

BATTLE AT WAR AFTER 1066

Founded through conflict, its location close to the southern coast, the association of Battle with the Cinque Ports and its position as a nodal point for attack and defence combined to ensure that it was destined to witness much military activity during the years between 1066 and 1945.

Thirteenth Century

In 1215 the Barons forced a legal and constitutional settlement upon King John at Runnymede, constraining (rather than limiting) the power and authority of the Crown. These constraints were never embraced by John, but only observed as a necessity (in any event he did not have to endure them long, he died in 1216) and still less by his son, Henry III, as his reign and self-confidence progressed. The Baronial party finally brought about a showdown and in 1264 the stage was set for triumph and tragedy. Simon de Montfort, an experienced and capable soldier and son of an equally capable father of the same name who had commanded the Catholic French army against the Cathars in the Albigensian Crusade, was leader of the rebel Barons. At the Battle of Lewes on 14 May 1264 de Montfort achieved a resounding victory which forced the king to peace terms that were far more constrictive than Magna Carta and left King Henry III and his son, The Lord Edward, prisoners of the Barons. This is taken as being the birth of parliamentary democracy in England and earned de Montfort the title 'Father of Parliament'.

Henry III and his army of approximately 10,000 men approached Battle on or about 3 May 1264, the king being entertained at Robertsbridge abbey; he demanded money with menaces. On arrival in Battle itself Abbot Reginald led the monks in solemn procession to the king who likewise demanded 100 Marks ¹ (to which the Lord Edward added a further 40!) apparently in punishment for the murder of certain men at Flimwell; however the truth is more likely that they had been killed by the King's men. The following day the army marched to Winchelsea ², making free with the abundant wine they found in the cellars there before returning through Battle on or about 6 May on their march which ended at the Battle of Lewes.

Fourteenth Century

The Hundred Years' War, 1337–1453, has left the town with its most notable landmark, the magnificent gatehouse of Battle Abbey and section of wall that runs along the High Street toward and opposite St Mary's church. Built by Abbot Alan after obtaining a Licence to Crenellate in 1338 it is a feature that was all too familiar in this area at the time, yet one which can hardly have ensured universal confidence. The great Cinque Port towns of Rye, Winchelsea and Hastings were each attacked and burned by the French many times despite impressive defences. But if the ports provided the first line of defence the Abbot of Battle was responsible locally for early warning (an order of 1388 requiring him to set-up warning beacons in the 'usual places') and he also commanded the second line of defence and a mobile reserve. Beacons however were not the only warning. Being within 7 leagues (21 miles of the coast) St Mary's church was only permitted one bell to be rung for services, the full peal being reserved for invasion warning.

On 29 June 1377 Rye was sacked, the townsfolk fleeing rather than standing in defence. On hearing of this the Abbot of Battle, Hamo of Offington, armed his men to defend the villages around Battle then, learning the French plans from a prisoner, made with his force directly to defend Winchelsea. The town was saved but the French raised Rye to the ground in a five-hours fire storm before leaving. Later that year they returned and set siege to Winchelsea, sending message to Abbot Hamo to come and redeem it. Hamo held calm in the face of

much taunting from the French and his intervention saved the port, but at the expense of Hastings which the French burned, having found it to have been evacuated.

Abbot Hamo did not always meet with such success. On 15 March 1380 he was routed when attempting to defend Winchelsea and one of the armed monks was taken prisoner. Many of Winchelsea's citizens were slaughtered and much of the defences were destroyed; Rye and Hastings were again burned. Following this disaster the Abbot of Battle and others were directed to re-fortify Winchelsea.

In addition we should not think that the activities of Battle men were restricted to home defence. In 1420 John Oxenbridge, who lived at Sedlescombe, accompanied King Henry V on his final campaign in France.

