

Edward the Confessor, his relationship with the Godwin family and his search for heirs



King Æthelred II married Emma of Normandy, sister of Duke Richard II, in spring 1002. It was not a marriage made in heaven, but to obtain a strategic alliance with Normandy as part of an effort to contain an escalating Viking threat.

We can assume from the start that Emma would have had a powerful, resourceful and opportunistic personality ... it came with her genes. This was not Æthelred's first marriage. He had previously been married to Ælfgifu, daughter of an English earl, most likely Earl Thored of Northumbria. From this marriage came six sons and three, possibly four, daughters. The sons were Æthelstan, Egbert, Edmund, Eadred, Eadwig and Edgar. The daughters were Edith (who would marry the to-be-infamous Eadric Streona (*the Acquisitor*)), Ælfgifu, Wulfhild and possibly another who entered a convent. So Æthelred did not seem to be short of heirs, nor daughters with whom to make strategic marriages.

So Edward, often *Eadweard* in charters, was nominally seventh in line of succession when he was born to Emma at Islip, most likely in 1005. His birth was followed by that of a brother, Alfred, and a sister Godgifu/Goda. Godgifu married Drogo of Mantes, count of Valois and the Vexin, in 1024, then when Drogo died in 1035, she married Eustace of Boulogne. Both husbands would have regarded marriage to a niece of the duke of Normandy as a benefit. Ralf, the second son of Godgifu and Drogo, would in time become earl of a large area of south Mercia centred on Hereford.

Only two of the sons of Ælfgifu (Edmund and Eadwig) survived their father. So, by the time Æthelred died in 1016, Edward had been promoted by default to third son in line behind his half-brothers.

By 1017 Edmund had died after briefly co-ruling with king Cnut, who had conquered England by invasion, and Cnut had Eadwig executed after he had foolishly returned to England after being banished. So, in theory, Edward was suddenly heir, very presumptive – before his mother, Emma, married Cnut.

But Cnut already had sons, and was to have one more with Emma, plus a daughter, so Edward's claim went backwards behind Cnut's sons. In addition, Edmund Ironside had a son and grandson, who could have also have had prior regal claim, but had escaped from Cnut to safety in Hungary and were nearly forgotten.

Emma and her children by Æthelred had fled to Normandy in 1014 when Cnut's father Sweyn of Denmark had rampaged into England and seized the crown. Emma went first with the abbot of Peterborough, and the children followed with the bishop of London. They briefly returned when Æthelred was asked back after Sweyn's unforeseen death, but then fled back again, but not before Emma had transferred her support from her ill-counselled husband Æthelred to her stepson Edmund. During the episodes of Danish invasions by Sweyn and then Cnut, Edmund Ironside and Eadwig had not fled, but tried with varying success to resist the Danes.

It is recorded that Edward came back from Normandy – with the advance party when Æthelred was asked back – but also there is a record in *Óláfs saga helga* in the *Heimskringla* concerning the life of Ólaf Haraldsson which says that, after the death of Æthelred, Edmund and Edward had co-reigned, and that Edward fought defending London against Cnut alongside Edmund. This is possible, but Edward would have been only about 13 at that time and the *Heimskringla* which is originally an oral history may not be reliable.

Whatever the situation, Edward is then presumed to have prudently returned to Normandy via Flanders in late 1016 to re-join his younger brother Alfred and sister Godgifu. As nephews of Duke Richard II of Normandy, Edward and Alfred were brought up in the ducal court, and their sister Godgifu married Count Drogo of Mantes. The brothers had many kinsmen in Normandy, were brought up as knights, but have no record of having been given estates or of marriage, although Edward may have witnessed some charters of Duke Robert I before the duke went on his fateful crusade.

The brothers Edward and Alfred probably moved around between courts, met many people and had many debts, both personal and monetary, to repay in the future. When Robert of Normandy and king Cnut both died in very different circumstances in 1035, Edward was aged about 30 and a survivor. He would have seen much duplicity, greed and fear, but was probably rather philosophical about his future, as Cnut's sons still lived.

