

Tour of Medieval England – July 2007

The Escape

It has been an exceedingly exhausting year for me; an escape away from work, from Hong Kong could not be more tempting. Though the desire to be somewhere foreign was strong, I did very little to realize the plan to travel. However, God has always been very kind to me for it appeared to be a wonderful opportunity when Father Ha, the professor of the MA class talked about this very interesting tour of Medieval Germany, Belgium, France and England. The itinerary was so inviting, if I were to join, this would be my very first group study tour traveling overseas. Even better, this would be *a study tour, not those of pleasure seeking ones*. How complacent it would be for a *die-hard workaholic working woman*. Yet it still took me longer than necessary to make a decision on whether to join the tour. Of course, the requirement of “3000 words” essay did mean a challenge to me.

The Medieval tour had two parts; the first part in Europe and second part in England. I had enough time only to join one part. Choosing either one would mean missing the other. Finally, I chose England. It was a comfort to me at that time thinking I could skip Europe because of my prior visits to the place. Needless to say, I was proved wrong and was left with a sense of regret.

Very well, decision was made and I began my preparation for the *escape*. By preparation, I confess I mean arranging my duties to be taken care of by my colleagues and more important, arrangement for my dog Elvis. Little was done to prepare for the study. Feeling obliged, I attended the several preparation seminars for the study tour. I wasn't an attentive student, but I was happy with the several meetings; the seminars increased my interest in the part of England I was to visit. We were also recommended to read *Canterbury Tales* by Chaucer and if possible, also the *Divine Comedy* by Dante. *Alas, too little time, too hard to read.*

I stayed up late July 13 until 11:40 pm just to ensure that I could check-in online and guaranteed an aisle seat. This would secure me arriving in England in reasonably good spirit. On July 14, as much as I could prepare, I departed for England. With me were four other tour group members. We made each other acquaintance very soon, and proceeded to find our way from London Heathrow to Canterbury where we would join the larger group that arrived from Europe. I was more than happy to be an agreeable follower. The only challenge I had was to decide on what to get for my breakfast at the train station to Canterbury, the price of the food was dear. Quite costly indeed, therefore my choice had to be value for money; I bought a piece of shortbread and a cup of tea. The shortbread was a good buy, it was very delicious. Very much delighted with it, I generously offered everyone of my company to try. Perhaps too cruel to refuse, each of them had a taste of the very sweet shortbread.

Canterbury Cathedral

After about one and half hour ride on the train, we arrived at the Canterbury Station. A small station in traditional architecture, smaller than I imagined; but its light yellowish color is pleasing under the clear blue sky. Our group was warmly greeted by Father Ha at the station and my friend Teresa was also near the exit gate to welcome us. Father Ha and the Europe tour group had just arrived from Dover by coach. With the help of our coach driver David, five of us quickly had our baggage loaded to the coach trunk and we were able to find our seat in no time. My friend Pauline and I were lucky enough to sit in the second row in the front, a very advantageous seat indeed, for I always enjoy the good prospect from the wind screen of a coach.

On our way to the hotel, Father Ha quickly reminded the new comers the nature of the tour by calling upon Karen, a student of the MA class to come to the front seat to give an overview of Canterbury through the microphone. This arrangement really helped and Karen did a very good job.

We stayed at the nice little Swallow Chaucer hotel; the Cathedral, the Abbey and the touristy town center are all situated within easy walking distance. No different from pilgrims of all ages, we visited the Canterbury Cathedral that very afternoon. This renowned Cathedral has been named the “mecca” for tourists. It is the Mother Church of the Anglican Communion and seat of the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Cathedral has a fine website <http://www.canterbury-cathedral.org/>, I was particularly attracted to the three words on the main page banner: *Worship-Pilgrimage-Living History*.

The history of the Cathedral dated back to 6th Century. Damaged and evolved through the centuries, it is most fortunate that it is gracefully preserved. The Cathedral is very impressive, its height, its fine vaulted arches, the nave, the magnificent dome, the chapels, the chapter house, the altar, the stained glass, etc. convey a Christian heritage *once* strongly affected England. Perhaps in a more subtle way or depends upon one’s interest, one could explore far beyond Christianity and Gothic architecture that this magnificent building could possibly entails. Not much of a surprise, you might come across someone in the Cathedral that you knew and perhaps duly respected.

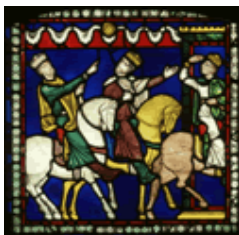


It is true that the Canterbury Cathedral is a *living history*, a *place for worship and pilgrimage*. In this England trip, we then visited a few more cathedrals and churches; most are nicely located up on a knoll or a little bit uphill so that everyone could see it from a distance. In the old days, the Christians probably find it comforting to be living near to the precinct of the Cathedral or local church.

