

**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST  
TRANSCRIPTS**

**EPISODE 67:  
THE YEAR THAT CHANGED ENGLISH**

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## **EPISODE 67: THE YEAR THAT CHANGED ENGLISH**

Welcome to the History of English Podcast - a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 67: The Year That Changed English. In this episode, we're going to look at the events of 1066 – one of the most important dates in English history and in the history of English. Of course, this was the year of the Norman Conquest and the beginning of the end of Old English. It was an incredibly active year. So much happened. And if the events had not unfolded in just the way they did, William's conquest would have probably failed. And English would be a completely different language today. So this time, we're going to explore how these events unfolded and how William the Bastard became known to history as William the Conqueror.

But first, I have a few quick announcements to make before we begin.

Since the last episode, several of you were kind enough to send me links to the new book by Paul Kingsnorth called *The Wake*. And I thought I should mention it to you if you are not familiar with it. The book was previously released in the UK, and it has now been released in the US. It is a fictional novel set in England in the immediate aftermath of the Norman Conquest. So the setting is very timely given where we are in the overall story of English. But what makes this particular novel so interesting is that Kingsnorth actually attempts to render the original language of the Anglo-Saxons. Of course, it isn't actually Old English because a modern audience wouldn't be able to read that. It's more of a modernized version of Old English than can be read and understood by a modern audience. So it combines Old English words and spellings with a more Modern English grammar. And given the period of history covered by the novel and the way that it treats the language spoken at the time, I thought many of you might find it interesting and might want to check it out. So again, the name of the book is *The Wake* and the author is Paul Kingsnorth.

And speaking of Old English, there is a brand new podcast out there called 'Learn Old English' by Bob Kiley. Bob was kind enough to contact me to let me know that he was putting it together, and the first few episodes are now up. They're very good, and they provide a much more technical insight to the language than I provide here. So again, the name of that podcast is 'Learn Old English,' and it is available through iTunes as well as most other podcast directories.

Also, I have previously mentioned the fact that I am working on a book version of the material presented in the podcast. It will actually include a lot of etymology and material not included in the earlier episodes. And it was originally my intention to prepare this book rather than release transcripts of individual episodes. However, the book seems to be taking forever, so I have decided to go ahead and put together the transcripts for those of you who want those. So I will start putting those up in a few days, probably next week. I have the first 25 episodes or so ready now, and I will add continue to update the list until they are all there. And I still plan on completing the book – probably early next year. So I'll make a note of that when it's ready.

So with that, I'm going to go turn to the events of 1066. And in putting this episode together, I thought it might be helpful to have to a map to illustrate the various places and events which I am going to be discussing. So Louis Henwood has once again been kind enough to prepare a map.

Just go to Episode 67 at [historyofenglishpodcast.com](http://historyofenglishpodcast.com), and you can refer to the map there if you want to get a sense of where these events occurred.

OK, so let's turn to the big event – the Norman Conquest. It is the one event which I have mentioned is just about every episode of the podcast since I began. And it is almost impossible to discuss the development of the English language without making some reference to this historic event.

As I've noted before, many scholars consider the Norman Conquest to be the most important and significant event in the overall development of the English language. It may seem strange that a battle could so fundamentally change a language, but it did. And if we want quick proof of that change, all we have to do is look at the words which we use for warfare.

Since the Normans emerged victorious in battle, today we tend to use their words when we're discussing the military. Almost all of the common English words for warfare, military personnel, strategy and tactics come from French. That includes words like *war*, *warrior*, *battle*, *military*, *army*, *navy*, *soldier*, *troop*, *division*, *rank*, *private*, *captain*, *corporal*, *lieutenant* (or 'left-tenant'), *infantry*, *cavalry*, *comrade*, *ally*, *enemy*, *invade*, *assail*, *advance*, *attack*, *defend*, *retreat*, *defeat*, *surrender*, *strategy*, *campaign*, *victory* and *champion*. And I am sure there are many, many more. And they all came into English because William the Conqueror and his descendants gave us the language in which English warfare was conducted after 1066.

In fact, you actually have to work to find military terms which survived from the defeated Anglo-Saxons. Most of those words actually relate to the equipment they used and which has continued to exist in some form even to this day. So the Anglo-Saxons gave us words like *sword*, *shield*, *ax*, *spear*, *helmet*, *bow*, *arrow* and *weapon*. But other than surviving tools and equipment, we generally have to look to the French for our military terms. And that's a good example of how the French conquerors changed the language of the Anglo-Saxons.

So as we turn to the conquest, let's pick up the story where we left off last time – with the last illness and death of Edward the Confessor. Edward had become very sick late in the year 1065, and his condition got progressively worse. By late December, he was bedridden.

As it turned out, his last illness coincided with the completion of his favorite project – the construction of Westminster Abbey just up river from London. Throughout his reign, Edward has supervised and overseen the construction of the church. And now, late in the year 1065, it was finally completed. The consecration and dedication of the church was set for December 28. But despite the fact that it had been his lifelong passion, Edward the Confessor was too ill to attend the dedication ceremony.

Rumors of Edward's illness were probably widespread by this point. And his failure to attend the Westminster dedication confirmed to everyone that he was likely in his final days. Edward held on for another week. So as we enter the first week of January 1066, Edward was still the King of England, but that reign was coming to an end.

In his final days, Edward was surrounded by a small handful of retainers and close associates. One of those associates was the man who had been the effective ruler of England over the prior decade – Harold Godwinsson, the Earl of Wessex and the son of the late Earl Godwin. Godwin the father had been a rival of the king, but his son Harold generally ruled as an ally. It appears that Edward came to trust Harold over time. And now, as Edward lay dying, he designated Harold as his successor. On his death bed, the king told Harold that he wanted to be buried at Westminster, and he commended the kingdom to Harold's protection. Early in the morning of January 5, Edward finally passed away.

