

The Village of Stamford Bridge

“What comes hither?”

The Viking looked down from the high ground towards the motion on the far side of the river. He saw a group of men approaching at a trot. It was not difficult to see that they carried spears and shields.

“My Lord, armed men approach!”

“‘Tis the men of York, come with their tribute as commanded,” another answered with a note of disdain.

“Nay, ‘tis not!”

Harald Hardrada rose from the grass where he had been lounging and looked across the river. The small group descended the hill and followed the road down to the bridge. He judged them to be of about thirty men, too small to be the party from Jorvik. Their manner was purposeful, they had an objective and it was not to meet peacefully with the King of Norway. Together the Vikings watched as the group headed for the bridge, their suspicions slowly being aroused by the scene unfolding before them.

Hestog tightened his grip on his spear and quickly looked around the area to get his bearings. Below them was the bridge spanning the dark and turgid river. The wooden construction started halfway down the hillside so that by the mid point the structure was easily over 14½ natural feet above the water. The enemy were in place as the young boy had described them. There were no Vikings on this bank and the main host on the south side seemed to be spread out over a large area, mostly on the high-ground or beyond it even. Some of the Norsemen were conducting swimming races in the river, others wrestling, still others were involved in a boulder throwing competition, but the majority seemed to be resting in the warmth of the sun, sat in small groups or stretched out seemingly asleep. It did not look like an army so much as a gathering waiting for a festival to begin.

A moment later and sudden alarms could be heard from the Viking host; the Saxons were now known for what they were. Hestog broke back into a trot and dashed down to the bridge. A small group of Vikings who had been enjoying the cold water hastily exited the river and started to prepare themselves for battle. They were

the nearest to the bridge on the south bank. With glistening water running down their hard muscles they drew their weapons and ventured onto the wooden planks to stop the Saxons' advance.

With a roar Hestog started the charge. His band of light infantry followed suit, giving voice to their bloodlust. With a clash of steel and wood the two war parties collided. The Saxons outnumbered the Vikings and carried them back several feet with the impetus of their initial rush. Hestog's men were well equipped and better protected than any of their enemies. Tough Norse muscle was sliced by sharp Saxon steel. War cries gave way to screams of agony. The scent of blood filled the air. They fought in a loose order as the wooden bridge offered too precarious a footing for any other kind of formation. Man struggled with man. There was no cowardice, there was plenty of bravery, but it was not enough for the invaders. The Viking numbers quickly began to dwindle.

Hestog withdrew his spear and let a mortally wounded warrior fall. He glanced around with senses heightened by the violence, looking for another opponent.

How much time has passed?

Seconds?

Minutes?

How many of the enemy are left?

Is King Harold behind me now and descending the hill?

How much time do I have?

Enough time for men to already lay dead upon the wooden boards of the bridge or for their fallen bodies to float away on the lazy river.

As they watched the initial fight on the bridge movement back at the top of the hill attracted the King of Norway's attention. Men on horses began to crest the hill carrying banners and glinting spears. Hardrada's experienced eye read the scene before him and he felt, for the first time in an age, a shiver pass through his body.

I have been undone!

“‘Tis a Saxon army,” the War Wolf announced to them all with a noticeable degree of gravity.

The warriors around him were suddenly arrested at the news; they left off rousing their men for a moment and tried to verify the king's statement with their own eyes.

They had no reason to disbelieve him but neither had they been given cause to expect such a power coming to oppose them.

“It cannot be, Harold is in London and the northern eorls fled before you,” Tostig asserted.

“And you would know being the king’s brother,” growled Harald. “We should have pursued the eorls at Fulford.”

“And had York at your back?” Tostig retaliated with the king’s own reasoning.

The Norseman grumbled into his beard, defeated by his own logic. Tostig moved to stand next to him and they both watched the slow build up of men on the other side of the river.

“They’ve taken us by surprise, like a sleeping boar before baying hounds, but they’ve not won yet. We should retire to the ships and meet them there,” Tostig advised.

