

1066 AND ALL THAT....

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THE COACH pulled out of Pencester Road punctually at 9 a.m. on Saturday, 29th May for the Festival of Dover trip to Hastings and Battle. Despite a rather doubtful forecast the weather turned out to be ideal, with warm sunshine, good light and excellent visibility – an excursion-planner's dream.

Once we had wound our way round Rye and negotiated the Winchelsea hairpin bend, the pleasant woods and orchards of the rolling Sussex countryside came into view and village homes and gardens, often with banks of rhododendrons, lined the road to the outskirts of Hastings. An easy drive along Marine Parade led us to the approach to the steep slope up to the West Hill and the castle. From here there is a superb bird's eye view of the Old Town nestling in the Bourne Valley with East Hill beyond, the harbour, beach and amusements, parts of Hastings and St. Leonard's, and, of course, the pier, spread out like a map below.

Hastings Corporation, owners of the castle since 1951, have provided explanatory notices on the ruined walls and those of the Collegiate Church of St. Mary. An excellent audio-visual presentation, viewed in a suitable auditorium, instructs the visitor in background history of the town and the Norman invasion. It vividly sets out Hastings' early importance as a port and the rival claims of William of Normandy, Harold Hadrada of Norway and Harold of England to the English throne. It certainly helps one to appreciate the speed and stamina of Harold and his armies in forced marches, first north to vanquish his Viking adversary at Stamford Bridge on 25th September and then south within eighteen days to meet William, who had crossed the Channel with the first fair wind.

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After watching the presentation we were free to explore the site, look across the ditch to the tournament ground known as the Ladies' Parlour and imagine the wider view before 1287, when half the castle enclosure, including the keep, slipped away into the sea after a violent storm. Maybe we visualised the prefabricated wooden fort thrown up by the Normans on their arrival in England to control the hill overlooking the fort. (So the English post-World War II bungalows were not the first pre-fabs, after all!!)

After these glimpses of Hastings' eleventh century history, we left the coach among the sea-front attractions and repaired to our chosen eating places, many members doubtless enjoying a fish meal with some locally-caught delicacy, others choosing to stroll through the well-kept Old Town.

All Saints Street, with its many dark, timbered buildings and white, cream, or pink paint is still home to most of the fishermen who work on the dozen boats still plying from Hastings harbour, currently disputing the E.C. reduction in the number of days they may sail. No. 125 All Saints Street, with its black timbers, sloping floors and lattice windows boast a sign that it "was built about the fifteenth century and was reputedly the residence of ye mother of Admiral Sir Cloudesley Shovell". Modern houses opposite, with black doors and timber panelling, fit sympathetically into their surroundings. Next to the Stag Inn numerous steps lead up to the Tackleway and the groups of homes such as Starr's Cottages perched on the valley side, while across the Bourne (a modern road following the course of the early stream and water supply) the High Street has tempting second-hand book shops, local businesses such as Judge's Bakery and a restful memorial garden on the site of the Swan Inn. Numbers 1 – 3 of Swan Terrace were destroyed by enemy action on 23rd May 1943. Across the adjacent side road and above the main street is St. Clements' Church, one of two built to serve the area. A plaque marks the position of "the great SEAGATE erected circa 1385".

Time for a hasty postcard or two on the seafront and we were all back on the coach being carried the eight miles to Battle, the actual site of the 1066 encounter.

The little town had been invaded by cheery groups of Roundheads and Cavaliers in readiness for a re-enactment of the battle the following day. They mingled with tourists walking the Battlefield Site and Abbey Ruins, studying the neat English Heritage signs and table models, possibly a little disappointed, like the rest of us, to find that some sections are accessible only during the summer when Battle Abbey School pupils are on holiday. Good English Heritage publications (supported and sponsored by Gateway Foodmarkets Ltd.!) were, however, available at reasonable prices for study on site, or at one's leisure afterwards.

Being free to make our own time schedule, some people lingered in the sunshine or explored the High Street before entering Buckley's "Yesterday's World." Originally only a single shop front, "Yesterday's World" grew to its present form some eighteen months ago and is still expanding. It houses a fascinating collection of memorabilia, in twelve shops and other rooms typical of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Many have push-button commentaries. A realistic model of Queen Victoria talks of events during her reign. We could, if we wished, reminisce about the 'Rapid-line' system of supplying change in department stores, discuss the hardships of Victorian laundrymaids or housemaids, or enthuse about early photography. Whatever our particular interests we all hurried to catch the approaching steam train at a Southern Railway station, before emerging onto the terrace for a delicious and generous cream tea with unlimited cups of the "drink that cheers but not inebriates."

Our driver, choosing a different route for the journey back, used a quiet road beside the Royal Military Canal to Appledore and then, striking out across the marsh with its field after field of sheep, picked up the A259 coast road home from New Romney.



It was a most successful trip, thoroughly enjoyed by all for its historical interest, for the opportunity to widen one's circle of acquaintances and for the pleasure of a much-enhanced view of the countryside from the vantage point of our comfortable coach seats. We are greatly indebted to our Social secretary, Joan Liggett, for her excellent choice and planning for the excursion. ◊

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