

## Fulford Gate

The sound of horns announced the arrival of the eorls Edwin and Morcar at Fulford Gate. Against Coenred's advice they came down the track from York on horseback but at least only their individual banner carriers shared that honour, the rest of their men walked as they all should have done.

“Coenred, isn't it a fine morning for a battle?” Edwin shouted as the huscarl made his way over to the two young noblemen.

“My lords, the army assembles as you ordered,” was all that he could bring himself to say in return.

“Then let's to it men.” Edwin swung down from his horse and a servant disappeared with it. Saxons did not fight on horseback; a horse was just a means of getting to the battle. “Morcar, my brother, I give you the left flank, the greater number of men and the greater glory,” Edwin declared effusively.

The two brothers embraced fondly and the men cheered at the sight of their leaders in such good spirits.

“Brother, the glory will belong to every man who fights under our joint banners this day,” Morcar returned.

Coenred was grudgingly impressed by this uncharacteristic generosity of spirit on the younger brother's side.

Is the gravity of their situation giving the young men older heads?

The two young eoldermen were dressed in the best quality battle harness. Their metal byrnies gleamed in the morning sun, polished by servants so that they looked resplendent. Edwin wore a simple conical helmet with a nose-guard inlaid with gold. A curtain of mail hung down the back to protect his neck. Morcar's helmet was more lavishly embellished with long cheek pieces and an exaggerated nose-guard. It reminded Coenred that the Eorl of Northumbria was indeed young. Each wore an expensive sword decorated with gold, silver, and jewels but their shields and spears were carried by servants dressed as soldiers.

The retainers followed their lords and began to spread out along the line of the Germany Beck. Theign Ricbert was a companion of Eorl Morcar's and so positioned himself and his men on the right of the eorl's banner and near the centre of the line. He was in good humour with his warriors, encouraging them to form their lines without the need to employ threats or the flat of his sword. He saw a figure seemingly lurking in the back row.

“You man! What do you do there?” He called out, suspicious of the man's loitering.

“My Lord,” Wulfhere replied with a loud voice and marched up to the theign in a proper manner.

“Wulfhere! ‘tis you.”

“Aye My Lord.”

“What do you in the back row?”

“I was forming the lines, My Lord. Seems some of these fyrdmen know not how to position themselves,” he spoke disdainfully and attracted one or two scowls from men close enough to hear what was being said. “In my experience ‘tis worth having a man who has been in the wars stand in the back row to keep fyrdmen in check. They’re as like to run after touching shields to the spears of the enemy thee know, My Lord!”

Ricbert studied Wulfhere’s face. He could not say that he liked the butescarle particularly but the man seemed able and trustworthy. Certainly no one else in his household had spoken ill of him in particular. Of course there were duties that necessitated the employment of such a man, although in truth the theign wished that he might afford the service of a proper huscarl rather than this poor replacement. Mayhap if the battle went well today a boon from Eorl Morcar might allow him to retain the services of a real huscarl? Wulfhere seemed genuine enough, however, always eager to serve when tasked, and in one thing he was right, the fyrd could sometimes take flight at the first provocation so it might be wise to have an experienced man like him in the back row to steady them.

“So be it. Keep them steady but when I call you to the front I want to see you there promptly.” The theign turned and pushed his way through the ranks of his men to take his rightful position in the front row. As soon as he was out of earshot Wulfhere turned and looked at the fyrdmen around him. He chose one who looked less formidable than his fellows and cuffed his ear with the back of his hand.

“You heard the theign,” he roared, “get into line and don’t let me catch a man of you casting longing looks back to York. Eyes forward only.”

It was a job half done to acquire a position at the rear of the shield-wall. If the battle went against them he would not have to fight through other fleeing men to reach the safety of York from this position. If the battle went their way then he would have leisure following the advancing line to pilfer the bodies of fallen heroes for their gold and jewels. Yes, he was set for a good day no matter how the world turned. He wondered if he should call his two rogues to him, they were so eager for the fight that they had positioned themselves in the second road convinced that they were mighty warriors destined for greatness. He remembered how small had been their ambition when they had stopped at the farm on the way to York; he knew that he could do better than them. Let them stay in the ranks of heroes then, if they survived he would drink a cup of beer in celebration with them, if not, well it was no great loss. First, as always, he would look after himself.

