

Tuesday 19th September 1066

Fulford Gate

The warm September sun gave a lie to the landscape as it hung in the west, late in the afternoon. The world looked beautiful in the soft, slow fading light. A heron majestically flapped over the wetland, hunting for a last catch. The approach of evening could be felt as much as seen. The smell of water was in the air, not just from the beck in front of them but to either side too; river water on the right, marshland on the left.

It might work, Coenred thought to himself.

They had ridden out from York, which lay only one and a half miles to the north, as Eorl Edwin had instructed. A little too late, mayhap, to get the clearest view of where it was proposed to hold the battle tomorrow, but light enough for Coenred to understand what it was that Edwin had in mind.

It seemed to the huscarl that he had passed the last three days in just waiting. First, he waited upon the return of High-Theign Aethelwine, then he had waited for the arrival of the eorls, and now he awaited the approach of the enemy.

The noblemen had feasted too well last night and slept most of the waking day so that now, with this most important of business at hand, they reviewed the proposed battlefield in the dying of the light. From the advantage point of being on horseback they looked south with Germany Beck immediately in front of them running west to east. On the left the ground was firm approached across the beck by a narrow ford running north to south. 'Foul Ford' the locals called it.

"What say you?" Eorl Edwin asked. "A good place in which to lay a trap for a wolf, eh?"

Further east stretched the marshland. Viewed from their position it looked like a natural extension of the grassland where Eorl Edwin hoped to offer battle to the Vikings, but an experienced eye could see the telltale signs of the change in the land.

Coenred dismounted and walked over towards the marsh. Due to the warm spell there were no obvious pools of standing water but just beneath the surface the ground was still sodden. He stopped when he heard the water squelch beneath his leather shoe and looking down he saw it rise to the surface.

The marsh was punctuated with isolated mounds of trapped sediment that allowed plants better suited to drier areas to still flourish. Goat willow and alder were amongst the larger plants to grow there but there was also an abundance of soft rush grass growing in clusters

and giving shelter to birds. Yellow Iris dotted the marsh like a scattering of golden coins. The air was laced with the scent of water mint too. The ground was too soft and wet, unsuited to men in armour or even on horseback. The Vikings could not outflank the Saxons there.

He turned and looked back to the west, to the River Ouse, from which the beck sprang. It was marked by the growth of willow, silver birch and alder trees. Another crossing point was located further towards the river but like the Foul Ford it was narrow and easily defended. The flanks appeared to be protected. The front was made difficult by the shallow beck, a natural but not impassable obstacle. It was a good place to hold against an invader, that Coenred could not dispute.

The problem was that the eorls had a little over one thousand trained warriors, huscarls like himself. The fyrd were not all disciplined warriors, they were trained whenever called to service but dependent on the settlements from whence they were raised for their equipment, which could vary alarmingly in quality. They owed an allegiance to their theigns and were conscripted to military duty as and when required. Some training would - should - have been given to them during their time giving service, but mostly they would only have experience of tilling their land or practising their trades. They could hold a shield-wall. They could fight with spears and when the battle turned their way they would prove as vicious as wolves when an enemy's back was presented to their spear points, but when the battle went against them?

That was the doubt.

Hardrada had a seasoned army, largely Viking warriors, some mercenaries and adventurers no doubt, but few if any of them would have the distractions of a farm or a business to consider running, or a family to protect. They were coming here to seize property, land and women; to build a kingdom for themselves. Their motivation for success was great and they carried little baggage to slow them down. The Saxons had everything to defend and that meant a loss of mobility. The fyrd was raised locally to defend locally and there would be many of Viking descent in their number.

Where would their loyalty lie?

"I say again, is this not a good place to meet the enemy?" Eorl Edwin had dismounted also now and marched over to Coenred in a manner that suggested that he was beginning to become frustrated with his retainers lack of enthusiasm.

"I am spying out the land," Coenred told him and continued walking towards the River Ouse

The village of Fulford Gate, or Gate Fulford as some termed it, lay close to the river but behind what would be the right flank of the army. A typical Saxon habitation, a collection of single storey and single roomed houses made from wooden frames with mud and wattle walls. Thatched roofs reached to the ground in many cases, although some of the better off families had adopted the newer style where the roof stopped higher to allow shuttered windows to be

placed in the walls. Oxen, pigs, chickens, goats and sheep were farmed here but fish from the river and hunting in the marshland also supplied extra food to be either stored against winter or traded at the market in York. Across the beck, on the wrong side as it would happen tomorrow, stood the village of Water Fulford, almost identical to its larger neighbour of Fulford Gate, except that it sat closer to the river.