Sixteenth Century

The trauma of Dissolution and the break from Rome of the Church in England resurrected long-dormant fears of invasion, not this time from France but Spain. Initial threats never materialised and later, with the marriage of Queen Mary to Philip II of Spain, fears of foreign invasion all but disappeared. However tensions between England and Spain resumed following Mary's death and the accession of her Protestant sister Elizabeth. The execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, in 1587 lit the fuse of war and the following year Spain's great Armada set sail for the invasion of England. Beacons were lit at traditional sites, blazing the alarm across the county. Known sites for beacons in the Battle area at this time were Baldslow (Hastings), Bexhill, Brightling, Burwash, Fairlight, Salehurst (Robertsbridge) and Stapley (Sedlescombe). Others recorded in the seventeenth-century at Netherfield and Wartling may have earlier origins. False alarms were not uncommon and created such panic when they were sounded that the Privy Council found it desirable in 1544 to issue an order requiring beacons to be set in pairs, one to be fired if ten or more enemy ships were sighted and both in the event of a landing; however no action would be taken on sight of just one beacon in one place being light. Still it was found necessary to evolve these instructions only a year later and from time-to-time thereafter.

The militia system used with relative success during the earlier wars with France was refined, particularly in the years following the Dissolution (when the military responsibilities of the Abbot of Battle were variously taken up by the county's Sheriffs and Lieutenants) in order to meet the evolution of weaponry following the advent of firearms and growing professionalization of war. By an order dated 16 February 1586 Sussex was to provide 800 men, 4,800 lbs each of gunpowder and lead, and 6 cast iron cannon together with their fittings and ammunition. Bulverhythe was identified as a potential landing site and arrangements put in place for its defence. Winchelsea was likewise identified as strategically significant. Muster lists were prepared and updated annually, to which were appended the names of all able-bodied men aged 18-60 years who would be required to fight 'should the danger become extreme'. Although they were never required to fight, the fear remained and in 1596 erupted into panic once more when the Spanish again assembled a fleet. In 1599 it was recommended that the seven days that it took to muster the militia of Sussex for the Armada threat in 1588 was no longer acceptable and that it must stand in constant readiness to achieve full muster in a single day. 'Draft-dodging' was also noted.

Seventeenth Century

Along with most of southern England, Sussex officially took the side of Parliament during the English Civil Wars and although spared the full rigours of armed conflict, which only extended from the west as far as Arundel, the social and religious tensions were ever present. Battle thus found itself one of four venues in Sussex where specially appointed committees met to inquire into the behaviour of the clergy. These local committees reported

to the central 'Committee of Plundered Ministers' which had been established by Parliament, and consisting of 5-10 members who were paid five shillings (25p) per day for their attendance took evidence under oath as they investigated ecclesiastical persons for the offences of:

- * Failure to preach the Word of God at least six times a year;
- * Blasphemy, perjury, fornication, adultery, frequenting of alehouses, drunkenness, profane swearing and cursing.

Evidence was taken without the accused being present. However, he could if he wished purchase a copy of the accusation – abuse and injustice was rife as political and personal scores were settled on both sides. There is some evidence, though not conclusive, that one of Oliver Cromwell's chaplains was Dean of Battle during this period: Henry Fisher, who was so described in the parish register when his daughter was baptised at St Mary's in July 1647.

But if Battle found itself on the edge of affairs, one of its citizens placed his duty in the heart of them. John Ashburnham, appointed as a Groom of the Bedchamber to King Charles I in 1628 and elected Member of Parliament for Hastings in 1640, absented himself from Parliament in 1642 and moved with the Court to Oxford; the following year his estates were sequestered by Parliament. He acted as one of the King's Commissioners on many occasions including negotiations with the Scots' army and was clearly held in high regard by the King, whom he accompanied to confinement at Hampton Court and on the Isle of Wight. Ashburnham was imprisoned by the Parliamentary forces on several occasions from which he escaped on at least one occasion to return to Court. Following the Restoration in 1660 Ashburnham was himself restored by King Charles II to his position of Groom to the Bedchamber.

Eighteenth Century

From 1789 the French Revolution spread fear of civil unrest and foreign invasion, thrusting Battle once more into a frenzy of active home defence. Barracks were built along Whatlington Road (where even today traces of the old parade ground gravel are reportedly encountered when gardening) and many individual properties were either built or requisitioned to accommodate officers. A colourful social life developed in the town, 'another Ball....by the officers,...Battell is got to be the gayest place in ye world.' But the presence of soldiers brought a darker side as when a sergeant was accused of murdering a woman for her money.