What is so fascinating about the death of Edward is how quickly events moved afterwards. With Edward's death, he had to be buried and a new king had to be chosen. Under normal circumstances, the selection of a new king might take a few days or a few weeks. But as it turned out, the witan was always summoned at Christmastime. And given Edward's dire condition, they were still in town waiting for the inevitable. So as soon as Edward died, the witan were gathered to select a new king. And they immediately selected Harold.

On the day after Edward died, two major events occurred. In the morning Edward was laid to rest at Westminster. And in the afternoon, Harold was crowned as the new king. The day of the burial and coronation was known as Twelfth Mass at the time because it was twelfth day after Christmas. So the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records the following:

King Edward died or 'went forth' on Twelfth Mass eve.  
"se cyng Eadward forðferde on twelfta mæsse æfen."

And he was buried on Twelfth Mass Day.  
"7 hine mann bebyrgede on twelftan mæssedæg."

In the newly hallowed/consecrated church at Westminster.  
"innan þære niwan halgodre circean on Westmynstre."

And Earl Harold succeeded to the kingdom of England.  
"7 Harold eorl feng to Englalandes cynerice."

So thanks to these rapidly moving events, England had a new king before most of the country even knew the old king was dead. This fact is even more fascinating given that Harold had no blood claim to the throne. But the issue of the succession had been hanging over everyone's heads for over a decade. So by this point, the Witan likely knew what they were going to do when Edward died and that was choose Harold – the man who had effectively been ruling England for several years.

I should note here that there was actually one other potential heir in Edward's family line – a grand-nephew who was a descendant of Edmund Ironsides who I mentioned in an earlier episode. His name was Edgar the Aetheling, but he was never given any serious consideration. He was a small child who had actually been born and partially raised in the Hungarian royal court. By the time Edward the Confessor died in 1066, the boy was about 13 years old, but he had no real

support among the nobles or the Witan. Everyone knew that there would probably be many claims to the throne. So a 13-year-old boy was not a good option to defend the country. And the Witan was never strictly bound to the next of kin anyway. So for now, young Edgar the Aetheling was disregarded.

So Harold Godwinsson became King Harold in January of 1066. But as he assumed the throne, he was surrounded by enemies, especially beyond the sea. There were three specific enemies out there on the horizon. So let's briefly consider each one because each one plays a role in this story.

Let's begin close to home with the Godwin family. As we know, the Godwin family had come to dominate English politics. Harold had emerged as king. He also had two brothers who were earls in the south. And he had a brother named Tostig who became the Earl of Northumbria. But Tostig's position in the north was always a little awkward. The Godwins were based down in Wessex, and so Tostig didn't really have a base of support in the north. On top of that, he proved to be a bad leader.

He often ignored the Danish laws and customs which were still common in the region. He also imposed very high taxes. Over time, he made many enemies. And apparently, he had several of those enemies murdered. He alienated so many people in the region that a full-scale rebellion broke out in Northumbria. The thanes and nobles demanded that Tostig be removed and replaced with an earl from Mercia.

When we last looked at Mercia, the Earl there was Leofric – the husband of Lady Godiva. By this point, Leofric and Godiva had both died, and Mercia was being ruled by their grandson Edwin who was in his late teens. He had a brother named Morcar who was also a teenager. And the thanes and nobles of Northumbria demanded that Morcar be brought in to replace Tostig.

Now this rebellion against Tostig broke out in 1065 – the year before Edward the Confessor died. And Harold had been sent to the north to deal with the problem. Of course, Tostig was Harold's brother, so everyone just assumed that Harold would side with Tostig, but he didn't. Harold actually realized that his brother was largely at fault. And Harold ended up supporting the rebels. So he had Tostig exiled, and Morcar was allowed to take Tostig's place as the Earl of Northumbria. This is often cited as an example of Harold's fairness and his willingness to put the interest of the people above those of his family. And while that may have been the case, there was also a more practical consideration.

At the time, Harold was positioning himself to succeed Edward. He knew that he had strong support in the south, but he needed the support of the north if he wanted the Witan to make him king. So by siding with the rebels, Harold helped to ensure that he had that support. And that left Leofric and Godiva's grandsons as the Earls of Mercia and Northumbria.

So Harold made allies in the north, but in the process, he had his brother Tostig exiled. And in 1066, Tostig was still in exile in Flanders, and he was looking for revenge. So Tostig was the first potential threat beyond the sea.

The next potential threat came from Scandinavia. I have alluded to this threat in earlier episodes, but let's examine it one more time just so we have all the players on the table. The Scandinavian claim came from Norway, and it goes back to the time of Harthacanute. Remember him? You might remember that he was a son of Canute, and he was in charge of Denmark while his father was in England. When Canute died, Harthacanute was the presumed heir in England, but he was tied down in Denmark fighting the Norwegian king Magnus. They eventually settled their dispute with a truce in which they agreed that the survivor would inherit the kingdom of the one who died first. Well, that freed up Harthacanute to travel to England where he became king. And then he died. So Magnus of Norway then claimed Denmark and England, but he never really pursued those claims to the English throne.

When Magnus died a few years later, his half-brother Harald Hardrada inherited his kingdom. And Hardrada was one of the most well-known and feared Viking warriors in all of Europe. But the people of Denmark didn't really want him as their king, so Hardrada got tied down in Denmark for about fifteen years trying to kill or overthrow the local leaders there. As a result, he also never really pursued his inherited claims to England. But in 1063, Hardrada finally made a truce with the Danes. So when Edward the Confessor died in England a couple of years later, Harald Hardrada was free to pursue his inherited claims if he chose to do so. So Harald Hardrada was the second threat across the sea.

The third threat across the sea was the obvious threat – William of Normandy. I discussed his claims to the throne in the last episode, so I won't repeat them here. But as we saw, William felt that he had been promised the throne by Edward and that Harold Godwinsson had confirmed that promise by taking an oath to William. So as word spread that Edward the Confessor was terminally ill in England, William was probably planning a trip across the channel to receive his new title. But that's not what happened.

