

Chapter Six

THE KINGDOM OF ENGLAND

THE tenth century was to be the last one of Anglo-Saxon England, for the dynasty which descended from Alfred was first to reconquer and create a united kingdom of England and then collapse in ruins. By the turn of the year 1000, when many believed that the world would end, a new wave of Vikings, the Norsemen, scourged the country, this time one of their number becoming king of England. But beneath all these dramatic sagas of victory and defeat there was slowly emerging a society whose framework began to be one we would recognise today. It was during this period, for instance, that all the English shires and counties took shape. They, in turn, were divided into a series of smaller units called hundreds, each one of which had a 'moot' or court in which presided someone appointed by the king who, along with those who lived in the area, meted out justice. This meant that the running of the country in terms of right and wrong rested at grassroots on a dialogue between the king or his representative and ordinary people.

This dialogue between ruler and ruled was to be a fundamental thread which was to run down through the centuries fashioning how the country was to be governed and justice administered. At its highest level it was reflected in the fact that Anglo-Saxon kings were always elected from a member of the royal dynasty. That was the task of the great magnates, both nobility and upper clergy, who made up the king's council or Witenagemot. In spite of the tempestuous events, the status and mystique surrounding the monarchy continued to grow through the century, by the end of which an added dimension was bestowed on the wearer of the crown, that of coronation in a church. In this ceremony it was not, however, the crowning by the bishop which was the most important act but the anointing of the king with holy oil in the same way in which priests were anointed. This act set him apart from ordinary men. Everything, however, depended on the personality of the king. A strong one could achieve much, a weak one little, but that never eroded the respect people had for their ruler.

During this century also came the first signs that government was becoming literate, that kings no longer relied wholly on word of mouth, but began to record their decisions on paper as formal documents. Charters, royal grants of land or privileges, were the first such documents to emerge. These were always in Latin. Then came a form of royal letter called a writ which contained in writing the king's instructions. These, in contrast, were written in Anglo-Saxon and could be read out at once to everyone by the king's representative. To prove that these documents came from the king, a wax seal containing an impression of his image and name was attached to them. Everyone then knew that this could only have come from the king's royal writing office called the chancery. This was the department of the royal household which staffed the royal chapels and was made up of priests who were monks who could read and write.



King Edgar offering his charter to the New Minster at Winchester. Dated 966 this is the earliest manuscript in the style associated with the monastic community at Winchester. Ultimately inspiration came from the art of late classical antiquity, but via carlingian France. To this style English artists added brilliant colours, ornamentation and pattern with a vivid use of line drawing to indicate action. The text is in gold on purple vellum.

At the same time a system of universal taxation gradually began. This was the direct result of the attacks by the Norsemen who were shamefully bought off with large sums of money called 'Dane-geld'. Everyone had to contribute towards this; the money was collected from all over the country in carts and delivered to the king's treasury at Winchester. Although these taxes were the result of a crisis they set a precedent: everyone should be taxed to meet certain definite common needs such as war. But for centuries taxation was to be exceptional, for the kings of England were expected to live 'of their own', that is from the income from the vast estates which they held as the country's richest landowner.

All of these developments were to be passed on as part of the Anglo-Saxon inheritance. No one, however, could have foreseen that when King Alfred died his dynasty was to end in disaster and ignominy. In fact most of his immediate successors indicated far otherwise. His son Edward the Elder, his grandson Athelstan and his great-grandson, Athelstan's nephew, Edgar, were all great kings who took up where Alfred had left off the task of creating and consolidating the new kingdom of England.

From the first Edward the Elder was styled 'king of the Anglo-Saxons' and this indeed was what he set out to be. Under him his father's defensive war turned into an offensive one. In 909 he opened hostilities which lasted a decade and ended with him in control of the whole of the country south of the Humber. The king was a brilliant military tactician. In his campaigns he had the support of Ethelred, ealdorman of Mercia, who was married to his sister, Aethelflaed, 'Lady of the Mercians'. Year by year they edged further into the Danelaw territory, each time securing another area by building a 'burh'. In 917 the city of Colchester fell signalling the passing into his hands of the whole of East Anglia and the eastern midlands. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* writes:

'And many people who had been under the rule of the Danes in East Anglia and in Essex submitted to him; and all the army in East Anglia swore agreement with him, that they [agree to] all that he would, and keep peace with all whom the king wished to keep peace, both at sea and on land.'

