

SELF-LED ACTIVITY

1066 BATTLE OF HASTINGS
ROLE PLAY

KS3

Recommended for

KS3 (History, Drama)

Learning objectives

WHAT: Learn about the Anglo-Saxon and Norman armies, their weapons and their tactics.

HOW: Take on the role of Anglo-Saxon and Norman soldiers, and re-enact the critical moments of the 14th October 1066.

OUTCOME: Critically evaluate events and make considered judgments about the reasons for William's victory and Harold's defeat.

Time to complete

Approx. 30 minutes

BEFORE YOUR VISIT**PRIOR LEARNING**

This activity focuses on the battle itself, so, to get the most out of it, students should have an understanding of the build-up to the battle. This can be gained from a visit to the onsite Visitor Centre at 1066 Battle of Hastings, Abbey and Battlefield, which contains historical information, an introductory film and multi-user interactive experiences.

PRE-VISIT ACTIVITIES

In the classroom, students could prepare by making shields from card and/or helmets. Watch **'How To Make a Cardboard Shield'** (1 min 54 sec) on our YouTube channel: https://youtu.be/NmTJUJSG_PY

PREPARATION AND RESOURCES

Print and bring the role play activity outline with you to the battlefield. You will probably want to discuss the activity with your supporting staff and agree who will be stationed where on the battlefield.

You may wish to split your class in half and elect your 'lead' characters and army segments in advance (see 'Build an Army' instructions on the next pages). This could support some more in-depth independent research and character preparation in advance of the role play.

CONTENTS SUMMARY

1. Build an army – split class and assign roles
2. Prepare for battle – learn about location, formation, armour and weapons
3. Let battle commence! – re-enact the Battle of Hastings
4. The aftermath – reflect on the events of the battle

HEALTH AND SAFETY

This activity embraces active learning by encouraging students to recreate the Battle of Hastings. It should be made clear that, while enthusiastic drama skills are encouraged, no prolonged physical contact or actual fighting to cause harm should be tolerated.

I. BUILD AN ARMY

Both armies would have been fairly evenly matched, estimates vary between 5,000 and 7,000 men. The numbers here are meant to be largely representative of the proportion of each section of the Anglo-Saxon and Norman armies.

The suggestions below are based on a class of 30; please adapt as required. Divide students into two groups to form an Anglo-Saxon and a Norman army.

| Side | Role | Character suggestions | Number |
|--------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|
| Anglo-Saxons | Harold Godwinson, King of England | Body: shoulders back, chest and chin lifted, sword in hand, powerful strides. Voice: low pitch, controlled pace, assertive tone, booming volume. | x1 |
| | Housecarls, Harold's highly trained soldiers | Body: wide stance, clenched fists, battle axe/sword in hand, marching steps. Voice: fast pace, aggressive tone. | x5 |
| | Fyrd, mainly from farming communities | Body: restless feet, hunched shoulders, shield in hand, lumbering movements. Voice: fast pace, blood-thirsty tone. | x8 |
| Normans | William, Duke of Normandy | Body: shoulders back, chest and chin lifted, sword in hand, powerful strides. Voice: low pitch, assertive tone, booming volume, French accent! | x1 |
| | Infantry (foot soldiers) | Body: wide stance, gritted teeth, weapon in hand. Voice: angry tone, fast pace, low pitch, loud volume. | x4 |
| | Archers | Body: upright posture, facing side on, staring intensely, bow in hand. Voice: loud volume, controlled pace, confident tone. | x3 |
| | Cavalry (knights on horses) | Body: torso upright, legs on stirrups, reigns in one hand, weapon in the other. Voice: loud volume, arrogant tone, energetic pace, low pitch. | x6 |
| Other roles | Narrator/ trumpet player (doesn't need an actual trumpet) | Body: wide stance, shoulders back, chest and chin lifted, trumpet in hand. Voice: loud volume, steady pace, engaging tone. | x1 |
| | Taillefer, William's minstrel | Body: taunting gestures, brandishing weapons, arrogant body language. Voice: heavy breathing, fast pace, mocking tone. | x1 |

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2. PREPARE FOR BATTLE

Find a good location in which to stage your battle re-enactment. If at 1066 Battle of Hastings, Abbey and Battlefield, this can be done on the battlefield itself or at a point along the terrace walk. It would be helpful to have an area of higher ground to best illustrate the positions of the two armies.

Ask the narrator to set the scene by reading this script:

The year is 1066.

Two armies are stationed at Battle near Hastings.

The reason for them being here depends on who you ask.

A Norman would tell you that William, the Duke of Normandy, was promised the throne of England. And not just once – but twice. The first time by Edward the Confessor, the English King who's just died; the second time by Harold himself, who swore on holy relics that William was to be King. Harold had been shipwrecked in Normandy and, while he was there, William looked after and protected him, before sending him safely home to England.