From 1794 reports such as the following frequently detail military activity, including unit names, strengths and locations were published by the local press that seem to make unnecessary for the French to use spies:

Sussex Weekly Advertiser

19 March 1798

'The artillery barracks at...Battle are proceeding with great alacrity.'

28 May 1798

'The Barracks now finishing at Silver Hill [Hurst Green], are the largest in this county. We understand they are calculated for 4,000 men.'

23 July 1798

'The East Kent Grenadiers from Battle marched into...Barracks on Friday.'

As High Constable of Battle, William Ticehurst was responsible for billeting troops and his diligent records survive. In addition to the barracks and commandeered buildings, troops

were accommodated in The George (now Simply Italian), The Eight Bells (now Costa) and The Chequers. The scale of responsibility and the overwhelming impact on Battle are clear from an examination of Ticehurst's records which for the two months 18 October to 21 December 1809 show 6,997 soldiers passing through the town, 2,592 of whom he was required to find billets. Evacuation arrangements were also an important responsibility for William Ticehurst and a register of carts and waggons was compiled 'in case of invasion by Napoleon to remove families up the country. Guides were also registered.'

These records together with details of regiments in the parish registers present a rare and valuable window into the life of the town as it stood on the frontline of home defence.

There were of course many who claimed exemption from service in the Volunteer Militia and the committee set up to consider such applications for the Rape of Hastings held its first meeting at The Chequers, Battle on 19 March 1799.



This building in Mount Street is believed to have been requisitioned and used as officers' quarters.

Nineteenth-Century wars

Britain was very often at war after 1800, as before. The French revolutionary and Napoleonic wars had a brief respite in 1802-3 and again for a few months in 1814-15, before ending in June of the latter year. British forces were in the United States in 1812-14, and involved in Portugal around 1830. There were frequent minor battles and skirmishes in India and a full-scale war in the Punjab in 1846. The so-called Kaffir wars in the Cape Colony carried on for several decades. There were three wars in China; the Crimea (1854-56, which included some sharp actions in the Baltic, three Anglo-Burmese wars, the Zulu wars, the first South

African war of 1880-81 and the second of 1899-1902, and a variety of operations in various countries including west Africa, Crete, Egypt, the Sudan, Indonesia, New Zealand and Ethiopia.

There is little or no firm evidence of any involvement of Battle men in any of these operations up to 1899. St Mary's church has a plaque to Lt Col Kingsbury (other names not given) who, it records, served 33 years to his death at the age of 46 on 14 August 1813, when he died. It states that he had been in the great siege of Gibraltar (1779-83), and in Egypt, Portugal, Spain and Walcheren during the wars after 1793. He was seriously wounded at Salamanca where the battle took place on 22 July 1812, but did not die for over another year. His connection with Battle is at present unknown.

Service overseas was always dangerous, and not only for military reasons. The church records the deaths of Harriet Swain and her daughter Mary Ann, on 21 October 1821 and 25 July 1821 respectively. They were family of Major Swain of the 36th Regiment, then based on Cephalonia in the Ionian Islands. These islands had been passed to the British in 1815. They had been Venetian before the revolutionary wars and now Venice was no more and the British wanted a good base in the eastern Mediterranean. The only possible claimant was Austria, which had absorbed the rest of the Venetian lands, and Britain gave them the colony of Lissa in the Adriatic, presumably as a sweetener.³

Also in the church is a plaque to Lt Robert James Smee Laurence, who died on 11 April 1856. It might be thought that he was a casualty of the Crimea, but in fact he died near Bombay. He was in the 9th Regiment of the Native Infantry, and a son of Charles Laurence who ran the gunpowder works at Powdermill, and his wife Elmira Susannah.