The news of Edward's death and Harold's coronation reached William very quickly. William was informed of both events at the same time. And needless to say, it was not the news he expected to hear. According to a Norman history (the *Roman de Rou*) written a hundred years later, the news reached William while he was on a hunting trip. When he received the news, he was so angry that he couldn't speak. It was an era before buttons existed, so the history says that William just stood there in silence, tying and untying the fastenings on his cloak. He returned to his palace and sat down on a bench and pulled his cloak across his face.

For years, William had let it be known around Normandy that he was Edward's heir – that he would one day be the King of England. Now he had been made a liar and made to look like a fool.

I noted that the historical sources say that William tied and untied his cloak because buttons were not yet a fashion accessory. And I make that note because there is actually a linguistic connection between *buttons* and William's ultimate response to the news he received. The word *button* is in fact a French word, though it has Germanic and ultimately Indo-European roots. The Indo-European root word was *\*bhau*, and it meant 'to push or strike.' And a button was a fastener which you had to push through a small opening. So that root word produced the word *button*.

And that same sense of pushing or striking something also produced the Old English word *beat*. So *beat* and *button* are cognate. And you might beat something with a *bat* from the same root. If you beat someone with a bat, you might get charged with *battery* from that same root via French. If you have an argument with someone, you might *butt* heads – again via French. If the argument leads to a physical confrontation, then you might engage in *combat* from the same root. And if you gather supporters and face off against your opponent, then you might have a *battle*, again from the same root via French. So all of that means that *beat*, *bat*, *butt*, *button* and *battle* are cognate. They come from the same root. And even though William might not have known anything of buttons, he definitely knew about battles. And the ultimate kingship of England was going to have to be determined by a battle – actually two different battles.

In February of 1066, about a month after Edward died, William arranged a meeting of his closest allies and vassals. He told them that he planned to gather an army and invade England in the summer. Now this announcement was probably expected, but it was still met with a lot of skepticism. Many of William's allies and supporters weren't sure that he could pull off a successful invasion by sea. Yes, the Vikings had invaded England by sea, but they were skilled and adept at sailing and boat-building. The Normans on the other hand were a land power – not a sea power. They didn't have the ships or the maritime skill to launch an invasion of England.

Furthermore, when the Vikings invaded England, they fought on foot, just like the Anglo-Saxons did. But the Normans had a cavalry and fought on horseback with chain mail and armor. So horses would also have to be transported across the channel, along with all of the knights' equipment.

Beyond the logistics of building ships and gathering an army big enough to actually win, they would be completely dependent upon the wind to get there. Again, Viking ships could be rowed if the winds weren't favorable. But Norman ships relied solely upon the wind and sails. And the winds were unpredictable in the North Atlantic. No wind would leave them stranded. And too much wind in the wrong direction would send them off course. So the logistics were a nightmare.

And assuming they actually made it across the channel in tact, the English army would certainly be waiting for them. It wasn't going to be a surprise attack like most of the Viking raids because everyone in England knew that William would be coming. And England was larger and richer than Normandy. So England could muster large armies, while William could only fight with the number of troops he could actually bring across the channel on boats.

In order for William to pull this off, he was going to have to be a 'pretty' man. And by *pretty*, I don't mean the modern sense of the term as 'good-looking.' I am referring to the original Old English meaning of the term. In Old English, the word *pretty* was *prættig*, and it meant 'cunning, skillful or tricky.' In order for William to launch a successful invasion of England, he was going to have to be either a miracle-worker or a magician. So he was going to have to be *prættig*. But if he was successful, he would be remembered for working wonders and doing what no other man could do. And that is how the sense of the word *prættig* evolved over time. By the Middle English period, it meant 'manly' in the sense of a successful, honorable or admirable man. So a man you admired or respected might be a 'pretty man.' By the time of Modern

English, the meaning of *pretty* had shifted to mean ‘attractive’ in a more physical sense. As it came to refer more and more to a person’s physical appearance, it was applied to women more than men. But in 1066, *prættig* still meant ‘cunning, skillful, or wily.’

But while William’s supporters admired him and considered him cunning and skillful, they didn’t necessarily think he could invade and defeat the Anglo-Saxons. They suggested that William convene a wider council of all the barons in Normandy to get their input. In early Spring, William did just that. But once again, William didn’t get the response he wanted. The barons initially balked at William’s proposal. But rather than give up, William met with each baron individually to convince them. One by one they gradually agreed, and each one promised to provide a certain number of soldiers and ships.

Having finally secured the support of the Norman barons, William moved forward with his plans for invasion. But Norman support wasn’t going to be enough. This was going to be a massive effort, not just a few Norman knights. So William quickly concluded that he needed support from other nobles throughout northern France. So he visited the neighboring counts and dukes to drum up support there as well.

And it was at this point that William did something that proved to be crucial to the success of the overall mission. But more important for our story, he did something that ultimately contributed to the decline of Old English as a written language. So let me explain.

Realizing that he needed support throughout France for his planned invasion, William decided to seek the approval of the one person who would give his mission legitimacy – the Pope. The Crusades were still about thirty years away, but the idea of Papal support for a military mission wasn’t new. If the Pope gave his blessing, all who died in support of the mission were deemed martyrs, and they would be guaranteed eternal salvation. So it was a great way to drum up support for the expedition. And as it turned out, William had an inside connection to the Pope.

The Pope was Alexander II. About twenty years earlier, as a young cleric, Alexander had studied at a monastery in Normandy. While there, one of his teachers was a monk named Lanfranc. And Lanfranc was now a bishop in Normandy. He was not only a close ally of William, he was also a close friend of the Pope. So Lanfranc acted as a go-between.

William was seen as sympathetic figure in Rome. He had been a strong patron of the church in Normandy. And Pope Alexander remembered his time in Normandy with great fondness. But more importantly, William argued that the English church was out of line with Rome’s teachings, and only he could bring it back into compliance.