“We can hold them here.” Eorl Edwin followed after the warrior but kept stopping as if unsure of whether or not he should be going after him. He wanted to speak his mind, however, and as Coenred showed no interest in standing still he was forced to walk quickly along the same trail. A part of Edwin needed to hear Coenred approve of his plan although he could not think why this should be so.

For his part the huscarl continued his musings. Their only chance of seizing the initiative was to force the location of the battle upon the enemy, as Eorl Edwin was looking to do now. It was a risky strategy, however, because it meant fighting outside of the protecting walls of York. The courage and support of the people could prove doubtful. Certainly the populations of the two villages here had something to fight for; their homes were not defended by stout walls. They could only expect the Norsemen to burn to the ground everything left unprotected but then these buildings were easy to erect again, they could be replaced, unlike the people themselves or their valuable farm animals.

The people of Northumbria had risen up against the tyranny of Tostig Godwinson previously, however, demonstrating that they had no love for him. They might fight all the harder knowing that he had returned and sided with their enemy of old. A victory for Tostig would inevitably result in retribution. The blood feud was a way of life here even though it profited no one.

“It is a place where an army such as ours might make a stand against an even greater force,” Coenred conceded, “but I have misgivings.”

“Tell me,” Edwin demanded. “I want to understand.”

The return of this manner of attentive pupil was refreshing. Coenred turned to face his lord at last.

“This is good ground for the defender, the river to the west and the Dam Lands to the east will protect the flanks. Across the front runs the Germany Beck, a yard deep and three yards wide with steep banks. The ground on this side is firm, to the south soft. There are the two fords but they are narrow and easily defended; the power that holds this ground here, where we stand now, may have the day.”

“As I told you,” Edwin exulted. “So what troubles you?”

“The front is some six hundred yards wide, from river to marsh, we have about a thousand huscarls; a thousand is not enough.”

“This we know, but we do have the fyrdmen,” Morcar offered. He had chosen to dismount also and had followed them over to where they now stood near the beck. “They will be placed with the huscarls; they will form a strong shield-wall.”

“We have sent out word to call in all the warriors that owe us allegiance. More huscarls and more thegns will come, yet still thee worry,” Edwin observed. A shadow of impatience crossed his face.

“You will draw up in two groups, the largest on the left facing the main threat. The other on the right to resist the Vikings' should they push along the river.” He snapped a branch from a nearby bush and then snapped it again, unevenly, so as to represent the supposed disposition of their forces. He held the pieces out before him in two hands, apparently joined. “If one flank moves forward without the other they will lose contact with each other.” He moved the larger stick in his left hand as if it were pivoted to the one on the right and yet also moved them slightly apart. “They will risk being severed by an enemy attack at the point where they once joined. If this happens the Viking wins the day.”

“Then it will not happen,” Edwin insisted. His eyes were at least fixed on the graphic demonstration that Coenred presented to them. He could see the point of weakness that was being illustrated and for the first time a doubt entered his mind but he was determined to resist it.

“I have seen the enemy give way before a defending force when it is a feint. The defenders think the battle won and the foe preparing for flight. They leave the ground they held to fall on their enemy only to find him turning at bay; more fierce than at any other time in the battle. Then it is the defenders' turn to flee. Then is the battle lost.”

“It will not happen thus,” Edwin insisted again. His voice rose, mayhap more to quell the growing unease he felt inside.

How hard could it be for a shield-wall to stand its ground before the enemy?

“Do you know the art of the warrior before the enemy's shield-wall?” Coenred asked of both the young eorls.

“Do you take us for slaves?” Morcar demanded, his quick anger coming to the fore once again. He was too sensitive to his brother's moods. He had become aware of Edwin's unease and it made him defensive, consequently he failed to appreciate what was being asked of him.