Edward wisely accepted the Danes as his subjects letting them live under him according to their own system of law.

The next turning point came after the deaths of both his sister and brother-in-law when he was formally elected king of Mercia: 'And all the people who had settled in

St. Dunstan, Archbishop of Canterbury, kneels in adoration before Christ. By tradition this is a self-portrait by the saint when he was Abbot of Glastonbury. Above him one of the Latin verses reads: 'I pray thee, Christ, protect me Dunstan.' Dunstan was the prime mover in the cultural revival of the tenth century. He was himself a skilled calligrapher, painter and player of the harp.

Pictura et scriptura huius pagine sub
uifa: est de propria manu s^ci dunstani.



Mercia, both Danish and English, submitted to him.' By 920 he had reconquered England as far as the Peak District.

'And then the king of Scots and all the people of the Scots . . . and all who live in Northumbria, both English and Danish, Norseman and others, and also the king of the Strathclyde Welsh . . . chose him as their lord and father.'

When Edward the Elder died on 17 July 924 he bequeathed to his eldest, Athelstan, a mighty achievement.

Athelstan was to be like his father, a victorious leader in the field of battle. But he was also to take his place as one of the great kings then ruling in Northern Europe, one whose court was famous for its splendour. During his reign the Norsemen invasions renewed, time and again attempting to set up a northern kingdom based on York. In 927 Athelstan defeated them and not only re-established his rule in that part of the country but at the same time received the submission of what was left of the pre-Viking Northumbrian kingdom which centred on Bamburgh, along with that of the kings of Scotland, Strathclyde and Gwent. Athelstan had to return the following year to defeat the Norsemen yet again, and shortly after that even the Welsh kings did him homage.

Athelstan saw himself as king of England in the grandest sense casting himself in the following terms in documents: 'I, Athelstan, king of the English, elevated by the right hand of the Almighty, which is Christ, to the throne of the whole kingdom of Britain.'

His task was to weld together a people made up of West Saxons, Mercians, East Anglians, Danes, Norsemen and Northumbrians. This he did by being an active law maker and also by introducing a single currency for the realm. In the year that he died, 937, he was once again victorious in battle at a place called Brunanburgh, defeat-



Coin of Athelstan. The use of the profile follows classical precedent.

ing an alliance of the Norsemen with the kings of Scotland and Strathclyde.

Athelstan's greatest legacy was the establishment of the notion of a single king ruling both north and south. His death was followed by a period of twenty years during which three kings reigned and a Norse kingdom based on York kept on reasserting itself. This was the prime problem which beset Athelstan's brothers, Edmund and Eadred, both of whom followed him as king in succession. Both of them were successful in driving the Norsemen out of York, Eadred dealing with the last of the Norse adventurers, Eric Bloodaxe, whose death in 954 was to usher in twenty-five years of peace.

On Eadred's death, Edmund the Elder's son, Eadwig, was elected king. Short though the previous two reigns had been, both kings had been outstanding. Now there succeeded one who demonstrated the weakness of the system, for he was feckless and defiant, upsetting everyone around him. So deficient was he in the qualities needed to rule that both Mercia and Northumbria defected and chose his younger brother, Edgar. If Eadwig had not died in 959 there would have been revolution, but his death made way for another great king.

Edgar was only sixteen when he succeeded. He died at thirty-two leaving behind him a legend of having been instrumental in giving England a golden age of peace. In achieving that he was aided by three quite outstanding churchmen, Dunstan, Archbishop of Canterbury, Oswald, Archbishop of York and Aethelwold, Bishop of Winchester. They played a crucial role in the conduct of affairs of state but at the same time carried through a radical reform of the church, introducing a new set of rules to govern monasteries based on those used on the Continent at the great abbey of Cluny. This close relationship of church and state was reflected in another significant development, the introduction of the ceremony of crowning and anointing the king. This rite was performed when Edgar was thirty and shortly after, it is said, it was followed by the homage of his subject kings, who rowed him from his palace to the church at Chester while he tended the prow.

