

Where did the monks of Marmoutier first try to build Battle Abbey?



Google Earth image of Battle Abbey Park

There has been considerable discussion in recent years about the location of the Battle of Hastings and the site of Battle abbey, which William the Conqueror insisted should be built on the site where Harold Godwinson fell.

The doubts have mainly arisen because of the lack of any conclusive archaeological finds on the designated battle site. This is explained as being due to the nature of the acidic soils on the site which rapidly dissolve metallic and organic objects, the fact that the site has been agriculturally managed for over 900 years, and that the construction of the abbey itself would have involved considerable earth moving, due to its rather bizarre siting on the top of a dry narrow sandstone ridge, with the need to construct ranges of cellars, crypts and earth platforms to make a reasonably large flat base for the monastery buildings and church.

Acknowledgment also needs to be made of the fact that in and after 1066 the post-battle site would have been stripped of any usable, protective or ornamental objects whether military or personal – such items, even small pieces of metal, would have been relatively valuable.

One quarry used by the monks for much of building stone was east of the abbey precinct and behind the messuages on the west side of Lower Lake and Upper Lake. So here an

extensive area of the designated battlefield (the eastern end) would also have been completely disrupted.

The extensive destruction of the abbey church and cloisters etc. post-dissolution and the re-building work after dissolution, and even after that further demolition of the large abbey kitchen and further buildings, up until the 18th century, will have caused further loss of any archaeological material of earlier date.

Archaeological studies on the abbey, but not the battlefield, site were carried out in 1929-34 led by Sir Harold Brakspear¹ and in 1978-80 by a team led by J N Hare^{2,3}. These have been fully reported. Smaller watching excavations have been made in more recent years, not just of the abbey and its environs, but also when the opportunity presented of sites on or just off the High Street of Battle and behind the Pilgrims Rest. BBC's Time Team did some very limited work on the battlefield itself, but did not dig very deeply. No material of obvious military use or related to the original battle has been retrieved. The only object which may have been used in the battle was an axe head found at nearby Marley Lane, at the very eastern end of what would have been the battle line, which is preserved in Battle Museum of Local History⁴. It has been postulated that significant findings might only be made at a very deep level, or at the bottom of the hill where anaerobic wet conditions may have persisted for centuries.

Estimates of the position of the battle have been attempted by a number of authors, and probably many others, based on various descriptors in the early accounts of the events of 1066. Roy Porter⁵ of English Heritage has published a very strong analysis defending the position of the designated battlefield and the abbey, based on re-analysis of the literature including the near contemporary works.

The Chronicle of Battle Abbey (CBA)^{6,7} records that the monks chose a different initial position, from that of the present abbey, to start building in 1070. This position has been described thus in the CBA (extracts from both Lower's and Searle's translations are given):

These personages having viewed the scene of the battle, judged it an unsuitable site for so noble a building, but thought a lower place on the western side of the hill more eligible; and there, not to seem remiss in their undertaking, they built some little dwellings. (Lower's translation)

They studied the battlefield and decided that it seemed hardly suitable for so outstanding a building. They therefore chose a place fit for settling, a site located not far off, but somewhat lower down, towards the western slope of the ridge. There lest they seemed to be doing nothing they built themselves some little huts. (Searle's translation)

The monks huts were at first located at a place which the Chronicle records as 'Herste' There are only two mentions of 'Herste' in the Chronicle of Battle Abbey and the word

'herste' refers to a very common local geographic feature in old English. The monks appear to have made very little progress at first living in their 'rude' huts on their 'wrong' site. As Graham⁸ has pointed out they were sent to oversee the building work ('*qui operi preessen*', p69 CBA, Serle⁷ as previously emphasised in p191, Graham⁸), and would not be expected to build a great church without lay help. de Lasteyrie⁹ has clearly stated '*there were a fair number of monks practising architecture.....many bishops and abbots were sufficiently instructed to supervise the skilled craftsmen whom they engaged, but the work was executed by laymen.*' There were only five monks (one designated to be the future abbot) and there was a huge amount to organise.

