

Hastings, England: Home to English History

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

Some places are forever associated with certain events in their past and no more can that be said than for Hastings, England.

Lying on the southern coast of England opposite France, its location immediately explains why Hastings has been a target for invasions. England has a veritable record on this front, most recently having successfully fought off such attempts during the Second World War. Though there have been other invasions since Hastings, the infamous Battle of Hastings, in 1066, was the last time that an invading foreign army took control of the country.

William of Normandy crossed the English Channel from France to claim the English throne, after Edward the Confessor, who had been the King of England, apparently designated William as his successor on his deathbed. William claimed that Harold Godwinson had sworn an oath of allegiance to him and his right to the throne. It wasn't long before Harold went back on that oath and took the throne as his own. William wasn't prepared to let that happen and headed, with his army, to England. The resulting battle led to Harold being killed, reportedly with an arrow to the eye, and William taking the throne.

Today, there's actually a place called Battle, a little village a few miles outside of Hastings itself that's home to Battle Abbey, where you can learn all about the events that took place on that fateful day nearly 1,000 years ago. An exhibition, including film and interactive displays, explains more about it, and there's even an audio guide to enjoy as you tour the battlefield itself. Perhaps suitably enough, visit it today and it seems very desolate. You can't just walk on to the battlefield, as the whole thing is carefully managed, but it is easy to find, with regular bus services from Hastings.

You can learn more about life under siege at Hastings Castle, which is home to the 1066 Story, a commercial attraction. It was the country's first Norman castle, built by the invaders who arrived after the battle. However, the attraction doesn't just focus on the battle, taking you through the town's history over the following centuries.

As you'd expect, the castle is located on the clifftops, overlooking Hastings below, and modern ingenuity provided a means of travel to get up there. Hastings is home to two funicular railways, which are more usually found in mountainous areas. We saw plenty when we were in

Switzerland, and the railway running up to the Peak in Hong Kong is another example. The one that runs up to Hastings Castle is known as the West Hill Lift, while another is on the other side of the town, known as the East Hill Lift. That runs up to another attraction, the Smugglers Adventure. Both railways were built in the late 19th and early 20th century. The West Hill Lift has perhaps the easier time, going up a 33% grade, while on the East Hill, you experience a 78% gradient, the steepest in the country. Having been up this thing, it does feel as if you're almost going up vertically during the couple of minutes ride to the top.

When you reach the top, you're treated with some spectacular views back over the modern day town of Hastings, and the English Channel beyond. This town has had a long association with the sea, and even today, you can still see fishing boats operating out of the harbour. Something else that it's had a long association with is smuggling, and that's the focus of the town's Smugglers Adventure attraction.

We found Smugglers Adventure to be a fascinating trip back in time, and we were surprised to learn that smuggling didn't just extend to things like wine, beer, and spirits, but it also included foodstuffs. Perhaps some of the best entertainment we had was trying to guess how much certain products would be worth on the open market, and how people hid the things they were smuggling. They were pretty inventive, I can tell you!

The whole attraction is set in caves that were originally used for smuggling, with interactive displays, exhibits, and some films to narrate the thing. Be warned though, that it can be scary for kids. We visited with friends, and their three-year-old quickly took fright, almost as soon as we entered the caves, and decided he didn't want anymore to do with it. This was a great shame, as almost immediately afterward things did lighten up.

A quick trip back down on the East Hill Lift and you're in the center of Hastings, and this is a center well worth visiting. Unlike many town centers today in England, where you find the same national chain names, this area is home to a variety of galleries, craft places, and unique shops, with restaurants scattered throughout. We found a beautiful fish restaurant and enjoyed a superb lunch there. A lot of the architecture here dates back 100 years plus and we were fascinated to find shops located in what presumably once used to be stores for the area's fishermen.

Although a seaside resort, Hastings is unusual, as the beach isn't necessarily the top draw for visitors. The reason for that is its shingle,

rather than traditional sand, which doesn't make lying around on it particularly comfortable, I can tell you!

It's certainly home to a range of attractions, and we really enjoyed our day out here, exploring the role Hastings has played in English history over the past few hundred years.

About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)

Article last updated: 01-13-2011

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