

Fulford Gate

The mood of the men changed like the wind and like the wind it could be felt. For a brief moment they had dreamt of victory like their lord; then they had been stopped and held, unable to push on any further. Now they knew that defeat was upon them. Morcar was very aware of the change and tried to rouse his brave warriors but his voice was lost, like his banner, in the clamour of the battle.

Aethelwine still stood with a group of fellow theigns and their retainers with whom he had formed the line, fighting as hard as anyone else. They were positioned on the far left of Morcar's position and here they had enjoyed the greatest success, cutting down Tostig's men like wheat for the harvest. The world had turned, however, and it was now brave Saxon men that were being cut down where they stood. As the Vikings pressed hardest against the Mercians and the centre of the battle-line Aethelwine saw their chance to escape. It would be achieved only by more fighting, more swinging of swords and axes, thrusting of long spears, by tired arms carried on equally tired legs. They must continue their push west, however, because here the enemy were still weak.

“By all the gods I'll not stand to be slaughtered like swine for this man's vanity,” Aethelwine declared. “Push west lads. Push west.”

His cry was taken up by his brother theigns. They called their men to them and pressed hard, cutting a bloody swathe through their enemies who simply were not strong enough at this point in their lines to resist this last desperate Saxon charge.

Oswyn felt a presentiment of doom wash over him. His warriors were exhausted; they could barely hold their shields aloft as the Saxons' weapons rained down upon them. He found himself facing a large theign, well appointed with arms and armour. He seemed like a most formidable warrior, the very kind a tired man would hope to avoid when his breath came too quickly and he had already been too long in the fight. From deep inside Oswyn called up his last reserves of strength and prepared to stand in one more epic battle between well matched individual warriors.

With his spear shattered and his strength waning Oswyn opted for his sword and struck at the theign. Aethelwine parried the blow easily with the blade of his Dane-axe and shoved the mercenary backwards with his shield. Stepping forward he swung once, twice, thrice, his keen blade biting into the linden wood of his foe's shield. Each time he twisted the ax after it impacted to stop the wood from holding his weapon fast.

Oswyn relied on timing, knowing that he could not match the other for strength now. Aethelwine looked to keep the gap between them to an arm's length. He was ever mindful of the larger battle going on to their right and that it had gone against his people. It would not be long before the advantage that lay with the enemy elsewhere on the field began to tell here too.

He feinted another push with his shield and stepped forward looking to over-reach the mercenary's defence with his axe. Oswyn was not deceived and stepped forward rather than backwards, bringing his sword over the edge of the theign's shield and into his face.

Aethelwine's vision was suddenly lost in an explosion of pain. The edge of the blade of the sword cut into his left eye socket. Instinctively he reacted by lashing up with his heavy Dane-axe held in one hand. Neither of them saw the blade flash upwards, slipping under Oswyn's shield. It bit into the man's steel byrnies, bursting the mail links. The cold steel cut effortlessly through muscle and organs, stopping only when it met his sternum on its upward swing through his stomach.

The impact of the blow staggered Oswyn and sent him backwards on failing legs. He collapsed into the churned mud as his life's blood seeped from the terrible wound in his abdomen. He was dead before he rolled onto his side and the damp mud stained his face.

Someone grabbed Aethelwine's weapons-arm and pulled him along as the rest of his men continued forward. The blood flowed freely from his wound on the side of his face. Pain wracked that face and rendered him blind. The noise of the battle seemed far away from the foreign place that his consciousness now occupied. He followed the prompting of his fellow warrior, not questioning them nor minding the fate of his foe.

The Saxons pressed on and did not stop even after they had passed through the main body of the host, but kept on, turning south down the same road to Riccall that the Vikings had used to reach the battle ground. That way stood fewer of the enemy and, therefore, safety.

They abandoned their fellows on the field of doom to whatever fate wyrd through the Vikings would bestow on them. Not that it sat well with Aethelwine but he thought of his wife and children, he thought of his retainers and their families too; for all of those for whom he was responsible, a charge given to him by the king. He thought of those people and it inspired him to keep encouraging his men to fight as they made their way south. His vision slowly returned in one eye. They came upon contingents of Norse warriors still making their way to the battlefield and they slaughtered them without mercy as if in penance for saving their own lives.

Chaos now reigned as the once solid formation of the shield-wall was torn apart. Warriors were reduced into fighting in small knots of determined resistance and desperate combat. Eorl Morcar felt fear taking him. This was not his first taste of mortal combat but it was the first

time in his young life that he found himself staring death in the face. A cold and sickening feeling filled his stomach. He felt certain that the moment of his doom was upon him as he stood in the front rank of the crumbling shield-wall, then he felt a force dragging him backwards. He turned to see a fierce huscarl, his armour spoilt by blood, glaring back into his face. Even as his mind began to run wild with fear a semblance of familiarity came to the young nobleman.

“Hereric.”

“My Lord, this battle's done, we must get thee away.”

“They're on all sides, only the marshland is safe.”

“We'd flounder in there like hunted deer with hounds at their heels; their arrows will pierce our backs,” the huscarl declared, “come with me.”

Still gripping the earl by the arm the warrior steered him towards a patch of much trampled grass that was a few paces from the front line. They seemed to be surrounded by hectic activity where nothing was clearly discernable. Still gripping Earl Morcar by the arm Hereric gave a shout. With impressive discipline a number of warriors obeyed his command and approached them. An armoured man appeared next to Hereric holding a battle-horn in one hand and a sword in the other. The huscarl repeated the captain's command with a series of blasts on the horn.

Within a few moments both Hereric and Morcar were surrounded by a group of some five hundred Saxon huscarls. The men had successfully detached themselves from the front rank earlier as the shield-wall disintegrated around them. They had remained in the back rows to offer what help they could but it was for this moment that they had been waiting and preserving their strength.

The huscarls were grim and bloodied, their once bright armour smeared and stained but their valour was still intact. At the command of their captain they formed a protective ring around Morcar, pulling in tight so that their shields overlapped forming an apparently invulnerable barrier. Long spears jutted forth with those in the ranks behind holding their spears upright, partly to deflect the arrows that were expected to come their way, partly to make the formation look larger and more formidable than it really was. Hereric's voice called out again and as one man they began to edge north towards the hoped for safety of York but they moved slowly, painfully slowly.

Morcar's army of Northumbrians was being destroyed. Men, wild with fear, began to run into the marshland, throwing away their weapons and armour in order to flee more quickly. Vikings followed them to the edge of the marsh from where they hurled throwing spears or used bows to cut down the slow moving Saxons in their hundreds. It was no longer fighting, it was a sport; it was a massacre. The Vikings rejoiced at every death blow or mortal wound inflicted and the Saxons knew no mercy.

Braver, or more desperate men, stood back to back fighting with a waning strength as the Vikings ringed them all about. No quarter was expected and none was given. Saxons were pierced several times with spears, their blood running freely down their trousers or the sleeves of their shirts, each drop taking their strength with it. There was no haste to end the game, no respect for the Saxon warriors' bravery in the face of their enemy. When a leg gave way or a man stumbled, Viking steel would cut into any exposed body part. They were literally hacked to pieces before they reached the ground. When one fell, the others would pull tighter together but they only delayed the inevitable and failed to exact any cost from their tormentors. It was slow, bloody work but the Norsemen went at it with an obscene will.