In England king Cnut's death was somewhat unexpected. His oldest son Sweyn had been with his mother Ælfgifu in Norway acting as regent, but 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.

Cnut's son by Emma, Harthacnut, was acting as 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, through Emma as his regent and supported by earl Godwin of Wessex, was holding on. This split in rule roughly conformed to the old Danelaw line, which was not surprising as Harefoot was Danish-Northumbrian and Harthacnut Danish-Norman. Soon Harefoot seized the royal treasure from Winchester in the heart of Wessex, as Harthacnut was held up in Denmark. In 1037 the Witan eventually made Harefoot 'protector' of all England, which made things very difficult for Emma. If Harthacnut had promptly returned from Denmark he might have gained all England for himself, but he was pinned down defending Denmark from Magnus, the new king of Norway.

At this point a letter asking for help was received by Edward and Alfred in Normandy, said to be from Emma living at Winchester, but possibly forged by Harefoot. Emma had sometime also repeated a rumour that Harefoot was not the son of either Cnut or Ælfgifu, but a changeling. It is possible that Edward was the first to respond, with Norman help, with a raid into Hampshire with 40 boats, landing near Southampton, presumably heading for Emma in Winchester. They were welcomed as a Viking raiding party, fought a small battle, took some booty, but had to retreat. The reports of this are entirely of Norman origin (or copied second-hand), and may not be entirely accurate.

Then Alfred acted. He sailed from Flanders, possibly to Dover, was received by Earl Godwin's men (Godwin had opportunistically switched allegiance to Harefoot), and was tricked into being handed over to Harefoot's minions at Guildford. They took him to their ships, and sailed round to Ely, blinding him at some time en route. They left him with the monks of Ely to die, rather horribly, from complications of his terrible treatment. This event would colour Edward's future relationship with Earl Godwin and his family.

So in 1037 when Harefoot was finally recognised as king of all England Emma fled to Flanders, as Normandy at the time was unstable. She asked her son Edward for help, but he could do nothing. Harthacnut was still defending Denmark against Magnus, and also refused to be drawn into Emma's schemes, but in late 1039 he was able to visit her. This was after he had drawn up some sort of tontine treaty with Magnus, by which the survivor of the two if they had no children would rule both Norway and Denmark. It was never totally clear if England was also included in this pact, and later there was some confusion about this. Emma obviously thought it might be the case, as she would toy with the idea of supporting Magnus against Edward in the near future.

Harold Harefoot then 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 just before midsummer with a moderately large escort of 60 ships (were they expecting trouble, or was it just a display of power?) to Sandwich, receiving a good welcome. Harthacnut is said to have had Harefoot's body exhumed and thrown into a ditch. Edward had a better reception. He was invited to join his half-brother and mother and to take an active role at court.

Edward was probably accompanied by Robert, abbot of Jumièges, and his nephew Ralf, son of his sister Godgifu, plus a small group of other Norman supporters. Edward's fortunes were changing and changed even more the next year when Harthacnut died on 8 June 1042. He just dropped down dead with a convulsion according to reports. He was drinking heavily at the time. He was only 24. His half-brother Harefoot had died aged 23. With no obvious love the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (C version) says spikily of Harthacnut, '*And also he never accomplished anything kingly for as long as he ruled*'.

Edward was now aged about 37 and unmarried and as at one time he had been the seventh son found himself in a somewhat surprising position. For him to gain the crown was not quite as straightforward as it might seem. He was the only surviving male heir of Æthelred II, if Ironside's offspring are ignored, but another Sweyn, Harthacnut's cousin by Cnut's sister Estrith Svendsdatter, also had a distant claim, and 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 plus other southern magnates and bishops. Earls Leofric of Mercia and Siward of Northumbria who leant more to a Scandinavian outlook took somewhat longer to make their minds up.

