

Christianity and '1066'



The role of Christianity in the events of the Norman Conquest of England and the Battle of Hastings of 14th October 1066, 950 years ago, was mainly incidental. The driving forces were ambition and greed. All the bishops and archbishops of the time as well as the monasteries and nunneries were Catholic. The word of the Pope governed the outlook of the Church and the people were in fear for their souls. Many bishops, archbishops and abbots were noble placemen and they were powerful in the political world as well as in the church. Some were soldier-bishops.

We know very little of the common man's feelings, but we do know that the nobles expressed their piety by the funding and founding of monasteries such as Fécamp and Jumièges and the building of great churches such as Westminster Abbey and the Abbayes aux Hommes and Dames at Caen. The gifts were often given with directions to say prayers for the donor's soul, not just once but numerous times, before as well as after death. The buildings were expressions of power and only incidentally of piety. Excommunication was a truly dreaded act imposed by the Pope or a senior prelate and in some cases was used as a political tool.

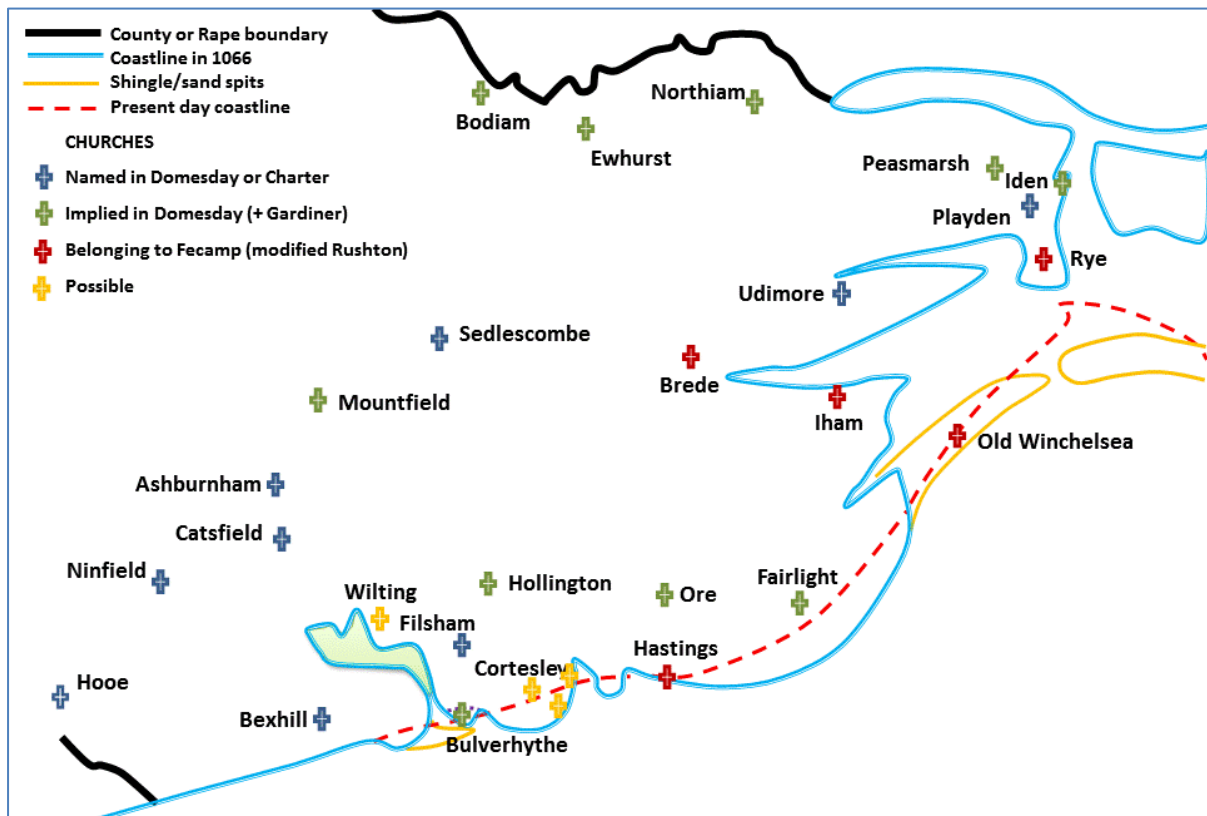
We can list some of the more powerful Norman churchmen: Robert of Rouen (uncle of Duke Robert I), Nicholas of St Ouen (an illegitimate cousin of William the Conqueror), and Bishop Odo of Bayeux (half-brother of William the Conqueror).

On the English side it is important to note that Edward the Confessor, although born in England in 1003, had been taken to Normandy when Queen Emma and her family fled from Sweyn in 1013. Edward briefly returned when Æthelred II was recalled in 1014, and then fled back to Normandy in 1016 when Cnut took the throne, as he was clearly not safe in England even though Cnut promptly married his mother Emma, widow of Æthelred II. He then lived in Normandy until 1041. After 25 years of living there he must have had a Norman outlook. When he came to England in 1041 to join his mother Emma (widowed for a second time) and half-brother King Harthacnut (son of Cnut and Emma) just before the latter died, he was accompanied by trusted Norman friends. After some prevarication by the Witan Edward was crowned king in 1043. Some have regarded him as England's first Norman king.