By the time Edgar died in 975 the kings of England had come to occupy a position as among the leading rulers in Western Europe. Then followed forty years in which it seemed nearly everything they had achieved was thrown away. But not quite, for the idea of the single kingdom was so strong that it was able to survive decades of rule by two unworthy occupants of the throne. The first of these, Edgar's eldest son Edward, was only fifteen at his accession. He was violent, so much so that within three years he was deliberately murdered in a plot which involved his stepmother, brother and his servants. The tragedy was that Ethelred, his brother, was to be no better.

The name Ethelred means 'noble counsel' but later he was to be labelled 'unraed' or 'no counsel', worse even, for it could mean 'evil counsel' or even 'treacherous plot'. Ethelred came to power as the result of a crime. He remained always a guilty and insecure man. He was the first Anglo-Saxon king to fail in the duty to lead his men in battle. During a reign of thirty-eight years he only led them thrice. When he succeeded to the throne, England was a rich, powerful and renowned country. By the time he died it had been over-run by enemy forces. Ethelred's reign coincided with a



Emma of Normandy, queen of Ethelred and Canute, receiving the *Enconium*, a tribute to her in her second widowhood, written about 1040 to press the claim of her son, Harthacanute, to the throne. This is a rare instance of the biography of someone who had no claims to sainthood, the work of a monk of St. Omer in Normandy who presents Emma with his book. Behind stand her two sons, Harthacanute and the future Edward the Confessor.

new wave of attacks by the Norsemen, ones which were spurred on by the fact that the country was once again worth plundering and was also an easy prey, for it had a weak ineffective king who had disbanded the fleet.

The characteristic of this reign was inertia. Both king and government stood by, letting the Norse invaders march the length and breadth of the land without doing anything much to stop them. Even worse, they embarked on a policy of appeasement, buying off the Norsemen with huge payments of gold, the infamous 'Dane-geld'. In 991 Ethelred bought peace for the sum of 22,000 pounds in gold. So inept was the government that in 1002 the king ordered the massacre of the long-settled Danes believing them to be abettors of the Norsemen, when they were not.

By then the Norse attacks had taken a far more serious direction, the conquest of the kingdom. In 1009 Sweyn, king of Denmark, landed at the head of a vast army and by 1013 '... all the nation regarded him as full king.' Ethelred fled into exile. But then Sweyn died and in the confused period which followed Ethelred died too, followed not long after by the death of his son Edmund and the election by the Witenagemot of Sweyn's son, Canute.

In this way England entered the eleventh century as part of a huge Scandinavian empire which embraced Denmark and Sweden and part of Norway. Canute, who had begun his life as a bloodthirsty Norse warrior, transformed himself into an ideal Anglo-Saxon king. He married Ethelred's widow, Emma of Normandy, and chose as his model, King Edgar. For Canute England was the jewel in his crown. He became a great lawgiver realising that in order to govern successfully he must be true to his contract with his people. His greatest innovation was to divide the entire country into four great earldoms each presided over by an 'earl' or 'jarl'. Canute was the most powerful king in Western Europe and when he went to Rome for the coronation of the Holy Roman Emperor by the pope he wrote back describing how they 'all received me with honour, and honoured me with lavish gifts.'

Canute, however, failed to make any provision as to what would happen after his death. He left two sons, one by Emma, Harthacanute, and another, Harold Harefoot, by his mistress. Harthacanute rushed off to Denmark while Harold seized power and had himself proclaimed king. He reigned for five calamitous years, dying when Harthacanute was about to land at the head of an army to reclaim the kingdom. Harthacanute now took over but regarded England as little more than a source of money to maintain his Scandinavian empire. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* sums him up: 'And he did nothing worthy of a king as long as he ruled.' After two years he died and was succeeded by his half-brother, Ethelred's son, Edward.