

WHAT COULD HAROLD GODWINSON HAVE DONE DIFFERENTLY?



Being the loser in battle is never great – so could Harold Godwinson have done anything differently? We've made an assessment of the key decisions he made in the build up to and during the Battle of Hastings in 1066. Use this to help draw your own conclusions.

Decision	Description	For	Against	Assessment
1	Harold took the crown of England on the death of Edward the Confessor on 5th January 1066.	<p>He had been named as Edward's heir and he was his brother-in-law.</p> <p>He was the most powerful noble in England at the time therefore the best hope for a quick succession.</p> <p>He was the head of the royal army and was able to successfully command forces.</p>	<p>He was not of royal blood.</p> <p>By taking the throne he put himself in a position to be directly challenged by the other contenders, Harald Hardrada and William, duke of Normandy.</p>	<p>Did Harold make the right decision?</p> <p>If he hadn't taken the throne, the crown may have passed to Edward's nearest relation, Edgar Aethling, who was in his early teens and lacking in experience.</p>
2	When he heard of Harald Hardrada's invasion, Harold moved north to challenge him immediately.	<p>Harold needed to be decisive.</p> <p>His northern armies had not succeeded in stopping Hardrada and his forces moving inland.</p>	<p>By moving north, Harold left the south coast of England unprotected and open to invasion from the south.</p>	<p>By all accounts this was the correct decision – by acting swiftly Harold caught Hardrada and his forces by surprise, allowing his army to defeat them and achieve a great victory at the Battle of Stamford Bridge.</p>
3	When Harold heard that William had landed in England he rushed south to meet him.	<p>Having landed unopposed in England, William had already built a timber and earthwork castle at Pevensey and then moved his forces to Hastings.</p> <p>Harold couldn't let this invasion continue.</p>	<p>Harold and his men were tired from the Battle of Stamford Bridge. They then had to march over 190 miles south in 5 days.</p> <p>Harold's haste meant he had to go into battle with a shortage of archers as bowmen travelled on foot and they'd not yet arrived.</p>	<p>If Harold had waited longer he could have amassed a larger army made up of more rested and experienced men. However, the element of surprise had worked for him at Stamford Bridge.</p>
4	Harold used different military tactics to William at the Battle of Hastings.	<p>Harold secured the better position on the battlefield, arranging his forces along the ridge. His housecarls were the finest infantry in Europe and the Normans had to climb the slope to fight them.</p> <p>Harold employed a 'shield wall' formation which was thought to be impenetrable by cavalry (as long as it held together!).</p>	<p>William had 2,000-3,000 knights. This gave his forces greater visibility and manoeuvrability on the battlefield (not possible in a 'shield wall' formation).</p> <p>The use of horses also allowed William to communicate with his forces more quickly and easily. (Horses were vulnerable to attack though and it's said William had 3 horses killed beneath him.)</p>	<p>There were a number of points during the battle when being on horseback gave William the advantage – when he needed to show his face to rally his troops, for communicating changes in battle strategy and leading the charge.</p> <p>The battle was not easily decided. It lasted for 9 hours, from dawn until dusk, indicating how challenging it was for both sides.</p>

Decision	Conclusion
1	
2	
3	
4	



Harold Godwinson was killed at the Battle of Hastings on 14th October 1066.

HINT

Don't forget to consider Harold's decisions alongside other things that were beyond his control.