

1066: THREE KINGS, THREE BATTLES, AND A COUNTRY CHANGED FOREVER

The year 1066 is the most famous dates in English history. We all know the story, William of Normandy kills King Harold with an arrow to the eye, conquers England, Harries the north, and writes the Domesday Book. The conquest changes England forever, new king, new government, new language, and the ruling elite relegated to conquered underlings.

King Edward is crowned in 1042 following the death of Harthacnut but is a weak and pious king. Edward married Edith of Wessex in 1043, but the match produces no heirs and a crisis in the secession. Edward's court is dominated by the powerful Godwine family, the earls of Wessex, and brief banishment in 1051 did not curtail their power for long. Upon the death of his father in 1052, Harold Godwineson becomes the earl of Wessex. King Edward does have living blood relatives, a nephew also called Edward, who has been living in exile in Hungary since 1016. The family of Edward the Exile are brought back to England in 1057, but Edward dies before he can be named heir, meaning his five-year-old son, Edgar is given the title of 'Aetheling'.¹ King Edward's death on the 5th of January leaves chaos in its wake, a year of bloodshed, and three kings crowned by Christmas.

England has a second king, and it's not Edgar. Although the rightful heir, Edgar is an unknown, he has no money, no supporters, and no military experience, the witan are unwilling to support his claim.² The new king is Harold Godwineson, Earl of Wessex. He has been acting as sub regulus for Edward since 1056, governing the country when the king could not.³ It is claimed that the king issued a 'novissima verba' on his deathbed naming the earl as his successor, this is quickly agreed by the witan. England has one king is buried on the morning of the 6th of January and another crowned in the afternoon. What seems to be the end of one crisis is the start of another.

There are two other men who believe they should be king of England. The contender with the weakest claim is Harald, King of Norway, known as Hardrada. The throne was promised to Hardrada's father, Magus around 1038 by Harthacnut but Magnus dies before he can take the crown.⁴ Hardrada believes the throne should be his by right of his father. The second contender is William, Duke of Normandy who believes he should be king because the throne was promised to him twice; once by King Edward in 1051 and again by Harold Godwineson in 1064. Edward's promise of the throne only appears in

¹ Marc Morris *The Norman Conquest* Dublin: Penguin Books (2022 p.106.

² Ibid p.138.

³ Ibid p.108

⁴ Ibid pp.60-61

the Norman Chronicles and after the invasion.⁵ The Bayeux Tapestry has Harold swearing on relics with the caption, 'Here Harold makes an oath to Duke William' but does not say what the oath was.⁶ The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles



Figure 1: Panel 23 Bayeux Tapestry (WWW.BayeuxMuseum.com)

do refer to Harold being in Normandy but not why.⁷ The reasoning comes much later, Eadmer, a twelfth century monk claims the oath is taken under duress, while William of Poitiers states that Harold is there to re-affirm William's claim to the throne.⁸

News of Edward's death and Harold's crowning reaches Normandy and Norway within days and neither ruler is happy with the news.⁹ All three contenders spend the spring and summer months preparing for battle.

Battle of Fulford – 20th of September 1066

Much to everyone's surprise, it is Hardrada who invades first early in September. Hardrada and Tostig Godwineson sail up the Humber, meeting the northern earls, Edwin of Mercia, and Morcar of Northumbria on the River Ouse near Riccall. The battle, in short, it is a rout for the Anglo-Saxon army, the day's fighting is brutal, the 'foul ford' is said to have run red with the blood of the dead.¹⁰ First victory is to the Vikings. Edwin and Morcar escape with what is left of their forces, York is forced to submit to Hardrada and Tostig, who demand hostages. It is agreed that the exchange will take place at Stamford Bridge on the 25th.

⁵ Morris *Conquest* p.70.

⁶ Bayeux Museum *Explore The Bayeux Tapestry Online* WWW.Bayeuxmuseum.Com (accessed 15-28/12/25).