Even for the South African war of 1899-1902 we are forced to look again to the church and to surviving military records. The church lists nine of those who died, of which only two, or possibly three, can be traced to Battle. We also know that ten men served in this war who also served in 1914-18, two of whom were killed in the greater war. Given that some 60% of the 1914-18 military records were destroyed in an air raid in the later world war it is likely that several more men served, perhaps another five to ten. But the effect of the 1899-1902 war on Battle as a whole must have been small.

The First World War

It was in 1914-18 that a war first made an enormous impact on the town. More than 500 men who had been born or lived at Battle are recorded as having served in the forces, and 112 of them died in the war. With Napoleon across the Channel there had been a real threat of invasion a century earlier, and in 1914 the town prepared again, even if the strength of the Royal Navy was to prove sufficient deterrent to the Germans. Foreigners had to register with the police, and enemy aliens were interned; plans were drawn up and published for a retreat to the Heathfield-Burwash high ground in the event of an enemy landing; in almost every week of the war troops arrived at and left their billets on the way to the western front or on their way back. Newhaven was a major military port, and Battle a convenient staging post for the men. There were, however, no military bases close to the town, and the threat of invasion did not leave behind the tank traps, pillboxes and other detritus of the Second World War.

The position of women began to change. Before the war women were rarely in paid employment, though some ran shops or businesses after the deaths of their husbands; most stayed at home to look after their families, sometimes helping their husbands' work and on a few occasions working as dress-makers and laundresses. Sons went out to work as a matter of course; where daughters did they were usually domestic servants. From 1914, though, women were in great demand as nurses and assistants in the military hospitals, the nearest

of which was at Normanhurst at the northern edge of Catsfield (demolished in the 1950s). The Church Hall was also used as a hospital early in the war, mainly for Belgian refugees.

Although records are sketchy at best, women moved promptly into some of the vacancies left by men departed for the front: shop assistants, messengers, some parts of agricultural work. They were also in evidence at Newbery's jam factory, reported in 1916 as employing 60 people. Women had always helped out in fields and orchards at harvest time, but now some of them worked throughout the year. Local women could not work in munition factories because there were none in the area. Some records suggest that some 4.5 million women took up work; the National Archives suggests that over one million were formally added to the workforce.

When survivors returned the women generally reverted to their former roles (though we shall have no first hand evidence until the 1921 census returns are available), and it was not until the next major war that the long road to equality began to open up.

Women were important in the war effort not just for filling in where men had been and not just as nurses, but in two other ways. First, from the very beginning, they provided what were known as comforts for the troops. As early as November the first large consignment left Hastings for 2nd Battalion, The Royal Sussex Regiment: it included, inter alia, 882 pairs of socks, 64 pairs of gloves and 27 of mittens, 183 handkerchiefs, 106 woollen scarves, 109 cakes of soap, 11 vests, 461 shirts and five housewives. This last was not human cargo, though the troops might have preferred that. A 'housewife' was a kind of universal sewing and mending kit. These comforts were vital to the forces, and not only for their morale: for example, men suffered frostbite in the first winter of the war because army issue clothing was insufficient for the conditions that they had to endure. The efforts went on throughout the war.

Moreover, at least one local woman took an active part in the war. This was Joan Ashton of Vinehall, daughter of Lord Ashton and later the wife of Hugh Whistler of Caldbec Hill. She had served throughout the war, starting as a welder with the RNAS (at a time when the supply of effective welders' masks, made in Germany, were no longer available) and then with the ASC, driving empty lorry chassis to coachbuilders in England and then transporting shell supplies from the Rouen area to the front in France. She lived to 1981. Her service is peculiar in that she appears to have been a regular member of the ASC with an MT number at a time when women were confined to their own – generally home – services.⁴

Secondly, women ran the billets for troops passing through. There might be 200 extra men at Battle in every week during peak periods, and premises identified as suitable were compelled by law to house them; there was of course a payment for doing so which must have been welcome at a time of rising prices. The local women would have had to deal with cleaning rooms, providing fresh linen and cooking meals; sometimes, no doubt, they would also have had to deal with drunken men.

