

King Harold and a Dover Legend

by Sherifa Rashidally

Harold Godwineson, was the son of Earl Godwine, a name that surely evokes thoughts of what was without doubt the most momentous event of English history - *The Battle of Hastings*.

The Godwine family were the wealthiest thegns (high-ranking landowners having at least five hides of land) in England controlling all of Wessex, Kent, Sussex and beyond. Much of this land had been acquired by raiding and young Harold Godwineson was no newcomer to these means of acquiring wealth and land. With the Godwines it was something of a regular habit, in fact a habit of many of the thegns of the day. This was considered perfectly normal practice by them which held no shame or guilt.

Earl Godwine came from a long line of Anglo-Saxon thegns and his sons were to have a place in English history but there was one son who would exceed in a way never imagined. Firstly there was the eldest son Swein who would achieve little but notoriety, a wayward son who even murdered his own Danish cousin Beorn, and who eventually died at Constantinople on his way to England after visiting the Holy Land to pay penance for his assortment of crimes. Another son Tostig was to become the Earl of Northumbria, hated by the people he ruled for his unjust treatment, in particular the extreme taxes he imposed upon them causing much suffering. Two other sons Leofric and Gyfth were both to die on the battlefield at Caldbec Hill on that fateful day in 1066. Another son was Wolfnoth (named after Earl Godwine's

father) and then there was Harold who was to become a legend as the last Anglo-Saxon King of England. After his rise to the kingship, having been crowned on the 6th January 1066 at Winchester Cathedral by Bishop Stigand (the previous day on the 5th Edward the Confessor had died and Harold ascended to the throne) little did he know that he was to be king for just nine months and nine days for the cruel hand of fate was to decide this on the 14th October 1066.

Besides his brothers Harold had a sister Edith and it is her marriage to King Edward which no doubt contributed greatly to Harold's prestige for he thus attained much influence and power. After all due to Edith's marriage he was now the king's brother-in-law, something he could use to his great advantage. After the king himself Harold was now the most important man in the kingdom. He was to have many favours bestowed upon him though one request from Edward was to become Harold's final downfall - the request to pay a visit on behalf of the king to Duke William in Normandy for at one point during a tumultuous time Edward had been sent into exile and it was none other than William who had given him refuge. Supposedly Edward had, before returning to England after a considerable time in Normandy, made a promise to William that he was to eventually ascend to the English throne, this being a repayment for the refuge given, one may say a somewhat over-generous reward, if ever such a promise was really made. This has frequently been doubted and questioned. The year of Harold's visit was

1064 and much was to transpire between this time and 1066. Rumours purported that Harold was to pay this visit to try to get the release of some hostages and not to verify the supposed promise from Edward. We should consider that at this stage Edward's cousin Count Walter had been imprisoned by William and shortly before Harold's visit, had been found dead, believed poisoned, so it would surely be somewhat dubious that such a promise from Edward was ever made at all. Suspicions were flying high and much was to be questioned on this matter. It is indeed likely that Harold's visit solely to try to get the release of hostages was seen by William as an opportune moment and forced Harold to take an oath which he took under great duress. No doubt he consented, fearing that if he did not then he might be imprisoned or even killed. It can be assumed that William took advantage of Harold's visit and no doubt engaged some of his Norman knights to falsely testify so as to meet his own end. We shall never know but can only speculate at the events between 1064 and 1066.

After Harold's return to England, Edward found himself with ailing health and since he and Edith had no children there was now a serious problem - who would succeed to the throne. A decision had to be made - and quickly. The young Atheling Edgar was Edward's preferred choice but he was a mere lad of 14 years old, inexperienced in ruling and warfare and further debates clearly showed that the odds were in favour of Harold. Shortly after on the 5th January 1066 Edward's final hour came and Harold became king. He was crowned the following day at Winchester Cathedral by Archbishop Stigand - news which would hardly please Duke William! Now revenge must be

sought and this would be his invasion of England! William lost little time in making his plans and calculating the best time for the final blow.

On the 28th September 1066 Duke William landed at Pevensey (it has been said that he intended to land at Dover but due to the wind his boat reached the shores of East Sussex at Pevensey instead.) From Pevensey he and his army headed for Hastings where they made camp. At this time Harold had been away fighting. On the 20th September he fought a battle at Fulford then on the 8th October the battle at Stamford Bridge. He lost many men in both battles and the remaining were tired and weak. The long trek back to the south made matters worse. Many of his remaining men were *fyrds* (reserves who were not as well trained as his *huscarls* - skilled soldiers many of whom had been killed), but Harold held his usual determination and pressed on. By the time Harold had arrived back at Hastings, William and his men had had time to rest and prepare for battle but Harold did not give his men chance to do likewise. He met William at Caldbec Hill on the 14th October where that fateful arrow decided all - Harold had lost. It is said that the arrow was in fact a stray one but it achieved what William wanted. Harold had acted hastily in not delaying his meeting with William on the battlefield. If he had postponed this a little longer then William's men would have run low on supplies and become weaker also it would have given Harold more time to gather more men and given a chance for the men to regain their strength. With this delay William's men would have run low on moral, and with this on Harold's side he could have then struck the final blow. We shall never know what the outcome would have been, we can only