Upon returning from my trip, I read several Chinese books on western architecture, the technical descriptions in the book is still rather difficult but the readings gave me much pleasure in appreciating (as a novice) the architectural beauty of English Gothic church. And of course, the word “Gothic” once sounds so very “noble” to me was found to mean “barbarian”. Quite disappointed, yet I blushed for my ignorance.

I enjoyed very much the stained glass windows of Gothic churches; they are integral part of a typical Gothic church but they are also artistic presentation in themselves. The following description was also found on the Canterbury Cathedral website, I was quite enlightened by the first word—**Light** and the description.

Why stained glass?



Light, as the first act of God’s creation, was seen as the purest manifestation of God’s presence, and stained glass windows come to life only when illuminated by light. To medieval theologians, the vibrant holy images depicted in the windows were therefore brought to life by God’s presence.

Few people were able to read or write in the Middle Ages. Stained glass windows told the stories of the Bible and of the Saints in pictures, and guides, perhaps the monks themselves, would explain their content to the pilgrims. The Latin inscriptions in many panels acted as aides memoires to those literate guides.



Battle of Hastings & 1066

Perhaps not fair upon my own sex, it has been my presumption that females are not particularly interested in Battles or Battlefields. However, my follow up readings after the trip indicates to me that the Middle Ages or Medieval periods were not that peaceful after all. The study of battles and their significance could not possibly be avoided if one were to have a good grasp of the aristocracy of Medieval England. Battle of Hastings was just amongst the one, but it's certainly well remembered for its debatable significance.

In an interesting book titled *Daily Life Chaucer's England* (Singman & McLean 1995), the battle of Hastings was briefly described as followed:

“In 1066, King Edward the Confessor died, and there was a dispute over the English crown between an English lord, Harold Godwinson, and William, Duke of Normandy. William invaded England, and Harold was defeated and killed at the Battle of Hastings. William became king, and the native English aristocracy was largely supplanted by French-speaking Normans. Under the Norman kings, England began to expand its authority. In 1166 Norman lords under Henry II invaded and conquered Ireland ...”.

I was quite satisfied at first with this short and easy paragraph, but I soon realized the Battle of Hastings means a lot more to many English speaking people. Jim Bradbury published a book in 1998 under the title *The Battle of Hastings*. It's a book grew out of his MA study. This book has a total of 278 pages, with good illustrations of historical sites and scenes depicted from the famous Bayeux Tapestry.

Searching on the web as part of a serious research is not recommended, but perhaps it is tolerable for a small study trip report. I tried the word string of “battle of Hastings” on Google, and got a hit of 358,000 entries. Average hardworking student view the sites listed on first few result screens; deviate from the average, I viewed only those listed on the first page.

The Battle Of Hastings 1066



Welcome to the Battle of Hastings 1066

This site will attempt to tell the story of the British Isles from the first Roman Invasion to the fateful culmination known as the Battle of Hastings which was fought between King Harold II of England and Duke William of Normandy

ON THE

The 14th October 1066

A date that changed the course of British history

Source: <http://www.battle1066.com/>

On this first website I visited, the sentiment of the web creator is strong. I believe the battle is a painful memory though the historic event warrants more understanding on my part. It has this description on the first page:

“This is the story of the Battle of Hastings that was fought on the 14th October 1066. An event so significant, it completely changed the course of English history. To speak of this battle without recourse to the events that came before, would be an injustice to the people of this island who have fought and died for her. What makes this event so important to the English is the immutable fact that it was the last time any foreign power was to conquer her. Without doubt, a lesson that became indelibly etched into this island race - for ever. This must surely be the one conflict that every British student and adult alike can recount - hopefully, along with the naming of the two main protagonists.”

The second site I visited is a non-profit .org site.



The Battle of Hastings - 1066

[The Battle of Hastings -1066](#)

[Battle of Hastings Timeline](#)

[Biographies of the Battle of Hastings Leaders](#)

[Events preceding the Battle of Hastings](#)

[Preparation for the Battle of Hastings](#)

[Battle of Hastings 1066 Sitemap](#)

The Battle of Hastings - 1066

The events surrounding the Battle of Hastings and the actual battle itself are well documented - but there are many misconceptions about the events! What claim did Duke William of Normandy have on the throne of England? Why did King Harold lose the Battle of Hastings? Was he a bad leader? Did he just have some bad luck? Was he betrayed? And where did the Vikings fit into the story of the Battle of Hastings? All of

Source: <http://www.battle-of-hastings-1066.org.uk/> In the chapter *Review of the Battle of Hastings*, it contains the following; regretful and miserable:

It is indeed evident that the loss of the battle by the English was owing to the wound which Harold received in the afternoon, and which must have incapacitated him from effective command.