In the last episode, we saw that the Norman Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert of Jumeiges, had been kicked out of the country when the Godwins returned from their exile. And he was replaced with a loyal Godwin supporter. Well, the papacy had never fully accepted that development. And the Godwins were seen as the ones responsible for the exile of the Archbishop. So the deck was already stacked against Harold in Rome.



Furthermore, the English Church was so far away that Rome didn't always have a good sense of what was going on in England. That made it easy to convince the Pope that the English Church was out of control. But the biggest problem for the English Church may have been the fact that much of its literature and pastoral work was being composed in English rather than Latin. Since the time of Alfred the Great, the English Church had been translating parts of the Bible and other religious texts into English. And that was unusual at the time.

The original Latin texts were considered sacred, and any attempt to render them into a local vernacular was viewed with suspicion in Rome. The Roman Cardinals and church officials didn't speak English, so they weren't exactly sure what was being taught to English congregations. They suspected that the true meaning of the original texts was being lost in those translations.

So here we may find part of the answer for why Old English writing disappeared so quickly in the wake of the Norman Conquest. Certainly, the Church scribes in England didn't stop speaking English. So why did so many of them immediately stop writing in English after 1066? Well, it appears that this was all part of William's agenda. He promised to reform the English Church in order to get papal support for his invasion. And part of those reforms probably included a return to Latin and the relegation of English to a secondary role. So after the Conquest, Latin once again became the primary language of the English Church. And Old English writing began to disappear. So here we see some of the first linguistic consequences of the Norman Conquest.

William's arguments ultimately convinced the Pope to give his blessing. And the Pope also granted William a papal banner to carry with him to England to show that he had the support of the Church. With the blessing of the Church, volunteers started to pour into Normandy from Flanders, Aquitaine and especially Brittany, which had many landless knights. William had effectively made them an offer they couldn't refuse. They were guaranteed landed estates if they succeeded, and salvation if they failed.

In the end, only about one-third of William's army was actually Norman. About one-third was Breton. And the remaining one-third was made up of other mercenaries – mostly from other parts of northern and central France. So the whole northern part of France had been pressed into service. Work soon began on the construction of ships to transport those troops across the channel when the time was right. As winter turned into spring, planning for the Norman Conquest was underway.

Meanwhile, across the channel, King Harold had traveled to the north of England to shore up his support with the nobles there. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle reports that he headed south to London and arrived at Westminster on Easter Day in 1066. According to the Chronicle entry for 1066:

In this year, King Harold came from York to Westminster on the Easter after the midwinter when King Edward went forth.

In the original Old English it reads:

“On þissum geare com Harold cyng of Eoforwic to Westmynstre to þam Eastran þe wæron æfter þam middanwintre þe se cyng forðferde.”

The Chronicle then tells us that Easter fell on April 16 in that year. So Harold arrived back at Westminster on April 16 – Easter Day.

Now notice that the Chronicle states that Edward the Confessor died in *middanwintre* – ‘midwinter.’ So *winter* was an Old English term. And if we trace the word *winter* back to its original Indo-European root, we find that it’s cognate with the words *water* and *wet* – also both Old English words. So *winter*, *water* and *wet* are all derived from the same root. And I mention this because most scholars believe that the word *winter* originally meant the ‘wet season.’ Of course, it was also the cold season. And that’s why battles and wars were rarely fought in the wintertime. The fighting season didn’t begin until spring and summer when the weather improved. In the springtime, crops were planted. And they didn’t have to be harvested until the fall or autumn. So that left many of the available fighting men free to fight in the summer.

This is an important point because it meant that there was a window of opportunity for William to invade England. Beyond mid-autumn, William would probably have to wait to the next year. And everyone on both sides of the channel understood that.

So when the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle says that Harold returned to London on Easter Day, we know that it was early spring, and the fighting season was about to start. So it was time for Harold to prepare his defense of England.

Now I should note here that Harold would not have described this season as spring. He would called it *lent* in Old English. And *lent* produced the word *Lent*. And *Lent* was later appropriated by the Church for the Christian holiday. But originally, the word just referred to the spring season. In fact, the word *lent* is cognate with the words *long* and *length*. And that’s because the springtime was the time when the days grew longer. The original Germanic word for the season has been reconstructed as *\*langi-tinaz* – literally ‘long days.’ And that term was later shortened to *lent*. And the season of *lent* roughly coincided with the forty days of penitence and fasting that preceded Easter. So *lent* gradually acquired that specific Christian meaning. Since *lent* acquired a specific religious meaning over time, it became necessary to find a more general term to refer to the season itself.

And since that season corresponded to the time of year when plants and flowers and leaves ‘spring forth,’ that season started to be called *spring* or *springtime* in Middle English. But in 1066, it was still called *lent*. And that time of year meant the fighting season was about to begin.

Of course, the spring and summer comprise several months. So Harold didn’t know exactly when the invasion would come, but he did know the direction it would come from. It would come from the south – from across the channel. So Harold’s only option was to station as many forces as he could across the southern coast of England. And that is what he did.

From the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, we're told that 'King Harold . . . gathered so much a ship-force and also a land-force as no king ever did before because he was informed that William the bastard would come hither and strive for this land.' In Old English, the passage reads, "Harold cyng . . . gegædrade swa micelne sciphere 7 eac landhere swa nan cyng her on lande ær ne dyde, for þam þe him wæs gecyðd þæt Wyllelm bastard wolde hider 7 ðis land gewinnen . . ."

Now within that passage, we see several examples of Old English military terms which have since been replaced by French terms. First of all, it uses the term *here* for 'army.' *Here* is Old English, and *army* is French. We've seen that term *here* before in the term *heregeld* which was the 'army tax.' And a version of the word still survives when we speak of an army *harrying* a town or region. So English *here* was replaced with French *army*.

