michael is named in 1404. The Bishop of Chichester, in 1440, reported that *'the parishes of St Andrew's, St Leonard's, St Michael's, and St Margaret's, had so suffered from the depredations of the sea in the last 100 years, that they had no longer any churches'.* He could also have mentioned the unwelcome attentions of the French! There was no mention of St Peter's at all. The great storms of the 13th century, the continued erosion by the sea, shingle movements, inundations of the Priory valley and predations by the French through to the 15th century could have hidden a lot of local history, just as in Winchelsea. The losses clearly finalised a wholesale move eastwards into the Bourne valley starting with the small 'Hastings' of *Domesday*, as the areas described above appear to have depopulated well before 1440,

perhaps by the mid-14th century in the wake of the French raids, the Black Death and incessant erosion.

Possible coastal changes at Hastings by 1450 (with dotted outlines of damaged/lost buildings – compare with map above. Severe cliff erosion may have caused loss of St Peters and the market place and two-thirds of the Norman castle on West Hill, also exposing other churches and the Priory to sea damage. © BDHS

The other local burgh was at Eorpeburnham, which has not been clearly identified, but is believed to have been at Castle Toll near Newenden on the Kentish border, although others have raised the possibility that it could have been at Rye. Interestingly, King Alfred himself held an estate near these at Beckley. This burgh (if near Newenden) took the form of an 8Ha (20 acre) enclosure on a low peninsula which was defended primarily by the marshland of the former River Rother on three sides and by a broad bank and ditch on the southern side. Partial excavation of this southern ditch in 1971 showed that it was not completed in its intended form but was reduced in scale and remained unfinished. There is a strong possibility that this is the unfinished Eorpeburnham of the Burghal Hidage, mentioned in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for 892 as having been an incomplete fort attacked by the Danes, whose fleet of 250 ships made landfall at Appledore.

A mint was very briefly active in Rye during the reign of Stephen. At Rye there was probably a Saxon church before the Conquest but Abbot William of Fécamp visited in 1103 and soon afterwards building started on a new church of St Mary. Down the years much repair and rebuilding work has taken place on this church, particularly after the severe damage of the 14th century. Fécamp also founded St Georges at Brede in 1190.

By 1200 the management of the manors of Rameslie and Brede by Fécamp appears to have become less 'hands on' and more commercial. Rye and Winchelsea had become 'limbs' of the Cinque Port of Hastings to support its ship duty as the latter's fortunes and harbours were fading fast. Later in this century they were to have full status as 'Ancient Towns'.

The first information about the Cinque Ports, whether they were termed as this at first or not was by King Edward the Confessor in 1050, when he proclaimed that the ports would provide ship service for 15 days each year. Henry I confirmed their mercantile privileges ' as had his father and his brother'. In the Domesday entry for Dover the arrangement is confirmed that Dover would supply 20 ships, manned by 21 men for 15 days each year and we can assume that a similar demand may have been made of Hastings. Various charters and confirmations concerning the Cinque Ports were made down the years and In the charter of Edward I of 1278 the privileges granted to the barons of the Cinque Ports were laid down. There were also two letters patent of Edward I dated 1298. The first excused the ships of portsmen of all taxes in respect of their ships and tackle. The second dealt with the contribution of members to ship duty.

Edward II granted a confirmatory charter in 1313. A charter of Edward III in 1326/7 explained further the wording relating to the contribution of ships in the letters patent of 1298. Letters Patent from him listed the numbers of ships required from each port – this included three from Hastings, one from Pevensey, five from Rye and ten from Winchelsea – yet more indication of the relative wealth of the towns and condition of their harbours. He also granted a further confirmatory charter in 1364. Confirmatory charters were also made by Richard II in 1378, Edward IV in 1465 (as well as adding further privileges), Henry VII in 1487, and Henry VIII in 1510

To the west, the medieval borough of Pevensey originated as a quite late Anglo-Saxon settlement, but by the mid-11th century Pevensey was established as a significant borough. It had grown quickly as there was no significant population there around 800. Pevensey is referred to by name in a charter of 947, but the name is simply used to locate a saltpan. In 1054, a saltpan and 12 houses formed part of a local grant to the Abbey of Fécamp. More significantly, *Domesday* records that Pevensey was a pre-Conquest town with 52 burgesses, with tolls to the value of 20s and port dues of 35s. When the count of Mortain was given Pevensey in about 1069 there were only 27 burgesses, but by 1086 there had been a rapid expansion to 110 burgesses and it was regarded as a large town. A mint was active at Pevensey between the reigns of William I and Stephen

As in the Roman period, late Saxon development must have been influenced by the shallow harbour at Pevensey which developed into a port in the late 10th and 11th centuries. But this too gradually silted up as land was reclaimed and longshore drift of masses of shingle deviated its draining river eastwards and partially blocked it. Examples of use of the port at Pevensey include Earl Godwin's arrival from Sandwich with a fleet of 42 ships in 1049 and again arriving in 1052 from Bruges, when he added to his fleet by taking ships from Pevensey before sailing on to London. William I used the port for his first return to Normandy in 1067 and may also have used it in 1085.

Further developments in the places of eastern Sussex are covered in other sections as they occur in the timelines.

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