Women would have been in the domestic front line when it came to prices. German submarine activity made the supply of basic foodstuffs increasingly short until the convoy system was introduced in 1917, with the effect of ensuring a steady but still meagre supply. The market took the brunt of this pressure: rationing was not introduced until 1918, at first only in the south east. In its absence prices rose alarmingly. The Ministry of Labour retail price index, which had stood at 123 in 1915, rose to 203 in 1918, an increase of two thirds in three years. (Prices continued to soar afterwards.) Wages went up sharply in some areas of work such as shipyards and munitions factories but income tax rose from 1/6d in 1914 to 6s in 1918. Other taxes rose too.



Joan Ashton, later Whistler

There was no local bombing in the first world war, but the sound of the artillery on the western front was often evident.

World War II

Evidence of Battle's most recent home defence role is clearly to be seen along the eastern side of the town. From the rear of St Mary's church and past the church hall runs a line of 'dragons' teeth', anti-tank obstacles.



'Dragons' Teeth' in front of St Mary's church hall.



'Dragons' Teeth' in front of St Mary's church hall.

With as much buried below ground as appears above these robust features were only subsequently removed where absolutely necessary such as where the High Street narrows near The Almonry or by subsequent development. Battle was designated a 'fortress' area, others being at Mountfield and at Cripps Corner where much survives today. In 1940 the area was defended by 45th Div., XII Corps, and Battle's fortress area lay on the Divisional Stop Line (a line intended to hold the enemy's advance). Occasionally the constructors left their mark in the wet concrete; Wills⁵ states, 'At Battle, Sussex, the days' scores by the Royal Air Force in the Battle of Britain were recorded on some obstacles.' How effective such measures would have been was thankfully never tested in earnest; however, the imperative for them is found in German sources. Plans for invasion 'Operation Sealion' detail for 'Landing Zone C' the 99th Mountain Regiment landing at Winchelsea Beach and making directly for Battle, whilst the 94th Mountain Regiment landing at Pett/Fairlight was to cut off Hastings and send a detachment in support of the 99th; the strategic objective for the 1st Mountain Division being the quick securing of the high ground south-west of Robertsbridge which would serve first to achieve safe landing of succeeding waves, second as a springboard for attack on London. Meanwhile the 34th Division landing, under the cover of smoke, at Cooden in 'Zone D' would broaden out, part securing the ridge

from Lunsford's Cross along to Windmill Hill (Herstmonceux) and part turning from Lunsford's Cross to attack Bexhill from the rear and link up with 1st Mountain Division from Zone C.

Later in the war Battle took on the role of a garrison centre, on the edge of the militarised coastal zone, Canadians being predominant and based at Battle Abbey. The town was fortunate in escaping the frequent hit-and-run raids by fighters that plagued Hastings, Bexhill and Eastbourne. However there were precautions: a public air raid shelter was opened in the garden of 28 Senlac Gardens.



WWII Public air raid shelter (note blast wall to protect the entrance) in garden of 28 Senlac Gardens

On 2 February 1943 Battle was visited by one such raid during which three bombs were dropped. Two failed to explode (one behind The George and one dramatically skidding off the Abbey Green and though the gatehouse of Battle Abbey; it broke in two, grazing the leg of a sentry). Had the bomb exploded the drama would have ended in spectacular fashion befitting the town's long history of bonfire celebrations, for the Royal Canadian Engineers had stored two tons of gelignite in the gatehouse - a deliverance for which residents and visitors must be forever thankful. But not so fortunate was the consequence of the third bomb, which exploded killing two residents and destroying two shops, 74 & 75 High Street, where a brass plaque may be seen affixed to the re-built no.75 (Martins Newsagent) in remembrance of Tom and Margery Giles. There were other bombs too: a cluster was dropped near La Rette farm, and incendiaries fell on Caldbec Hill but in neither case were there casualties or serious damage.

