1000 YEARS OF ANNOYING THE FRENCH

STEPHEN CLARKE

TRANSWORLD
BOOKS

About the Book

Was the Battle of Hastings a French victory?
Non! William the Conqueror was a Norman and hated the French.

Were the Brits really responsible for the death of Joan of Arc?
Non! The French sentenced her to death for wearing trousers.

Was the guillotine a French invention?
Non! It was invented in Yorkshire.

Ten centuries' worth of French historical 'facts' bite the dust as Stephen Clarke looks at what has *really* been going on since 1066...

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To the Crimée Crew for their thousand years of patience, and especially to N., who helped me through every battle.

Merci to my editor Selina Walker for her sense of history in reminding me constantly of my deadline.

And to everyone at Susanna Lea's agency for their role in making this whole *histoire* possible.

‘The English, by nature, always want to fight their neighbours for no reason, which is why they all die badly.’

From the *Journal d’un Bourgeois de Paris*, written during the Hundred Years War

‘We have been, we are, and I trust we always will be, detested by the French.’

The Duke of Wellington

A selection of English synonyms for ‘annoy’

Provoke, infuriate, anger, incense, arouse, offend, affront, outrage, aggrieve, wound, hurt, sting, embitter, irritate, aggravate, exasperate, peeve, miff, ruffle, rile, rankle, enrage, infuriate, madden, drive crazy/mad/insane, get up the back/on the tits of, bust the balls of, piss off.

All of these have been done to France, and more . . .

Introduction

One of the most frequent questions I get asked when doing readings and talks is: why is there such a love–hate relationship between the French and the Brits?

The love is easy to explain: despite what we might say in public, we find each other irresistibly sexy. The hate is more of a problem. For a start, it's mistrust rather than hatred. But why is it even there, in these days of Entente Cordiale and European peace?

Like everyone else, I always knew that the mistrust had something to do with 1066, Agincourt, Waterloo and all that, but I wondered why it persisted. After all, most of our battles were too far in the past to have much effect on the present, surely? So I decided to delve into that past and come up with a more accurate answer.

And having written this book, I finally understand where the never-ending tensions come from. The fact is that our history isn't history at all. It's here and now.

William Faulkner was talking about the Southern USA when he said that 'the past is never dead. In fact, it's not even past.' But exactly the same thing can be said about the French and the Brits; no matter what we try to do in the present, the past will always march up and slap us in the face.

To give the simplest of examples: if you are lucky enough to be invited to an Anglo-French function at the British Ambassador's residence in Paris, go in to the first anteroom and what do you see? A gigantic portrait of the Duke of