⁷ Project Gutenberg *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* WWW.Gutenberg.org (accessed 15-28/12/25).

⁸ Morris *Conquest* p.116.

⁹ 'Episode one' 1066. *A Year To Conquer England* (television programme) (London: BBC One September 2021) WWW.Catmosecollege.SharePoint.com (accessed 15-20/12/25).

¹⁰ Peter Rex *1066 A New History Of The Norman Conquest* Stroud: Amberley Publishing PLC (2011) pp.47-49.

Battle of Stamford Bridge – 25th September 1066

The news of Hardrada's invasion reaches Harold in London by mid-September. Gathering his forces, Harold marches north, completing the two-hundred-mile journey in as little as five to six days.¹¹ Hardrada, believing that he is meeting Edwin and Morcar, leaves the bulk of his force with his ships at Riccall, as it was a warm day, the troops he does have are not wearing full armour and are poorly armed.¹² Hardrada is surprised to find he is facing Harold and not the earls. It is another day of brutal fighting, but this time it is the Vikings who are routed. Hardrada is killed by an arrow to the neck and Tostig is killed by the hand of his brother, Harold. King Harold has removed one threat to his crown, and while recovering in York, hears that the second has landed at Pevensey.

Battle of Hastings – 14th October 1066

William's invasion starts badly. William has spent months preparing, leaving little to chance, but he is stuck in port for two months by unseasonal northerly gales. When William does set sail, his ship makes faster progress than the rest of the fleet, he wakes on the morning of the 28th of September alone in the channel and must wait for the fleet to catch up. Upon landing, William stumbles, grabbing a handful of pebbles, declares he is holding his new kingdom.¹³ Harold is forced to march south in haste, arriving back in London early October, here he holds council with his advisors including his brothers Gyrth and Leofwine, who offer to face William first and buy Harold some time. Harold refuses. As William marches north, Harold goes south and the two armies meet in a field eight miles north of Hastings.

The opposing forces are evenly matched with approximately 7,000 men apiece. Harold is on top of Senlac Hill with the Housecarls and Fyrd, he immediately orders the shield-wall, a tactic perfected during the numerous battles with the Vikings. Harold is in the middle of the wall, with his brothers Gyrth and Leofwine commanding the flanks.

¹¹ Ibid p50.

¹² Rex 1066 pp.51-52.

¹³ 'Episode Three' 1066 BBC One 2021.



Figure 2 The top of Senlac Hill looking down hill¹⁴

William is at the marshy bottom of the hill, with approximately 1,000 archers, 4,000-foot soldiers, and 2,000 heavily armed knights on horseback.



Figure 3 The bottom of Senlac Hill looking uphill¹⁵

The battle begins at 9am with trumpet calls, and a hail of arrows followed by the cavalry and a charge of foot soldiers, none of whom can break the shield-wall.¹⁶ This is repeated all morning but to no avail, the shield-wall holds. At lunchtime, the two sides are so evenly matched the day could go either way. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles reveals that ‘there was great slaughter made on either side’.¹⁷ Everything changes in the afternoon. A rumour spreads claiming that William has been killed. Orderic Vitalis writes that William rides in front of his troops, removes his helmet and shouts, ‘See, I am here; I am still

¹⁴ Anna Douthwaite (photographer) Battle 2024 (from own collection).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Morris *Conquest* p.179.

