

British History Series: Episode 9 - 1066 & The Norman Conquest

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Key Event: The Norman Conquest of England

Date: 1066

Main Figures: Harold Godwinson, William of Normandy, Harald Hardrada, Edgar the Ætheling

Background: The Death of Edward the Confessor

- Edward the Confessor died in January 1066 without an heir, sparking a succession crisis.
 - England had been part of a Danish North Sea Empire for 25 years before Edward's reign.
 - The House of Wessex's only surviving heir was **Edgar the Ætheling** (aged 13), deemed too young to rule.
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Claimants to the Throne

1. Harold Godwinson

- Powerful Earl of Wessex; brother-in-law to Edward.
- Elected king by the Witan (council of nobles) but lacked royal blood.

2. William of Normandy

- Claimed Edward promised him the throne (no witnesses).

- Argued Harold swore an oath of allegiance to him (disputed).
- Great-nephew of Emma of Normandy (Edward's mother).

3. **Harald Hardrada**

- Viking King of Norway; sought to revive Danish claims to England.
- Allied with Harold's exiled brother, **Tostig Godwinson**.

4. **Sweyn II of Denmark**

- Nephew of King Cnut; considered a threat but delayed invasion.

5. **Edgar the Ætheling**

- Last male heir of the House of Wessex; too young to defend the kingdom.

Key Battles of 1066

1. **Battle of Fulford (20 September)**

- Hardrada and Tostig defeated Earls Edwin and Morcar near York.
- York surrendered, but Hardrada waited for hostages/tribute.

2. **Battle of Stamford Bridge (25 September)**

- Harold Godwinson marched north and surprised the Vikings.
- Hardrada and Tostig killed; Viking army decimated (only 24 ships returned).
- *Legend:* A lone Viking held the bridge until killed by a spear from below.

3. **Battle of Hastings (14 October)**

- William landed in Sussex; Harold raced south with exhausted troops.

- Harold's army formed a shield wall but was broken by Norman cavalry/feigned retreats.
 - Harold died—possibly from an arrow to the eye or cut down by knights.
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Aftermath: The Norman Conquest

- **William crowned King on Christmas Day 1066**, but resistance continued:
 - The Witan briefly proclaimed Edgar king before submitting.
 - **"Harrying of the North" (1069–70)**: William brutally crushed rebellions, leaving villages ruined for decades.
 - Castles (e.g., Tower of London) built to control the population.
 - **Domesday Book (1085)**: A vast tax survey recording all landholdings.
 - **Legacy**: Norman barons replaced Anglo-Saxon nobles; French influence reshaped English culture/language.
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Fun Facts & Trivia

- **1066 is Britain's most popular 4-digit PIN**—avoid using it!
- Harold's sister **Edith** married Edward but had no children—possibly due to Edward's grudge against her family.
- **Edgar the Ætheling's sister Margaret** married Scotland's King Malcolm III, linking the House of Wessex to future monarchs.
- William's son **Henry I** later married Malcolm and Margaret's daughter, restoring Anglo-Saxon blood to the royal line.