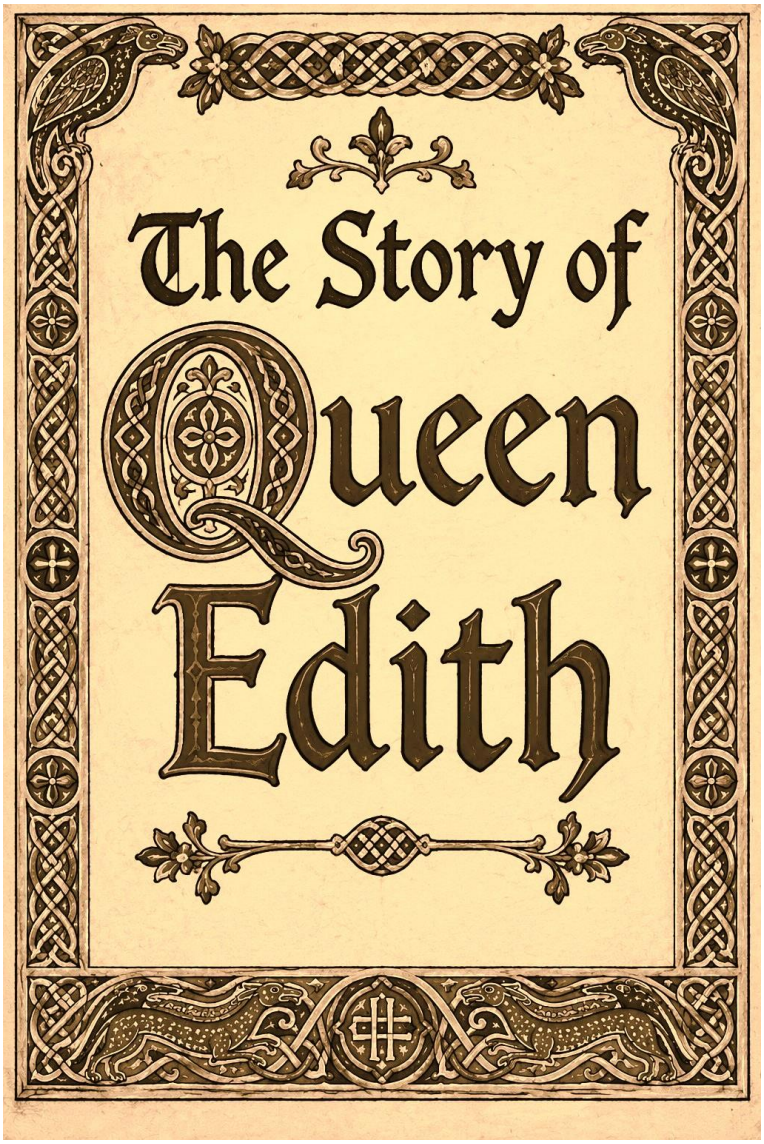
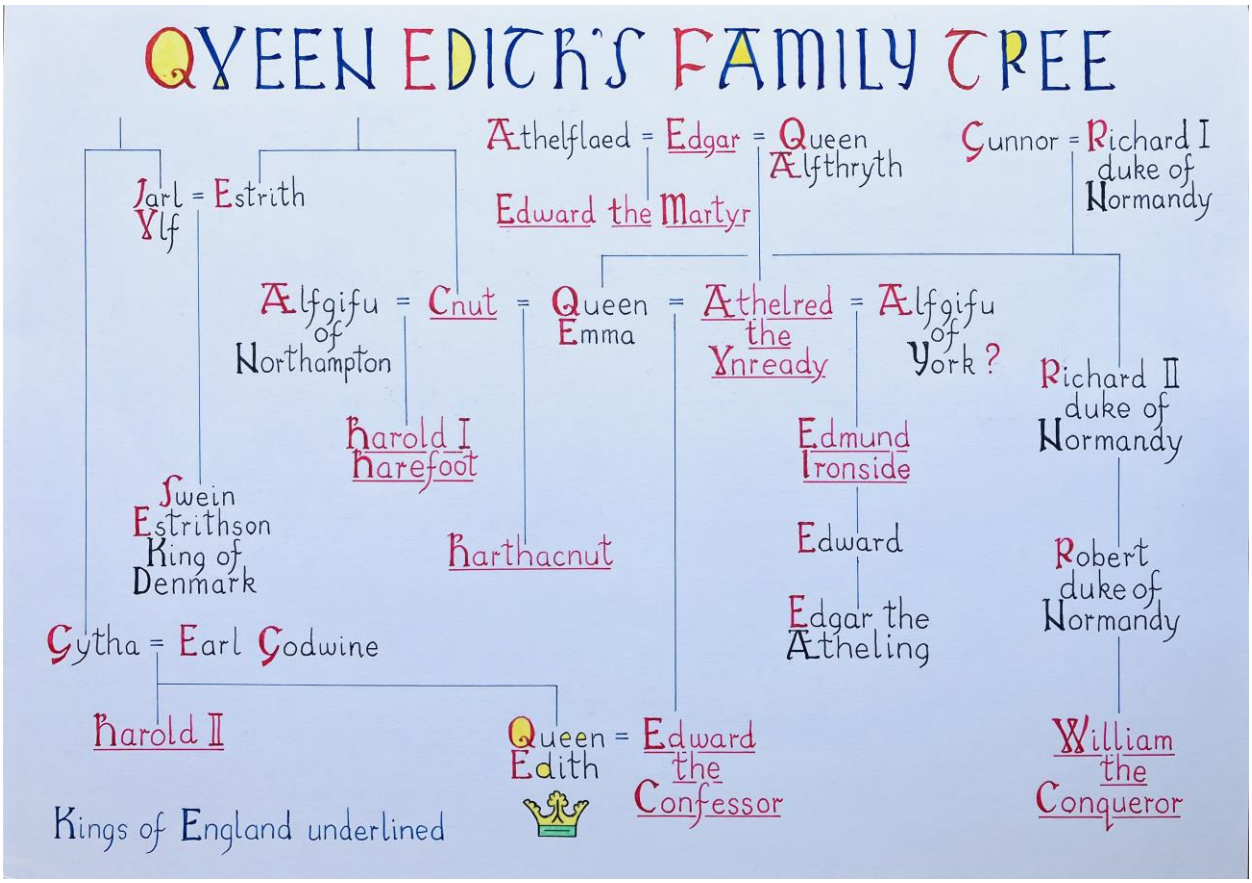
ROYAL RYCLAND