¹⁷ Gutenberg, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* 1066.

living and by God's help, shall yet have the victory'.¹⁸ Vitalis claims that the rumour lead to some of the cavalry retreating, with some Anglo-Saxons following the fleeing Normans down Senlac Hill, the cavalry swiftly turning and slaughtering their pursuers.¹⁹ William of Poitiers argues that the retreat was not a reaction to a rumour but a well-rehearsed battle tactic, he writes:

In this manner, the Normans, twice again pretend to retreat, and when they are followed by the English, suddenly wheeled their horses, cut their Pursuers off from the main body, surrounded and slew them.²⁰

Whether the retreat is real or fake, the shield-wall breaks. Gyrth and Leofwine are killed, the Norman cavalry can circle round the shield-wall and slaughter the Anglo-Saxons from behind. At some point, Harold is killed, legend being by an arrow to the eye. Orderic Vitalis argues that 'King Harold slain at the first onset'²¹ this is unlikely, as the death of a commander signals the end of battle, but Hasting is still being fought late into the afternoon, he does not mention arrows in eyes only that Harold 'was recognized by other tokens'.²² The arrow to the eye appears in later texts by Amatus of Montecasino in 1080 and Baudi of Bourgeuil 1096.²³ It is seen in the Bayeux Tapestry, but the scene is confusing, there appears to be multiple 'Harolds' being killed in multiple ways.



Figure 4 Panel 57, Bayeux Tapestry, showing the death of multiple Harolds (www.Bayeuxmuseum.com)²⁴

Guy of Amiens paints a very different story, in his eyewitness account, 'Carman de Haestingae Proelio', Harold is killed by an assassination squad of four knights:

¹⁸ Orderic Vitalis *Gesta Normannorum Ducum* www.saxonhistory.co.uk (accessed 15-28/12/25.)

¹⁹ Morris *Conquest* p.181.

²⁰ Vitalis *Gesta* <https://saxonhistory.co.uk>.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Rex 1066 p.76.

²⁴ Bayeux Museum *Bayeux Tapestry*.

Harold is forced to go the way of all flesh
The first shatters his breast through the shield by a lance
The second by sword severs the head below the helmet
The third by spears pours out the belly's entrails
The fourth cuts off the leg at the hip
The flying rumour 'Harold is dead' spreads through the battlefield
The defeated English refuse battle they demand pardon²⁵

Is the arrow to the eye a cleaner, kinder version of the death of a monarch, a lucky accident and not a cold-blooded assassination?

After the Battle

With the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy dead on the field of Hastings, William is disappointed that the witan does not immediately offer him the crown. The witan votes for Edgar. Knowing he cannot defeat William, Edgar surrenders the English crown at Berkhamsted in early December. England's third king of 1066 is crowned on Christmas Day, but it is still not secure. The Anglo-Saxons are a proud people and rebel against the new regime, first in Herefordshire in 1067; the Anglo-Saxons are unhappy being forced to build Norman castles. This is followed by an uprising in Exeter by townspeople loyal to the Godwinesons, William shows unusual leniency and only builds a large castle. The Northern Rebellion is in 1069 and sees William at his most brutal. William's answer is the Harrying of the North, the complete destruction of Northumbria, Yorkshire, and York. The Domesday Book of 1086 describes the area as 'waste'.²⁶ There is an uprising in East Anglia in 1070 with the Vikings having another attempt at the English throne, the final rebellion is the Earls Revolt of 1075. The offspring of the original invaders are unhappy with diminished land and influence.

The language of law-and-order changes from English to Norman French and Latin. Society changes from six powerful earls to over two hundred barons and bishops, the peasant class increases to include disinherited Anglo-Saxons. The peasants see their rights eroded particularly with the loss of forest rights and no longer being allowed to leave their villages without permission. The Normans kept the Anglo-Saxon system of local government but increased the number of courts of law to include the Lord's Court and the Manor Court, the Murdrum Fine was introduced to ensure the safety of the new overlords. To remind the conquered who was now in charge, castles were built everywhere and usually alongside cathedrals showing that God supported the invasion.

1066 was a momentous year, too complex to be discussed fully in such a short essay, but the results can be seen today in castles, churches and in our language.

²⁵ Guy Of Amiens *Carman De Haestingae Proelio* Translated by Kathleen Tyson <https://saxonhistory.co.uk> (accessed 15-28/12/25).

²⁶ Anna Powell-Smith *Open Domesday* www.opendomesday.org (accessed 28/12/25).

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