

4 “Evening Battle: A Light and Sound Spectacular”: A review of the Jorvik Viking Festival’s Saturday highlight

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The penultimate day of the 24th annual Viking Festival, run by the Jorvik Viking Centre in York, culminated in what was billed to be a ‘light and sound spectacular’ whilst promising an evening battle. What followed was two hours of good family fun you just couldn’t help but get caught up in.

The event began with a gathering and march to battle for the Vikings and Anglo-Saxons from the Museum Gardens to the Eye of York (the grass between the Castle Museum and Clifford’s Tower rather than the big wheel formerly housed at the Railway Museum, a factor that caused some debate). This was a site to see, given the sheer amount of people in Viking, Anglo-Saxon and Norman dress. This included the necessary warriors but also children and ‘civilians’.

The procession filed into the Eye of York; an inner ring for performing and an outer ring for spectators. The numbers admitted and the space available meant that most people got a decent view, even if some of the performers did tend to direct their acts straight forward and only a few turned to acknowledge the sides. This aside, the atmosphere was generally good and not even the cold weather could stave of a healthy dose of audience participation.

The entertainment began with The Abbots Bromley Horn Dance from Staffordshire, who according to the festival pamphlet performed ‘a traditional folk dance’ with reindeer antlers radiocarbon dated to the Viking era. The dance itself, whilst probably accurate (not that the archaeology students in attendance could come up with a suggestion as to how they know the routine) was a little dull, mainly being men in period costume weaving in and out of one another holding reindeer antlers that look like they lived on a stately home wall the rest of the year to their chests.

This was followed by the ‘rabble rousing’ antics of a small section of the Viking army who demonstrated battle tactics and the weapons in use. This was relatively accurate and there’s something to be said about cheering for your warrior in a one-on-one combat and booing the opposition.

The highlight of the entertainment section must definitely go to the four strong troop, *Juggling Inferno*. Set to music, the group did things with fire than can only make me think what their mothers have to say



John Foulger, Hardcore Viking. (credit: author)

about their career paths! They confidently twirled flaming batons and juggled fire whilst the two women made light work of hoola-hooping with flaming hoops. If this was to be the only light and sound spectacular promised, I was already quite happy!

However, the main event of the evening was the battle itself. This was mostly well choreographed and whilst we noticed the stragglers at the back of battle not doing a lot, the kids probably didn't. Set to music (some of it worryingly Band of Brothers, yes the WWII one) and narrated in appropriately dramatic style as night fell, the battle combined informative story telling, battle-field antics and even the appearance of the Valkyries. Unfortunately, the Normans won, but history cannot be re-written for the purpose of a themed festival it seems.

Rumour has it that in years gone by a real boat was burnt, but in these health and safety conscious days we had to make do with a pyrotechnic one. This was still quite a visual treat and as night had fully fallen by this point. The evening was rounded off by the most entertaining firework display since the Millennium. The fireworks were set off from the top of the Castle Museum roof, illuminating the lovely architecture in a colourful glow. The display was lengthy and set to music, again suitably dramatic, this time including Wagner's Ride of the Valkyries.



The Battle! (credit: author)

The evening was good fun. Archaeological sensibilities instilled at university may have to have been suspended at times, but who cares! Its entertainment well worth the £4.50 concessions, £6.50 admission charge and even though you could have stood at the outer fence and seen the fireworks, the entertainment and battle is much better seen close up. As a result you will find me there this time next year and I'll still be cheering for the Vikings, even if they *are* going to lose again.