Coenred continued to watch as the men formed up. The huscarls, resting their heavy shields for the moment with the rim on the ground, were interspersed with well-equipped ealdermen and theigns and their companions as he had ordered. Nevertheless the Saxon shield-wall would barely cover the full front with properly armoured men.

Behind them would stand the second row made up almost entirely of lesser theigns and better equipped fyrdmen. Their job was to thrust the long fighting spears over the shoulders of the more heavily armoured front row. The poorer equipped fyrdmen and all of the villagers who had volunteered to fight today would make up the third and fourth rows where their weight could be used to hold the line against the push of the Vikings. Inevitably men in the front row would fall and their place would have to be taken by those behind them, then would the lack of armour and quality weapons tell; then would the true resolve of the Saxons be tested.

The army began to become a thing of discernable proportions and evident control, not just a multitude of excited, chaotic individuals. There was much shouting, much cursing, and more than one man regretted having drunk so much at the feast many had enjoyed last night. Banners were raised to mark the presence of important individuals, lesser eorls and royal theigns alike. Battle horns were readied against the onset of glory.

Young boys walked through the throng carrying pitchers of weak beer for the soldiers to quench their thirst. The sun had climbed above the tree line and burnt down upon them from a clear sky. It was unseasonably warm still. Men would be getting hot even without the weight of their armour. The huscarls and theigns wearing both padded jackets and mail would sweat most uncomfortably today.

Coenred turned and looked at his men. They were either standing and talking quietly or sat upon the ground. There were some one hundred huscarls; all that he believed could be spared from the front line to make a reserve force. They were supported by another three hundred fyrdmen, carefully chosen by Aethelmaer for their training and experience; men that could be relied upon to follow orders and stand their ground. Others, who seemed lost or confused, not knowing where to stand or whom they should follow, had congregated nearby, mayhap fooling themselves into thinking that as this collection of warriors were not already in the front line of the army then they would be safer associating with them. Mayhap a little later they might have reason to regret their ignorance.

Coenred mused on their dispositions. He had some one thousand five hundred huscarls, mayhap another one thousand theigns and a hundred or so ealdermen of quality. In addition there were two thousand fyrdmen and poorer theigns and another one thousand villagers and townsmen who would be of little use unless the real fighting men forced the enemy to turn

and run. He would count on four thousand five hundred warriors, not a small force by today's standards.

How many would the Vikings number?

He thought over the number of ships reported by several different messengers, the totals being worryingly consistent. Based on experience he estimated Hardrada's army to be at least seven thousand that could be put straight into the field with possibly another three thousand to act as a reserve and a guard for the fleet. If pushed the Vikings could send forth into the field an army twice the size of the combined power of Mercia and Northumbria.

Eorl Edwin would hold the riverbank with three hundred and fifty huscarls supported by seven hundred fyrdmen. Eorl Morcar would hold the longer stretch of the line with one thousand one hundred huscarls and two thousand two hundred fyrdmen. It would be left to Coenred with his reserve to try and stop any breaches of the line, especially where he knew it to be the weakest.

"This is not a good day for a battle," Sigbert declared, breaking Coenred's contemplation.

"You have read some portent? Some sign in the sky that keeps your eye attracted?" Coenred glanced upwards mockingly.

"That I have," Sigbert admitted, "the bloody sun climbs high and burns hot with no sign of a cloud to offer us shade!"

"As it burns us so it burns the Viking, although they've had further to walk than either of us this fine morning."

"True enough friend, but I hate this waiting. 'Tis true, there's nothing worse than a battle begun if not a battle waited upon."

"I think you will not have long to wait then friend, for your misery to abate. There comes your enemy!" Coenred used the point of his fighting spear to aim southwards across the beck. Sigbert looked and squinted into the morning sunlight. Dark shapes were forming themselves into the recognisable body of a large number of men in armour.

The Vikings were coming.