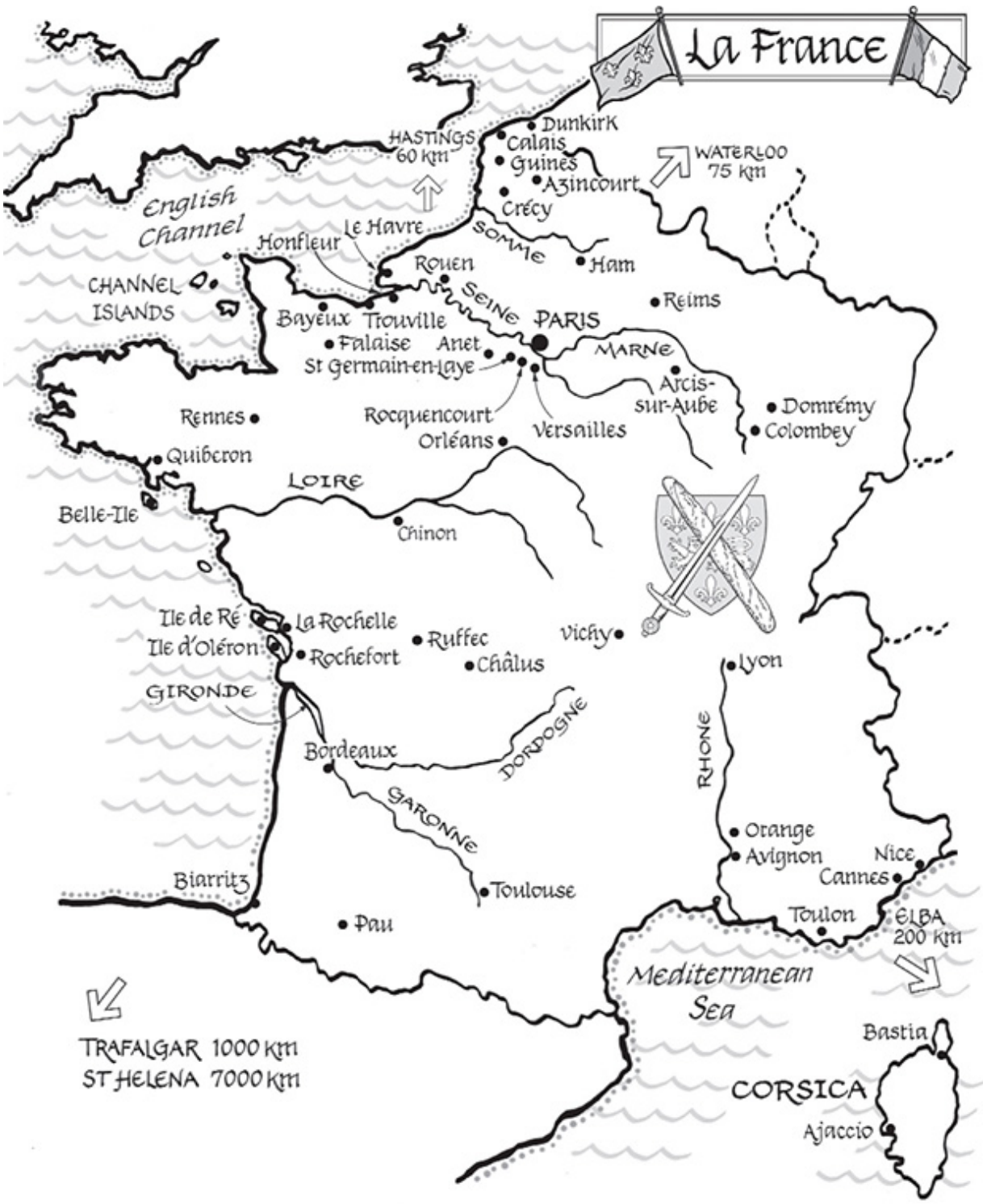
Wellington, the man who effectively ended the career of France's greatest general, Napoleon Bonaparte. Essentially, a two-century-old defeat is brandished in the face of every French visitor to Britain's diplomatic headquarters . . . in France's own capital city.

This is not tactless or provocative – relations couldn't be better between the British Embassy and their French hosts – it's simply *there*. Just as the battle between the sexes will never end (we hope), neither will the millennium-old rivalry between the French and anyone who happens to be born speaking English.

And the most interesting thing for me was that while researching this book, I found that our versions of the same events are like two completely different stories. The French see history through tricolour-tinted glasses and blame the Brits (and after about 1800, the Americans) for pretty well every misfortune that has ever befallen France. Sometimes they're right – we have done some nasty things to the French in the past – but often they're hilariously wrong, and I have tried to set the record straight.

I realize that any book that gives a balanced view of history is going to irritate French people a lot. So I'm really sorry, France, but the 1000 years of being annoyed by 'les Anglo-Saxons' aren't over yet . . .

Stephen Clarke, January 2010



France, featuring the key places of historical interest – famous and otherwise – mentioned in this book.

1

When Is a Frenchman Not a Frenchman?

The French are very proud of the fact that they were the last people to invade the British Isles. Hitler didn’t make it beyond Calais, the Spanish Armada was swept into the North Sea, and even France’s own Napoleon never managed to land more than a few bedraggled soldiers on British soil. William the Conqueror, on the other hand, not only invaded England, he grabbed the whole country and turned it into a French colony.

However, as with so many things in the French version of history, this is not quite correct. Or, to be more precise, it is almost completely wrong.

For a start, a Dutchman, William of Orange, successfully invaded Britain in 1688. But because this was a bloodless take-over, it could be argued that it was less an invasion than the response to a plea from the Brits to come and save them from themselves.