“The warrior looks for a break in the shield-wall, a weak point,” Coenred spoke on as if he had not even heard Morcar, “if he cannot see it he looks to make it with spear thrusts and axe hews, but when he does see it he must grasp it quickly, he must push his blade into the softer flesh of men and make the blood flow. This you know.”

“As well you know we do,” Edwin kept his voice calm whilst Morcar raged silently, “this has always been your teaching.”

“When you hold the ground in a place like this that is not the art of the warrior. The defender stands his ground no matter what. He lets the enemy break upon his wall like the sea upon rocks. When the enemy pulls back, like the surf, the defender does not surge forward but waits like the rock. Only when he sees the enemy's back, when he sees their power lying spent in blood and gore at his feet, only then does he move.”

“I understand,” Edwin said. His insistence came quickly.

“Do you? Hardrada is a warrior who has fought and won more battles than any other man I know of. Some call him the War Wolf because like that animal he is cunning, steeped in the craft of battle. If there is a weakness to this position that you mean to hold then you can trust him to find it. If he finds it, we are lost.”

“Can you not see such a weakness then warrior?” Morcar asked with a hint of disdain.

“I've just shown it to you, if you do not see it for yourselves then we are lost,” The huscarl said quietly. “There is one more thing; the land behind us is soft too. It will turn into a mire with the churning of so many feet. If we need to retreat to the city the going will be hard and many will be dragged down. There is a track, some yards wide, down which we just rode. If we must retire then that is the place to do it. The army will present as small a front as possible to the enemy as it moves up the road to York and disciplined soldiers will be able to protect the withdrawal of the men.”

“Sound advice,” Edwin conceded, “but it is not we who shall be withdrawing. We'll stain the ground red with Viking blood!”

“I would like this place better if our route to safety were more suited to an army,” Coenred commented, “and that we had a thousand more huscarls.”

He glanced up at the sky. The sun was turning red as the evening began. The cloud was light but enough to be stained by the dying rays. The shadows grew long over the ground.

“It is time to return to York,” Edwin declared. He returned to his horse and vaulted back into the saddle with the vigour and agility of youth. “What time shall we muster the men?”

“At first light,” Coenred responded. “We have no news of where the Vikings are or where they will land. If you mean to fight this battle here at Fulford Gate then we must have the men in place because Hardrada will not grant you the time to do it after he arrives.”

“So be it. We'll feast tonight in York and be back here at first light on the morrow. Come; let's return to Aethelwine's fabled hall.” He turned his horse for York and set off at the gallop with Morcar and their retainers following. Coenred watched them go but did not move. A murder of crows descended noisily into the trees along the riverbank, cawing and thrashing the branches with their wings. It was not difficult to imagine that they came so as to be close at hand for the feast that the battle would surely bring them.

Coenred's own retainer, Edwin, waited until the eorls were at least out of earshot before dismounting from the pack horse and approaching his master with both horses in tow.

"I have never been in a battle," he said simply, "I have no harness."

"You'll need none," Coenred told him. He looked at the young man and saw the anxiety in his face. For some reason it touched him. "There will be no time to fit you out with a battle harness and even less time for me to train you in the use of weapons. You will stay in York tomorrow after I have made ready, there's a service you can do for me there."

"I am not a coward!" Edwin insisted with some passion.

"There's no cowardice in avoiding a fight that you are not prepared for," Coenred told him, "neither does obeying his master's commands make the servant a coward. Tomorrow I will say to this or that man go to this place and do this thing for me and whether I stand him in the front line or at the rear of the army all will know that it does not signify the measure of his courage. He will do it as a thing that must be done and as a service to me."

"I do not want you to think me a coward," Edwin replied looking down at his new leather shoes.

"I think that you will have time to prove your courage to me yet Edwin. Besides, the service I will ask of you tomorrow will mean more to me than to have you stand here lacking arms and armour on this field. I have misgivings about this fight and there are things important to me that your presence in York might make safe."

"Then if it is understood between us I will happily do your bidding," Edwin insisted.

"Then if you understand that I value the lives of men, whatever their rank, and will not use them so that they may seem brave, I will command this duty of you." Coenred took his horse's reins from Edwin's hand and mounted quickly. "Come now, to York before we are missed. You will tend Theign Aethelwine a service again tonight and not get drunk in carrying out this duty, unlike many a lord is likely to do."