Edward advanced Robert Champart of Jumièges to be Bishop of London in 1044 and then in 1051 Archbishop of Canterbury, against the wishes of Earl Godwin. This and other matters led to the Godwin family's banishment, then on their return in 1052 to near civil war. Champart fled to Rome and was replaced by Godwin's placeman, Stigand, whom the Pope refused to accept but who somehow clung on, pallium-less and without Papal authority, and therefore not able to perform some functions such as consecrating bishops. Fortunately England had another Archbishop (of York) called Ealdred (who was the one who crowned Harold – not Stigand as shown on the Bayeux Tapestry).

Religion in England was not an unimportant part of everyday life; local churches were small and English local priests were usually ordinary members of their community. They were not

especially well-educated, were usually married, and as shown in the Domesday Book they sometimes had small landholdings. The map below shows the churches in south-east Sussex that existed or possibly existed at the time of the Conquest. The placement of the churches probably reflects the population density, and where they are more closely clustered the larger foci of habitation.



Modified from Foord K and Clephane-Cameron N '1066 and the Battle of Hastings' ISBN 978-1-903099-02-5
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Monasteries in England were in decline and where they existed, monks formed part of their local communities rather than shutting themselves away to live holy lives apart from the world. The Church was also handicapped in England because of the diminished position of Stigand, but senior prelates did contribute to the Witan alongside the earls (or ealdormen). From this we can perhaps see that the Church was more powerful in Normandy than in England where it operated in a lower key.

The call to undertake a pilgrimage to Jerusalem would suddenly seize even the most powerful men, but it was also used as a means of rehabilitation of those who had offended mightily such as by slaying kinsfolk and offending kings (for example Sweyn Godwinson, the brother of Harold, who kidnapped an abbess he fancied and killed his cousin, Beorn. He was only accepted back to England if he would perform the pilgrimage, on which he died).

A pilgrimage was not to be undertaken lightly in those days. It was a long, arduous and hazardous journey there and back from western Europe and the death rate from the attentions of pirates, bandits and health hazards en route was high. Robert I of Normandy,

William the Conqueror's father, out of the blue, became convinced he should go on pilgrimage in 1035. He could not be dissuaded by his council, but ensured that they accepted William, then aged about seven, as his heir. This was politically dangerous to the stability of Normandy, but clearly he had accepted that he was called to make the pilgrimage. He got to Jerusalem, but died at Nicaea on the way back.

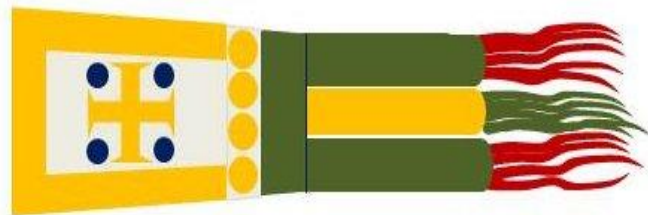
Archbishop Robert of Rouen, who was in his seventies, kept things together in Normandy for a few years, but ~~after his death~~ anarchy set in after his death, with the Norman court just hanging on. Somehow William survived but in 1047 there was a serious challenge from his cousin Guy of Burgundy. William's saviour was King Henri I of France and at the Battle of Valès Dunes Henri, with some assistance from William, beat the rebels. To stabilise anarchical Normandy the Church stepped in and a 'Truce of God' limiting private warfare between feudal lords was proclaimed and sworn on holy relics. The chief penalty for breaking this was excommunication.

Following 1047 William gradually got the upper hand and later repulsed Henri I, who had decided that William was getting too big for his boots and had become threat to him and then developing kingdom of France. By 1060 the Dukedom of Normandy was powerful and mainly stable.

In 1066 William believed that he had a right to the throne of England as a first cousin once removed to Edward the Confessor (via his great aunt Emma, mother of Edward the Confessor as the second wife of Æthelred II, and a sister of Duke Richard II of Normandy, William's grandfather), claiming that back in 1051 Edward the Confessor had promised him the throne and that in late 1064/early 1065 Harold had sworn him fealty on holy relics.

In England Harold had been crowned king the day after Edward's funeral with the support of the Witan whose members were available. The Witan would have included the dubious Stigand who was not able to perform a coronation, and a few other bishops, but few from the north of England.

In the build up to the invasion the Church in Normandy was very active in ensuring confirmations of grants and ratifications and settlements of disputes before William departed on his hazardous venture. The Church was also active in material support. Abbot Nicholas supplied 15 ships and 100 soldiers and Bishop Odo 100 ships. Support of Duke William I's invasion of England was endorsed by Pope Alexander II (1061-73), and the man who would become the next pope, Gregory VII (1073-85) had advised William. Ordericus Vitalis writes '*On hearing of all the circumstances the Pope favoured the legitimate rights of the Duke, enjoined him to take up arms against the perjurer and sent him the standard of St Peter the Apostle by whose merits he would be defended against all dangers*'.