More importantly, though, if you look at the facts of the Norman Conquest in 1066, it becomes clear that France’s claim to have launched the last successful cross-Channel invasion is completely unfounded. It seems rather harsh to begin this book by undermining one of the core ideas in France’s collective historical psyche, but it has to be done . . .

My kingdom for a Norse

Before 1066, the issue troubling the inhabitants of what is now Britain was not ‘Will I get a decent pension?’ or ‘How much is my house worth?’ It was more along the lines of ‘When will a horde of axe-wielding murderers come charging across the horizon to rape the women and steal the cattle (or in the case of certain Viking tribes the other way round)?’

If people didn’t starve to death because of famine or pillage, if they managed to get the harvest in and have time to eat it, life was good. And to give themselves a reasonable chance of enjoying this luxury, what they needed most was a strong king. Someone who would tax them half to death but who might just keep them alive long enough to pay the taxes – a lot like modern governments, in fact.

In the ninth century, Britain had just such a king: Alfred. By maintaining a permanent fleet and a highly trained army, Alfred managed to keep England – or the portion he governed, up as far as the Midlands – free of Viking raiders. In fact, Alfred earned the title ‘the Great’ because of the way he transformed these raids on Britain from violent treasure hunts into suicide missions.

The upshot was that the Vikings, understandably frustrated at losing a sizeable chunk of their income, decided to sail a few miles further south and pillage France, where much easier pickings were to be had. So easy, in fact, that the Vikings set up bases on the French coast from which to raid inland – sort of pillaging resorts. Soon, the whole region was so unstable that the King of France was forced to pacify the invaders by ceding a large slab of territory to these ‘men of the north’. And in the year 911 the region officially became the country of the Norsemen, or Normandy.

In short, Normandy owed its existence to an Englishman who deflected invaders away from Britain and over to

France. An auspicious start.

In those days, the domain governed by the French King was little more than a collection of easily defendable duchies in the northeast of what we now call France, and the ruler was a puppet who could barely hold on to his own lands, never mind invade anyone else's. In fact, these kings didn't even call themselves French until more than a hundred years after William the Conqueror, when in 1181 Philippe Auguste first took the title 'Rex Franciae' (King of France) as opposed to 'Rex Francorum' (King of the Franks).

And when one of these Kings of the Franks did try to bring the troublesome Normans under his umbrella, it was with disastrous results. In 942, the Duke of Normandy, the formidable-sounding William Long Sword, was assassinated and succeeded by a mere ten-year-old called Richard. Sensing weakness, King Louis IV of the Franks decided to attack southern Normandy and capture Rouen, the major river port between Paris and the coast. But young Richard was not alone – he was supported by powerful clansmen with names like Bernard the Dane, Harald the Viking and Sigtrygg the King of the Sea, and the invasion ended in Frankish tears. Louis was captured and only released in exchange for hostages – one of Louis's sons and a bishop. In short, the Normans were issuing a clear warning that they had zero fellow feeling with the Franks, Burgundians, Lorraines or anyone else in the country that would one day become France. They wanted to be left alone.

All of which leads to a rather obvious conclusion: despite what a modern Parisian might tell you, the Normans weren't French at all. Calling a tenth- or eleventh-century Norman a Frenchman would have been a bit like telling a Glaswegian he's English, and we all know how dangerous that can be.

In fact, the Normans thought of the Franks as a bunch of limp Parisians who acted as if they owned the continent and needed to be kicked back home if they strayed too far from

their snobbish little city. (An attitude, incidentally, that hasn't changed much since the tenth century.)

And the feeling was mutual – the Franks looked down on the Norman dukes as dangerous Nordic barbarians who lived only for hunting and war, and who practised heathen-style polygamy, living with hordes of mistresses and illegitimate children.

The Franks were perfectly right, and it was into this context that William was born.

William was a bastard

It is still possible to visit the Conqueror's birthplace today, in a small Norman town called Falaise (the French word for cliff). William's castle, or, as the locals call it, le Château de Guillaume le Conquérant, dominates the whole area from a rocky knoll opposite the grey stone cliff in question.

At the centre of a walled enclosure stands a freshly renovated Norman keep, a proud angular tower made of the creamy-white Caen stone that William and his descendants exported all over their territories, both in Britain and on the continent. Norman castle-builders insisted on working with Caen stone because it was easy to carve, yet resistant to the onslaught of weather and missiles (plus, presumably, they had shares in the quarries back home).

