

CHAPTER 1 – Introduction

I think I am a lucky man. At a time when the country is still in upheaval, even three years after the decisive battle at Senlac, I and my wife Ela, live in an oasis of calm here at Buckhurst in north Sussex.

At a time when so many families, Norman, Saxon and Dane, have lost loved ones, I still have two healthy sons to run my estates after I have gone.

At a time when established landowners from Saxon families are being deprived of their estates I, who lived amongst the Saxons and served a Saxon King, am secure in my tenure of thousands of acres of woodland in Surrey, Sussex and Kent.

Admittedly, my brother, Hamo, who is in the service of King William, has great influence at court and has already acquired estates in Essex. But, I have the good fortune to have the tenure over my estates guaranteed in writing over the seals and signatures of two Kings.

Yes, I am notionally a tenant in Surrey and Sussex of Robert, Count of Mortain, and in Kent of Odo, the Earl of Kent; but that was designed by Edward of Wessex and William of Normandy to protect me. As brothers of King William, Robert and Odo have sworn oaths to respect my tenure and, if necessary, to come to my aid.

I never fought for either Edward or William as Kings but I placed my life in great danger on their behalf countless times. And, I and my brother protected both of them from death by poisoning or force of arms over the years.

You see, for some time I held the post of Household Steward with Edward of Wessex whilst my brother Hamo had the same role with William of Normandy. In England my role was entitled Pincerna; in Normandy Hamo was called Dapifer.

But, it is the work I have done over the last 20 or so years that has earned my greatest reward, the land for my family in perpetuity. In Kent, Sussex and Surrey I have been the woodreve to two Kings.

Whilst my home at Buckhurst is an oasis of calm, it is adjacent to the great Forest of Andred stretching from Farnham in the west to Canterbury in the east. With my sons, Robert and Ralph, I manage the cultivation of and production from the forest.

There are workshops throughout and around the forest producing panels for the outer fortifications of new castles, timbers for buildings and ships, woven and wooden fencing, wagons, swords, spears, axes, long bows, crossbows, arrows, quarrels and shields.

Then there are the charcoal pits producing fuel for the smiths and filters for drinking water.

We do not have to hide these activities from the outside world now but, for some time, we did have to conceal the sheer quantity of materials and weapons we were producing and storing.

In his last years, King Edward had lost the will and the ability to rule; he became forgetful and his mind wandered. And, gradually his physical health deteriorated until a succession of strokes killed him.

But, before that he was a determined man with a very clear understanding of what he wanted for England and who should succeed him as King. He continued to focus on that until the day he died

Edward hated the Danes but, even more, he hated the Godwinson family which had gained such great power under the Danish King Cnut and his sons. He blamed the Danes for turning his mother against him and the family of Earl Godwin for the murder of his older brother Alfred.

The only legitimate Wessex successor was Edgar Æthling. His father, Edward, had been exiled first to Sweden and then to Kiev in Rus. Edward had married Agatha, a daughter of Yaroslav, the Grand Prince of Rus; and then, he followed another Kievan exile, Andrew of Hungary, on a mission to reclaim his throne.

Harold Godwinson had brought Edward back to England but had then murdered him. Edgar, his son, was a puny teenage boy who spoke with a pronounced foreign accent and he received no respect from the English Earls. Edward was convinced that the throne would end up being taken by force of arms.

And, even if he had not made a vow of celibacy, he knew that a child of his own would have been likely to fall victim to an accident or an unfortunate 'illness'. As the younger son, his calling had been the church and he had only agreed to become King because of a promise he made to his brother, Alfred; but, he had no intention of breaking his vow of celibacy.

There would be claimants from Scandanavia although none of them had a right of direct descent from Cnut. But, the claim he feared most was one from the Godwinson family based on leadership of the South Saxons, a tenuous relationship to Danish royalty and sheer force of arms.

William of Normandy had no more legitimate claim being a nephew of Edward's mother but nothing more. Indeed, William's wife, Matilda, had a better claim being in direct descent from the great King Alfred.

But, Edward had been William's friend and mentor. In fact, Edward acted as one of William's guardians during his early years ruling the Duchy of Normandy and was regarded as a favourite uncle.

They had often talked about stronger links between England and Normandy and when Edward gained the English throne he quickly realised that he wanted William to succeed him. He could have waited and left things to chance but that was not his way.

He worked hard to marginalise Earl Godwin's family and to alienate his sons from each other. He even married their sister and used her as a conduit to feed poisonous rumours to her three older brothers.

At the official level he eventually forced his nobles to swear an oath to support William's claim. He even put Harold Godwinson in a position where he had to swear an oath of loyalty to William in Normandy.

But, he was realistic and he believed that William would have to invade. And, recognising the fighting prowess of the Godwinsons, Edward knew that William might have to fight a number of battles before he finally gained the throne of England.

So, he put me and a small handful of trusted courtiers and churchmen in charge of a project to ensure William's success. Some of us were Normans, some with brothers at William's court; others were men of Wessex who despaired at

the ascendancy of the Godwinsons and would rather have any King than what they called 'a Danish/South Saxon mongrel'.

Gradually we put in place a network of spies and couriers, efficient communication channels through abbeys and churches on each side of the Channel and, of course, the capacity to supply an invading army with fortifications, weapons, horses, wagons and, above all, information.

Each of us probably had different reasons for choosing to support Edward and William's plan. My reasons were quite simple. Edward had been a friend and mentor for most of my years as well as my master. William had been a friend from my childhood. And, I knew from personal experience that William was a natural leader; from an early age his talent for inspiring people shone out.