William I pre-1070 was still employed on settling England and probably half-forgot about the matter of a special monastery on the site of his most famous victory. It was only after having the Penitentiary of Erminfred¹⁰ imposed on him, and then later showing a closer interest once he found that little had happened, and what had was in the wrong place, that he found the resources and skilled craftsmen to accelerate the work. We then also get William I's strong order late in 1070 to go back to the drawing board to where he wanted the abbey built:

The king on making careful enquiries as to the progress of the work, was told by the monks that the place where he had determined to build the abbey was situated upon a hill with a parched soil, dry, and destitute of water; and they entreated him that a more convenient spot in the immediate vicinity might be chosen for so important a work. Upon this the king grew angry, and commanded them with all haste to lay the foundations of the temple on the very place where he had achieved the victory over his enemy. Not daring to resist him, they complained of the scarcity of water; to which the king is reported to have replied in these memorable words: ' If God spare my life, I will so amply provide for this place, that wine shall be more abundant here than water is in any other great abbey' They next complained of the unfitness of the place, because, the ground being woody for some distance round, proper stone for the edifice could not be obtained.... (Lower's translation)

Accordingly, when the solicitous king inquired meanwhile about the progress of the building it was intimated to him by these brethren that the place where he had decided to have the church built was on a hill, and so dry of soil, and quite without springs, and for so great a construction a more likely place should be substituted, if it pleased him. When the king heard this he refused angrily and ordered them to lay the foundations speedily on the very spot where his enemy had fallen and the victory had been won. When, without presuming to oppose him they gave as their reason the lack of water tradition has it that this noble king uttered a memorable saying '.....' Again they complained of the unsuitability of the site, this time because for some distance round the ground was heavily wooded and therefore stone fit for building could not be found. (Searle's translation)

But just where was 'Herste'? The etymology of 'herste' in the OED is as follows: Old English **hyrst**: Old Germanic type *hursti-z*, whence Old High German, Middle High German **hurst**, German dialect **horst** 'heap, cluster, thicket, top of rock, sandbank' ; Middle Low German **horst** hill, wooded or bushy eminence, small wood, Low German **horst, host**, a bushy piece of land surrounded with marsh, a wooded eminence, East Frisian **hörst, horst, höst**, thicket, copse, sandy eminence (probably formerly overgrown with brushwood); Middle Dutch **horst (horscht, horst)** thicket of brushwood.

In the forms **-hurst, -hirst, -herst**, the word is a frequent element in place-names, in south and west England, but not in the area of the Danelaw. So this is not very helpful – we are looking for a place which could have one or more characteristics! A thicket (of brushwood), a wooded eminence/rise/hillock, sandbank, or just a small copse ...

This is the description of 'Herste' in the 'Chronicle of Battle Abbey'.

There is a certain land, lying between the orchard adjoining the Abbey and the park, which is on the south side. It is called Quarrere, and contains four acres. On the other side of the road, by the orchard, adjacent to the hospital, are two acres in Herste. Near these is a messuage with two acres of land, where the vestments of the monks are washed; where also there are three acres more. There, also, on the west side, are eight acres. Near them, towards the south, there are likewise eight acres of demesne. (Lower's translation)

There is a certain piece of land, lying between the orchard next to the courtyard and the fish pond to the south, which is called 'the Quarry', and there are four acres there. On the other side of the road, next to the orchard adjoining the house called the hostel, are two acres in Herste. There, next to them is a messuage with two acres appurtenant to it where the monks clothes are washed (i.e. There must have been water), and where there are three other acres. Also there to the west are eight acres. Next to those towards the south there are similarly eight acres of demesne. (Searle's translation)

So, in summary:

Two acres of 'Herste' lay beyond the orchard attached to the hostel, and on the other side of the lane from the abbey courtyard. Beside these was a messuage with another two acres, plus another three acres, with another eight acres to the west, and south of these yet another eight acres.

