

Eastern Sussex from 900 to the death of Edward the Confessor in 1066



Introduction

Most people may think that pre-1066 England was a peaceful country about to be rudely invaded by a foreigner.

In fact this period was one of the most disturbed in English history. The throne was usually contested; kings were often short-lived and sometimes murdered; invasion followed rebellion and plot, and the back to the beginning. Royal marriages failed to secure the peace. This was a hugely critical period for eastern Sussex as the events that took place in these years were the preludes to William of Normandy's invasion in 1066, which for eastern Sussex was followed by a remarkable age of relative peace.

The record of kingships underlines the point:

EDWARD (The Elder) 899 - 924

Succeeded his father Alfred the Great.

ATHELSTAN 924 - 939

Son of Edward the Elder. During his reign individual kingdoms were brought together to create a single and unified England.

EDMUND I 939 - 946

Succeeded his half-brother Athelstan as king aged 18. Re-established control over northern England, which had fallen back under Danish influence following the death of Athelstan. He died after being stabbed aged just 25. His two sons, Eadwig and Edgar, were perhaps considered too young to become kings.

EADRED 946 - 955

Son of Edward the Elder by his third marriage. Eadred succeeded his brother Edmund but died in his early 30s, unmarried and without an heir.

EADWIG 955 - 959

The eldest son of Edmund I, Eadwig was about 16 when crowned. Eadwig died when he was just 20; the circumstances of his death are not recorded.

EDGAR 959 - 975

The youngest son of Edmund I.

EDWARD THE MARTYR 975 - 978

Eldest son of Edgar. Edward was crowned when aged just 12. Edward's short reign ended when he was murdered by followers of Æthelred.

ÆTHELRED II (THE UNREADY) 978 - 1016

Æthelred was 'badly advised'. He became king aged about 10, but fled to Normandy in 1013 to join his second wife Emma and his children by her, Edward, Alfred and Godgifu, when Sweyn Forkbeard, king of the Danes, invaded England.

Sweyn was pronounced king of England on Christmas Day 1013 but died just five weeks later. Æthelred returned in 1014. The rest of his reign was one of a constant conflict with Sweyn's son Cnut, who re-invaded.

EDMUND II IRONSIDE 1016 - 1016

Son of Æthelred II by his first wife Aelfleda. Edmund had led the resistance to Cnut's invasion since 1015. He eventually made a pact with Cnut to divide the kingdom between them. Edmund died shortly later in 1016, possibly assassinated.

CANUTE (CNUT THE GREAT) THE DANE 1016 - 1035

Cnut became king of all England following the death of Edmund II. In 1017, he married Emma of Normandy, the widow of Æthelred II, and divided England into the four earldoms of East Anglia, Mercia, Northumbria and Wessex.

HAROLD I (1035 – 1037 of Anglia, Mercia and Northumbria) then 1037- 1040 of all England

Also known as Harold Harefoot he was the (probably) illegitimate son of Cnut's first wife Aelfgifu of Northampton. He had been bequeathed England excluding Wessex but claimed the full English crown on the death of Cnut while his (possible) half-brother Harthacnut (who had been bequeathed Wessex) was in Denmark protecting his Danish kingdom. Harold was not made 'protector of all England' until 1037 but died three years later.

HARTHACANUT (1035 – 1037 of Wessex) then 1040 - 1042

Son of Cnut and Emma of Normandy, Harthacnut sailed to England from Denmark with his mother following the death of Harold I. He invited his half-brother Edward, Emma's son from her first marriage to Aethelred II, back from exile in Normandy. Harthacnut died aged just 24 and was the last Danish king to rule England.

EDWARD THE CONFESSOR 1042-1066

Following the death of Harthacnut, his half-brother Edward restored the rule of the house of Wessex to the English throne but he died childless. His only somewhat distantly related blood successors were his half-brother Edmund Ironside's grandson Edgar Atheling and his mother Emma's great nephew, his cousin once removed: William of Normandy.

To simplify the account, coverage of the period is split over three papers, this one and two others which focus on the key points about the lives of William of Normandy and Harold Godwinson and the ways in which they were involved with eastern Sussex.

Eastern Sussex and the Viking raids

There is a very little charter information about eastern Sussex during these years, and although some events can be found in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle they tend to be general

ones involving Sussex in passing. This means that when something *is* known it gets a disproportionately large review, as it is a glimpse through a very opaque window. There were no local abbots to consider at this time but the abbeys of Fécamp, Tréport and St Denis, Paris, had some interests in local manors and estates and these will be included in the discussions.

