

Fulford Gate

It would be another warm day in this long, glorious English summer. The sun was climbing into a clear blue sky over Fulford Gate against which the green of the trees looked so vibrant and so full of life. Birds flew across the heavens with no care for the worries of men. They fought their own battles for survival, whether predator or prey. The ravens and crows, however, would be spared the need to travel far for food; a feast awaited them after the bloody business of the day was completed.

Coenred stood leaning on his fighting spear in an attitude of relaxed waiting. The leaf shaped blade of the spear was highly polished and glinted in the morning light. It had a central ridge running from the socket to the very sharp point to give the spearhead strength. The shaft felt smooth under his hand. Made from the wood of the ash tree it was both strong and supple, allowing the spear to absorb the impact of thrusts against linden shields, impacts that would shatter more brittle woods. Fighting spears did not come in any one size. Coenred's was cut to a length of eight natural feet, a length that he found easily manageable. Others might be shorter depending upon the skill and strength of the man who was to wield it.

His great round shield, now free of its protective linen covering, was swung onto his back where he could carry it comfortably. The yellow dragon of Mercia scowled out at the world from a black background. A leather strap fixed to the inside of the shield held in place his three angons or throwing spears. Each measured up to seven natural feet in length, with barbed tempered iron heads on long iron shanks attached to a wooden shaft barely half that length. Some warriors placed iron rings in the shaft to mark the exact point of balance in the weapon so that they would know where to hold it when throwing the spear. Coenred had no need for such devices; he knew instinctively how to launch this necessary and deadly weapon.

His armour consisted of a byrnie made from steel mail links, an expensive long coat that provided protection against cutting weapons such as sword blades or axe edges. This was a thing of great value as most warriors could not afford such a large amount of metal in a single protective garment. The pattern of the byrnie was basically a 'T' shape with a hole for the head to pass through. The sleeves reached down to his forearms, whereas the body of the mail shirt reached to the bottom of his thighs. It was gathered at the waist by a leather belt that helped to distribute the two stones of weight more comfortably. Suspended from this belt, which was decorated with gold fastenings, were his double-edged sword housed in its leather scabbard also suitably decorated, Mildryth's scramseax, a double handed Dane-axe, and a bottle filled with weak beer.

Underneath the byrnie he wore a padded jacket made up of several cross-ply layers of wool encased in linen. This garment helped absorb impact blows and could stop the progress of piercing weapons that penetrated the steel mail.

Coenred wore a pointed helmet of a simple conical design made from polished steel sections riveted together with strengthening crossbars welded over the riveted seams. A strong nose guard extended down to offer some protection to his face, accompanied by solid plate cheek guards fixed to the helmet by leather straps. The cheek guards had bronze plates attached to them, each of these decorated with a stylised image of a horse chased in silver. At the back, riveted to the helmet, fell a curtain of mail to protect his neck. Linen trousers and strong leather shoes completed his battle dress.

He had left his horse and his retainer Edwin back in the safety of York. This soft wet ground would cut up badly under the hooves of horses so he had issued a general order for the fyrd, from eorl to ceorl, to assemble here on foot. Eorl Edwin had given nominal command to him as Captain of the Huscarls, the elite of the fyrd, but Coenred had no misunderstanding about the appointment; Edwin and Morcar would not surrender real command because that would mean surrendering the glory too. His was the job of organisation, not leadership upon the field when the battle was about to be joined.

“How’s your head?” Sigbert asked jovially. He was a stocky man to begin with so the addition of his battle harness, of an equal quality to that worn by Coenred, seemed to make him even more rotund, as if he were almost as wide as he was tall.

“Fine,” Coenred responded truthfully with a grin, “how was Hilda?”

The other huscarl laughed roughly before answering.

“Like silk beneath my hands and as warm as a fire. Rare are the times when I’ve lain with my wife before a battle but every time I have we’ve won and I’ve escaped wounding, or we’ve lost and I’ve just escaped.”

They laughed together.

“May wyrd grant you the same fortune again today,” Coenred smiled.

Even as experienced warriors they were both anxious to a degree though neither wished to show it. Mirth might not seem appropriate before a battle but it let them vent the nervous energy that they felt building in an acceptable fashion and it gave no reason to others to doubt their courage. They knew what was coming better than most men that morning and there was nothing like the threat of enemy spear-points to make the mind appreciate the immediate moment of living all the more readily.

