

How, when and where – William’s landing in 1066



The most famous use of the landing places of eastern Sussex was the arrival of the fleet of William, duke of Normandy on the morning of 28th or 29th September 1066, after an overnight crossing from St Valéry sur Somme. It may not have been his first-choice landing place, and had been dictated by the weather, but the area was known in Normandy thanks to the ownership of lands in south-east Sussex by the abbey of Fécamp. William’s eventual landing site in 1066 was around Pevensey. When William returned to Normandy in March 1067, for the first time since his invasion, he did so, symbolically, also from Pevensey.

Today Pevensey is clearly neither a port nor tidal estuary, but in 1066 it was a clear choice for a mass landing once issues which confuse interpretations and understanding of what happened in the area in 1066 are appreciated. These issues are twofold – the status of the manor of Rameslie, and the coastal changes that have occurred all along our coast since 1066.

Firstly, let us look at the manor of Rameslie, a large area which lay south of the river Brede and between Rye and the present Priory valley of Hastings. This had previously belonged to the abbey of Eynsham near Oxford, but had been given by King Cnut, at Queen Emma’s request, to the abbey of Fécamp in Normandy. Potentially this gave the manor both political and strategic importance, as its geography would have been well known in Normandy. ‘Rameslie’ / ‘Rammesleagh’ presents us with the conundrum of the words used both in pre-Conquest royal grants and in *Domesday*. In grants Rameslie is described as an estate and it is also described as a manor, not a town in *Domesday*. It should therefore be accepted as the name of a manor or estate alone, with no need to search for a ‘lost town’ or to try to ascribe the name to a local town as some have attempted.

Early pre-Conquest charters issued by early English kings in favour of French abbeys still offer problems of interpretation for the student of local history. Offa and his successors may have given Sussex lands to St Denis of Paris. But the most important abbey involved was the Norman abbey of Fécamp, a favoured foundation of the Norman dukes, and also it seems of Cnut’s second queen, Emma, who was a Norman princess. This was a grant first planned by king Æthelred II, Emma’s first husband, but not actually made until Cnut’s reign.

Emma was the daughter of Richard I, duke of Normandy, and sister of Richard II, William the Conqueror’s grandfather, so William’s great-aunt. Æthelred II had been deposed by Cnut’s father Sweyn in 1013, but Sweyn soon died and Æthelred came back but died himself in 1016. Cnut, son of Sweyn, then fought Æthelred’s son, Edmund Ironside, for the throne of England. When he finally achieved this, he married Emma, who already had two sons by Æthelred: Edward and Alfred (Alfred murdered it is believed on the orders of king Harold I Harefoot by earl Godwin’s men, but Edward was to become king Edward the Confessor) and a daughter Godgifu/Goda. Once Cnut won England these three children had all been sent for their own safety to grow up in Normandy under the protection of Emma’s relatives.

A charter of Cnut in 1017 grants to Fécamp an estate at ‘Rammesleagh’ with its harbour, ‘as promised by Æthelred’. A second charter (of 1032) confirmed by Harthacnut adds an estate

at Brede and $\frac{2}{3}$ of the tithes of Winchelsea. The latter may not be genuine, but there is no doubt that the church at Brede was started by Fécamp. *Domesday* says *Fécamp holds of the king three manors, Rameslie, Steyning, and Bury*, all in Sussex. This was 'ding-dong' ownership as Steyning had been usurped from Fécamp by the Godwin family prior to 1066. Earl Godwin had also seized some of Pevensey from the abbey of St Denis before this in 1042. Abbot John of Fécamp in 1054 had petitioned for the return of Steyning and was fobbed off with the return of a saltpan and 12 houses at Pevensey, and some farmland at Eastbourne and Langley, all very probably the former property of St Denis. But even this gift might have had future consequences as Fécamp gained extra knowledge of the Sussex coast.

There is no evidence to suggest that the Godwins had also usurped Rameslie as has been claimed by some. The stolen lands were restored to Fécamp after 1066 to by William, who at the same time took from Fécamp some of the land of the manor, just west of the present old town of Hastings, probably to formally obtain the land on Hastings West Hill to build the stone castle. But the monks of Fécamp did not lose out as in exchange for this he also gave them Bury in western Sussex, which had previously belonged to countess Goda, Edward the Confessor's sister.

Domesday in 1086 clearly only records the Old Town area of present Hastings with 4 burgesses – *'The Abbot of Fécamp holds Rameslie from the King, and held it from King Edward. Then it answered for 20 hides, now for 17 ½ hides (2100 acres/850 Ha). Land for 35 ploughs. In lordship 1 plough. 100 villagers, less 1, have 43 ploughs. 5 churches which pay 64s, 100 salt houses at £8 15s; meadow 7 acres; woodland, 2 pigs from pasturage. In this manor is a new borough; 64 Burgesses pay £8 less 2s; in Hastings 4 burgesses and 14 small holders pay 63s. Value of the whole manor before 1066 £34 now the Abbot's lordship £50, the men's 44s'*.

