

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Mark Mitchels, The Bayeux Tapestry

Mark Mitchels captivated his audience when he spoke about the Bayeux Tapestry and the events of 1066 to the November meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall. He explained that the Bayeux Tapestry was completed between 1006 and 1076. It is 70m long and 50cm wide. It is comprised of nine linen sections and is embroidered cloth rather than a tapestry. It is both a remarkable piece of art and an invaluable historical record. It is thought a male artist who sketched the images and then groups of eight women stitched the pictures using ten colours of woollen thread.

The tapestry contains three types of information. There are the central pictures which illustrate the complex events of 1066. Above this is text which may have been added later. This tells the story mostly in Latin, but parts of it is in Anglo-Saxon which has led historians to think that the tapestry was embroidered in Canterbury. There is a border above and below the pictures which are a mystery to historians. They do not know what the animal and human images are meant to depict and how they relate to the Bayeux Tapestry's story.

Mark Mitchels emphasized the importance of William, Duke of Normandy, as an historical figure. There are very few occasions in which an individual has changed the course of British and European history in a single day which is what William achieved through his victory in the Battle of Hastings. Most of the Anglo-Saxon nobility of England was killed, allowing about 20,000 Normans to subjugate an English population of about 2,000,000 people. He views William as a very ruthless man who had emerged from a troubled early life with a suspicion of most people. He was an outstanding warrior and strategist who would not forgive any person who let him down. The tapestry should be viewed as Norman propaganda which legitimised William's claim to the English throne. It claims that promises were made to William by Edward the Confessor and Harold Godwinson that he should be the next King of England. These were broken and William had to mount an invasion to remove the usurper, Harold Godwinson, to gain what was rightfully his.

Some of the most graphic scenes of the Bayeux Tapestry show the Battle of Hastings. The art work of the horses is amazingly realistic. It is possible that the artist may have been present at the battle as historians think that the ebb and flow of the battle described in the tapestry mirrors the actual events. The armies appear to have been of a similar size, about 8,000 men on each side. There was terrible slaughter as the battle went on from dawn to dusk, unlike most medieval battles which lasted less than an hour. The outcome was decisive. William broke the major resistance of the English and could claim his throne.

Bishop Odo of Bayeux, William's half-brother, is believed to have commissioned the Bayeux Tapestry. This is supported by his prominent appearances in the tapestry, for example, his image is larger than that of William in a feast scene and he is shown fighting bravely at Hastings. After the battle, he became Earl of Kent which strengthens the view that the tapestry was sewn in Canterbury. Odo also rebuilt Bayeux Cathedral and the tapestry was seen for the first time in 1076 when the new cathedral was consecrated with William and the Norman nobility in attendance.

The subsequent history of the tapestry begins to explain why it has survived in such good condition. Odo fell from grace in 1082 when he was imprisoned by William. It appears that the tapestry was stored away in the crypt of the cathedral until its rediscovery in 1476. It was later protected from Napoleon and the Nazis by the people of Bayeux who proudly display this remarkable artefact in a museum today.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on Wednesday 27 January 2016 at The Village Hall, Rickinghall IP221HD when Neil Lanham will be speaking about *Experiences as a Fine Art Auctioneer*. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net.

Gerry Gurhy