

Battlefield Britain

Episode Synopses

I. Boudicca

Father-and-son team Peter and Dan Snow use ground-breaking graphics to bring alive the epic stories of battles that shaped the nation, in this major new series. Battlefield Britain journeys through 2,000 years of invasion, civil war and rebellion, opening with the momentous uprising led by Queen Boudicca against Roman rule in Britain.

In a first for British television, the trail of destruction wreaked by Boudicca's followers on Roman towns, and scenes of the final showdown, are recreated using technology that is usually the preserve of Hollywood. Peter Snow draws on his personal passion for military history and computer imagery to give a unique overview of the battle of wits fought between Boudicca and the Roman governor Suetonius Paulinus.

Dan Snow, a 25-year-old military historian, tells the stories of the soldiers, many of whom would have been his age. He also joins the London Wasps rugby team to experience what it would have been like for Boudicca's warriors as they clashed with the Roman army.

The story begins in 60AD when a brutal assault on Boudicca and her daughters turned the queen into a rebel leader. It was perfect timing - much of the Roman army was in Anglesey, carrying out a slaughter of the Druids. Boudicca marched her entire tribe and their neighbours on the centre of Roman rule, Colchester, which was torched. London was next; it, too, burnt to the ground.

The final confrontation between the two armies took place somewhere north of St Albans. The exact location is a matter of debate but Peter and Dan investigate the most recent suggestion: an area near the village of Paulerspury. Peter uses the remarkable computer graphics to show the Romans' predicament – outnumbered 10 to one, it was only their discipline, tactics and the cunning choice of battlefield by Suetonius Paulinus that swung the battle in their favour. One account estimates that 80,000 Britons were slaughtered. The battle was to be the last serious threat to Roman supremacy in over 400 years of occupation.

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2. Battle of Hastings

The Battlefield Britain action moves forward a thousand years to the Battle of Hastings, a true clash of the Titans: William the Bastard, Duke of Normandy versus Harold, the Saxon King of England. It's one of the best-known conflicts ever to have taken place on British soil but will be seen here as never before. The powerful combination of extraordinary computer imagery and the compelling story-telling of father and son team, Peter and Dan Snow, reveal the epic scale of this historic struggle.

Peter uses the latest 3D graphics to trace the turbulent events of 1066. Dan gives the soldiers' perspective and joins the Metropolitan Police Public Order Unit to experience the crush of a shield wall – the Saxon army's favoured tactic.

The story starts in January of 1066. Following the death of King Edward the Confessor, Harold seized control of England. The move enraged William who saw himself as the rightful holder of the crown. He immediately prepared an army to invade. Harold readied his troops along the south coast but as he awaited the onslaught from across the Channel another came from an entirely unexpected direction: Vikings had landed in Yorkshire. Harold rushed his army to Stamford Bridge and successfully fought off the Norse invaders, but this was precisely the moment William made his move. The Norman army was in England and heading towards Hastings.

What followed was a battle for the survival of Anglo-Saxon rule in this country but, in one of the most famous incidents of British history, Harold was killed when an arrow struck him in the eye. The Saxon defence crumpled and Norman rule in Britain was assured. The consequences of this were far-reaching – it brought about a change of ruling class, dynasty, language and culture.

3. The Battle for Wales

Battlefield Britain journeys to Wales and the great battle for Welsh sovereignty fought by Owain Glyndwr against Henry IV. The latest computer-generated imagery brings the action to life while presenters Peter and Dan Snow get to grips with the detail.

By 1400, Wales had been ruled by English kings for over a century. Laws dictated where in Wales the Welsh could live, what jobs they could have, even who they could marry. Then in 1400, a Welsh nobleman, Owain Glyndwr, had land seized from him by a neighbouring English Lord. This prompted the outraged Glyndwr to lead a rebellion of independence against English rule that raged for over 10 years.

Peter and Dan trace the path of the rebellion, starting with the dramatic defeat of the English on the phenomenally steep slopes of Pilleth. They describe how the battle of Shrewsbury – scene of the biggest clash between longbowmen ever seen on British soil – deprived Glyndwr of a powerful ally; and how, in a little-known moment of history, the Welsh invaded England. This final showdown, outside Worcester, brought any hope of Welsh independence to an end. Glyndwr's rebellion would be the last ever attempt by a Welsh army to rid Wales of English rule.

Together, the Snows try out the weapon of mass destruction of the day – the longbow – and experience for themselves how Glyndwr used the rough terrain of the Welsh borders to outwit his enemies, King Henry IV and his son Prince Hal.

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4. The Battle Against the Spanish Armada

Battlefield Britain turns its attention to the sea and the struggle against the Spanish Armada, one of the most famous naval battles in Britain's history. Spectacular graphics bring the action to life, whilst presenters Peter and Dan Snow take to boats themselves to tell this astonishing story.

In the summer of 1588, a vast Spanish invasion fleet – an armada – sailed up the English Channel. England braced itself against invasion by the greatest superpower the world had ever seen. Peter and Dan use cutting-edge graphics to trace the series of ferocious sea battles that took place over the 11 days that followed, from the first famous conflict off Plymouth to the final showdown off Gravelines, on the coast of northern France.

Both experienced sailors, the presenters demonstrate the different tactics the two sides used and how the English managed to fend off the much bigger, more heavily armed ships of the Armada. They discover for themselves why, despite hitting their mark, the English guns failed to sink many Spanish ships.