Another four acres lay south-east of the orchard, and this was above the fish ponds at the bottom of the slope. It presumably took its name 'Quarrere' from the quarry which lay between the abbey precincts and the rear of the messuages on Upper and Lower Lake.

So if we are looking for Herste we can speculate that it is not that far away from the present abbey site, but from what the monks recorded a flatter zone, with the benefit of nearby

streams and/or springs. It was also west, not south-east of the track into the park, and south of the road that demarcated the park to the north.

In the CBA the place we are looking for is twice quite specifically called 'Herste'. Every other 'herste' local place name around Battle in the 'Chronicle of Battle Abbey' has a prefix attached, e.g. Bode-herste, Cro-herste, Bret-herste, and Ew-herste. So maybe we are looking for a site which is actually very nearby, so nearby that a prefix or suffix was not needed for the monk who wrote the chronicle to bother with further description – i.e. it may have been the 'herste' ... just over there!

In addition in later charters¹¹ of the abbey numbers of local individuals are called 'de Herste' and 'atte Herste', indicative that somehow they had a direct association with a place or locality called 'Herste' and took their name from it. Similarly there were 'de Beches', a de Pukehole and de Loxebeches in the Lay Subsidy Roll of 1296¹².

Finally 'Herste' would surely have been located within the banlieu/ leuga or lowey of the abbey as granted by William the Conqueror. Inspection of the history of the negative reaction of the surrounding land owners to this royal 'gift' which re-allocated land that had previously been given to them makes it very clear that they would not have tolerated trespass outside of the boundaries. Indeed over the years adjustments were made by the abbey and their neighbours with quite limited exchanges of land to resolve many small boundary disputes, so that in the end the banlieu boundary had a slightly jagged circumference, but still essentially the circle of 1 leagues radius originally granted. In later land deals in the 1300s the abbey actively purchased more lands around its boundary, but this was not the case until well after the founding 11th century.

Some further written clues exist in the CBA: *'The church also has three mills in demesne: two within the leuga, namely one below Loxebeech, the other further down the valley, the third is partly in and partly outside the leuga, south of the abbey in a place called Pippering-ea (now known as Pepperingeye)'*. Also we have the description of the boundaries of the banlieu and some of the manors within its bounds.

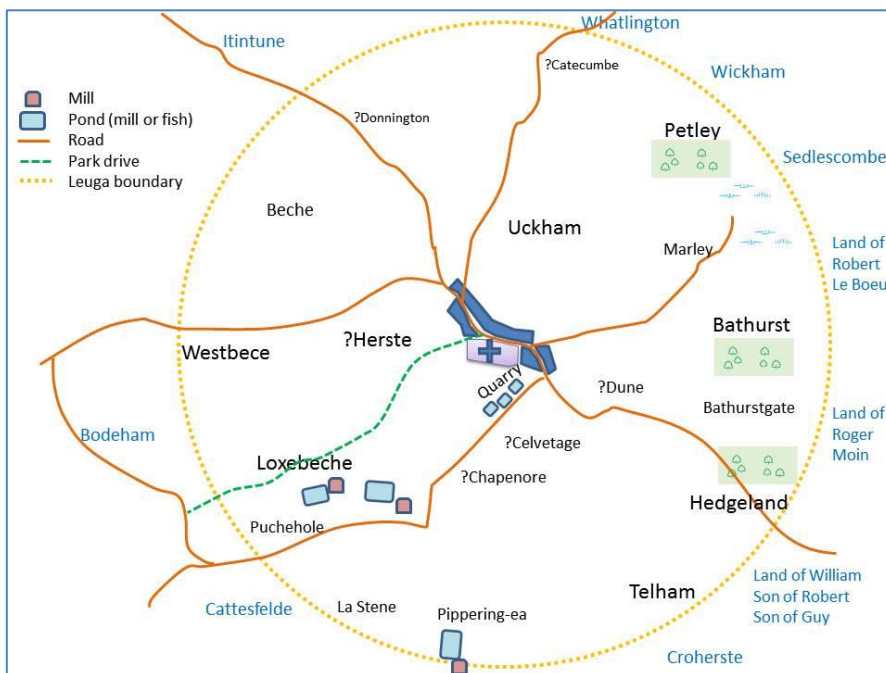
Unfortunately no maps of the abbey park exist before about 1600. The monks relied on written descriptors and reference to the lands of others. So we need to attempt reconstructions from these, which is quite tricky.