“Not give battle?” The king looked accusingly at the Saxon. “You would have me run from this rabble?” His heavy arm rose and a calloused finger pointed out across the river.

“’Tis no rabble, ’tis Harold’s army,” Tostig asserted. He could feel it. He knew brother Harold’s presence from old. They could see that the Saxon army was growing considerably. Tostig knew that only one man in the whole of the kingdom could command such numbers; it had to be his elder brother. “This will be the finest host in England, following their king’s banner, their ranks swelled by armoured theigns looking to win glory and renown before the prince of aethelings. Loyal huscarls will also add their swords to the reckoning. This is no hastily raised levy, My Lord, this is the best that the Saxons have to offer.”

“Your brother took that which was mine by Harthacnut’s boon. Better methinks to stand my ground against the thief and take back that which should be rightly mine own.”

“But we lack armour and there are more men at the ships to swell our ranks,” Tostig argued.

“True, but we would have to flee before their mounted spears with naked backs and risk being run to ground. Nay, they stand too close. The ground is good. We stay and fight!”

“We take the bridge,” Hestog ordered.

The fyrdmen responded with an increase in their efforts and began to force the desperate Vikings back from the midsection. Hestog pushed his men on valiantly. His breath came in quick bursts. The steel armour that he wore was already uncomfortable from the heat of battle, but he could see that victory was within their grasp. The Vikings were giving way. Behind the Saxons came the king with his army. They flowed over the ridge of the hill and began the descent towards the bridge. It was crucial that Hestog and his men reach the other side before the main Viking army was able to mount a more capable defence.

One last push will gain the bridge!

A savage foreign war cry rent the air and Hestog felt a sudden impact through the bodies of his men. He raised his head and looked over their shoulders. A giant stood before them now. A huge Norseman, his shoulders twisting as he swung a war axe through the front ranks of the Saxons. The weapon swept up into the air, leaving a crimson trail in the summer sunlight.

The Saxons shrank back before this new onslaught. Their spear points jabbed at the giant but they could not pierce his shining mail byrnie. If they found the flesh of his arms or legs the berserker seemed not to notice; the red mist was upon him. They could not form a shield-wall to resist his dreadful weapon because the wooden bridge was unsuitable, and the fallen lay too close around their feet; their courage began to wane.

Hestog let the men fall back past him. He dropped his fighting spear, readied his sword, and hefted his shield. As the last of the fyrdmen moved past behind him the warrior-theign shouted at them to hold fast on the bridge but they did not heed his words and headed for the safety of the ranks of the army that was approaching. Only a small group remained, led by the dependable Yffi.

The Viking had advanced after them with long, purposeful strides and stood now in the middle of the wooden bridge. He grasped his axe in two hands and raised it above his head in a challenge, letting out a deafening roar to intimidate his foes. There was no choice. The bridge had to be cleared of the enemy but the fyrdmen did not have the stomach for it; it was Hestog's time to prove himself.

"Yffi, your spears will do no good against this berserker's axe, find another way to pierce him while I hold his attention," Hestog called to the men behind him.

"How Lord?" Yffi was perplexed by his theign's command.

Hestog glanced at the river. The surface was tainted with a red stain that slowly drifted away with the current. The blood ran between the ill fitting planks of the bridge beneath his feet. The sight of the gaps between the wood suddenly gave him an idea.

“From below,” Hestog suggested.

Yffi glanced towards the river and scanned the willow trees that hung heavy over the banks, looking for some meaning in his theign's suggestion. Suddenly he thought he saw a way to carry out Hestog's command and set off down to the riverbank with another man following.

“Hold him, My Lord!” Yffi cried.

“And now for you,” the theign muttered as he turned his attention once more to the matter of the bridge.

