

The events leading up to the Norman Conquest

The events leading up to the Norman Conquest, when England was taken over by the 'Normans', led by William of Normandy (an area of what is now France) are quite complicated. We will meet a number of different contenders to the English throne at this time and we will study their motivations. To begin though, we need to go back a few years to the January of 1066...

In January of 1066, the English King, Edward the Confessor, died. He had no heirs (children in line to inherit the throne), which caused a problem. There was no natural successor. Edward had, however, told two other people at different times, that they could be the next king.

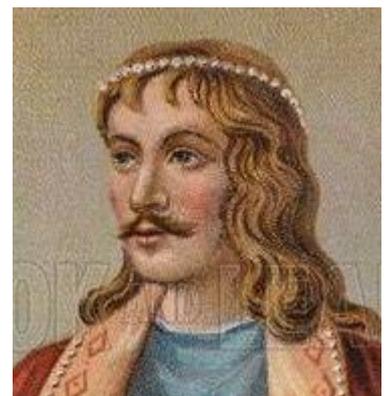
Why did Edward do this? There are a number of possibilities. He may have felt under pressure depending on who he was with. He lived for a long time in Normandy and may have made a promise about a future Norman King whilst surrounded by Normans. The years passed however and as he grew closer to the English nobility, living in England again, he may have changed his mind and (hoped) the Normans had forgotten about it or not taken it too seriously.

Edward was a deeply religious man (always confessing his sins) and used to leave his advisors to deal with political matters whilst he focused on religious ones. There is a chance he didn't really think through his promises with political foresight, so when he died, he left a political mess behind him. The irony was, Edwards reign had been one of peace and economic stability for England, as he disliked war.

The Witan, the Anglo-Saxon council who were supposed to deal with such matters and had authority to decide on the next king, had a choice of four people to consider. The decision was not an easy one to make, although the group could never have known how massive the consequences of their decision would turn out to be.

The Contenders:

1) Edgar the Aetheling. This was a young Anglo-Saxon prince, the great-nephew of Edward. The throne had actually been promised to his father, but as he was now dead, it made sense that Edgar



now had a claim. He was only 15 however, so it seemed like a bad idea as he was inexperienced. How could a 15-year-old lead an army? However, he was young and healthy, and his reign could lead to many years of stability if accepted by the nobility. He was after all a relation of the last King.

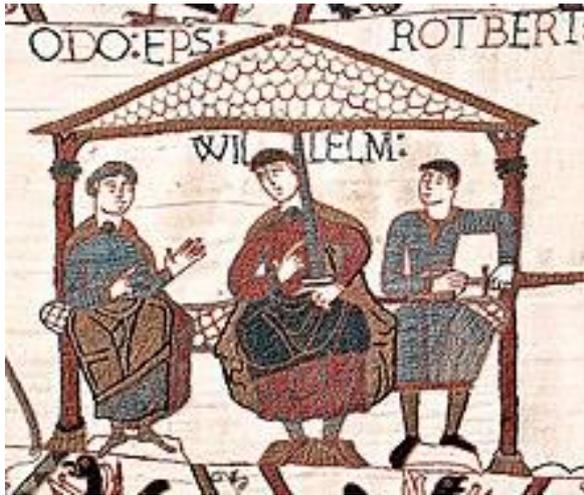


2) **Harald Hardrada.** This Viking King's claim was also based on his father being promised the throne. It wasn't unusual for England to be ruled by Vikings, they had been for much of the past century. Harald Hardrada's name meant 'hard ruler'. This tough Viking King could stop any future hostile invasions from other countries, but he was a foreigner himself too. Some of the nobility may not like that



3) **Harold Godwinson.** This rich noble had been Edward the Confessor's right-hand man and was also his brother in law. He had been promised the throne most recently by Edward and had the support of many of the Anglo-Saxon nobles.

Harold is the King we saw in the first source we looked at today. In the Bayeux Tapestry he is shown touching two church altars whilst William watches him. This is supposed to show Harold swearing an oath that he would support William in his bid to be King of England after Edward's death. We don't know if this really happened though.



4) William of Normandy. This distant cousin of Edward knew William well (William used to live in Normandy) and was outraged to hear Edward had promised the throne to Harold. William was supported by the Pope (the Head of the Church) and felt he had God on his side. He was the son of a Duke and still a relative of Edward, but also a foreigner too.

Using the information sheet and the clip task information....

Challenge: In pairs create a short presentation for the Witan on why your contender should be picked as the next King.

More challenging: In pairs create a short presentation for the Witan on why your contender should be picked as the next King. Prepare to defend your claim though as the Witan are going to grill you.

Mega challenging: You are the Witan members. Be prepared to ask your contenders tough questions. What social and economic benefits can they offer? Will they bring peace or war? You will grill the 'more challenging' students.