Sussex was now within Wessex and the push to reconquer all of England was usually well away from eastern Sussex, although the ports must have been called on for ships from time to time. Alfred had gradually pushed back the Danes who had settled in northern and eastern England, so that between 884 and 954 rule in England was shared between Anglo-Saxon law and the Danelaw (divided NW to SE, generally following the alignment of Watling Street – the great Roman road from London to Anglesey). Although Alfred had been recognised as the king of all the English some Viking raids continued. There was one particularly large raid of 250 ships landing not far away from the eastern Sussex boundary – at Appledore, Kent in 892. It took no fewer than four more English kings – Edward, Athelstan, Edmund and finally Eadred to remove the Viking threat, and restore full English rule across the whole of England.

After 900 the very first bit of direct information about eastern Sussex we have is from 900 itself, in Alfred the Great's will. He gives to his cousin Osferth the manors of Beckley and Rotherfield (and also manors at Ditchling, Southampton, Leominster, Angmering and Feltham).

In 928 Athelstan's 'Statute of Greatly' (made at Faversham) recorded a mint at Haestingaceastre. This must show that the town was a notable trading centre, but Athelstan was producing silver coins from 30 mints across the country, many to pay off the Vikings. The first surviving coins bearing the town's name date from 985-991. There were five mint operators in Hastings in 1017-23, a later time of economic boom, but minting there was discontinued at the end of the reign of King Stephen (1135-54).

The death of Eadwine, an ealdorman or earl of Sussex, is recorded in 982. He was buried at Abingdon Abbey in Berkshire, where one version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* was compiled. According to that abbey's records, in which he was called *princeps Australium Saxonum, Eadwinus nomine* (Eadwine leader of the South Saxons), he bequeathed estates to this abbey in his will. Earlier in the same year he had witnessed a charter of king Æthelred II as *Eaduine dux*. His name was also added to a forged charter dated 956.

After Alfred there continued to be sporadic Viking raids in south-eastern England, but there had been nearly 100 years of relative peace until there were serious recurrences after 980.

At first there were coastal raids, mainly in Kent, but eastern Sussex would not have been spared some attention and by 994 the whole of the south coast from Essex to Hampshire was involved. There was a massive Viking attack on London led by Sweyn and Olaf Tryggvason in 994, but they were beaten off and went harrying, with the coast of Sussex one of their targets. In 997 a Viking army created a base on the Isle of Wight and they

carried out raids over the next 20 years, including one into Kent in 999. The biggest problem for the English was the ineffectiveness of Æthelred in dealing with them.

Time after time he bought off the Vikings with Danegeld, which led to brief periods of calm, only for raiding to be resumed. As with blackmail, the bribes to go away became bigger and bigger.

Vikings based in Normandy were also a problem. Diplomatic approaches were made to Duke Richard I, but by 990 feelings became quite hostile. The Pope brokered an Anglo-Norman treaty in 991 but the Vikings still overwintered across the Channel. A later event to try to help control their raiding from Normandy was the 1002 marriage of Æthelred to Emma, sister of the new duke of Normandy. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (E version) for 1002 says *'And in the same spring, the Lady, Richard's daughter, came here to the land'*. The marriage unfortunately failed to stop the Vikings using Normandy as a raiding base. It did, however, create some interesting general and dynastic issues which would come to haunt eastern Sussex and England as a whole.

A prelude to issues involving eastern Sussex is hidden in this charter issued by King Aethelred II in 1005:

King Æthelred to Eynsham Abbey; confirmation of its foundation by Æthelmær, with endowments including Rameslege (Rameslie) bequeathed to Eynsham by Wulfin (Wulfwyn), Æthelmær's kinswoman, who was a 'property holder in Sussex'.

Æthelmær 'the Ealdorman or Earl' was a kinsman of Æthelred and it appears that he had been bequeathed Rameslege by Wulfwyn at her death in 982. Æthelmær retired to Eynsham Abbey but died in 1013. At some point, possibly as part of the marriage agreement, Æthelred had promised Emma that he would give Rameslegh to Fécamp Abbey and would compensate Eynsham Abbey, but he failed to do so before his death. Emma was not to forget this and dealt with the matter later, an issue which we shall discuss below.

In 1009 a large Viking army landed in east Kent but were paid off with £3000, after which they raided and burned everywhere in Sussex, Hampshire and Berkshire, even though Æthelred had placed men against their attacks throughout the coastal districts. Then the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle says that in 1011 the Vikings overran all Kent, Sussex, Surrey and 'Haestingas' which appears to show that the Hastings area was still a significant and semi-independent locality.