The first good map that we have is one of a survey of the Park farm (ESRO BAT 4419) by Anthony Everenden¹³ from circa. 1650. The outline of Park Farm is shown below. The farm only covers the eastern part of the park as it stood at that time and included the part of Bodeham (just north of Catsfield) added in the 1300s, but it can be compared with more recent maps and field boundaries, which show that in the area covered that there has been little change of note.



Post-Napoleonic era early OS map of the Battle Abbey estate. The Park Farm outline from Anthony Everenden, *The Great Park at Batle* c.1650 is overlaid, with good concordance of topography.

The maps below have been constructed using as a template a modern OS map on which the banlieu as described in the 'Chronicle of Battle Abbey' is mapped as a 1.5 mile (1 league) radius circle centred on the abbey, firstly in outline as the whole banlieu, and then on a larger scale of the Abbey Great Park, adding in the orchards, ponds, mills and fields as described.

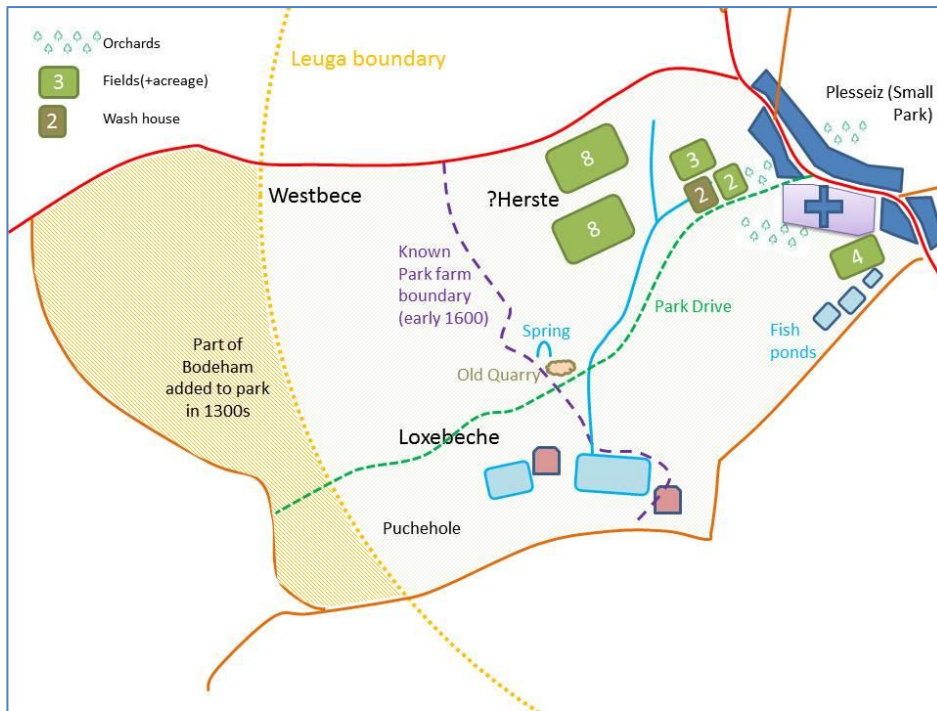


The original Abbey Banlieu / Leuga / Lowey

The banlieu in approx. 1110, showing the circular boundary and place names as enumerated - and by best interpretation the locations of place, field, mill and woodland name locations.