Hestog felt the dryness in his mouth and the sweat on his palms. He did not fear pain or the violence of combat but he did not welcome death either. The berserker stood well over 8½ natural feet tall. His limbs were thick with muscle and sinew. His bright mail byrnies were already spattered with blood. The great Dane-axe cleaved the air like a toy in his hands. His face was dominated by a brush of thick coarse hair, a beard, a moustache, a collection of plaits streaming out from beneath his steel helmet, each clipped with gold at their end.

I cross the bridge that stands in-between and he is death waiting on the other side!

“I am Hestog. Royal Theign to King Harold of England and thy doom!” he bellowed out at the giant, hoping that his voice carried none of the trepidation that he felt in his heart.

“Come to thy death little man. I tally three Saxons to make one man such as I am and find my score a little short of the price of this bridge to your king,” the Viking hurled back. “Know that I am Stykar, banner carrier to Harald, King of Norway, and soon of England.”

With a display of confidence that he did not feel the Saxon warrior stepped forward. He knew that his shield would be of little use against the blade of that battle-axe directly, thrown at him by the awesome strength of the giant, but it would serve to hide the thrusts of his sword at least.

The Viking grunted when they stood face to face, looking down on the Saxon theign from his greater height. Without a word he raised the axe and brought it down at an oblique angle with terrible speed striking from the Saxon's left. Hestog resisted

the temptation to offer the shield to ward off the blow; he raised it but only in token. Rather he crouched and stepped back a pace. The great blade cut through the air where he had been but a moment before.

With a desperate speed of his own Hestog lunged forward, sending the glittering, sharp pointed blade of his sword forward into the belly of the giant. The berserker was too experienced however. He used the momentum of his own swing to both partly twist his body and to take him onto his back-foot; the sword missed its' mark by inches. The axe completed its' swing, hanging high in the air once more before descending at a sharper angle, this time coming from Hestog's right. The Viking stepped forward to bring himself closer to his opponent; to bring him into its' deadly arc.

Experience and instinct led Hestog into moving a step backwards and to his right, dropping his left shoulder and stooping. He heard the passing of the axe over his head. The edge of the blade bit into the timbres of the bridge, if he had not moved it would have cut through his body from the collarbone down.

Desperately, Hestog tried to counter-attack but he was off balance and the edge of his sword slid along the mail shirt where it protected the giant's ribs. With his left hand the berserker swatted at him, pushing him to the low lip of the bridge. Hestog fought to recover his balance. With a mighty effort the Viking pulled the axe free and let the velocity of the arc carry the weapon back towards Hestog. The weapon hit him on the top lip of his shield and then bounced up to collide with his helmet. If it had not been the back of the axe-head Hestog would have been mortally wounded, even so his vision blurred from the impact and dented metal protruded uncomfortably into the side of his head. He staggered to the right, further towards the edge of the bridge. The Viking reversed the swing of his weapon and changed to a shallower plane of attack. It came sweeping from the right again but much lower this time. With a great effort Hestog sprang both upwards and backwards to put some distance between himself and his enemy. The move worked, the axe blade hissed through empty air and when the Saxon landed he was able to take two steps further back and put some distance once more between his sword and his enemy.

Hestog glanced to the side of the bridge to get a reference point as to where they exactly stood. They were closer to the northern bank and the surface of the river seemed much nearer to the bottom of the bridge. If he had had the time to look more closely he might have seen two men in a small skiff making their way towards the

bridge, but valiant Hestog had very little time to concentrate upon anything other than the battle at hand.

He stepped back again, moving slowly with both his sword and shield raised ready to receive another blow. Styrkar grunted with frustration at this man's determination to avoid his axe. He knew that every moment that he held the bridge allowed his brother warriors to form up on the hill behind him, gave his king time to prepare to meet the enemy, but even the great strength of a champion could tire in this blistering heat. He rushed forward and jabbed the axe head at Hestog who blocked it with his shield. He performed the same attack again, not looking to injure his opponent but to catch him off guard. Hestog allowed himself to be forced back, hoping that Yffi had understood his last command. He left the shield in front of him as the Viking repeatedly hit it with the top of the axe head, the dull thuds passing through his arm as the heavy metal impacted on the solid linden wood.