Afterwards

The British army has lost men in every year since 1945, with the single exception of 1968. The gates to the churchyard commemorate one such man: Lt Col Geoffrey Hildebrand DSO, who died in Palestine very near to the end of British involvement there, on 6 April 1948. On

that day the 12th Anti-Tank Regiment of the Royal Artillery were involved in evacuating a large camp near Pardes Hanna near Haifa when they were attacked by irregulars, believed to be from the Zionist Irgun organisation. The sentry and three other members of the guard were held up against the guardhouse wall, shot in the back, and killed. The wireless mast was then destroyed and shots fired into the camp, killing one more soldier and mortally injuring the commanding officer. Hildebrand was from Longfield in Kent and was aged 43.⁶

Geoffrey Lancelot Hildebrand had been born in Kent on 25 April 1905, and his home was at the Mill Farm, Higham, Suffolk. His father Arthur had served in the army and had risen to be a Brigadier General in the Royal Engineers.

The gates were erected when the Dean was the Rev Alfred Thomas Arthur Naylor, DSO OBE, formerly Chaplain to the King and with distinguished records in both world wars in which he served as a chaplain. (A stone commemorating him is inside St Catherine's Chapel.) The decision to erect the gates was taken in the last year of his Deanship.

In July 1959 Dr and Mrs Nevill-Wood offered to pay for the gates to be erected. Tom Nevill-Wood was a native of Gravesend who is recorded in the 1911 census as a medical practitioner; he married Helen Margaret Frances Hildebrand in Suffolk in 1929 and died at Cranbrook in 1966. For some years he lived in Hastings Road in Battle. The 1911 census records that Hildebrand's father had four children (only two of whom appear in accessible census records) and that his wife was Helen Louise Balston. Nevill-Wood's executors include a Balston. It seems certain that the younger Helen was Geoffrey's sister. That Geoffrey's residence at his death was in Suffolk provides additional evidence.

In September 1959 the parochial church council applied for a faculty to erect the gates, which must have been granted because in April 1960 a quotation was accepted from Mssrs Grundy Arnott Ltd for £183 and after some muttering about the colour of the paint to be applied to them they were erected.⁷ Helen Nevill-Wood died in the Battle area in 1984.

Neil Clephane-Cameron
George Kiloh

SOURCES

'A Vindication of [John Ashburnham's] Character and Conduct....by his....Present Representative', 1830.

'Battle and Robertsbridge in Old Photographs', A. Gillet, 1989.

'The Battle of Lewes', Powicke et al, 1964.

'Beaches, fields, streets and hills: the anti-invasion landscapes of England, 1940', W. Foot, 2006.

'Invasion of England 1940', P. Schenk, 1990.

'Pillboxes: A Study of U.K. Defences 1940', H. Wills, 1985.

'The Defence of Sussex and the South Coast of England from Invasion, considered by Queen Elizabeth's Privy Councillors, A.D. 1596', W. H. Blaauw, Sussex Archæological Collections (vol XI), 1859

'Sussex Men at Agincourt', W. D. Cooper, Sussex Archæological Collections (vol XV), 1863.

'The Ghastly War-flame: Fire Beacons in Sussex until the mid-17th Century', F. Kitchen, Sussex Archæological Collections (vol 124), 1986.

'Sussex in the Great Civil War and the Interregnum 1642 - 1660', C. Thomas–Stanford, 1910.

'Winchelsea', W. D. Cooper, 1850.

'The Victoria History of the County of Sussex' (vol 9), L. F. Salzman (ed), 1937.

Miscellaneous research documents held in file 'K' of the archive of the Battle & District Historical Society.

The Hastings Observer, various dates.

John Turner (ed): Britain and the First World War (Routledge, 1914).

¹ A mark was a third of a pound, or 6s 8d.

² Old Winchelsea, which stood approximately 1 mile to the south of today's town of Winchelsea. Old Winchelsea was destroyed by the sea in 1287.

³ On-line records of the Ionian Islands do not confirm these two deaths.

⁴ Information from Ralfe Whistler, August 2014.

⁵ Wills, 1985, p.44

⁶ <http://www.britishforcesinpalestine.org/events48.html>

⁷ Minutes of the Battle Parochial Church Council, 23.07.1959, 13.09.1959 and 12.04.1960.