When we remember that he had himself just won the battle of Stamford Bridge over Harald Hardrada by the manoeuvre of a feigned flight, it is impossible to suppose that he could be deceived by the same stratagem on the part of the Normans at Hastings.

But his men, when deprived of his control, would very naturally be led by their inconsiderate ardor into the pursuit that proved so fatal to them.

All the narratives of the battle, however much they vary as to the precise time and manner of Harold's fall, eulogize the generalship and the personal prowess which he displayed until the fatal arrow struck him.

The skill with which he had posted his army was proved both by the slaughter which it cost the Normans to force the position, and also by the desperate rally which some of the Saxons made after the battle in the forest in the rear, in which they cut off a large number of the pursuing Normans. This circumstance is particularly mentioned by William of Poitiers, the Conqueror's own chaplain.

Indeed, if Harold or either of his brothers had survived, the remains of the English army might have formed again in the wood, and could at least have effected an orderly retreat and prolonged the war. But both Gurth and Leofwine, and all the bravest thanes of Southern England, lay dead on Senlac, around their fallen King and the fallen standard of their country.

The exact number that perished on the Saxons' side is unknown; but we read that, on the side of the victors, out of sixty thousand men who had been engaged, no less than a fourth perished; so well had the English billmen "plied the ghastly blow," and so sternly had the Saxon battle-axe cloven Norman's casque (a visorless headpiece) and mail.

The old historian Daniel justly as well as forcibly remarks: "Thus was tried, by the great assize of God's judgment in battle, the right of power between the English and Norman nations; a battle the most memorable of all others, and, however miserably lost, yet most nobly fought on the part of England."

On Christmas Day in the same year William the Conqueror was crowned, at London, King of England."

These are but two descriptions of the Battle of Hastings by the English (one from a .com site and the other .org), both with sense of painfulness and regretfulness. Perhaps the bewildered rivalries between the English and French today are laid long time ago.

Even the famous *Bayeux Tapestry* stimulated patriotic move to have a replica in England.

BRITAIN'S
BAYEUX TAPESTRY
at the Museum of Reading

Here you can read the tale told by the Bayeux Tapestry -
The story of William the Conqueror and Harold, Earl of Wessex, the men who led the Norman and Saxon armies in 1066. William's defeat of Harold at the Battle of Hastings ensured the success of the Norman invasion of England...

The Victorian replica of the Tapestry is housed in its own gallery at the Museum of Reading, where it can be viewed for FREE during the Museum opening hours

[The Tapestry - Scene by Scene](#)
[Go straight to Scene One](#)
[History of the Tapestry](#)
[People in the Tapestry](#)
[What happened after Hastings?](#)
[Activities and Learning Resources](#)

Reading
BOROUGH COUNCIL

READING
MUSEUM
SERVICE

Source: <http://www.bayeuxtapestry.org.uk/Index.htm>

- The Original Bayeux Tapestry -

The Bayeux Tapestry is preserved and displayed in Bayeux, in Normandy, France. Nothing is known for certain about the tapestry's origins. The first written record of the Bayeux

Tapestry is in 1476 when it was recorded in the cathedral treasury at Bayeux as "a very long and narrow hanging on which are embroidered figures and inscriptions comprising a representation of the conquest of England".

The Bayeux Tapestry was probably commissioned in the 1070s by Bishop Odo of Bayeux, half-brother of William the Conqueror. It is over 70 metres long and although it is called a tapestry it is in fact an embroidery, stitched not woven in woollen yarns on linen. Some historians argue that it was embroidered in Kent, England. The original tapestry is on display at Bayeux in Normandy, France.

**- The Victorian Replica -
"England should have a copy of its own"**

It was the idea of Elizabeth Wardle to make the replica Bayeux Tapestry, now on display in the Museum of Reading. She was a skilled embroiderer and a member of the Leek Embroidery Society in Staffordshire. Her husband, Thomas Wardle was a leading silk industrialist. Elizabeth Wardle researched the Bayeux Tapestry by visiting Bayeux in 1885. The Society also based the replica on hand-coloured photographs of the tapestry held by the South Kensington Museum, now called the Victoria & Albert Museum, London. The aim of the project was to make a full-sized and accurate replica of the Bayeux Tapestry "so that England should have a copy of its own".

