

Hastings:

The 1066 Country

> Derick McGroarty looks at South East England especially the sites of the battle which ended Anglo Saxon rule

Motorways linking London with Brighton and Dover have increased development. However, the land between is less hurried and retains historical sites of events which formed England's future. In the spacious countryside many stately homes are open in summer and dramatic white cliffs are protected by the National Trust.



Hastings Castle

قلعة هاستنغز



Battle Abbey

كنيسة باتل

Closeness to France makes the South East vulnerable to invasions, two of which were successful! An area around Hastings is designated "1066 Country". (www.1066country.com)

In September 1066, William, Duke of Normandy, with a legitimate claim to the English Throne, asserted that right by landing at Pevensey with 5,000 foot soldiers and 2,000 mounted knights. Julius Caesar chose Pevensey a millennium earlier. Today in the substantial ruins there are Roman foundations, remains of the Norman tower built by William's brother and a gatehouse erected 200 years later. Walk the walls to realise the scale of the layout.

However in 1066 William moved without hindrance to Hastings and established the first Norman Castle on a mound 20 ft. high and 30ft round. Fortified over the centuries a great storm in 1300 caused the cliff and half of the castle to fall into the sea. Now its an impressive ruin well worth a visit.

There is an excellent video history. Hastings retains an attractive old town set beneath high rugged cliffs. Fishing is still important and boats are winched ashore to a market where nets are dried in tall black towers. Many restaurants serve a good variety of fresh fish. Activities in this area include Underwater World and a Fisherman's Museum. At the other end of the long wide promenade the Royal Victoria Hotel has a history of famous guests, comfortable rooms with a sea view and a restaurant serving quality meals.

The Battle of Hastings itself took place in October 1066 seven miles inland in what is now the market town of Battle. Harold's 7,000 foot soldiers in poor fighting condition after a long march from the North were defeated by William with his elite knights, trained archers and mercenaries armed with battle axes, but only after a long fought hand to hand battle which lasted the whole day. Crowned in Westminster Abbey on 25th

December, William, as atonement for the 7,000 slain, built an Abbey at Battle with the altar at the spot where Harold died. The vast amphitheatre is peaceful now but an audio head set, sign posts and a video film help bring it to life. Re-enactment each October on this site is an international event.

Further along the coast I stayed at the reasonably priced Burstin Grand Hotel, Folkestone www.britanniahotels.com On the sea front with a large car park, there is a swimming pool, evening entertainment and the option of day trips to France It is a good location not only for touring "1066 country" but exploring the nearby villages of Winchelsea and Rye, the cathedral city of Canterbury and the port of Dover with its imposing castle.

Folkestone, like Hastings, offers locally caught fish, attractive cobbled streets of artisan shops and a high broad promenade. Only an hour or so from London it is a part of Britain worth taking time to explore. ■