Suddenly Styrkar changed tactics. He jabbed once more into the shield with the blunt head of the axe and then whipped the axe up and backwards so that it hung above his own left shoulder. Gripping the haft in two hands he brought it back down on the Saxon's right, hoping that he would be foolish enough to try and parry the blow with his sword. Hestog knew better, he raised his sword to offer a block but at the last moment stepped backwards and let the deadly axe pass through the space that he had occupied. Again he counter attacked, stepping forward and sending his sword towards the giant's thigh, hoping to pierce the unprotected muscle offered there.

Before the sharp steel could reach its' target the Viking's left hand balled into a fist that leapt forward and collided with Hestog's face. The world momentarily went dark to him. He was aware of the thudding impact, the crushing of his nasal bone, the eruption of blood, but the actual physical sensation seemed to take seconds to arrive after the act. Hestog staggered backwards again, hoping to recover some distance once more between them, but he was not prepared for the speed of the Viking. Allowing the axe to complete its' arc with his right hand gripping it firmly Styrkar stepped forward quickly, long strides that closed the gap that Hestog had tried to open up. Great muscles in the champion's shoulders and upper arm bunched up, arrested the momentum of the axe, and then swung it back in the Saxon's direction with a terrible force.

Everything that Hestog knew about fighting warned him against using the shield for his immediate defence, but his instincts also responded to the impending danger.

Even as he pushed the shield into position he knew that he had made a grave mistake, but there was nothing that he could do about it. Warm blood ran down his face, his eyes watered and blurred his vision, and there was thunder rolling through his skull. The great blade swung through the sunlight, almost horizontally. It hit the wooden shield like a thunderbolt just above the central boss, slicing through the grain of the wood and into flesh and muscle, biting through bone, destroying his left arm.

Hestog cried out involuntarily. His head went back and his helm fell down onto the bridge behind him. Blood flowed from the wound in the side of his head and more freely from his battered nose. The Viking grunted and pulled on the haft of his weapon. Hestog cried out again as the jerk moved him on failing legs. His enemy stared in morbid fascination. Slowly the Saxon fell to his knees, the sword, released from fingers that could no longer feel the warm leather that bound the grip, clattered onto the bridge.

The Viking grasped the axe with two hands and pulled with all of his considerable strength. With a wrench the bloodied blade came free. Hestog followed its' movement, falling onto his damaged arm and the remains of his shattered shield. He rolled over onto his back and then lay still, except for the rise and fall of his ribcage as his lungs attempted to draw in air. He could see the endless blue of the summer sky above him but could no longer feel the warmth of the sun. What seemed like only seconds ago he had been complaining to himself about how hot he had been on this beautiful day but now he could not remember what it was like to be warm. He felt as if his life's blood was leaving him, draining out of his body to stain the rough planks of the bridge. Drops of it would drip down to the river below and be carried out to the sea many miles away. Somehow he found that thought pleasing. He had always liked to be near the sea, now some part of him would be in it for eternity. Hestog blinked sweat from his eyes and saw a large dark shadow looming above him. Death was come and he was not afraid; not today.

Styrkar looked down at the fallen Saxon and then looked up the hill. The first several hundred men had approached the bridge but stopped to watch the ill-matched duel. They looked on now with solemn faces.

“Because you are a man of courage I will make your passing swift;” the Viking declared.

He lifted the axe once more into the air and brought it down with a heavy finality. Looking up he scanned the bank to find the face of another challenger. Hestog's fyrd

stood closest still to the scene of their lord's demise and stared with fixed expressions as if they were waiting for something significant to happen.

"Come on Saxons; come join your fellows here!" the Norseman taunted them.

He raised the axe once more to repeat his challenge but in doing so he failed see the sliver of shining steel that shot up through the timberwork of the bridge beneath the warrior's feet. The air was filled with a scream of agony from the giant as the spearhead cut through the unprotected muscles of his lower thigh and pierced through the leg to glisten in the bright light on the other side.