So the estate had gained in value since 1066, but had lost the 300 productive acres (120Ha) taken by William. When Hastings castle was built, William this passed land to the Count of Eu, so these 300 acres must have included the West Hill of Hastings, where the castle remains can still be seen, and both sides of the Priory valley and the small port there, which area is now the town centre of modern Hastings. It is noted that Filsham, a large manor in Baldslow hundred immediately to the west of this, was the property of king Edward before the Conquest and had 15 hides of good land (1800acres, 700Ha). We have proposed that Filsham was the manor containing Hæstingaceastre, the Alfredian fortified township and precursor of modern Hastings (See 1066 and the Battle of Hastings – Preludes, Events and Postscripts [Foord and Clephane-Cameron])

Argument suggests that the harbour of Rameslie manor must have been a small one at Old Winchelsea, and the new borough with 64 burgesses Rye, which later had a mint, but is not specifically mentioned by name (just the 'new borough'). It cannot have been 'new' Hastings as this only had four burgesses, and the other burgesses of Hastings had interests at Bullington, near Bexhill. Rye's old English name was *Atter ie* ['on the island'], later shortened to *Rie*. As the *Domesday Book* did not change English place names, it's just an oddity that the 'new borough' is not named. Rameslie was clearly a valuable estate, with a developing port (Old Winchelsea) on the Channel coast and with 100 saltpans, more than the rest of Sussex put together. It is interesting that the later Manor of Brede covered much of the same area, minus Winchelsea and Rye, which had been removed from the ownership of

Fécamp by King Henry III in 1248. There is an interesting discussion about this in the *Victoria History of the County of Sussex* Vol.9 (1937).

Interesting as the issues surrounding 'Rameslie' are, of more importance to understanding William's landing site must be the coastal changes which have occurred over the millennia. The coast of eastern Sussex and Dungeness has changed significantly with huge changes occurring between the 13th and 15th centuries. Longshore drift of shingle, and erosion of the local clay and sandstone headlands of Galley Hill, Bo-peep, White Rock, West Hill and the massive cliffs beyond Old Town Hastings to Pett Level and many great storms have changed the coast line dramatically since 1066. The openings of the shallow harbours that existed in 1066 became gradually fully or partially blocked by shingle drift. In addition estimates are that the sea cliff headlands have eroded back between 300 to 800 metres (1000–2600 feet) since 1066, or as much as one kilometre (just over half a mile) since Roman times. In addition, the residual White Rock outcrop at Hastings was physically removed in 1834/5, to make a road and a lower hill below Hastings Castle called the 'Gun garden' was also 'trimmed' to allow building development.

Because of this, whole coastal areas such as large chunks of the manor of Rameslie, and defensive features such as the burgh of Haestingaceastre (if as proposed it existed on the cliff top within the Filsham manor), may have been lost. The small shallow port west of Pevensey shore fort known as the Crumbles was lost to shingle drift, and secondary to the same drift, the previously good entrance to Pevensey harbour was impeded. Similarly there was probable partial blocking of the entrance of the old small port at Bulverhythe between St Leonards on Sea and Bexhill adding to Hastings' struggle to fulfil its duties as a Cinque Port. Later ining (reclamation of the edges of marshland) for farming would lead to marked loss of water volume, and thus power, of the tidal scours which had kept the residual shallow harbours of Pevensey, Winchelsea and Rye navigable, and they gradually silted up with the results that can be seen today.

The best recorded loss is of Old Winchelsea (formerly known as OE *Wines cesel ie* = *Protector shingle isle* and ME *Gwent-chesel-ey* = *Shingle Isle on the level*, both good descriptions) which stood on a large shingle and sand spit extending eastwards from Cliff End at Pett Level and positioned at a small inlet through the spit to the huge Rother Camber (embayment) which led to the Brede, Tillingham and Rother estuaries and smaller inland ports. The thirteenth century was a time of recurrent great storms in the English Channel. Old Winchelsea, on its shingle bank and gradually losing the protection of the eroding Fairlight cliffs, was under siege by the sea. In 1236 Old Winchelsea was inundated. On 1 October 1250, the town was almost destroyed, and again on 14 January 1252. It was finally destroyed by the great storm of 4 February 1287. Old Winchelsea was wiped from the map, the main Rother outlet at Old Romney was blocked and the River Rother changed course to have its new outlet at Rye, which would in due time allow Rye to become the local predominant port.

Looking at the evidence provided by the Romney Marsh Research Trust (RMRT) it is possible that the only safe way to access the Brede estuary in 1066 would have been via the Rother outlet at Old Romney. It is not clear if there was any breach at that time in the large shingle bar on which Old Winchelsea stood and that extended from Cliff End at Pett Level towards Broomhill on the far side of what is now Rye Bay. A breach at that time could only have been sustained by the small tidal scour from the Brede and Tillingham rivers, which are both much smaller than the Rother which was still exiting at Old Romney.

