

Chapter Seven

1066

ON the night of 24 April 1066 a comet appeared in the night sky. Today we know it to have been Halley's comet but to men at the time such a fiery portent presaged dire and dramatic events on earth. And in the case of England, this was to prove true for by the close of that year, Harold, the last Anglo-Saxon king, had perished on the field of battle and William, Duke of Normandy, had become king.

It was the outcome of a train of events which went back to the reign of Edward the Confessor. Edward, who came to the throne in 1042, was a competent and wise monarch, ruling England for twenty-four years and leaving a united country to his successor. He was a man of deep piety and his greatest legacy was to be the construction of Westminster Abbey. Although Edward was childless this was not a problem, for Anglo-Saxon kings did not succeed by primogeniture, the succession of the eldest son. They were elected by the assembly of nobles, the Witenagemot, and any noble who was of royal blood could be chosen. It was through the ceremony of anointing with holy oil and coronation that the man chosen became king. When Edward the Confessor lay dying on 5th January 1066 he nominated Harold, Earl of Wessex of the House of Godwin, as his heir. After Edward's death, Harold was duly elected by the Witenagemot.

Harold's somewhat tenuous claim to royal descent was through his mother, a Scandinavian princess. His sister had been Edward's queen. He was a man of strong character and a brilliant soldier. The earls of Wessex were the most powerful in the land and Harold's father, Earl Godwin, had been instrumental in putting Edward the Confessor on the throne. But the relationship was never an easy one. Edward, who had been brought up in exile in Normandy, tried to assert his independence of the House of Godwin by appointing Normans to positions in his government. For a time the earl and his two sons were exiled but eventually they returned, supported by a fleet, and were reconciled to the king. Therefore, when Edward died and Harold succeeded, everything seemed to indicate that the Anglo-Saxon kingdom would continue as before.



1 Edward the Confessor enthroned in his palace entrusts Harold, his brother-in-law, with a mission. Harold and his party then set sail and

are driven ashore in France and handed over to Duke William of Normandy.

William I was to claim later that Edward the Confessor had chosen him as his heir but it is likely that this was embroidery after the event, when William needed to stress his rights to a throne he had taken by force of arms. William claimed that Edward had promised him the crown in 1051 but there is nothing to prove this beyond his assertion. Even more mysterious is what happened in 1064 when Harold visited William in Normandy. No one knows why he went or what exactly happened but William stated that it was for Harold to swear his allegiance to him as future king of England.

The Bayeux Tapestry was embroidered during the decade 1070-1080, almost certainly commissioned by William the Conqueror's half-brother, Odo of Bayeux. Odo was also Count of Kent where the embroidery was executed, most probably at Canterbury. It is 70 metres long and 50 centimetres wide and it is stitched in woollen yarn in eight colours onto fine linen. Both as a work of art and an historical document it is unique.



2 While in Normandy Harold swears, touching two reliquaries, fealty to William. In the oath Harold

probably swore that he would not oppose William's claim to the English throne.

William's claim was extremely remote, for he was only Edward's second cousin once removed, a great-nephew of his queen. A much more important factor was the nature of the duke and his people. The duchy of Normandy was only a century old, a creation of William's grandfather, a Viking who had conquered this part of northern France. William himself was illegitimate, the son of the daughter of a tanner and Duke Robert. He succeeded when he was only seven years old and during the following twenty years was to emerge as an experienced and able ruler, administrator and commander. He was tough, cruel but not tyrannical, endowed with huge energy and motivated by an overweening ambition. He was a capable and brave leader of his men in the field and did not hesitate to share their rigours to the full. He was also a devout



3 Harold violates the oath by accepting the crown on Edward's death. Astrologers tell Harold of a

comet in the sky, an evil omen foreboding disaster for the oath-breaker.

and fervent supporter of the church. All of these personal qualities explain why he was so successful when he conquered England.

But it does not explain why he did it. This needs to be set in the broader framework of the Normans as a people. At the close of the eleventh century they had a vitality other peoples lacked. At the same time that they were to conquer England and Wales they conquered southern Italy and Sicily. A little later they were to play a major role in the first Crusade to rescue the Holy Land

Although the tapestry records the conquest of England, its purpose was a religious one, to show that perjury following an oath taken over relics, as had been done by Harold, drew retribution on that person and his kinsmen. In this way the invasion and the defeat and the death of Harold are presented as Acts of God. That story is told with 626 characters, 202 horses, 41 ships and 37 buildings besides an abundance of detail about life in the eleventh century.



from Moslem control. Compared with Normandy England was a rich country, and it promised ample rewards to anyone who joined the army William began to assemble.