Beneath the bridge Yffi screamed at the Viking above. He stood in a little fishing skiff and it rocked precariously in response to his lunge upwards. He held onto the spear with both hands and pulled down viciously. His companion desperately tried to stop the little boat from capsizing at the violent movement.

"For Hestog!" Yffi screamed. Warm arterial blood began to trickle down the shaft of the spear and onto his hands.

With an echoing shout the theign's fyrdmen charged forward. Styrkar the Viking, champion of King Hardrada, collapsed to his right knee, his left leg still transfixed by the spear, trapped in the vice of his powerful muscles that refused to let it go. With Yffi pulling on the other end Styrkar was effectively pinned to the bridge. He raised his head and tried also to raise the mighty axe but his strength had deserted him as his life's blood pumped from the wound. The fyrdmen fell on him with little fear, drawing close enough to pierce him with their spears, thrusting with all their strength to sunder the steel links of the giant's byrnie and the weave of his padded jacket. Again and again in payment for the many lives that he had so easily taken they stabbed at the Norseman. When a spear broke a langseax was used until the once great champion of Norway was hacked into a ruin of butchered flesh. The bloody bridge of the dead now belonged to the Saxons.

"We should retreat," Tostig urged, "there are far more of them than our power can hope to match."

The Saxon army now began to swarm over the bridge. When they reached the southern shore they started to fan out and take up a defensive position to resist any further attempts by the Vikings to stop their crossing. They were so numerous that their column stretched back up over the hill and beyond.

“We cannot,” Harald Hardrada retorted. “We cannot give ground to an enemy so determined; they will hunt us down like dogs. Still, we almost match them for numbers, and I have sent to Riccall for the reserve to join the fray. No, we will stand.”

“Stand? Harold is no fool, he has fought many battles. His men are well armed and armoured—“

“Aye, but they lack the fighting spirit of the Norseman. We stand. Form a shield-wall. Form a shield-wall I say!”

The Vikings had been mustering all the while Styrkar had fought to delay the Saxon's crossing the bridge, but it was not easy to marshal several thousand men into position at a moments' notice. Many of them had wandered some distance from their original resting point and were even now running back in response to the alarm sounded by the Viking war-horns. Their captains responded to the king's command and hastened their warriors into a defensive formation with loud curses for those who tarried.

Hardrada marched over to his horse. He had no intention of fighting from the beast but wanted to use it to get a good look at the Saxon forces that he would be facing. His first impression had agreed with Tostig's assessment; that this was not a hastily raised fyrd commanded by the earls Edwin and Morcar, there was too much steel in their armour to allow for that. Then there was the number to consider, and once again Tostig appeared to be right. They had some six thousand warriors and the Saxons appeared to have many more than that. Numbers alone did not confer an advantage, however, he needed to know for sure who was leading this impressive power. It was the quality of the war-chief that would make the real difference. Taking the reins in one great hand he placed his leather shoe in the stirrup and swung up into the saddle. For some reason the horse began to turn as the giant rose onto its' back. It misplaced a foot and could not recover; man and beast crashed to the earth. The king rolled away from the fallen horse with surprising agility and started to climb back to his feet even as his companions rushed forward to help.

“That was no omen with which to expect to begin a battle,” King Harald muttered involuntarily.

Tostig shot Hardrada a look of concern and then glanced back at his own retainer who was advancing with his horse. Tostig shook his head and motioned both man and beast away. He could not help but notice that many of the warriors around them had also seen their king tumbled to the earth by the horse and then heard his comment on

the incident. Their minds thrived on superstition. They believed that their pagan gods did indeed decide who would stand and who would fall in a battle. They looked concerned that their king had already been felled by a dumb animal.

For his part Harald Hardrada set about encouraging his captains to form a robust defence, acting as if nothing untoward had happened at all. A retainer took the bemused horse away thinking that it would be better if it were not there to remind everyone of what fate might have decreed for their mighty chief.