But with Edward the Confessor dead, the treacherous Harold has claimed the throne for himself. Outraged by this, William has taken his case to the highest authority in Europe, the pope, and has got his blessing for an invasion of England. A crusade if you will, to right this terrible wrong.

An Englishman would tell you that it might be true that Edward promised the throne to William – but he promised it to Harold too. And what was Harold supposed to do in Normandy? Shipwrecked, he was essentially a prisoner – if he hadn't promised the crown to William, he'd never have been released.

Besides, when Edward died it was the nobility of England who chose Harold as their leader – as is proper in English law. Everyone knows the Normans live to expand into new lands. Originally from Norway, they're now in France and Italy. They'll find any excuse to invade the rich and cultured land of England, the greatest prize in Europe.

Whichever side you are on, one thing is for certain, the fate of the throne of England is going to be decided here, today, 14th October 1066, on the battlefield...

Now use the information in the next table to get everyone into formation on the battlefield. 'Equip' them with their armour and weapons; give them the opportunity to act out using them, and talk through the discussion points. Be certain to stress that both sides were fairly evenly matched and there was no foregone conclusion of William's victory.

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| | Harold's Anglo-Saxon army | William's Norman army | Action/discussion points |
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| Location | On the top of Senlac Hill, facing downhill. | At the bottom of Senlac Hill, facing uphill. | Get students into the correct location. Who had the advantage, Harold or William? (William's men would have had to run or gallop uphill to attack, which would have been tiring). |
| Formation | Arranged in a single, solid shield wall formation along the top of the ridge, standing shoulder to shoulder with their shields overlapping. King Harold would have stood in the middle with the elite fighting men, the housecarls, around him. The fyrd make up the rest. | Three lines: Front line – Norman archers. Second line – Norman infantry (foot soldiers). Third line – cavalry (knights on horseback). Each group could be used to carry out specific attacks. | Ask students to organise themselves into the two respective battle formations. What are the options available to both leaders? How significant was the cavalry to William? |
| Armour | Helmets and chain mail shirts that covered the whole body down to the knees called hauberks. | A combination including chain mail and conical nasal helmets (with the metal piece to protect the nose). | Students to imagine putting on their armour. Discuss what it might have felt like, the ability to move in it etc. The Battle of Hastings lasted for around nine hours. What might it have been like to fight in this armour for that length of time? |
| Weapons | Housecarls – long battleaxes that are razor sharp and swords. Fyrd – mostly from farming communities and therefore small axes, spears and stones. | Archers – short bows and crossbows. Foot soldiers – axes, spears and swords. Cavalry – spears, lances (for jabbing and throwing), swords and maces. | When 'presented' with their weapons, students can practise using them, mimicking shooting arrows or swinging a sword. Noises as appropriate! Which would have been the most easy/difficult to use? Which would have been the most deadly? |

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3. LET BATTLE COMMENCE!

As the teacher, you will direct the action in this section, but we would advise you to pause at regular intervals. Students should improvise the action as the detail of each stage is introduced. At the end of each stage of the battle, discuss the suggested reflection questions. There are four stages in total.

| Stage | Instruction/Action! | Reflection |
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| <p>STAGE 1</p> <p>9am</p> <p>The start of the battle</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Duke William rallies his army and makes a rousing speech. The Anglo-Saxons shout the word 'Ut!', or Out! at the Normans and drum on their shields. The Normans shout in return 'Dex Aie' which means God Help Us. Legend has it that William asks for a man to take on one of the English army in single combat. It's said that William's minstrel, Taillefer, volunteers. He rides forward singing a popular tune of the day, the 'Song of Roland', and juggles his lance. He defeats the English challenger then charges at the English battle lines where he's immediately cut down. A trumpeter sounds their horn, the battle begins. Duke William orders his archers to shoot arrows into the shield wall to soften up the Anglo-Saxons. This has little impact and so William orders archers to the side of the battlefield and infantry forward uphill to engage – intense fighting takes place. The English fyrd throw stones and axes at the infantry. Then hand-to-hand combat takes place. However, the Saxon shield wall stands firm. Realising the infantry are having little effect, William orders the cavalry to charge uphill with lances and swords. | <p>What strategies are each army employing? What are the relative strengths and weaknesses of each?</p> <p>'The Song of Roland' is an epic poem based on the Battle of Roncevaux in 778 during the reign of Charlemagne who was king of the Franks. Why might William's troops have chosen to perform this poem as they went into battle?</p> <p>At this stage in the battle, what strategy is more likely to work, A or B?</p> <p>A. Anglo-Saxons standing firm on high ground allowing the Normans to do most of the work.</p> <p>B. Normans using a combination of military manoeuvres: archers, infantry and horse charges with knights.</p> |
| <p>STAGE 2</p> <p>10.30am–12pm</p> <p>The battle continues</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> The Norman cavalry are beaten back and fail to penetrate the shield wall. Fighting is deadlocked. Suddenly, the left-hand side of the Norman cavalry begins to break off from attacking the shield wall, as a rumour goes round that William is dead. They retreat back down the hill and this starts panic among many of the Normans on the left-hand side or flank of the battlefield. The Anglo-Saxon fyrd on that side of the field decide to leave the shield wall and chase after the retreating Normans on the left flank. William sees the panic and races around in front of his men. William gallops past his army and, raising his helmet, shouts 'Look at me! I am alive and will be the victor with God's help!' The Anglo-Saxon soldiers who race downhill after the retreating men are suddenly surrounded and cut down by the Normans. | <p>What would the students do at this moment (both Anglo-Saxons and Normans)?</p> <p>Was it a good idea for the Anglo-Saxons to go after the retreating Normans?</p> <p>What should William's next move be?</p> <p>What should King Harold do?</p> <p>What does William's shout to his men tell us about his belief that he will win?</p> |