Edward's mother behaved in a very strange way, which has never been adequately explained, suggesting Magnus of Norway as king of England, and holding on to the state treasures. Her relationship with Edward appears to have been a cold one, and possibly stemmed back to her lack of regard for Æthelred II, plus a perceived lack of support for her schemes from Edward. Perhaps she saw a frailty in Edward. The Witan finally decided and Edward was eventually crowned at Winchester on 3 April 1043. Soon afterwards the treasures were removed from Emma, and she was left to live out the rest of her life at Winchester until she died in 1052.

There were almost immediate post-coronation challenges from Scandinavia which lasted several years. Magnus planned an invasion, but was held up by fighting with another Sweyn, a cousin of the Godwinsons, over Denmark. Sweyn pulled the Godwin card and asked for help from Edward, but was ignored. Sweyn was eventually chased out, and Magnus started to prepare his plans for England once more, only to die in late 1047. Sweyn returned, was re-crowned, and remained king of Denmark, and held it (just) against Harald Hardrada who had taken Norway (but who was to die at the Battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066), until he died in 1074.

Once more in 1048 there were 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 men and ships from Hastings and the other future Cinque Ports took part in these actions.

In the early years of his rule Edward had brought in Normans to advise and assist him. He also needed to keep the English great earls, Siward, Leofric and Godwin on side, which was either helped or hindered by the earls' rivalries. Godwin rose to be much more influential than the others, and possibly to appease him Edward married his daughter Edith in 1045. But there were very clearly great tensions between the king and his father-in-law about the Norman influence. Normans and Norman abbey had received grants of land from Edward and Edward's nephew, Ralf of Mantes, became earl of an area centred on Hereford. Tensions continued to rise. Two events in 1051 – the advancement of Robert Champart of Jumièges, who had already been made bishop of London, to the archbishopric of Canterbury over Godwin's candidate, and a secondary event involving Eustace of Boulogne caused a complete rift. After an armed stand-off and near civil war, and with the support of Earls Siward and Leofric, Edward banished Godwin and his family, and Queen Edith was sent to a convent. These were extraordinary events. It can only be assumed that Edward had become almost completely in thrall to Godwin but actually detested him, possibly because of his role in killing his brother Alfred, but also because of his rising opposition to Edward's wishes. Edward had taken his first clear opportunity to rid himself of the Godwins.

What is somewhat astonishing is that the Godwins came back in force the next year and made a co-ordinated attack, again leading to near civil war. Things were appeased by the Witan with weasly political words, and the essential withdrawal of Siward and Leofric from active support of Edward. This caused Edward to submit, although he had already taken Godwin's youngest son Wulnoth and grandson Hákon as hostages of Godwin's good faith and did not return them.

What happened in the year to change things so dramatically? Was it the possible visit of Duke William II to England in 1051 and/or an indication to William via Robert Champart that he might be nominated by Edward as his preferred inheritor of the English throne the root cause of all this? We just don't know – records are contradictory, and much academic controversy has flowed over the issues.

Queen Edith was released from her convent and Robert Champart was sent packing to Normandy, somehow, it is believed, taking Edward's hostages Wulfnoth and Hákon with him. Godwin's protégé Stigand was inserted into Canterbury in Champart's stead. Stigand was promptly excommunicated by the pope, both as a usurper and also for plurality (holding on to other ecclesiastical appointments in addition to Canterbury). He could not consecrate bishops, nor could he crown kings. This situation was maintained by successive popes and William of Normandy would exploit it later.

Meanwhile the Godwins were firmly established back in power, and were now truly difficult to dislodge. Earl Godwin died in 1053 and Harold Godwinson became the pre-eminent earl, taking over Wessex, with East Anglia being transferred to Ælfgar, son of Leofric. In 1055 Earl Siward died and Harold's brother Tostig became earl of Northumbria. Finally in 1057 Leofric of Mercia died, handing the earldom to his son Ælfgar. Ralf, earl of Hereford, a possible claimant to the English throne as the son of Edward's sister Godgifu, also died in the same year. Harold promptly added the lands of Ralf's earldom to Wessex. East Anglia, which Ælfgar had previously held, went to his brother Gyrth Godwinson, and another brother Leofwine Godwinson took over Buckinghamshire and Kent and the area in between. So virtually every earldom south of the old Danelaw line, plus Northumbria, was held by a son of Earl Godwin.

