

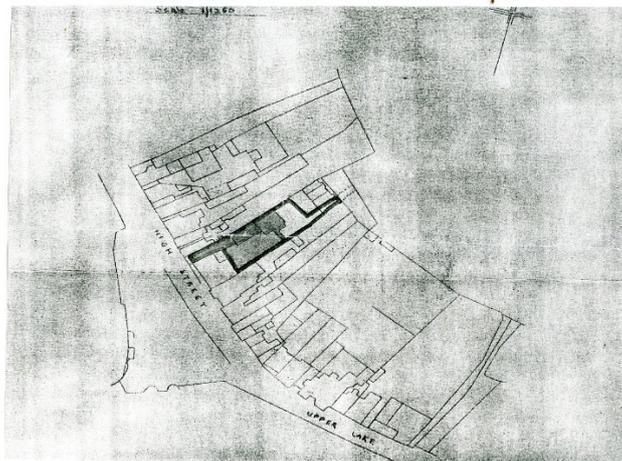
A SHORT HISTORY OF BATTLE

The town of Battle marks the world renowned site of the Battle of Hastings in 1066, which gave the town its name.

The town began with the erection of the Abbey by the Norman victors perhaps as a penance for the bloodshed; and to mark where, in their opinion, King Harold was killed. The town grew up in the late eleventh century to provide the trades required for the building work: there were over a hundred houses by 1105 and their sites can still be traced. Henry I encouraged the town with grants of licenses for fairs and markets, the last of which survived until 1967 to be replaced by a new library and housing by the North Trade Road roundabout. St Mary's Church was built in the early twelfth century for the needs of the local population, a function it still serves. Development of the town, north and south, was along one of the principal High Weald ridges. The 2017 Battle Tapestry on display in St Mary's Church Battle depicts in historically accurate fashion the creation of the Abbey and the town. Senlac Hill and the area south of the town are protected by English Heritage as a historic battlefield and designated as an Archaeological Sensitive Area. The early history of Battle is evidenced in the medieval Battle Abbey Chronicle and in the substantial research work in the late twentieth century of Eleanor Searle.

By 1367 the number of houses in Battle had doubled to 211, with the town eluding the worst long term effects of the Black Death. The Abbey gatehouse was fortified in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries as armed incursions from France became more frequent.

Until the dissolution of the monasteries in 1534 -38 the Abbey was a royal "peculiar" enjoying substantial local autonomy from the Crown to the exclusion of the diocese of Chichester. It is thought that arising from this, the pattern of land ownership changed little.



Long narrow medieval plots in Battle

As a result, unusually, the structure in the centre of Battle of the medieval burgages with accompanying strip plots, is largely intact. So, many of the narrow building plots in the High Street are still recognisably medieval in dimension and many shop fronts can still be paced in perches. The town's medieval core – High Street, Upper and Lower Lake and Mount Street - has been a designated conservation area since 1970, along with large areas of countryside to the south. In the

conservation area virtually all the buildings are listed, and date from the eighteenth century or earlier: 23 predate 1500; 9 are from the sixteenth century; 24 from the seventeenth; and 28 from the eighteenth century. In all in 2009 there were 118 listed buildings in Battle town centre.

The landed families owning the Abbey after the dissolution had minimal requirements from the local community and so the town shrank in size to around 120-30 houses at which it stabilised until the eighteenth century. During this period of three centuries (sixteenth to eighteenth) , leather working, legal services, iron-making, clock-making , tanning and gunpowder manufacture became local trades at various times, reasonably prosperously. There was little disruption from the English Civil War. Eighteenth century facades were often placed on the front of older buildings but as David and Barbara Martin's 2016 book "Building of Battle Town" shows, the town centre retains its antique character. The Almonry and Pilgrims' Rest, at opposite ends of the High Street, illustrate the timber construction usually hidden under Battle's Georgian facades. Brewing was a late nineteenth/early twentieth century phase, and in the twentieth century, Newbery's was a significant manufacturer of jam and chutney.

In the nineteenth century Battle- then very rural and somewhat isolated by the awful Sussex roads- acquired a gas works (1838), union workhouse (1840) , railway (1852), reservoir(1854) , police station and magistrates court (1861) and new cemetery (1862). The Cresy Report of 1850, following an investigation into the poor sanitary conditions in Battle, resulted in many improvements to public health in the town, sustained by a Sanitary Board.

In the twentieth century a turning point was the purchase of Battle Abbey by English Heritage in 1975, ushering in an era for the town of organised tourism, of which heritage understanding is a key part, promoted by Battle Town Council, Battle Abbey, Battle Museum of Local History and Battle and District Historical Society. An HLF-funded heritage trail is being established and a stainless steel sculpture at the north end of the town commemorates in modern style the events of 1066. There have been introductions of modern housing near to Battle centre- restraint has been exercised bearing in mind the economic value of the town's heritage appearance.

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Battle Museum of Local History

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For more on Battle's history, visit www.battlehistory.btck.co.uk and look through the 100+ and varied Collectanea articles on local history by the Battle and District Historical Society.