The Chronicle says that Harold raised a *scip-here*, literally a 'ship army,' and a *land-here*, literally a 'land army.' Of course, *scip-here* – or 'ship army' – was later replaced with the French word *navy*. And *landhere* – or 'land army' – was replaced with the French word *infantry*. So the Chronicle captures these English words shortly before they were wiped away. And these are just small examples of what was getting ready to happen to the language.

Now in order to understand the challenge that faced Harold, we have to consider the nature of the English military at the time. It included a band of professional soldiers who were highly trained and were a very formidable force. These troops were called the *huscarls*. The term *huscarl* is a Norse term that was brought to England by Canute who had his own band of huscarls. The huscarls were still around during the time of Harold, and they were his strongest warriors. They fought on foot with axes and swords in a manner inherited from the Vikings. The only problem with the huscarls is that there simply wasn't enough of them to defend the county against the William's forces.

So beyond the huscarls, Harold relied upon the *fyrð* – or /furd/ in Old English. This was the local militia – the citizen soldiers. And once again, we see an Old English military term – *fyrð* – which has been largely replaced by a French term – *militia*. And I should note that the word *fyrð* is closely related to the word *ford*, which was a shallow crossing-point in a river. And *fyrð* and *ford* are related to the words *far* and *farer* as in *seafarer*.

The connection between all of those words is that all have to do with traveling. And the *fyrð* was called that because armies were always on the move. So the *fyrð* were basically armed travelers.

Now Harold could call up lots of men of the *fyrð* or *militia*, but they were all amateurs. They had very basic training, if any at all. And they had rarely been summoned over the past half a century. So most of them had never seen any combat. And that meant that they might not be reliable once a battle was underway.

The other problem with the *fyrð* is that most of the men came from farms across the countryside. So they would have to return to the farms in the fall in time to harvest the crops. Otherwise, mass starvation would occur across the country.

As Harold began to mobilize his army and navy across the southern coast of England, an ominous sign appeared in the sky. Just four days after Harold returned to London, Haley's Comet appeared. Of course, they didn't know it as Haley's Comet, and since it only appears every 75 years, most of them had never seen anything like it before. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records the following entry:

Then it happened that all through England such a sign in the heavens was seen as no man had seen before.

“Þa wearð geond eall Englalund swylc tacen on heofenum gesewen swylce nan man ær ne geseah.”

Some men said that it was the comet-star that some men call the long-haired star.

“Sume men cwedon þæt hit cometa se steorra wære, þone sume men hatað þone fæxedon steorran.”

For many Anglo-Saxons, this bright light in the night sky was believed to be a bad omen – a sign of God's wrath. The Chronicle says of the comet that it shone for seven nights – “7 swa scan ealle þa seofon niht.”

And perhaps it was an omen, because as soon as it disappeared from the night sky, the first of Harold's enemies appeared on the horizon. But it wasn't William. It was Harold's brother Tostig who was returning from exile.

Tostig arrived with a fleet of ships along the southeastern coast seeking revenge and reinstatement to his prior position as Earl of Northumbria. But Tostig didn't have enough of a force to actually pose a serious threat. He was repeatedly turned away from the southern coast, but a southerly wind gave him no option but to sail up the eastern coast of England. When he reached the Humber south of York, he tried to go ashore again. And again, he was turned away. So Tostig's feeble attempt at invasion had apparently come to an end. And he continued to head north to Scotland. But that was not the end of Tostig's story. From Scotland, he sailed cross the North Sea to Norway. And guess who he met there? If you guessed Harold Hardrada, you would be correct.

Tostig actually made an alliance with Hardrada. Together, they agreed to launch a joint invasion of England later in the summer. But no one in England actually knew that at the time.

In England, the focus was on William to the south. The fyrd waited and waited along the southern coast. But there was no invasion. In fact, the Chronicle makes no report of any event in England from June until September. So the entire Summer season passed without an invasion from the Normans or the Scandinavians.

Earlier I discussed the words *winter* and *spring*. So as summer turned into autumn, let's consider the origin of those words. *Summer* is also an Old English word. It was originally *sumor*. And for the following season, we have two different words – *fall* and *autumn*. But neither word is Old English. *Autumn* was borrowed from French during the Middle English period. *Fall* actually developed a bit later in the 1600s. Just as *spring* referred to the time when leaves sprang from the trees, *fall* referred to the season when those leaves fell to the ground. It was in common use in England in the 1600s and 1700s when English settlers were migrating to North America. So American English still tends to use that term. But the word *fall* fell out of favor in England in later centuries, and today British English prefers the word *autumn*.

But if we go back in time to the period of Old English, we find that the Anglo-Saxons actually called the season *hærfest*, and it still survives as the word *harvest*. In fact, the word *harvest* originally was a seasonal term. It referred to a specific time of year – *autumn*. Of course, that was also the time when crops were gathered. So after the words *autumn* and *fall* came into use, the word *harvest* began to change its meaning, and it took on a more restricted sense. It went from referring to the time when crops were gathered to the actual gathering of crops. Some of the original sense of the word still survives in the term 'harvest moon,' which is a full moon that occurs within two weeks of the beginning of autumn.

Now that little bit of etymology about the Anglo-Saxon season of *harvest* is actually important to our story because, when the harvest season began, the men of the fyrd had to return home to harvest the crops. So harvest meant the Anglo-Saxon defenses would have to be withdrawn. Harold was probably counting the days as summer came to an end and the harvest season approached. But there was still no William.

By this point in mid-August, both William of Normandy and Harald Hardrada in Norway had assembled their respective fleets. Estimates vary, but it appears that William had about 700 ships in Normandy and Harald Hardrada had about 300 ships in Norway. They were both ready to go whenever the winds were right.

But here's the thing. Normandy is south of England, and Norway is northeast of England. So William and Harald Hardrada were each waiting for different winds. William wanted a southerly wind to carry his fleet north. But Hardrada wanted the opposite. So the winds were literally winds of fate. They would determine the future of England.

