

# The Norman Claim of 1066

**By: Sir Andrew FitzMichael**

The case of the Norman invasion of England, leading to the conquest by Duke William of Normandy on the surface may seem a rather simple vulgar grab for power. However as the Normans saw things, they had a claim that had moral as well as political logic behind it.

On the most basic level, Duke William of Normandy had a promise from Earl Harold Godwinsson to support his tenuous if legitimate claim to the throne of Wessex (England) when the current King died. Edward (the Confessor) was childless and it was widely known that England would have a contested succession when he died. William had gained Earl Harold's support through a series of adventures in Normandy (as depicted in the Bayeux Tapestry) when the two struck up a friendship and alliance. However the Norman claim went far beyond a friendship and an implicit deal between two powerful men.

To see the situation in 1066 one has to go back nearly one hundred years. First of all, Normandy had close ties of friendship and kinship with Wessex going back to 988 when a formal treaty arranged by the Pope between Normandy and Wessex was signed where both agreed not to harbor the other's enemies (namely, hostile Vikings). Normandy was the closest land opposite Wessex on the continent. They were natural trading partners, and several times during the the eleventh century Normandy had been a refuge for the rulers of the house of Wessex. When Canute had overrun Wessex in the early years of the eleventh century, where had King Aethelraed and his son Edmund Aetheling fled to? They had gone to Normandy for refuge.

England also had a recent history of foreigners ruling. Canute had been a Dane after all. Still within living memory was the reign of Canute and his sons. He and Edmund (known as Ironside), son of Aethelraed had agreed to share rule in England after a bitter series of wars with the Viking Army of the Danegeld had finally ended more or less in stalemate. Canute became king less than two months later when Edmund Ironside died. Canute had proven to be a great king and ruled long and wisely. Later in the century England was finally lost to the Danish kings due to the weak rule his dissolute sons and in 1042 King Edward (the Confessor) restored the Wessex line to the throne. Edward was half Norman, and had lived in exile in the Norman court during the rule of Canute and his sons. Edward was culturally very Norman after growing up in Normandy, speaking French, and when finally restored to power brought Normans to England with him.

England had been in a power struggle between the chief earls of the realm for much of the last two centuries. First of all, there was the whole issue of who was the chief kingdom of England anyway? The kingdom of Wessex had only asserted it's primacy as the lead Kingdom during the reign of Aethelstan during the early tenth century. There were plenty who remembered the ascendancy of the Kingdoms of Mercia and Northumbria from times past. Memories were long and the English did not see themselves as one country, rather as several under one great King. The Cornish, Welsh, and Scots suffered Wessex's claim only with disdain as foreign upstarts, tolerating the military force of the claim so long as they were left more or less to rule themselves. Another legacy of Norse rule in England during the eleventh century was the rise of the Godwine dynasty. Earl Godwine was English, but originally was only a thegn. His family had risen to power under the Norse Kings and dominated the Witan (ruling elders) who advised the king. Even after the sons of Canute had lost control of the throne, the Godwine line continued to rise in power and prominence.

The lead son of the dynasty, Earl Harold Godwinsson was a strong man, and his brothers were equally formidable as Earls governing the Kingdoms of England. However, there were not related to the line of the legendary King Alfred. The Wessex line of kings reputedly went all the way back to the God Wotan. While the English were by now thoroughly Christian, such ties were still respected and revered. When King Edward died early in 1066, the election of the Godwine line to the throne was a distinct break in the

dynasty. To their credit, they were a strong, dynamic family. This fact alone however was not enough to give them sole claim to the throne. The election of the Godwine line to the throne of Wessex guaranteed that England would face more conflict. Distant as their kinship ties were, the Normans in the person of Duke William represented the most direct line of succession to the Wessex line.

In an age when claims were made (and confirmed) when backed with force, William of Normandy felt that he had every right to rule in England. So as the summer of 1066 wore on, he gathered an army, ships to transport them, and political backing from Rome to force his claim on the throne of England.