In 1013 Sweyn of Denmark invaded with rather more serious intent. After briefly landing at Sandwich he sailed north to the Humber Estuary and landed his army at Gainsborough on the River Trent. All the threatened areas submitted and they marched southward. Briefly repulsed from London, they went westward but soon returned and London too capitulated. The growing difficulties meant that Emma fled for Normandy with her children later that year. Eventually Æthelred was also forced to join them, when *'all the nation regarded him (Sweyn) as full king'*.

Sweyn had become king of England by conquest but just five weeks later he suddenly died. The Danes elected Sweyn's son, Cnut, king but in an about-face *'all the councillors of England, ecclesiastical and lay, took council and determined that Ælthelred should be sent for, declaring that no lord was dearer to them than their natural lord "if only he would govern them more justly than before".'*

Ælthelred was called back and somewhat out of character rapidly attacked and drove off Cnut. Emma returned. But in the summer of 1015 Cnut returned and proceeded to march through England. *"[Cnut] came into Sandwich, and straightway sailed around Kent to Wessex, until he came to the mouth of the Frome, and harried in Dorset and Wiltshire and Somerset."* By the winter of 1015–16 Wessex had submitted and Cnut marched north-east through Warwickshire to eastern Mercia.

Emma and the children were now back in Normandy and Ælthelred's oldest surviving son Edmund (Ironside) took things into his own hands. Ælthelred died on 23 April 1016, leaving a confused power vacuum with conflicts in many parts of England. After the Battle of Otford Edmund somehow managed to drive the Vikings into Kent and on to the Isle of Sheppey. Finally there was the evenly matched Battle of Ashingdon or Assandun in Essex in October 1016 which Cnut just won. After it a sort of brief co-ruling arrangement was made, with Edmund in control of Wessex.

But Edmund died suspiciously on 30 November 1016, and Cnut became king of all England. In the following year numbers of high-ranking Englishmen were executed, including some relatives of Earl Godwin of Wessex.

Cnut had won a country that had a surprisingly stable government. He went on to weigh the pros and cons of making a political marriage. He was already married 'in the Danish way' to Ælfgifu of Northampton, whom he was prepared to 'put aside', but he made a formal arrangement to marry Ælthelred's widow, Emma. So a deal was done. Cnut *'had her fetched'* in 1017.

Emma played an active role in the signing of royal grants and charters and she took steps to make sure that Ramesleagh or Rameslie was signed over to the Norman Abbey of Fécamp, a favourite abbey of the Norman court. Emma signed the grants that Cnut made to the abbey in 1017 by which Fécamp was given an estate at 'Rammesleagh' with its harbour, 'as promised by Ælthelred'. Some of Hastings was included in the grant of Rameslie to Fécamp which covered virtually all of the Hundred of Guestling.

This link with Normandy was to last four centuries, and may explain why the Normans chose Hastings as their 1066 base. Rameslie may have been Rye; the full extent of its manor in 1017 is unknown, except that it was to the north and east of Hastings, possibly extending into Kent. The abbey of Fécamp probably founded the churches of All Saints and St Clement on its land after the Norman conquest.

In 1018, at Emma's request, Cnut made a grant smaller than that to Fécamp to Archbishop Ælfstan of Canterbury: 'a copse called Hæselersc (Lower Hazelhurst) in Ticehurst, Sussex'.

At first Cnut ruled Wessex himself, but placed earls in the other three English earldoms and sent Harthacnut as a child 'half-king' to rule Denmark with the assistance of a regent. In 1018 Godwin Wulfnothson was appointed to be earl of East Wessex (Hampshire, Berkshire, Surrey and Sussex) and after the earl of West Wessex (probably Æthelweard) was outlawed, apparently for having caused some subversion whilst Cnut was away, Godwin took the role of earl of all Wessex, bar Kent, in 1020. As Godwin and his family story is so critical to England and eastern Sussex this is covered at length below.

In or just after 1028 a further charter or charters confirmed by Harthacnut after his later accession and also signed by Emma added to Fécamp another estate at Brede and the revenue from two thirds of the tithes of Winchelsea. Overall, although there is one charter it appears to contain two documents which refer to three. C H Haskins says that the cartulary of Fécamp 'is not free from forgeries' but there is no doubt that the present St George's Church in Brede was founded by Fécamp in 1180 and if they had not held the land this might not have happened.

