

## Edward the Confessor

The last English king of England, Edward the Confessor (ca. 1003–1066), spent much of his youth in exile at French courts. Edward was the son of King Aethelred II (ca. 966–1016)—who had lost the support of the witan and was replaced by the Danish king Canute—and Emma of Normandy (ca. 985–1052). When Edward became king of England in 1042, he returned with Norman warriors and churchmen, the beginning of the Norman presence that would overwhelm England after Edward's death. Edward married in 1045. His wife, Edith, was the daughter of Godwin of Wessex, the most important nobleman in England. They had no children as Edward had taken a vow of celibacy. Edward's death and the fact that he left no legitimate heir, transformed Medieval England. It caused various claims for the throne of England to emerge, which culminated in the Battle of Hastings and led to the reign of the Normans starting by William the Conqueror.

## The Norman Conquest

The Norman Conquest was a pivotal event in English history. The most famous date, **1066**, the year **Duke William of Normandy** (1027- 87) conquered the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of England. When King Edward died at the beginning of 1066, the lack of a clear heir led to a disputed succession in which several contenders laid claim to the throne of England.

Edward's immediate successor was the Earl of Wessex, **Harold Godwinson**, the richest and most powerful of the English aristocrats. Harold was elected king by the Witenagemot (Witen) of England and crowned by the Archbishop of York. Harold was immediately challenged by two powerful neighbouring rulers. **Duke William of Normandy** claimed that he had been promised the throne by King Edward and that Harold had sworn

agreement to this; **King Harald III of Norway**, commonly known as **Harald Hardrada** or “hard ruler”, also contested the succession. His claim to the throne was based on an agreement between his predecessor **Magnus I of Norway** and the earlier English king, **Harthacnut**, whereby if either died without heir, the other would inherit both England and Norway. William and Harald at once set about assembling troops and ships to invade England.

In an attempt to seize the throne of and in alliance with Harold’s brother **Tostig Godwinson**, Harald Hardrada invaded England. The Norwegians won one battle at **Fulford** (September 20, 1066) and lost the second at **Stamford Bridge** (September 25), where both Harald and Tostig were killed. However, the campaign against Harald and Tostig seriously weakened the English forces for their confrontation with William.

The decisive battle between the English and the Normans took place on **October 14, 1066**, at **Hastings** in Sussex. Harold, along with most of the fighting aristocracy of Anglo-Saxon England, was killed in battle, and William was crowned king. The Battle of Hastings was a victory of Continental military technology, particularly the mounted warrior, against the old-fashioned, infantry-dominated army of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom. William’s own military skill and his control of the vital south and southeast enabled him to surmount English resistance. After years of warfare, William finally crushed the resistance of the Anglo-Saxon nobility in 1075; the few surviving male Anglo-Saxon aristocrats went into exile.

The Norman triumph was followed by the importation of a new ruling class rather than widespread settlement. The English ruling class was replaced by Norman, Breton, and French nobility. Englishmen were removed from high governmental and ecclesiastical office. William also took inventory of his kingdom in the **Domesday Book**; a written description or inventory of all the productive land in the kingdom.

Following the conquest, many Anglo-Saxons, including groups of nobles, fled the country for Scotland, Ireland, or Scandinavia. The largest single exodus occurred in the 1070s, when a group of Anglo-Saxons in a fleet of 235 ships sailed for the Byzantine Empire.

Before the Normans arrived, Anglo-Saxon governmental systems were more sophisticated than their counterparts in Normandy. The country was organized in administrative divisions and subdivisions with the royal court as the centre of the government. English treasury was permanent, its economy was strong and its legal system developed. This sophisticated medieval form of government was handed over to the Normans and was the foundation of further developments. They kept the framework of government but made changes in the personnel and the language of official documents (from Old English to Latin). **The forest laws** were introduced, leading to the setting aside of large sections of England as royal forest. Rather than giving away huge blocks of territory, the Norman kings dispersed the lands of the great **feudal** lords in smaller parcels. Building on Anglo-Saxon centralism, they imposed a very tight feudal structure where all lords swore allegiance to the king and all land was held feudally—that is, in return for services, usually military services.

One of the most obvious effects of the conquest was the introduction of Anglo-Norman, a northern dialect of Old French, as the language of the ruling classes in England, displacing Old English. French words entered the English language, and a further sign of the shift was the usage of names common in France instead of Anglo-Saxon names. Male names such as William, Robert and Richard soon became common; female names changed more slowly. However, French had little impact on place names.