They stood on a swath of grass that looked to be ideal grazing for oxen and sheep. The late summer sky was a limitless blue, the kind of hue that seemed to turn a man’s mind to the sea and the cooling breezes that could be found there. The rhythm of life could be felt everywhere, in the season that was beginning to close, in the trees that were just beginning to

show their autumn colours, in the flowing of the beck that rippled over stones and over which countless insects darted. Flowering plants marked the marshland, painting the landscape with bright colours. They could feel it coursing through their veins as the beating of their hearts drove blood through powerful limbs. They could taste it with every breath taken. This precious life that seemed so fragile but to which they clung with dogged tenacity, normally without conscious thought. Today they did think about that life, about all that it had given them and all that they shared with the other people who mattered to them.

The threat of war brought with it an awareness of how good it was to be alive at that very moment. For those who had hazarded their lives on the spears of the enemy before now this was a time to place a value upon their lives and all that they had enjoyed and loved. There would be no other moment like it once the battle was begun.

Together Coenred and Sigbert watched the army assemble slowly. Lesser eoldermen and theigns walked down the road from York with their men, mostly ceorls, some could call on lesser theigns to bolster their numbers, and some of the richer lords could even afford the services of mercenary butescarles, warriors better equipped and more experienced than fyrdmen but whose loyalty was counted in coin and not in terms of obligation.

The men wore a variety of armour ranging from mail coats to leather byrnies. Some wore only padded jackets and there was a large number who did not even have that slight protection, they came to the battle in their everyday tunics. There were many bare heads too, a few with light helmets made from iron hoops riveted together and covered in leather. Some could afford helmets with steel structures also covered in leather; very few could afford the best quality of head protection. The only piece of defensive equipment that they all had in common was the great round shields that every weapons man carried. Again, the quality of decoration presented on each shield reflected the means of the man who held it.

Their weapons were just as varied ranging from bejewelled swords to mean langseaxes formerly used for the butchering of farm animals. Experienced warriors carried battle axes whereas their poorer comrades brought wood axes. The commonest weapon was without doubt the tall fighting spears that every soldier was trained to use and the majority of the army also used throwing spears although not all were of the pattern of the angons with their heavy metal heads and sockets. Simpler versions were merely shorter fighting spears that were not as effective as the angon because they were lighter and their shafts could easily be broken at the head to lessen the encumbrance that they caused when fixed into a shield or even a man's body.

Some of the lords made a great show of their arrival, bedecked in their gold and jewels and pointlessly ordering their battle horns to be blown as they strode in the morning sunlight trying to impress everyone. Wiser men like Aethelwine came more discreetly, paying heed to

the younger and more inexperienced of their people who even now would be clutched by fear at the thought of what the day might bring.

The High-Theign of York spent time talking to his men, encouraging them to be brave, to seem so before the eyes of the men of distant Mercia who served Eorl Edwin. He had no need to put on a show to the other theigns. His armour was richly adorned as became his high station; his weapons were second to none in quality. He was already a man of note and a warrior of some experience. However, in his own eye he was a father to his people. He understood that many of them had misgivings for this day and concern for the loved ones that they had left at home. The Vikings were not feared without reason. Nevertheless there always seemed to be some self-important fool who had to strut in their battle harness and act the bold warrior before all the men. Such are the ways of those who have not experienced the reality of violent conflict. True heroes were cut from a different cloth.

“Here they come.” Sigbert nodded over to a group of heavily armed and armoured men who approached both him and Coenred. They were all huscarls, attired much the same as their captain, although some favoured the large, two handed Dane-axe over the fighting spear. These were the elite force of Edwin and Morcar’s army. In particular these men were the most experienced and best trained warriors. They would also be the men most to fear as far as the enemy was concerned. The Vikings had the violent fury of the berserker; the Saxons had the determined loyalty of the huscarl.

Coenred moved to meet them half way with Sigbert at his side. Verdant grass blades bent beneath the sole of his leather shoes as he walked, each recovering slowly as his weight was removed with the following step. He counted the warriors quickly and was surprised at their number. He estimated there to be some one hundred and fifty of them, each a captain of one hundred huscarls. This was good news.

