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The web site for information about the Cathedral City of Ely in the U.K.

The Full Entry

[Hereward The Wake – 1066](#)

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Most English know of Hereward the Wake (meaning ‘wary’), the Fenland’s most famous hero, who lead a revolt against Duke William the Bastard of Normandy, who had usurped the English throne after defeating the English army at the Battle of Hastings, and killing the last king of the English, Harold Godwinson, and the flower of the English nobility in the process. But what is fact and what is legend?



The real Hereward held lands in Warwickshire and Lincolnshire at the time of Edward the Confessor, left England some time after 1062, and later reappeared to plunder the Abbey of Peterborough (1070) — the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (at this time being written at Peterborough) says simply that among those at the sack of Peterborough were ‘Hereward and his crew’. At the time, or shortly after, he was holding the Isle of Ely, with its Camp of Refuge, against the Normans (1071). During this time Hereward sometimes he had Danish help. He also attracted many dissidents such as the Earl Morkar, and Siward Bain. The isle took a lot of Norman effort to capture. Hereward was one of those to escape. He continued the struggle for sometime, operating in and near the Fens. Eventually he made his peace with King William.

Like an avenging thunderbolt

From these sparse facts has grown the legend of Hereward, son of Leofric, Earl of Mercia (or Leofric of Bourne, Lincolnshire). In his youth he kept wild company, and when he was fourteen his father persuaded King Edward to make him an outlaw. He was brought back to England by the news that the Normans had seized his father's estates. On his return he found that the new Norman owners had not only taken the land, but also slain his brother, whose head was set above the door of the house. Like an avenging thunderbolt, he descended upon the killers and slew them all. Next day 14 Norman heads had replaced that of his brother above the door. News of Hereward's exploits spread and he became the leader of a mixed band of English and Danish warriors, who flocked to join him at his new base at the great Abbey of Ely.

The Normans were engulfed by the flames

William the Conqueror led his army to Ely, then an island in the Fens, and was three times foiled by Hereward in the attempt to build a causeway across the marshes. The third time, while William was encamped at Brandon, Hereward rode there on his horse, a noble beast called Swallow, on the way meeting a potter, who agreed to exchange clothes with him and lend him his wares. In this disguise Hereward got into William's camp and overheard his plans (as according to legend King Alfred disguised himself as a harper to enter the camp of the Danes). When William built his third causeway, and proceeded to send his soldiers along it to attack Ely, Hereward's men, hidden in the reeds, set fire to the vegetation. The Normans were engulfed by the flames, and those who tried to escape were either drowned in the marsh or picked off by English arrows.

He slew fifteen of his attackers

But the monks of Ely grew tired of the siege and let the Normans in by a secret path. Hereward escaped with a handful of men and was soon leading a new resistance. Whilst mounting an attack on Stamford, Hereward and his men became hopelessly lost in Rockingham Forest. Then St Peter sent a wolf (St Peter animal) to show them the way, and as darkness fell, lighted candles appeared on every tree and on every man's shield, burning steadily no matter how the wind blew. This was a token of the apostle's gratitude for Hereward sparing the abbot and returning part of the treasure to the saint's own abbey of Peterborough.

Though he slew fifteen of his attackers with his lance or his famous sword Brainbiter, and a sixteenth with his shield, he fell when four more knights entered and stabbed him in the back with their spears.

Eventually William made peace with him, but he still had other enemies. One day a chaplain, whom he had asked to keep watch while he slept, betrayed him and sixteen Normans broke into the house. Though he slew fifteen of his attackers with his lance or his famous sword Brainbiter, and a sixteenth with his shield, he fell when four more knights entered and stabbed him in the back with their spears.

The Hereward of legend was in full cry

Like Edric the Wild, it was as a resistance leader that he first became famous, but soon frankly fabulous stories were attracted to his name. Within eighty years of the real Hereward's death, the Hereward of legend was in full cry, in the *Estorie des Engles* of Geoffrey Gaimar from around 1140, and the *Gesta Herewardii Saxonis* ('Deeds of Hereward the Saxon'). The author of the *Gesta*, writing no more than fifty years after William's assault on Ely, tells us on the one hand that he remembers seeing fishermen dredging Norman skeletons, still in their rusty armour, out of the fen; on the other, that Hereward once slew a Cornish giant!

Songs were being sung about Hereward in taverns a hundred years after his death; and in the thirteenth century people still visited a ruined wooden castle in the Fens which was known as Hereward's Castle. But later he was supplanted by another outlaw-hero, Robin Hood, as a symbol of resistance to oppression.