If Ordericus Vitalis correctly records the return of William from Dieppe *'with a south wind'* in December 1067 *'to a harbour called Winchelsea'* there may have been a small port at Old Winchelsea in 1067. But even in 1191 when the breach, if persisting, would have been wider, Howden does not describe Winchelsea as a 'good' port and says that that Rye was *'up the Winchelse inlet'* – which would have meant following the small Brede/Tillingham channels. This suggests that Winchelsea's heyday was indeed short, as Eddison concludes in her RMRT Monograph *Catastrophic Changes: A Multidisciplinary Study of the Evolution of the Barrier Beaches of Rye Bay*.

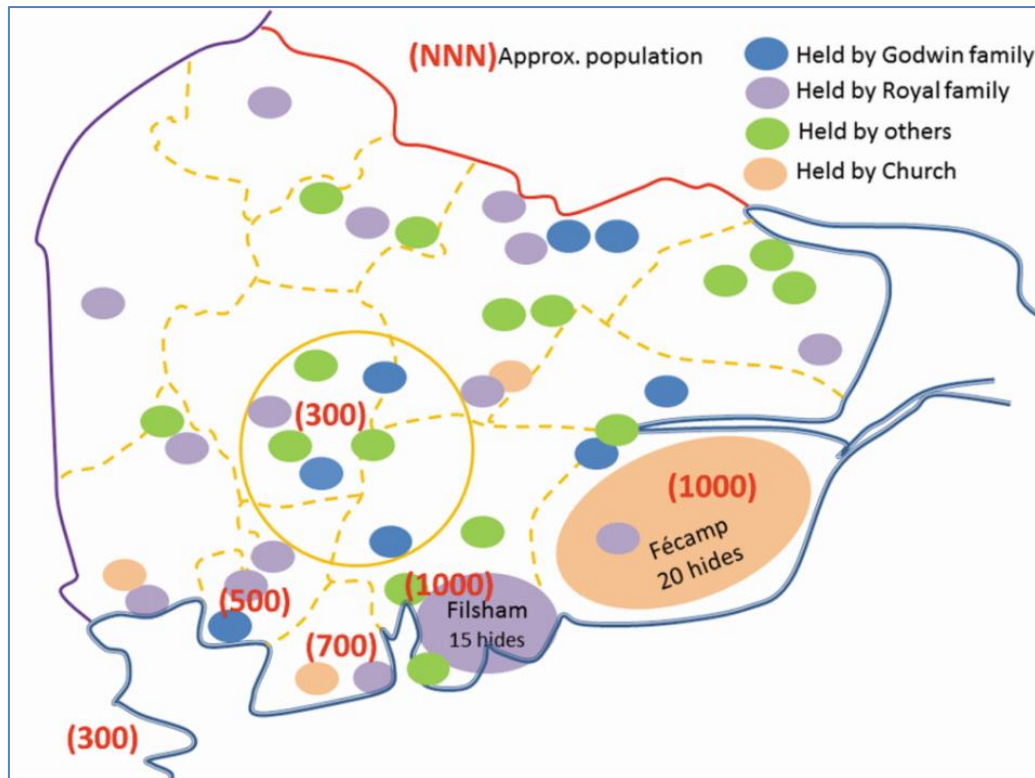
So how would all this have affected William the Conqueror's choice of landing site? We can put ourselves in a ship with William and his steersmen. He would have faced a broad-mouthed shallow port at Pevensey, a small port at Bulverhythe, a much smaller one at the Priory Valley, and a possible entry through a small opening in the Rye Camber spit, which only allowed scouring from the small Tillingham and Brede rivers – because as we have said above as the main Rother still exited the Rye Camber at Old Romney. The opening may or may not have allowed access to the Camber and its estuaries, perhaps just to a small port. William had 700 to 1000 ships to land in a short number of hours to use the optimal rising flood tide to help 'float in' his fleet.

All of the harbours/ports were tidal with the large tidal range and tidal flows still seen today. William's ships had relatively poor manoeuvrability, and he would have had to choose which inlet to aim for, and enter on the rising tide, so that the tidal inflow would help the ships make landfall. Given the circumstances, his safest point of landing was Pevensey where he could bring the majority of his boats to shore, possibly with some ships entering Bulverhythe. To the east of these points beyond Hastings, the massive cliffs would have prevented landings. Beyond these cliffs was the large shingle bar, but to be certain of getting into the Rye Camber, he would have had to go in by the Old Romney entrance. He could have considered direct coastal landings and beachings, but this would have been less inviting as small but steep sandstone cliffs directly backed some of the beaches east of Pevensey (as still seen at Galley Hill, Bexhill and Bo-Peep, St Leonards today).

Following his landings he would have fortified further the old Roman fort at Pevensey to protect his western flank and moved most of his men and horses towards Hastings, some on land some by water where he threw up a further wooden fort and established his bridgehead on land known to the Normans because of the Fécamp connection.

Keith Foord, 2017 ©BDHS

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 solid circle is an overlay to show the banlieu or leuga of Battle abbey post 1070. Harold was the main holder of Godwin lands, 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



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