However sure of itself le Château de Guillaume le Conquérant might look today, though, it suffers from something of an identity crisis, because it isn't actually the castle where William was born. In fact, in 1120 William's son Henry came to Falaise, knocked down the old chateau and rebuilt one of his own. None of the original structure survives.

It seems strange – Henry becomes King of England and Duke of Normandy, and the first thing he does is return to his father's birthplace and demolish it. It's almost as though he wanted to deny his origins, as if there might be some

shame associated with William's birth. And it's true – the Conqueror did have spectacularly low-class roots.

William wasn't known as 'the Conqueror' at first, of course. But he did acquire his other nickname pretty well immediately – 'William the Bastard'. His unmarried parents were Robert, the younger brother of the incumbent Duke of Normandy, and a beautiful girl from Falaise whose name differs according to which history book you read. In French sources, she has been called Herleva, Harlotta, Herlette, Arlot, Allaieve and Bellon.[fn1]

The story of how the young maiden met Robert also varies. In 1026 or 1027, she was either washing animal skins in the river or dancing, or maybe both, when Robert rode through the village of Falaise on his way to the castle. He caught sight of the lovely girl (let's call her Herleva for simplicity's sake) and instantly started to plan what his contemporaries called a 'Danish marriage', or, as we might say today, a shag.

According to later Anglo-Saxon legends, probably invented to irritate the Normans, Robert kidnapped Herleva. To be fair, though, he did go and inform her father, a local tanner, what he was doing. The father tried to insist on marriage, which Robert refused, mainly because Herleva wasn't posh enough – tanners were amongst the lowest of the low. Leather was tanned using a combination of urine, animal fat, brains and dung (dogs' muck worked very well, apparently), which meant that leatherworkers were even more malodorous than cesspit-cleaners.

Marriage was no real problem, though. Norman nobles didn't need to wed their conquests, so Herleva was washed of the leathery smell and laid out on Robert's bed in his creamy-white chateau to become his *frilla*, or local mistress.

Shortly after this, Robert's elder brother, Duke Richard of Normandy, attacked Falaise and took the castle. (It was the kind of thing warlike Normans often used to do to their

brothers.) Feeling pleased with himself, Richard returned to his headquarters in Rouen, where he promptly died in mysterious circumstances, which was another thing Normans did, especially if they annoyed ambitious men like Robert.

With characteristic modesty, Robert dubbed himself Duke Robert the Magnificent and reclaimed his castle at Falaise. And it was there, in late 1027 or early 1028, that Herleva bore him a son. The French know the baby as Guillaume, but even French historians admit that the newborn's real name would have been something much closer to the English William, and the Bayeux Tapestry gives him the decidedly northern-sounding name of Willelm.

From a very young age, circumstances combined to prepare the little Bastard for his future role as conqueror of England. In 1035, Robert, who never married, proclaimed William his successor, a choice which in no way shocked or disconcerted the Normans. As the French historian Paul Zumthor says in his biography of Guillaume: 'nowhere else in Christian Europe could a bastard have acceded to the throne'.[fn2] The boy William was sent to live with a cousin, and began to be groomed as a fighting duke.

He soon gained a reputation as a very serious young man, his only real pleasures being hunting and the occasional juggling show. He never got drunk at table, consuming a maximum of three glasses of wine (more evidence that he wasn't French), and had little or no sense of humour. He was, however, really excellent at hurting people, and reserved his most murderous rages for anyone who made a joke about his humble origins.

When he was twenty-four, William decided to consolidate his political position by making a good match. Not content with an old-fashioned 'Danish marriage', he decided to wed Mathilde (as the French call her, or Maheut, which was probably her original name), daughter of the Count of

Flanders and a granddaughter of the incumbent King of the Franks.