Our group visited Hastings to see the Battle Abbey and the battlefield. It was said that William the Conqueror later founded 'Battle' Abbey to commemorate the event and on the site of its high altar, one can stand on the very spot where Harold fell. To me, the whole idea of the commemorative abbey was rather sarcastic but probably it rendered the invader less repulsive! Notwithstanding this piece of sad history, the site was very well designed; visitors could easily follow the events of the fierce battle through the audio-cassette guiding device.

Ightham Mote



Source: [on the web](#)

Quite a happy side trip added to our itinerary. Nestling in a sunken valley and dating from 1320, Ightham Mote, this manor house has features spanning many centuries. Words might not be the best way to describe the beauty of this happily situated manor

house. As a BBC fans, I quite enjoyed the pictures of Ightham Mote on http://www.bbc.co.uk/kent/content/image_galleries/gallery_of_week_ightham_mote_gallery.shtml

I would love to have the chance someday to spend a day or two in an English manor house and enjoy the beautiful scenery of the countryside. It is always fascinating to walk in the country and to appreciate the beauty of nature at different times of the day.

Very well, I was lucky enough to experience some sort of wilderness during the trip. Towards the end of the journey, we stayed at a hotel called Village Resort; it's located far from the town. On its east side, there is a small batch of untamed 'grassland' with lots of yellow wildflowers. I was so tempted to it that I woke up early for the two consecutive mornings when I was there. I was quite pleased with my morning ventures and much delighted to see many white tail rabbits hopped away when I approached them. When I finally stopped and set quietly on a rock, I knew there were numerous pairs of anxious little eyes spied on this stranger. I looked up and saw the row of tall and slender trees in the far distance swing happily in the morning breeze. It was nature in harmony. I smiled, could not be more contented.

York in a glance

We visited York in a rush; we were greeted by two professors from the University who briefly introduced to us about the University and York. I did not take any notes, but I vaguely remembered he mentioned about identity crisis of English people; a topic which my interest was yet to develop. We followed the professor and had a quick tour of the city. Without much memory of the place, I would have good justification to come again. If there's anything I would not miss at all in York, it is the York pudding we had at the last supper of the trip in a pub. This not quite pleasing pudding led me to wish, rather than to believe York pudding should be much better.

Durham Cathedral

An essay of the journey could not be completed without mentioning our visit to Durham Cathedral. The psychology of each individual in light of the tight schedule was perhaps a good reference to one's character. I joined Father Ha and Father Tam to take the elevator to the ground level of the commercial center, and Durham Cathedral was in sight. I hesitated, wondering if there's enough time to make the return walk to the coach in 15 minutes and hurry our way to Manchester to catch the flight back to Hong Kong. In the end, it was the two Fathers visited the Cathedral, the two that held firm believe on completing the trip. With much regret, I wish I had followed Fathers' footsteps on that day ...

The Medieval people

I am not a student of the MA class, but the trip is a rewarding learning experience; I am quite delighted to find myself a renewed interest in medieval England. As a novice, I would not trouble myself in difficult readings. The book *Daily Life in Chaucer's England* is helpful to understand the social background; it is easy to read with lots of illustrations.

In chapter 2, *Chaucer's World*, it has a good description of the society at that time, in brief: "*Medieval political theory divided society by function into three "estates." The first estate was the clergy, who were responsible for people's spiritual well-being. The second estate was the aristocracy, who were supposed to defend the nation through their military might. The third estate was the commons, whose role was to labor and produce the country's wealth.*" Did our paths cross with theirs through time in our trip?

It is always fascinating how the knowledge of the past enlightened one to grasp the present and to have a glimpse of the time to come. I can hardly boast to myself what I have got out of this trip, but I see enrichment or placing of a few more pieces in the right place for my 4D puzzle in life.

I ended my essay hastily here, still much food for thought from the trip.

Cheers.

Maria

Books or DVDs I read after the trip:

Given-Wilson, Chris, ed., *An illustrated History of Late Medieval England*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996).

Ishiguro, Kazuo. *The Remains of the Day*, (New York: Alfred A. Knoff, 1993).

Singman, Jeffrey L. and Will McLean. eds., *Daily Life in Chaucer's England*, (London: Greenwood, 1995).

Britnell, Richard, ed., *Daily Life in the Late Middle Ages*, (Phoenix Mill: Sutton Publishing, 1998).

Bradbury, Jim, *The Battle of Hastings*, (Phoenix Mill: Sutton Publishing, 1998).

Jane Austen's work (BBC productions.) – works written in late 18th Century, many scenes about manor houses, estates of aristocrats, abbeys, women in society, servants, clergymen, the church, etc.

Charles Dicken's *A tale of two cities*. (BBC productions)