During the period 1053–57 some thought must have been given to Edward's successor, and Edward, son of Edmund Ironside, was 'found' in Hungary where he had been since 1016, having fled from Cnut. The story was that, as a child, Cnut had sent him and his brother to the king of Sweden 'to be killed', but the Swede had refused to do Cnut's dirty work, and sent them to far-away Hungary, clearly placing them with a regal family. Negotiations for his return took place (which may have involved Earl Harold) and he arrived in 1057 in some state, with some treasure and with the support of Holy Roman Emperor Henry III. He was accompanied by his wife and three children, Margaret, Edgar and Christina. Unfortunately he then died before he could meet King Edward. The children were placed in the royal household, and raised there.

Sources of information and charters become rarer post-1054. Edward was 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, and that after this everything went well. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* confirms that the king remained in good health. The names of people associated with the court become more Scandinavian, although French names do not totally disappear. Most in the church had English names. The role of Queen Edith probably increased, and it is believed that she stirred up hostility to Earl Ælfgar of Mercia, who was banished. But then Ælfgar caused mayhem around the southern

Welsh Marches having allied with the king of north Wales. Fortunately for him, he was able to regain his earldom through diplomacy. Edith may have also been implicated in some of Tostig's less savoury adventures. Edwin, eldest son of Ælfgar, took over Mercia on his father's death in 1062.

There were tensions between the Godwinson brothers, but as long as they cooperated and worked with, and nominally under, the king, the realm was strong. Foreign affairs were also surprisingly stable. The policy towards Wales and Scotland was defensive. Sweyn of Denmark was first cousin to the Godwinsons and the king was related to Duke William II of Normandy. Tostig was married to Judith of Flanders, daughter of Baldwin IV and Eleanor of Normandy, a grand-daughter of Richard II. Eleanor's niece was Matilda of Flanders who married Duke William II of Normandy.

It may have been that the relationship of Edward to William II of Normandy was the reason behind the visit of Harold to Normandy in 1064 (possibly 1065). It may have been, at least in part, a diplomatic mission as part of the succession issue. Once again the true story behind this is obscured by post-Conquest history, fact, fiction and halftruths. Harold had previously operated in diplomatic mode in relationships with Mercia and Wales, and had also visiting Flanders and Germany in 1056, when he may have had something to do with the negotiations with Hungary concerning Edward Ætheling.

Tostig and Harold were clearly both gifted men who, as brothers of different character, could disagree very strongly. Some sources suggest that Edward preferred Tostig, but there was a revolt in 1065 against Earl Tostig by the Northumbrians. The thegns of Northumbria seized and occupied York. The revolt involved *'all the thegns of Yorkshire'*, according to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. The rebels declared Tostig an outlaw and sent for Morcar, the brother of the new earl Edwin of Mercia, to be the new earl of Northumbria, and then they marched south.

Harold met them and, after discussed the issues with the rebels, he concluded that it was impossible for Tostig to remain earl of Northumbria. Harold returned to the king, and advised him to agree to the rebels' demands. Apparently Edward was furious, and took some time to be persuaded. Eventually Harold went to Northampton and told Morcar that he was now officially earl of Northumbria, and the rebels that they were pardoned. Tostig continued to argue with King Edward and found himself exiled to Flanders. In November 1065 it became obvious that king Edward was dying. One possible heir was Edgar Ætheling and, with the approval of the Witan, he might have acceded with Harold 'Dux Anglorum' continuing as regent and running the country until the boy was old enough to rule on his own. On 5 January 1066 Edward summoned the Witan to his deathbed. He had been semi-conscious for several days, but was roused. He 'commended' his kingdom and the protection of his queen to Harold.

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Based on '1066 and the Battle of Hastings – Preludes, Events and Postscripts' 2016, published by BDHS, with modifications and additions