Mathilde wasn't so keen, however, and made it public that she didn't want to marry a bastard. But William wasn't the type to let anyone get away with insulting his mum, so he leapt straight on his horse and galloped from Normandy to Lille, almost 400 kilometres away, crossing the Seine valley, splashing through the marshlands of the Somme and penetrating deep into the potentially dangerous territory of the King of the Franks. After several days in the saddle, and no doubt without stopping to freshen up or buy flowers, William bounded into the Count of Flanders's castle, threw Mathilde to the ground and, as Paul Zumthor puts it, 'tore her robe with his spurs', which is probably *not* a metaphor for 'asked her really nicely to marry him'. Apparently, the haughty young lady 'recognized that she had met her master' and agreed to the wedding.

Her father probably had something to do with this sudden change of opinion, too. When a Norman rode into your territory and had his way with your daughter, it was a heavy hint – similar things could, if necessary, happen to the rest of your domains. And William himself was the living embodiment of his political clout. At a muscular five feet ten, he was a giant for his time, a veteran of several military campaigns, and quite obviously a man with a future. Not a bad candidate for a son-in-law.

There was just one hitch to the pair getting hitched. What William had forgotten, or chosen to ignore, was that he and his new fiancée were cousins, and the Church opposed their union. Never one to back down from a fight, William decided to go ahead anyway, and the couple were married sometime between 1051 and 1053.

The relationship was a tumultuous one. As we've seen, William was famous for flying into sudden furies, and in Mathilde he had apparently met his match, even though many sources say she was only about four feet four inches

tall. The couple would often have flaming rows, and it is said that during one of these, William dragged Mathilde through the streets of Caen by her hair to show everyone who was boss. Despite the occasional descent into domestic violence, though, their marriage was deemed a great success. William was pretty well the only ruler of his time who sired no bastards and who was faithful to his wife,[fn3] and during their thirty-year union, the couple had ten children: six girls and four boys.

This devotion to creating a dynasty, coupled with William's obsession with getting his own way, did not bode well for the Anglo-Saxon rulers who were now sitting pretty in England.

A tapestry of illusions

If we know so much about William's reasons for invading England and ousting King Harold, it is because the Bayeux Tapestry paints such a detailed picture of historical events.

The 70-metre-long embroidery, with its vivid tableaux recounting events leading up to the Conquest and ending with Harold's death at Hastings, is a stunningly beautiful work of art, and anyone with the slightest interest in history, culture, needlework or just plain human endeavour should go and see it. Its survival is a miracle – in 1792, during the French Revolution, it was almost cut up to cover ammunition wagons, and in the Second World War Goebbels did his best to steal it. It is the only embroidery of its type and age to have lasted so long.

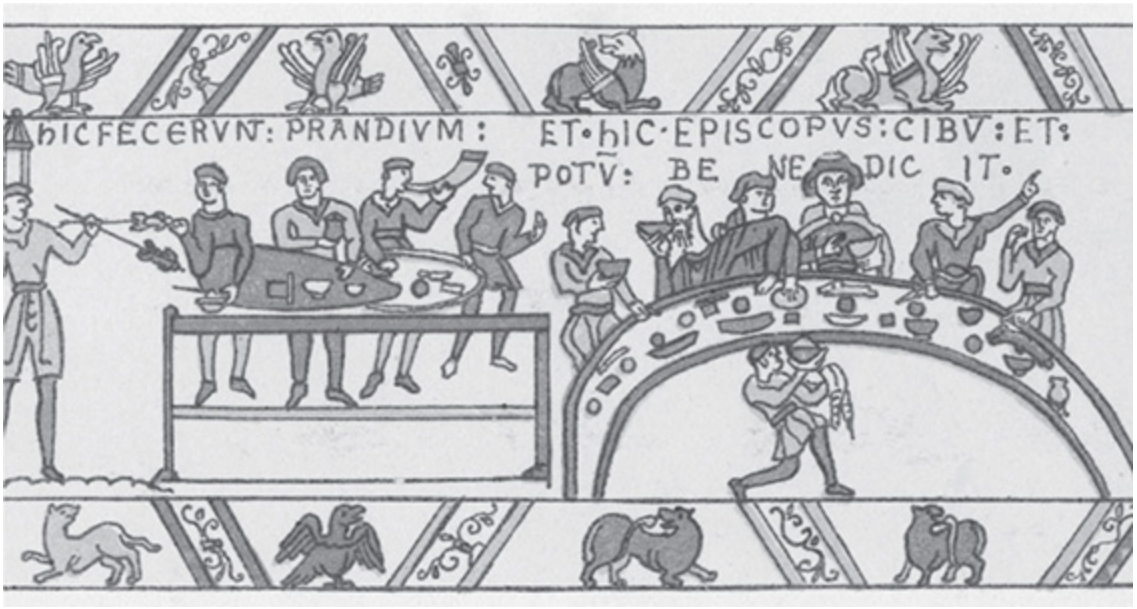
Its only failing is that it is definitely not a record of the historical facts.