And as it turned out, the wind was coming out of the north which was just what Harald Hardrada wanted. So around August 12, Hardrada was able to leave port on his way to Britain to meet up with Tostig, but William was still stuck in Normandy.

A few days later, Hardrada's fleet landed in the islands north of Britain. He gathered additional men and supplies and met up with Tostig. His 300 ship fleet was the largest Viking fleet seen in Britain in over fifty years.

By all accounts, neither King Harold of England nor William of Normandy was aware of Hardrada's arrival in northern Britain. William was still waiting for a favorable wind in

Normandy. And Harold was still waiting for William on the other side of the channel. That meant the north was left largely undefended.

We're now in early September. The Anglo-Saxon fyrd had been stationed along the southern coast for most of the summer. And they were tired of waiting. By custom, service in the fyrd was limited to two months. So that time had run out. Provisions for the soldiers were also running low. And now it was harvest time. And the entire country was dependent upon the harvest to avoid starvation.

So on September 8, Harold made the decision to disband the fyrd and allow them to return home. That happened to be a holiday known as the Nativity of St. Mary. And it may have been agreed in advance that if William had not appeared by that date, everyone would be allowed to go home for the harvest season. They may have thought that it would be too late in the season for William to invade beyond that point. So the fyrd was sent home. That left Harold with only his huscarls – his professional soldiers. As we've seen, Hardrada and Tostig were already in northern Britain by this point. But Harold and his huscarls didn't know that yet.

With the fyrd disbanded, Harold rode with his huscarls back to London. A couple of days later, on September 12, Hardrada's forces in the north descended upon the town of Scarborough, and they burned it to the ground. It was only at this point that the people in the north became aware that Harald Hardrada had landed. The news was sent to King Harold down in London, but even by horse, it would still take several days for the news to reach him.

From Scarborough, Hardrada and Tostig's fleet headed south to the Humber to approach York. York was second in size only to London, and it was the largest and most important city in the north. Six days after the burning of Scarborough, Hardrada and Tostig sailed up the Humber and disembarked from their ships. They headed toward York, but they were intercepted at a place called Fulford Gate by the two northern earls, Edwin and Morcar. Remember, that they were the grandsons of Leofric and Lady Godiva. And Morcar was the earl who had replaced Tostig when Tostig was exiled.

The two Anglo-Saxon earls were mere teenagers and had never fought in a major battle. Meanwhile, Harald Hardrada was one of the most experienced and well-known Viking warriors in northern Europe. So it was no match. Hardrada's forces won a decisive victory, but the two earls survived. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle briefly records these events. It says of Hardrada and Tostig:

They both went into the Humber until they came to York,  
“hi foron þa begen into Humbran, oð þæt hi comon to Eoforwic,”

and fought with them there, Earl Edwin and Earl Morcer his brother;  
“7 heom þær wið fuhton Eadwine eorl 7 Morkere eorl, his broðor,”

but the Norwegians had the victory.  
“ac þa Normen ahton sige.”

The day after Hardrada's victory, the northern earls surrendered York, and for this brief period, Harald Hardrada was the effective ruler of northern England. More importantly, there was an agreement to provide Hardrada with hostages at a place called Stamford Bridge about seven miles east of York.

The date was September 19 or 20. And by all accounts, the news of the burning of Scarborough a few days earlier was just now reaching Harold down in London. At this point, Harold realized that he had made a mistake. He had spent the entire summer focused on William's threat from Normandy – a threat which had never materialized. But now, Harald Hardrada was invading from the north. Furthermore, the fyrd had just been disbanded, so he didn't have a full army to mobilize. So he did the only thing he could do at the spur of the moment.

As soon as he got the news that Hardrada was in the north, King Harold pulled together his huscarls and any other troops that he could, and he headed north. On September 20, he pulled out of London. Estimates are that he had about 7,000 men with him. Just four days later, the Anglo-Saxons army arrived near York – 190 miles away. It was an incredible feat just to cover that much ground in such a short period of time with 7,000 men.

Harold arrived near York just as the Hardrada and Tostig were set to receive hostages from the conquered city. Harold's troops completely surprised Hardrada and Tostig at Stamford Bridge. Hardrada's forces weren't expecting battle, so they were spread out and disorganized. Despite the long and exhausting march, Harold's rapid attack had worked. He had the element of surprise on his side.

The Anglo-Saxons actually had a word for that type of surprise attack. It was called a *fær*. And even though that word has lost its original military sense, it still survives in Modern English as the word *fear*. And that's because a *fær* generated 'fear' in the enemy.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records these events. It says:

Then came our king Harold on the Norwegians unawares  
“Ða com Harold ure cyng on unwær on þa Normenn”

and met them beyond York at Stamford Bridge with a great host of English folk;  
“7 hytte hi begeondan Eoforwic æt Steinford Brygge mid micclan here Englisces folces,”

The battle began when Harold's army crossed the bridge to confront Hardrada's forces. The two sides met and began to fight in hand-to-hand combat. By all accounts, it was a brutal battle. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle says:

there was that day a very fierce battle fought on both sides.  
“7 þær wearð on dæg swiðe stranglic gefeoht on ba halfe.”

In the course of the battle, both Harald Hardrada and Tostig were killed. The Scandinavians soon realized that they had been defeated, and they began to retreat to their ships. The Chronicle records:

the Norwegians that were left were put to flight,  
“þa Normen þe þær to lafe wæron wurdon on fleame,”

and the English fiercely struck them from behind,  
“7 þa Englisca hi hindan hetelice slogon,”

until some of them came to ship,  
“oð þæt hig sume to scype coman,”

Some drowned,  
“sume adruncen”

some were burnt,  
“7 sume eac forbærnde,”

some perished in various ways,  
“7 swa mislice forfarene,”

so that there were few left,  
“þæt þær wæs lyt to lafe,”

And the English had the power of the battlefield.  
“7 Engle ahton wælstowe geweald.”