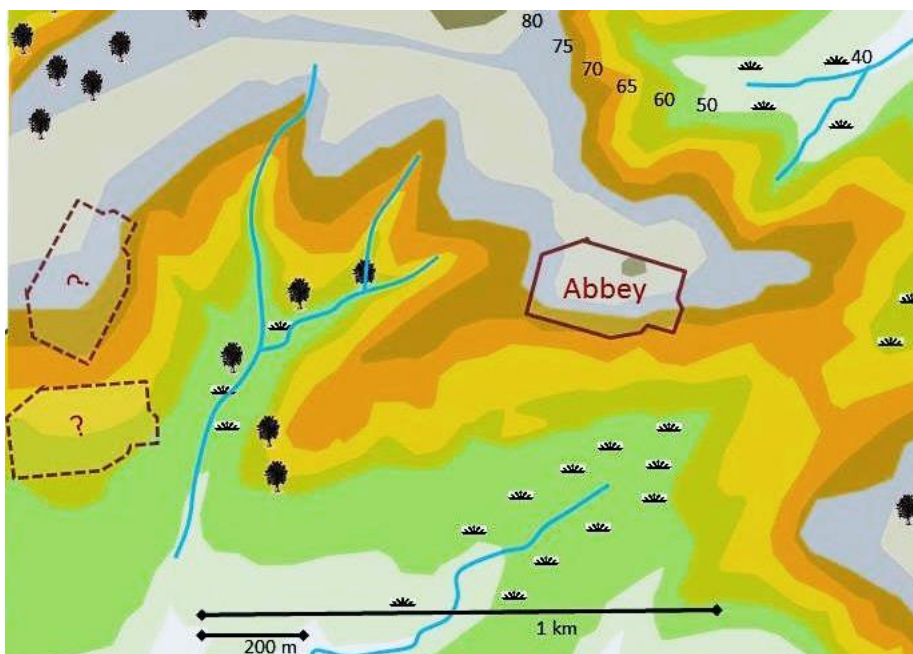
Neighbouring lands are shown in blue text.

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The Abbey Great Park: Abbey and houses along High Street, Upper and Lower Lake shown. The position of orchards, fields, ponds and mills is by best interpretation. The 2 acre field is clearly named as being in 'Herste' and the positions of the other fields are related to this and the orchard behind the pilgrim's house. The 4 acre field is that called Quarrere between the abbey and the fish ponds. ©BDHS

The maps are best looked at in comparison with modern OS maps which additionally and clearly show the land contours. There is no doubt that the zone marked ?Herste is the flattest area of the western extension of the Battle ridge (although intersected by streams in small steep sided valleys such as the Asten) and has access to water from these streams, and lower down from some springs).



The listed site of the abbey super-imposed on a 5 m contour map of the Battle ridge.

Note the closeness of the 5 metre contours particularly on the southern half of the abbey site. Possible other sites are shown with dotted outlines. These are just two of many projections which could be made based on the information above.

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Clearly in the short time that the monks struggled to start the abbey with very little lay help they can have done very little but some early planning and clearing. Their impassioned pleas to William, which must have taken some courage to deliver, show their relative despair at the sheer difficulty they perceived of building on his chosen site. It was indeed complex and they needed help from skilled labour and craftsmen, eventually recruited from all over England and even from 'overseas'.

Hopefully this short dissertation will convince readers that the early site chosen by the monks, and vehemently rejected by William I, was most likely in the fief or zone described in the text and marked ?Herste on the Abbey Leuga and Great Park maps above.

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J Hare in 1985 records being able to see Sir Harold Brakspear's papers which were in the possession of Mr. O.S. Brakspear. The main Battle folder comprised plans, elevations and drawings; both working drawings and those prepared for possible publication. There were groups of photographs, but no systematic photographic coverage. Letters (Battle Files) from 1933-6 and a notebook of 1933 were also consulted. The whereabouts of these papers at present is unknown, but some of his papers from elsewhere are in the National Archives. Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre hold 3 boxes of papers reference 2512/160/11 which may be of relevance.

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