A modern parallel might be ex-President Bush commissioning a film about Iraq. Make sure, he would say, that it starts with footage of Saddam's weapons of mass destruction. What do you mean there never was any

footage? Make some! Then we want plenty of tanks and explosions – I like explosions. Torturing prisoners? No, we don’t need any of that depressing stuff. Oh, and at the end, it’s me who catches Saddam, OK?

This, anyhow, is what the Bayeux Tapestry was assumed to be. But what makes it so fascinating is that it didn’t quite turn out that way.

For one thing, the job of putting the Conquest into pictures was given to Anglo-Saxon seamstresses, who were famous throughout Europe for the quality of their embroidery, and seem to have taken the opportunity to add in lots of jokes. To make things even more complicated, the story itself would appear to have been told by someone who wanted to undermine everything William had done.



‘Here they made a meal’ – William the Conqueror’s men land in England, and the first thing they do is have a barbecue. But they weren’t French. Refined eating was just one of the habits these Norsemen had picked up while living on the continent.

The best way to get to the root of all this is to try and unpick the tangled threads of the tapestry, and compare the Franco-Norman propaganda that has come down through

history with another, perhaps more credible, telling of events. Let's take things step by step . . .

Step 1: The Duke who would be King

By the 1050s, William, now Duke of Normandy, had fought off Breton and Frankish invaders and quelled Norman rebels. Possibly inspired by the mistake that his late uncle Richard had made in capturing Falaise Castle and then letting his brother come and murder him, William had developed a simple but effective strategy for dealing with enemies. Instead of bashing down their portcullises, claiming their chateaux as his own, and then going home to be poisoned or otherwise assassinated, William would pursue aggressors or anyone he felt like attacking until he either killed them or seized all their riches and rendered them totally powerless. Pretty soon, word had got round that it was not a good idea to annoy William unless you were sure of being able to take him out, which was a slim possibility given that he had a personal army of highly trained knights and was himself a fearsome fighter.

William was also intensely ambitious, and had long had his eye on England. Under the Anglo-Saxons, it had become a rich, stable country, but things had changed since Alfred the Great's day: the Scandinavians were raiding again, and the King of England, Edward the Confessor, was weak and under the thumb of warring earls. There was room for a strong man like William to step in and seize power.

Moreover, William knew that he might not have to do much fighting. King Edward was married to the daughter of one of the warring Anglo-Saxon earls, but he had taken a vow of chastity, and he had no direct heir. Edward was William's father's cousin, so in theory William had a claim to the English throne. In addition, Edward owed a debt of sorts to Normandy, because he had taken refuge there during the reign of King Cnut.[fn4] And just as Brits who have lived in

France come home with a taste for almost-raw steak and unpasteurized cheese, Edward had a fondness for all things Norman, and surrounded himself with Norman courtiers. All in all, it was a situation that the ambitious William couldn't afford to ignore.

William duly went to visit his royal cousin Edward, and, according to Norman chroniclers, the trip confirmed his feelings about England: 'When William saw what a green and pleasant land it was, he thought he would very much like to be its king.' Yes, a cynic might add, green, pleasant and full of treasure, valuable farmland and taxpayers.

It was during this state visit that Edward is supposed to have appointed the young Norman as his official successor to the English throne. And if you go to the vast former monastery in Bayeux that now houses the tapestry, you will be informed categorically that this was the case: William was the only rightful claimant to Edward's crown, because Edward himself had said so.

This is an opinion that was first recorded in the 1070s by the chronicler William of Poitiers, a friend of the Conqueror whose account of the Conquest is about as reliable as a biography of Genghis Khan published by Mongolians R Us Books. And it is this version of events that the modern-day Normans in Bayeux would still have us believe.