And then the Chronicle suggests the extent of the devastation. It reads:

And the king let them fare home with twenty-four ships.  
“7 se cyng hi let ham faran mid .xxiiii. scypum.”

So the Viking army arrived with 300 ships full of men, but it only took 24 ships to take the survivors home. After the Battle of Stamford Bridge, Harald Hardrada – one of the mightiest Viking warriors – was dead. And Tostig was dead. The massive Viking army had been vanquished. But more importantly, the Scandinavian claims to the English throne were now extinguished. For all practical purposes, this was the last battle of the Viking Age in Britain.

While Harold’s men cleared the battlefield and piled up the bodies, they probably thought they could take a deep breath. They had survived a surprise attack and ended the Viking claims to the throne. But on the night of September 26, the day after the Battle of Stamford Bridge, the winds finally shifted on the English Channel. A southerly wind was finally available to William. At his direction, the Norman fleet was readied, and they headed across the Channel the next day. On



the morning of September 28, they arrived at Pevensey Bay on the southern coast of England. William's army landed on the English shore without any opposition.

As we know, the fyrd or militia had been called off about twenty days before. On top of that, Harold and his army were still at Stamford Bridge clearing the battlefield there and having a celebratory feast. When William arrived in Pevensey, it is unlikely that he knew anything about the Battle of Stamford Bridge, but he could probably surmise that Harold's troops were occupied elsewhere. The lack of resistance allowed the Normans to occupy the small town of Hastings near the southern coast, and he built a fortification there.

Once again, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records these events:

Then Count William came from Normandy to Pevensey on Michaelmas Eve (September 28)  
“Ða com Wyllelm eorl of Normandige into Pefnesea on Sancte Michæles mæsseæfen,”

and as soon as they were prepared, they built a castle at the town of Hastings.  
“7 sona þæs hi fere wæron, worhton castel æt Hæstingaport.”

Now this is the first mention of the town of Hastings, and it is about to become very famous for the final battle which was fought there. I should note here that the original Saxon town of Hastings now lies under water, and in fact the entire coastline looks much different today than it did a thousand years ago. In 1066, Hastings was located on a small peninsula which stuck out into the ocean. It was basically a triangle roughly 10 miles by 6 miles. It was an ‘odd’ piece of land. And I use the word *odd* in the original sense of the word.

The word *odd* comes to us thanks to the Vikings. It was originally the Old Norse word *odd*. And it originally meant a piece of land which stuck out in the water. Since those pieces of land were often triangle-shaped, the word *odd* came to refer to a triangle or something three-sided. In later years, it came to refer to the third part of something. So in a dispute, that third party was the deciding vote. We still have that sense of the word when we speak of odd numbers and even numbers. An odd number is a number with a tie-breaker. In a three-way vote, it is often two against one. And the one that was different was sometimes called the ‘odd man.’ His views and opinions were not shared by the majority. And that is how we got the modern sense of the word *odd* as something strange or different.

Anyway, since the word *odd* was a Norse word, it was entering English around this time in the eleventh century. And Hastings was located on an *odd* along the southern English coast.

After settling in the area, the Normans laid waste to the surrounding coastal areas, and they spent the remaining days resting and preparing for battle against the Anglo-Saxon army.

As soon as William landed on the English shore, word went out that the Normans had finally arrived. But King Harold was still in the north of England cleaning up after the Battle of Stamford Bridge. Estimates are that it took about three days to get the word to Harold about 250

miles away in the north. So around October 1st or 2nd, Harold was finally informed that William and the Normans had invaded, and that they had gathered around Hastings.

It had only been a week since the Battle of Stamford Bridge, and even though Harold's army had won, it was still tired, wounded and depleted. Nevertheless, Harold felt that he had no choice but to gather his tired army and quickly head south to meet William. In fact, the troops of the northern earls – Edwin and Morcar – were too depleted to join the trek. So within one day, Harold gathered his huscarls and any other troops he could cobble together, and they headed south. They traveled through London and gathered a few more troops there. On October 10, he headed out of London toward Hastings about seventy miles away. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle tells us that the rendezvous point was an old apple tree which stood on a hill called Senlac. The hill cut across the only road out of Hastings. So it was a good defensive position. It was high ground, and it blocked William's only way out. Harold and his men arrived at the hill on October 13.

Over the past two weeks, Harold had marched a small band of soldiers from London to Stamford Bridge and defeated a formidable Viking army. He had then turned around and marched a depleted army all the way back down to the southern coast to face William of Normandy. In retrospect, this was probably a mistake. It is generally agreed that had Harold waited a few days before proceeding to Hastings, he could have gathered many more men. But Harold proceeded anyway.

The morning after Harold's troops arrived at Senlac hill, William gathered his forces for battle. The date was October 14, 1066 – the day of the Battle of Hastings. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle suggests that it was William who had the element of surprise. The Chronicle says of Harold's forces:

William came upon them unawares, before they were drawn up for battle.  
“Wyllelm him com ongean on unwær, ær þis folc gefylced wære.”

Historians continue to debate how many troops there were on each side. Harold probably had around 5,000 trained soldiers plus some farmers and peasants who had joined him on his trek south. In all, it was probably about 7,000 or 8,000 men.

William's army was probably about the same size – about 7,000 or 8,000 men. But all of William's forces were highly-trained professional soldiers.

Even though the two armies were about the same size, they were completely different in structure. As I've noted, the Harold's Anglo-Saxon army fought on foot, just as they always had. But William's army was much more diverse. He had about 4,000 infantrymen. And he also had about 1,000 archers or bowmen. But then he had about 3,000 men who fought on horseback. And remember that the Norman cavalry was a product of the French feudal age. Even though the Anglo-Saxons didn't fight on horseback, they did have a word for it. It was called the *ored*. But after Hastings, it was replaced with the French word *cavalry*.