Led by the Duke of Medina Sidonia, representative of the fiercely catholic Spanish King Philip II, the Spaniards planned to sweep Elizabeth, the heretic Queen of England, from the throne. All that stood in their way was a ragtag navy lead by the Elizabeth's cousin, Admiral Lord Howard, and the nation's favourite pirate, Francis Drake. Drake's seamanship was key but, in the end, tenacity, good luck and terrible weather also contributed to this famous English victory. The Spanish Armada was a broken force and the seeds of English naval supremacy, and the British Empire, were sown.

5. The Battle of Naseby

The drama of the English Civil War is brought to life using spectacular computer graphics, with presenters Peter and Dan Snow getting to grips with the detail.

By 1645, the British Isles had been torn apart by fighting between the Royalists, in support of Charles I and his Divine Right to rule the country as he wished; and the Parliamentarians, unified in their belief that the King should serve the country in the best interests of the people.

Peter sets the scene with the battle of Newbury. Here the Parliamentarians suffered a shambolic defeat that so enraged the newly appointed Oliver Cromwell that he created the New Model army – Britain's first national army – unified by discipline, uniforms, regulations, training and command.

By June 1645, they were ready to take on the Royalists at Naseby, near Northampton. This they did, with Cromwell commanding a decisive cavalry charge, recreated here with cutting-edge graphics. It ensured the defeat of the King, who fled from the battlefield. Within four years Charles I had been captured and executed. No British monarch ever again dared to attain absolute power.

To get to grips with the skills needed in a cavalry charge, Peter and Dan spend a day with the mounted soldiers of the King's Troop to try their hand at modern-style swordplay, swapping horses for motorbikes...

Documentaries

8 x 50 minutes

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6. Battle of the Boyne

Presenters Dan and Peter Snow bring to life a conflict that lies at the heart of Irish history: the Battle of the Boyne. They piece together the chain of events that led to the largest battle ever to take place in Ireland and, with the latest computer graphics, recreate the scene as the opposing sides fought it out by the water's edge.

By 1688, Roman Catholic King James II had so alienated the Protestant majority of England that they ousted him from the Throne. At the request of Parliament, William Prince of Orange became king. James fled to his Catholic stronghold – Ireland – and waited on the banks of the Boyne for William's impending attack. It came on 1 July 1690.

Fighting for country and religion, the two sides were divided by more than just a rushing brook. What began as a closely contested battle, with heroic bravery on both sides, descended into a rout. Peter recounts how, at each point the Williamites crossed the Boyne, the Jacobites desperately tried to repel them. Meanwhile, to try to understand the difficulties of the frontline troops, Dan tries crossing the river himself to see how they would have struggled to keep their gunpowder dry.

Ultimately, the Jacobites couldn't hold up against the opposing might of William's troops. They fled south and, within days, James was on a ship taking him to the protection of Catholic France. He died there, a broken man.

The Battle of the Boyne was the last to be fought between two rivals for the British crown but left a legacy that would eventually lead to the last land battle on British soil, the battle of Culloden, 50 years later. More than three hundred years later, William's victory is still commemorated annually on 12 July by the Orange Order in Northern Ireland.

7. The Battle of Culloden

In 1746, the British throne was occupied by the Hanoverian George II. It was some 60 years since the last Stuart king, James II, had been ousted at the Battle of the Boyne, and now James's grandson, Bonnie Prince Charlie, hoped to restore his family to the throne. Peter and Dan Snow follow Bonnie Prince Charlie's tracks as he marched his Jacobite rebel army from Scotland all the way into England. London was virtually in his sights when, chased by the Redcoats of the English Army, they were forced to turn back. The two forces finally came head-to-head on Culloden Moor, but the exhausted and confused Jacobites were no match for the new flintlock muskets or cannon fire of the Redcoats.

The Battle of Culloden was Britain's last land battle and arguably the bloodiest in Scottish history. Not only did the Jacobite defeat end forever Bonnie Prince Charlie's hopes of his family ascending the British throne, but for many years to come it would have long-lasting impact on Scottish culture, religion and the clans' relationship with the English Government.

As Peter reveals just how close Prince Charlie came to victory, Dan Snow goes on a night march across the moors to see what it must have been like for the Jacobite army without the aid of night-vision goggles, a map or even a compass.

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8. The Battle of Britain

In the summer of 1940, having occupied much of Western Europe, Germany now turned its attention to Britain. Prime Minister Winston Churchill was adamant that his country would never surrender. With his famous "We shall fight them on the beaches" speech, he rallied not only the troops, but also the entire nation.

In an attempt to cut off supplies and draw the Royal Air Force into battle, the Luftwaffe targeted the ports and ships. It came to a climax in September when the English Channel became the battle ground for what was one of the most important British battles of the 20th Century.

With 1,000 planes heading for Dover, the Luftwaffe was in a very strong position compared to the few hundred planes piloted by the RAF. But the RAF had a secret weapon – Radio Direction Finding, or radar, as it is more commonly known today. Peter explains the important role it played in helping to detect the German war planes and how this, coupled with the cracking of the *Enigma* code – which enabled the interception of German communications, gave Britain the upper hand.

Computer graphics reconstruct this momentous air battle, while Peter explains the strategy behind the attack, and Dan takes part in a high-speed manoeuvre to see what physiological effects the fighter pilots had to combat even before they faced the enemy.