But it's a false premise, because, according to eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon law, the successor to the English throne had to be approved by a 'wise men's council' of bishops and earls, known as the Witangemot. Edward had no right to pass on his crown. His promise, if it really existed, was probably part of a deal – he no doubt wanted to buy William's support if he had to go to war to hang on to his crown. Edward, a Norman on his mother's side, was unpopular with his Anglo-Saxon subjects. As well as his Norman courtiers, he had brought in Norman sheriffs to rule parts of England – foreign noblemen who spoke no Anglo-Saxon and didn't have a clue about local customs. The

Anglo-Saxon earls, who ruled over vast swathes of the English countryside, were in a semi-constant state of rebellion against the presence of these foreign lawmakers, and were also jostling for position to take over the throne.

The most powerful of the earls, Godwin of Wessex, had his eyes set firmly on the seat of power. He had married his daughter Edith to Edward, and was understandably annoyed that the union produced no princes. It was even rumoured that Edward had taken his vow of celibacy just to frustrate Godwin.

Godwin was virulently anti-Norman. In 1051, a group of Normans got into a fight in Dover and – having far less experience than the English of town-centre brawling after the pubs closed – came off worse. Several of the Normans were killed, and King Edward ordered Godwin to go and punish the townsfolk for being so inhospitable to his foreign friends. Godwin not only refused but thought that this Norman-bashing sounded fun, and declared war on Edward's continental cronies. He marched an army to London, where he received a hero's welcome from the people, and suddenly it was much less fashionable in England to be a Norman.

Godwin demanded that the foreign courtiers be sent home, and Edward was forced to comply. One can imagine the poor King sitting forlornly in his palace, deprived of his Norman playmates, begging his minstrels to play 'Je ne regrette rien'. Not surprisingly, it was around this time that he supposedly pledged the throne to William.

There was one consolation for Edward, though. Godwin had a dashing young son – the handsome, blond Harold Godwinson – and Edward liked handsome young men. (There are other theories about his lack of children, aside from his piety.) So, in the early 1060s, apparently forgetting his earlier promise to William, Edward elected Harold his new favourite. The brave, warlike young Anglo-Saxon, popular not only with the King but also with the Witangemot

and the people, began to look like a very probable candidate for the throne of England.

On the other side of the Channel, however, someone wasn't happy . . .

Step 2: A hostage is just a guest who can't go home yet

For a man whose family had spent years saying rude things about the Normans, Harold Godwinson now did a remarkably rash thing. In 1064, accompanied by only a few companions and his hunting dogs, he came to Normandy. It was a bit like Martin Luther King turning up at a Ku Klux Klan barbecue. And the question is, why would a man from such a politically astute and active family do such a brainless thing?

At the Bayeux Tapestry museum, you will be told one possible answer. The museum's audio-sets are an invaluable aid to interpreting the tapestry for anyone who can't read the Latin inscriptions and isn't an expert in early medieval iconography. The story of the Conquest is told by an Englishman with the sort of old-fashioned radio voice that used to tell people in the middle of World War Two that 'if Jerry pokes his nose across the *Chennel*, we'll give him a jolly good *threshing*.' You can't help but believe him as he informs you that Harold came to Normandy with a message from the ageing King Edward the Confessor, confirming that he wanted William as his successor after all.

But if you lift the audio-set away from your ear for a second and cut off the hypnotic voice, you might start to question why on earth Harold would do such a thing, when he himself was a likely candidate for the English throne.

There was another possible motive for his trip. It has been suggested that Harold crossed the Channel on a mission to retrieve two members of his family who had been kidnapped by Normans in 1051 and held hostage on the continent ever

since. This is of course much more credible. If Harold became King of England and thereby provoked the covetous William, the two unfortunate Godwins languishing in Norman dungeons were bound to get their rations, or worse things, cut.

So the first tableau in the tapestry could well represent Harold getting permission from King Edward to go and reclaim the prisoners, and not Edward ordering him to go and deliver the humiliating, anti-Godwin confirmation of William's claim to the English throne.