As the two forces met at Hastings, Harold took up his defensive position on the crest of the hill. His forces stood shoulder to shoulder to form a shield wall against the cavalry and archers. Harold placed his huscarls in the middle of the line and the men of the fyrd on either end.

Meanwhile, William divided his army into three roughly equal parts. The center consisted of the Normans. On the left flank, he stationed his Breton allies. And on the right flank, he placed his other French and Flemish allies.

William's archers allowed them to take aim at the English infantry from a distance. The cavalry would then attempt to smash through the shield wall. But that plan didn't work as William intended. As his cavalry approached Harold's shield wall, they were turned away again and again. This continued for the entire morning. So despite having a tired and depleted army, it actually looked like Harold's forces would emerge victorious.

At around 11:30 in the morning, there was a break in the action. Everyone caught their breath. Around 2:30 in the afternoon, the battle began again. For more than two hours, the Normans tried to break through the English shield wall, but continued to be unsuccessful. The Normans were accustomed to fighting against other cavalries. But they had never encountered anything like the Anglo-Saxon shield wall before.

At one point in the afternoon, the Normans gave up and started to retreat, but the untrained Anglo-Saxon fyrd on either end of the shield wall made the mistake of breaking ranks to pursue the fleeing Normans. They followed them down to level ground. And there on level ground, without the benefit of the shield wall, the Normans had the advantage. William rallied his troops to counter-attack. The Norman cavalry turned around. Standing in their stirrups, the Normans started to cut down the Anglo-Saxon fighters. The tide slowly turned in William's favor.

In the course of this counter-attack, Harold was killed., but it isn't entirely clear how he was killed. The Bayeux Tapestry suggests that he was shot through the eye with an arrow. Other sources say that a group of Normans attacked him and hacked him to death.

With Harold's death and the darkness of the late afternoon, the Anglo-Saxon shield wall finally broke down. The Normans then proceeded to cut them apart. The fallen soldiers included the king and his brothers, thereby leaving no surviving male member of the Godwin family. A large portion of the nobility of southern England was also wiped out. At the end of the day, William had won the Battle of Hastings, and much of the English aristocracy had been decimated. According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle:

the French held the field of the dead  
“þa Frencyscan ahton wælstowe gewæld,”

With Harold dead, England had no king. And there was no obvious choice left to succeed him. And the key towns and cities could no longer be fortified. But William didn't advance directly to London. He returned to the coastal and port cities of southeastern England, and he forced them

to submit. That included Dover and Canterbury. That ensured that he had way to retreat back to Normandy if he needed it.

Up in London, the remaining members of the Witan – mostly church officials – tried to pick a new king before William arrived. They selected the only remaining member of the old Wessex line of Kings. It was that young grand-nephew of Edward the Confessor known as Edgar the Aetheling. He was still a boy, but there was no other choice. According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle,

Archbishop Aldred and the townspeople of London would then have child Edgar for king,  
“Aldred arcebiscop 7 seo burhwaru on Lundene woldon habban þa Eadgar cild to kynge,”

as was his natural right,  
“eallswa him wel gecynde wæs.”

But even though he was selected as king, Edgar was never crowned. By this time, William was closing in on London. As William slowly advanced, day after day, the resistance began to fade away. The fact that William had that Papal banner may have been a decisive factor here. Most of the southern nobles had been killed at Hastings. The northern earls, Edwin and Morcar, were still alive, but they were only teenagers. So the church officials were effectively in charge at this point, specifically the Archbishops of Canterbury and York. And by this point they knew that William had received the blessings and the banner of the Pope. The fact that William had defeated the Anglo-Saxons seem to suggest that God was indeed on his side. And at this point, William’s capture of London seemed inevitable.

So the Archbishop of Canterbury came to meet William and acknowledged him as the new ruler of England. That enabled William to take London without a fight, and young Edgar was abandoned. William then met with the leaders of London and a coronation ceremony was set for Christmas Day.

William chose to receive the crown at the brand-new Westminster Abbey – the church had that been dedicated almost exactly one year earlier. And that choice was intentional. William wanted to reinforce the idea that he was the legitimate heir of Edward the Confessor. What better way to do that than to be the first king crowned in Edward’s church?

On Christmas Day 1066, William was crowned King of England in Westminster Abbey. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records the event as follows:

And William this land conquered. And came to Westminster.  
“Willelm þis land geode. 7 com to Westmynstre.”

And Archbishop Ealdred consecrated or hallowed him as king.  
“7 Ealdred arcebiscop hine to cynge gehalgode.”

William's coronation ceremony was conducted in both Latin and English. And during the coronation, a new element was introduced – a call for the people to consent to William's rule. The people assembled in the abbey were questioned in both French and English as to whether they accepted William as their ruler. The congregation shouted "Vivat Rex!," and then in English "Long Live the King."

William's assembled knights outside of the abbey misinterpreted the commotion inside. They heard the yelling and thought a revolt was underway, so they went on a rampage and set fire to the surrounding buildings and killed many of the Saxons who were assembled outside.

It was an ominous beginning to William's reign. The political and social changes were just beginning. And so were the linguistic changes. Old English texts became much less common after Hastings. Latin and French would become the standard written languages going forward. In fact, the Abingdon version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle ended abruptly in 1066 after recording the Battle of Stamford Bridge. The version of the Chronicle known as the Parker Chronicle contains only one more entry in Old English after 1066. That entry was in the year 1070. After that, the remaining entries were written in Latin. Another version was maintained in Old English until 1079. But only one surviving version was maintained in English beyond that. The Peterborough Chronicle in the north was maintained until the year 1154, and it is one of the few surviving documents that was still being written in English at that late date.

Next time, we'll turn our attention to the aftermath of the Norman Conquest. And we'll look at the surviving documents to try to trace the changes that were starting to occur. As we shift our focus to the post-Conquest period, we will return to the actual language itself. And we'll try to follow the relatively quick transition from Old English to Middle English.

So until next time, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.