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| Stage | Instruction/Action! | Reflection |
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| <p>STAGE 3</p> <p>12.30pm–4pm</p> <p>The start of the battle</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. William orders further cavalry charges up hill. 2. He decides to order at least two false retreats, where the Norman cavalry pretend to run away with the intent of drawing out the defenders. 3. The students who are the cavalry should do at least two false retreats and encourage some of the shield wall soldiers to follow them. 4. These mock retreats begin slowly to break up the shield wall as more and more Anglo-Saxon fyrd and some housecarls attempt to pursue the retreating Normans. Gaps appear and William's cavalry encircle the groups of separated fyrd and cut them down. 5. Emphasise the gaps that appear in the shield wall. 6. Norman infantry and cavalry can now penetrate the shield wall and get at the Anglo-Saxon soldiers behind the main wall. | <p>False retreats were a tactic that had been used before by the Normans, but evidence suggests that William was inspired to do this after the first unplanned retreat.</p> <p>What has stayed the same about William's strategy and what has changed?</p> <p>What does this suggest about William as a leader in battle?</p> |
| <p>STAGE 4</p> <p>5pm</p> <p>The battle comes to an end</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. William orders his archers to shoot arrows high over the front of the shield wall onto the English soldiers nearer the back. 2. During these volleys an arrow possibly strikes Harold in the eye. He is then cut down by three Norman knights. 3. The English army is broken and begins to flee pursued by the Normans. 4. The Normans are victorious on the field. 5. Many bodies lie around the battle ground and the victors, the Normans, start taking weapons, jewellery and armour from the dead. | <p>What might the scene on the battlefield have looked, felt and smelt like after around nine hours of fighting?</p> <p>How would the English soldiers, still alive, feel, knowing they had lost their king?</p> <p>For the Norman victors, how would they feel? What would they do next? How might they celebrate?</p> |

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4. THE AFTERMATH

To provide an opportunity for students to share their perspectives, we would encourage pairing up Anglo-Saxon characters with Norman ones and giving them some time to discuss and compare their battle experience before coming back together as a group.

Suggested questions to ask after the re-enactment:

Anglo-Saxon soldiers, the fyrd and housecarls

1. Why do you think your position was a strong one?
2. When did you feel the battle turned against you?
3. How did fighting a losing battle feel?
5. What do you think your army could have done differently to win?

NOTE ON HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION:

Some historians believe that if the fyrd on the left of the battlefield had been disciplined and not split from the shield wall, weakening it, the English could perhaps have retained their strong position on the hill and beaten the Normans.

Normans

Cavalry

1. How did you feel when charging at the English line?
2. What moment caused you the biggest worry?
3. When did things turn in your favour?

Infantry

1. How did it feel to be repelled by the shield wall many times?
2. How do you think you could have fought better?

Archers

1. Which had the best effect, shooting arrows to the front of the shield wall or to the rear?
2. How did the decision to use archers in the battle affect the outcome?

William the Conqueror

1. How do you feel now that you've conquered England?
2. What are you going to do first to show the people of England that you are in charge?

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Ask the narrator to finish the activity by reading the concluding text, explaining what William did next:

After the battle, William rode on to London. He was crowned king of England on 25th December 1066.

Despite this, resistance to the Normans continued and rebellions in the West Country, the Welsh Marches, the Midlands, the North, and East Anglia were not finally put down until 1071. William showed himself to be merciless in dealing with these revolts, devastating the crops, cattle and homes of those who opposed him.

To strengthen his legitimacy as king, William was crowned by representatives of the pope when they met at Easter 1070. He followed this by making sweeping changes to the church and the law. For example, almost all Anglo-Saxon bishops and abbots were replaced by Normans and most of the English nobility were replaced and their lands given to Normans.

William began a massive building campaign of churches, cathedrals and castles. One such building was the abbey he had built at Battle. William insisted on having the abbey church built on the very spot where Harold had been killed. Some have seen this as a way for him to atone (apologise) for the bloodshed; others have viewed it as another way for William to show off his power and authority.

Either way, with William's rule, the face of England was dramatically altered.

This is a great lead-in to exploring aspects of Norman England such as the feudal system, Norman architecture and castles.