The problem of Normandy

Relations with Normandy started to deteriorate in about 1030. Duke Robert of Normandy may have married Cnut's sister Margaret/Esthrith, but he had repudiated or divorced her. This is not recorded by Norman writers, who naturally tended to avoid writing about things that their dukes might not wish to see, but both Adam of Bremen and Rodulfus Glaber (an 11th-century French historian, in his *Historiarum Libri Quinque*), both record (in a somewhat confused way) a marriage of a sister of Cnut to a duke of Normandy.

Back in England Cnut's death in 1035 was somewhat unexpected. His oldest son Sweyn had been with his mother Ælfgifu in Norway acting as regent, but on being deposed had fled to Denmark where he died in 1034. So he was out of the English succession issue. He was replaced in Norway by Magnus, son of Ólaf Haraldsson. Harthacnut, Cnut's son by Emma, was acting as Cnut's regent in Denmark. Emma promptly manoeuvred on behalf of Harthacnut, but her stepson Harold Harefoot was in England.

The Witan prevaricated and split over the succession, but Harefoot gradually gained ascendancy in England, except in Wessex where Harthacnut held on with Emma as his regent, supported by earl Godwin of Wessex. But the Witan eventually made Harefoot 'protector' of all England in 1037, which made things very difficult for Emma. She fled to Flanders as Normandy was going through a period of instability. If Harthacnut had promptly returned from Denmark he might have gained all England for himself, but he was pinned down defending Denmark from Magnus, now king of Norway.

Then another sudden death: Harold Harefoot died suddenly at the age of 23 on 17 March 1040. The cause of death was some sort of illness, possibly suspicious, but the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* pithily says it was '*divine judgement*'. He certainly does not appear to have been a very nice person at all.

Negotiations between the English magnates and Harthacnut dragged on a while, but eventually he and Emma sailed to Sandwich just before mid-summer with a moderately large escort of 60 ships, receiving a good welcome. Harthacnut is said to have then had Harefoot's body exhumed and thrown into a ditch. It would seem that he had thoroughly disliked his half-brother.

And another: Harthacnut himself died on 8 June 1042, aged only 24. He just dropped down dead with a convulsion according to reports. He was drinking heavily at the time.

The Confessor becomes king

The only surviving male heir of either Æthelred or Cnut was Edward, son of Æthelred II and Emma, but another Sweyn, Harthacnut's cousin by Cnut's sister Estrith Svendsdatter, also had a distant claim; he was also, it seems, the heir presumptive of Denmark, in spite of the above deal with Magnus. The surprising champion of Edward in the Witan was Earl Godwin of Wessex, along with other southern magnates and bishops. Edward (to become the Confessor) was eventually crowned at Winchester on 3 April 1043.

Soon afterwards Edward may have given more land to Fécamp. He declared that the land at Steyning, was to pass to Fécamp Abbey after the death of Bishop Ælfwine. F E Harmer thought that this might have been dubious but it is noted that Harold Godwinson was to seize this land for his own at a later date (although he never touched Rameslie).

In 1048 there were again Viking raids on England against Thanet, Sandwich and the Isle of Wight, all of which were chased off by Edward's navy. In 1049 Edward assisted the Emperor Henry III in his war against Baldwin V of Flanders by using the English navy to blockade the Channel. No doubt many ships from Hastings and the other future Cinque Ports took part in these actions.

In 1051 there was nearly a civil war because of rising tensions between the Godwins and Edward. Edward banished Godwin and his family but they were soon back and becoming even more soundly firmly established in power. They were now truly difficult to dislodge; in fact it took the Battle of Hastings to do it.

Earl Godwin died in 1053 and Harold Godwinson became the pre-eminent earl, taking over Wessex. Edward was merely a nominal king now, and must have gone into a sort of semi-retirement. We are told that he spent much time praying and hunting. The *Vita Ædwardi Regis*, which is a strange document with Godwinian overtones, implies that before 1052 Edward was misguided, but that after this everything went well. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* confirms that the king remained in good health.

Although there remained many tensions in England, eastern Sussex and Wessex appear to have been outside the fray. In November 1065 it became obvious that Edward was dying, but it appears that just before he expired he granted some lands in eastern Sussex to Westminster Abbey. According to the Telligraphus of Edward in 1065/66 he gave

Westminster Abbey lands at ... Eastburneham (? Eastbourne), Chillington in Eastbourne, and West Chilmington.

Much was soon to change dramatically.

Keith Foord with George Kiloh ©BDHS