William was also a master of diplomacy and propaganda. He succeeded in persuading both the Holy Roman Emperor and the pope of the justice of his cause. Indeed the latter even sent him a banner as a symbol of his support.

While William was gathering his army and building his fleet Harold was faced with another invasion by another claimant, Harold Hardrada, king of Norway, who had the support of Harold's brother, Tostig. In response to this, Harold summoned his army and his fleet in preparation to repel this assault from the north. For four months they waited and it never came so Harold dispersed the army and sent the fleet to London. No sooner had this been done than news came that the king of Norway with a fleet of three hundred ships had landed in the north. The Norwegians marched

4 William lands at Pevensey, his ship bearing the banner bestowed by Pope Alexander II.



on York and defeated the Earls of Mercia and Northumbria. This presented Harold with an appalling problem for he was threatened on both sides, an army actually in the north and a second one ready to cross the Channel. Was it possible for him to march north, defeat the Norwegians and return south in time to meet the Normans? Harold gathered his troops and marched them north. On 25 September he gained one of the decisive victories of the age at Stamford Bridge. The king of Norway and Tostig were both killed and what was left of the invading army took to their ships. They were never to return.

Luck, however, was against Harold for while he was in the north the wind changed direction enabling the Normans to set sail and land at Pevensey on 28 September. As Harold was in the north, the fleet in London, and the militia disbanded, William was unopposed. Harold and his mounted housecarls came south in less than

5 The Battle of Hastings in action, 14 September 1066.



thirteen days. Scraping together what infantry he could, his aim was to surprise the Normans as he had the Norwegians by his speed. But this time his army was exhausted. Surprise he did achieve and through it the choice of battle site, a hilly stretch of land flanked by marshy streams not far from Hastings where William had made his headquarters.

Harold formed his soldiers into a wall of shields at the brow of the hill. They fought on foot armed with axes. William's army was made up of archers and knights on horseback wielding swords. These he divided into three, reflecting exactly the free-booting nature of the expedition: to the left Bretons, to the right mercenaries, with the Normans in the centre. Both armies numbered about seven thousand but the invading army was not only the more seasoned and experienced but the less tired. The Battle of Hastings began at 9 a.m. on 14 October. The duke's first attack up hill was driven back and if Harold and his men had then seized the offensive there is a chance

6 Harold dies after being shot in the eye with an arrow.

that they would have won the battle, but they did not. Instead a second and then a third attack followed. The last was fatal, for Harold was felled by a mounted knight with a sword. When the Anglo-Saxons saw that this had happened they fled. Harold's body was buried in unconsecrated ground on a cliff. Thus perished the last Anglo-Saxon king.

The Battle of Hastings was to be the opening chapter in the story of the death of Anglo-Saxon England. Soon the whole of the south-east surrendered to William. The army advanced on London, sacking and pillaging on its way. At Berkhamstead the Anglo-Saxon nobility capitulated, swore fealty to William as their king, and parted with hostages. On Christmas Day William was anointed and crowned in Westminster Abbey. Soon after he returned to Normandy.

The conquest of England was not achieved overnight. At first William declared his intent of being king within an existing system respecting the Anglo-Saxon people, their laws and customs. But within a few years that policy was abandoned in favour of reducing England to the status of a province of Normandy.

When William left he appointed two regents. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records: 'Bishop Odo [William's half-brother] and Earl William [fitzOsbern of Hereford] were left behind here, and they built castles far and wide throughout the land, oppressing the unhappy people, and things went ever from bad to worse.'

The result was that constant rebellions broke out all over the country in the following four years. They were rigorously put down, especially the one in the north which, from 1069-70, was given over to a reign of terror. The city of York was sacked, the monasteries were pillaged, churches burned to the ground and the land laid waste. It was recorded that:

'William in the fullness of his wrath ordered the corn and cattle, with the implements of husbandry and every sort of provisions, to be collected in heaps and set on fire until the whole was consumed and thus destroyed at once all that could serve for support of life in the whole country lying beyond the Humber.'

For three years the wretched inhabitants struggled against famine, misery and death. It was to take a decade for the north to begin to recover. Already by 1071, five years on from the invasion, William's ruthless and efficient military machine had made the Norman Conquest an irreversible fact.