Either way, as bad luck would have it, Harold's ship blew off course and he landed in Ponthieu (part of the Duchy of Normandy), in an area ruled by a notorious hostage-taker called Count Wido. Harold's unexpected arrival made the Count a very merry Wido indeed, and he immediately seized the rich Anglo-Saxon.

Unluckily for Wido, his superior in the feudal system, William, heard about the windfall and decreed that the hostage was his. Which was true – as Duke of Normandy, William's rights included ownership of anything that washed up on the beach, including numerous whale carcasses, which were a valuable source of oils and ivory.[fn5]

As a prisoner of his Norman rival, Harold might well have feared for his life, but he was probably in little danger of receiving a sword stroke as a welcoming gift. William didn't usually kill his well-born enemies unless they were no longer useful to him or made a joke about the leather industry. He preferred to make them swear an oath of feudal fealty, which meant that they were obliged, on pain of death and/or eternal barbecuing in the fires of hell, to give him a percentage of everything they earned and help him defend his territory should the need arise. In short, he butchered the poor enemies and milked the rich ones.

With Harold, there was even more to be won – an oath of allegiance would sideline the Godwin family as contenders

for the English Crown, because they would have to step aside for their superior, William. In the tapestry, you can almost hear the Norman chuckling as an abashed Harold swears eternal loyalty to William. According to Saxon sources, Harold didn't know as he gave his oath that holy relics were hidden under the table, turning the simple promise into a sacred vow. But to William and the Normans, Harold's ignorance wouldn't have mattered. People were very literal about their religion in those days. If you swore on a saint's funny bone that you would do something, you had to do it, otherwise a plague of monster fleas would crawl inside your army's chainmail. In Norman eyes, Harold's oath was binding, with God as a witness.

William tightened the screws even further by betrothing Harold to his daughter Aélis, even though she was already formally engaged to a local nobleman – thus proving that all Norman oaths were binding, but some were more binding than others.

With Harold now inextricably bound over to submit to William's claim to the English throne, he was finally allowed to sail home to England. The tapestry shows Harold hunched apologetically as he tells his tale to King Edward, who points at him accusingly, as if to say, 'What, you went to Normandy and you didn't bring me any Camembert?'

The audio commentary talks about Harold's 'humiliation', but if Harold's mission really was to tell William he was going to be king, where is the humiliation? He had delivered his message and even sworn allegiance to the future King William. The trip took a bit longer than expected, and he forgot to bring presents, but it went exactly as planned.

On the other hand, Harold had every reason to be bowed if he had failed in his mission to fetch his relatives – not only had he returned alone, he'd also got himself tricked into swearing homage to William when Edward was grooming him, Harold, as successor to the throne.

We will never know the truth, but one thing is certain – when Edward the Confessor died on 5 January 1066, Harold accepted the Witangemot's nomination and became the legally appointed King of England. Across the Channel, William's self-congratulatory chuckles turned into threats of legal action. Harold had sworn allegiance, in front of witnesses and on a saint's funny bone, and could not therefore claim the throne ahead of him. The Normans immediately began to accuse the new King of oath-breaking, feudalism's most heinous crime.

Harold didn't need to hire expensive lawyers to dream up a credible defence, though – what hostage is going to refuse to take an oath to a man who is holding him hostage? And what jurisdiction did this Norman foreigner have in England?

Sensing perhaps that Harold might have a case, Duke William of Normandy even went so far as to plead for support from the Holy Church. (Yes, the same Holy Church whose ruling he had ignored when he wanted to marry his cousin.) As a reward for this new-found piety, the Pope sent William a consecrated banner that figures prominently in the tapestry, much like a sponsor's logo on a Formula One racer's overalls: 'This invasion is brought to you by God', or a message to that effect.

Also very visible in the tapestry is what looks like a kite in the shape of a fried egg. This is Halley's Comet, which appeared at the end of April 1066, and was of course claimed by the Normans as a sign from God that Harold was an evil oath-breaker and had to be ousted by the righteous, God-fearing William, who was, as it happened, just setting off to do the ousting.

These same omen-seekers conveniently ignored the storm that blew the Norman invasion fleet back to France and forced them to take refuge for two weeks before attempting another Channel crossing. And when the fleet finally landed in Hastings on 28 September 1066, there was another potentially bad omen – as William strode to shore, he fell flat