“Good morrow brothers,” he called.

They returned the salutation willingly and in loud voices. It would not be lost on the fyrdmen that the huscarls were in such good spirits.

“Where are the eorls?” Thrydwulf asked the question that was on many minds.

“They’ll come soon, though travelling by foot might take them a little longer than they are used to,” Sigbert said and raised a hearty round of laughter. They all felt the nervous energy that seemed to be generated by the growing number of men and mayhap they laughed a little too quickly in their attempt to dissipate it.

“I call you here as your captain,” Coenred said when the mirth had subsided. “Tis known around the hearth-fire that we hold this ground against my counsel but the eorls command it and so we must do battle against the old foe as best we can.”

“Seems we must draw our line along the beck as deep as we can though the front is long,” Hereric observed.

“The order of battle is clear enough to see even without the September sun,” Sigbert answered, “that’s not what concerns us.”

“No.” Coenred agreed. “The ground looks good for a defence but I doubt the eorls can resist the call to glory. I fear that they will not be able to defy moving to the attack.”

“Mayhap we should if the opportunity presents?” Hereric suggested.

“Mayhap, if this were not Harald Hardrada that we fight. He’s won honours in the Varangian Guard of Byzantium, the Emperor himself is said to have rewarded him for his service. He is the King of Norway and the canniest, most experienced warrior to take the field today,” Sigbert responded. “He is the War Wolf and against him we have two youths-”

“And us!” Thrydwulf interjected and raised another roar of approval.

Coenred smiled grimly, he liked the spirit that they were displaying at least, they not only looked like warriors, they acted like warriors.

“Aye, and us. I don’t doubt that we stand a chance of turning the Viking back today if we hold the ground but I am wary that if the line is breached or turned we will be trapped with the wetlands to our backs. That would mean the capture of the eorls and Harold, our king, would find himself caught between two hard enemies.”

“The eorls may fall or be captured as any warrior on this field today.”

“True enough, but Tostig Godwinson rides with Hardrada,” Sigbert told them.

“Then the rumours are true?”

“Aye, Tostig Godwinson returns to exact his revenge with Hardrada as his ally. If they take the eorls alive then they take York and all of Northumbria too. Even Mercia may be counted as having fallen. Tostig is a friend of the King of Scotland, Hardrada’s back would be protected in the north; Malcolm will not interfere. Mayhap those of Dane blood will join his banner if he wins this day and holds or kills the eorls?”

“Then you want us to bodyguard the eorls?” Hereric asked.

“Aye,” Coenred nodded, “tis no easy task in the midst of a battle to watch a man’s back but that is what we must do. We must fight the enemy and make sure that neither eorl falls to either capture or death.”

“More than one eolderman has fallen in battle before and the enemy has not profited greatly,” Thrydwulf commented. Several warriors nodded their heads in agreement at this truth.

“How many of us fought in a time when three different men would wear the crown and two of them foreigners?” Coenred looked round at the faces of the warriors. “The Witan chose Harold for King and that sits well with me. Hardrada is another Viking adventurer looking to add England to his crown since Denmark escaped his clutch. Guillaume is a Norman and we know what his kind did at the court of King Edward. No, if we hold Hardrada today then we save King Harold an unnecessary battle, leaving him all the stronger to face the

Normans should they come. If we lose but save the eorls then Northumbria escapes Tostig's control. As long as the eorls live Hardrada will enjoy no real victory in the north."

"They may have the city but they won't have the people. Tostig will find that he has not so soon been forgotten," Sigbert added.

"If the eorls fall beneath Viking spears then our death-oaths demand the same fate for us, or the crushing of our enemy," Thrydwulf said this with notable pride and vehemence.

"Then that is another reason why they must not fall," Coenred answered him. "If we lose the day but keep the eorls alive then the heart of the Army of the North remains to fight another day. If Edwin and Morcar die and us along with them then who will remain to protect the people of Northumbria? Who will be here to protect your families?"

"Then we either win this fight or spirit the eorls to safety if it goes against us," Hereric observed.

"So let it be," Thrydwulf said in a grim tone.