The papal banner or gonfalon of St Peter as illustrated in the Bayeux Tapestry, with modern interpretation. Gonfalons were normally hung vertically with tassels downwards, but in the tapestry are presented as flags on spears.

So the invasion of England had an air of holiness added to the other, more powerful, motivations and men flocked to Normandy from Brittany, France and Flanders to join in, eager for a share of the spoils. The ownership of the lands between Hastings and Rye by the Norman Abbey of Fécamp (given in 1017 by King Cnut at the instigation of Emma of Normandy, his new second wife, and probably confirmed and extended to include Brede by Harthacnut their son in 1032) is a possible reason that the area of Hastings was chosen as a landing site. During the battle Bishop Odo of Bayeux took an active part.

On the English side there is little evidence of overt Church involvement in military events either before or at Hastings. The Catholic Church was established in England and there were numbers of local churches in eastern Sussex at the time of 1066 including a mission church at Bexhill. It should also be noted that English nobles also supported churches and that Harold Godwinson was a benefactor to Waltham Church (later to become Waltham Abbey and the reputed final resting place of Harold's remains). Some of the Pope's antagonism to Harold's kingship may have been because of the obduracy of Stigand and his support from the Godwin family.

Following his victory at the Battle of Hastings William moved east to Dover, north through Canterbury, west but to the south of London and then swung round to Berkshire and Oxfordshire where he crossed the Thames at Wallingford. Here he met Archbishop Stigand who weaselly renounced the young Edgar Ætheling (great-grandson of Æthelred II and his first wife, grandson of Edmund Ironside) who could have been a competitor for the throne. But it was not until he reached Berkhamsted that he met the full surrendering delegation including Archbishop Ealdred of York, the bishops of Worcester and Hereford, the northern Earls Morcar and Edwin, and Edgar Ætheling who must have been a very frightened 15 year old. William was crowned King of England on Christmas Day 1066 by Archbishop Ealdred and the Bishop of Coutances in both English and Norman-French.

Following William's complete subjugation of England by the end of 1070 Pope Alexander sent a powerful papal delegation to England. The legates ceremonially re-crowned William at Winchester and undertook with the king a number of ecclesiastical councils. One result of these was that William finally got rid of Stigand who was replaced as Archbishop of Canterbury by William's long standing advisor, Lanfranc of Bec. But William did not get away from from having *Ermenfrid's Penitentiary* imposed by the Church. This was a rare event and reflected the view of the holy Church on the undoubtedly ruthless campaign of subjugation that William had led – it was not imposed on the English 'who had suffered enough' but on William and his armies. This was an instruction of penitence according to the decrees of the Norman bishops, confirmed by the Pope through the leader of the papal legation, Ermenfrid, cardinal bishop of Sitten (Sion in modern Switzerland). It applied to William and to those men whom William, Duke of the Normans, led and who gave him military service.

This penitentiary would have provided the final impetus to commence building Battle Abbey – not just as a permanent memorial to his victory at the Battle of Hastings as William had vowed in 1066, but also to all those who died in the battle and during its truly terrible aftermath.

The penances were as follows:

Killings and wounding – at the Battle of Hastings

Anyone who knows that he killed a man in the great battle must do penance for one year for each man that he killed.

Anyone who wounded a man, and does not know whether he killed him or not must do penance for forty days for each man he thus struck (if he can remember the number), either continuously or at intervals.

Anyone who does not know the number of those he wounded or killed must, at the discretion of his bishop, do penance for one day in each week for the remainder of his life, or, if he can, let him redeem his sin by a perpetual alms, either by building or by endowing a church.

The clerks who fought, or who were armed for fighting, must do penance as if they had committed these sins in their own country, for they are forbidden by the canons to do battle. The penances of the monks are to be determined by their rule, and by judgement of their abbots.

Those who fought merely for gain are to know that they owe penance as for homicide. But those who fought as in a public war have been allotted a penance of three years by their bishops out of mercy.

The archers who killed some and wounded others, but are necessarily ignorant as to how many, must do penance as for three Lents.

Killings – after the battle but before William's coronation

Apart from the actual battle, anyone who before the consecration of the king killed those who resisted as he was going through the countryside for the sake of food, must do penance for one year for each man he so killed.

But if it was not for food, but merely for plunder that he was foraging, he must do penance for three years for each man he then killed.

Killings – after William's coronation

Those who have killed men after the consecration of the king must do penance as for homicides wilfully committed, always with this exception that if the men thus killed or wounded were in arms against the king, then the penalties will be as before stated.

Other crimes

Those who committed adulteries or rapes or fornications must do penance as if these sins were committed in their own country.

Concerning the violation of the church likewise. Let those who stole from churches restore what they stole to the church they robbed if they can. If they cannot, let them restore it to some other church. And if they will not restore it, then the bishops have decreed that they may not sell it, nor may anyone buy it.

Keith Foord, 2016 ©BDHS

The above document is based on a briefing produced for the minister of Battle Methodist Church, who wished to prepare a service for Sunday 16th October 2016 including reference to the role of Christianity related to the Battle of Hastings, on the occasion of its 950th anniversary on 14th October 2016.