He threw back his head and growled a roar into the summer sky. The group of huscarls followed his lead and sent up a war-cry that rolled across the field. The rough sound of their voices drew many an appreciative glance from the assembling army, eoldermen, theigns and ceorls alike. If the elite troops of the eorls' of Mercia and Northumbria were in such good spirits then it seemed they all had a firm reason to expect to survive this day.

"Hereric, I give you Morcar," Coenred told him.

The big Saxon puffed out his chest with pride. He was not the tallest man there but his limbs were thick with sinew and muscle and he could swing his two handed Dane-axe with the same dexterity that the best of them used with their fighting spears.

"You give me command of the largest number of huscarls," he declared acknowledging both the responsibility and the honour that his captain was bestowing upon him. He would tell Eadgyd of this tonight, when the enemy were scattered and he sat before the warmth of her hearth with his children around him. It would become an oft told tale in the long nights of winter; it would make her so proud of her man.

"That I do. Morcar will hold the left flank along the beck to the dam-lands; Edwin will hold the river bank. Thrydwulf, you'll stand with Edwin." Coenred looked each man in the face. They were brother warriors, men of the same mind and ability; they commanded his respect. He knew that he could rely upon them one and all and that in the coming fight none of them would let him down or stain their own honour. "I will stand at the centre where Mercia and Northumbria meet. I expect the Vikings will try to push the two flanks apart; we will hold them together."

"There will not be enough of us," Hereric recognised. "We are some fifteen hundred strong but the length of the battle line is beyond us."

“Of huscarls there will never be enough,” Coenred agreed. “The theigns and the fyrdmen will take their stand too. We will be the rocks onto which they will build their shield-wall. Behind us such ceorls as have skill with a bow will darken the sky with their arrows and behind them the village men will stand. They may be no good for fighting in a shield-wall but they will swell our numbers and give the enemy good reason to fear our strength.”

Many of the villagers from Fulford Gate and Water Fulford were even now heading up the same track down which the Saxon army was still coming; they were heading towards the safety of the city walls. Children drove the family animals before them, pigs, sheep and oxen. One or two had horses which they used to carry the belongings that they believed they could not afford to leave behind. As Coenred had observed many of the village men of fighting age had taken up positions at the rear of the army, close to the Ings Marsh which was to the north of the battleground and stood between them and York. Those with bows would be the most useful if they could be made to loose their arrows together, although the common practice was for bowmen to act individually and find their own mark. Many were saying farewell to wives and children and hurrying them off to safety. Their villages would be close to the battle site and few were expecting to find their homes intact if the day was lost.

It was surprising, however, that despite the common consensus that the Vikings would put both villages to the torch no matter what happened in the battle itself many villagers had decided to stay with their properties. These were mostly men who intended shuttering their doors and windows and staying put, but a few were joined by their women who seemed to be of an equally pugnacious spirit.

“Go now to your places and form the lines. Remember your oaths as huscarls; brothers of the sword, we know no defeat when our lord has fallen, only death or victory. May your shields be strong and your spears longer than the enemies.”

“DEATH OR VICTORY!”

The shout went up at Coenred's words and afterwards they departed with a mind to make war.

“Aethelmaer,” he called to his own huscarls.

“My Lord,” Aethelmaer responded eagerly advancing towards Coenred. Although a young man he was tall and strong and had the makings of a captain. With the other huscarls, Alfrid and Hengist included, his troop numbered only twenty, but they were proven men.

“We will form in the centre the same as the others but stand back from the main line. I want us to be able to respond should we see a weakness in either our shield-wall or the Vikings’. Muster another eighty huscarls from the line if you can. See if you can get a reserve of fyrdmen behind us too.”

“Yes, My Lord,” Aethelmaer responded, eagerly. His young face showed none of the concern that dominated so many others. He seemed to be revelling in the prospect of a violent

encounter with the Vikings, proud of his station as a huscarl, proud of his immaculate armour, proud of his brother warriors.

“I like that lad. He has a comely head on his shoulders supported by youthful strength. Hopefully they won't be parted from each other by some Viking Dane-axe today,” Sigbert said. “Where do you want me then?”

“At my side of course where I can keep an eye on you,” Coenred told him. “I fear your wife's wrath more than any Viking's spear point!”