Text by Pauline Stafford

Illustrated by Paul Wiggin


QUEEN EDITH'S FAMILY TREE
Athelflaed = Edgar = Queen Ælfthryth
Gunnor = Richard I duke of Normandy
Jarl Ylf = Estrith
Edward the Martyr
Ælfgifu of Northampton = Cnut = Queen Emma = Æthelred the Unready = Ælfgifu of York ?
Richard II duke of Normandy
Harold I Harefoot
Edmund Ironside
Swein Estrithson King of Denmark
Harthacnut
Edward
Robert duke of Normandy
Gytha = Earl Godwine
Edgar the Ætheling
Harold II
Queen Edith
Edward the Confessor
William the Conqueror
Kings of England underlined

Queen Edith based on the coronation

from Aelred's 13th century 'Life of Edward'.

# 1. Edith - heir to a turbulent politics

In 1066, at the time of the Norman Conquest of England, Oakham, like much of Rutland, was held by Queen Edith. Edith was the daughter of Earl Godwine of Wessex and his Danish wife Gytha, and the wife and widow of the English king Edward the Confessor. She was heir to the turbulent politics of the eleventh century.

What we now know as England was largely a product of the tenth century, when kings of the West Saxons had enlarged their power beyond the Thames, the Trent and eventually the Humber.

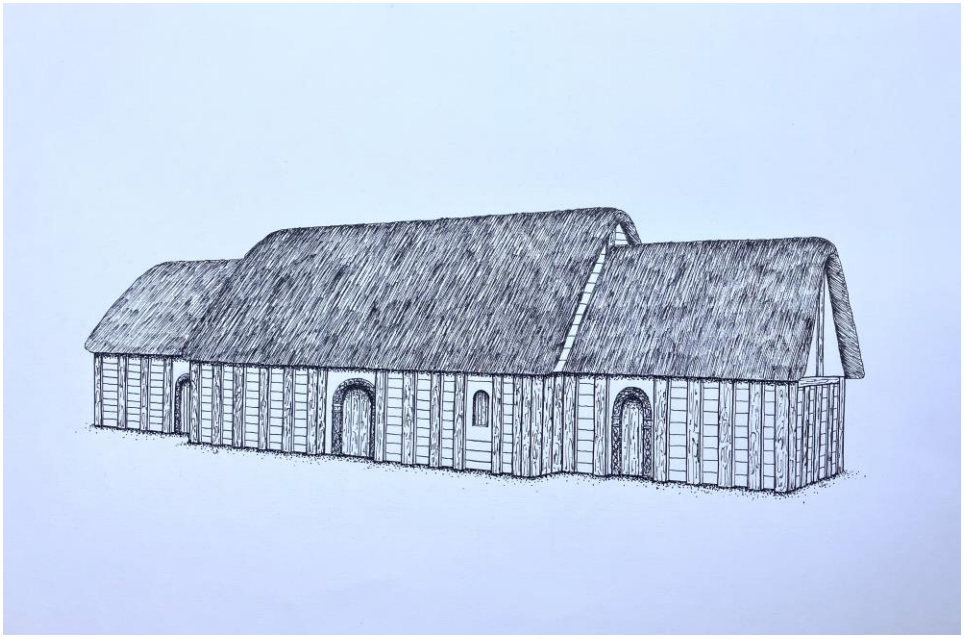
The new kingdom was wealthy and a tempting target for invasion. The first attacks and conquest came in the late tenth and early eleventh century from Scandinavia. These resulted in the conquest of the kingdom by the Danish king Swein and his son Cnut and the succession of Cnut as king in 1016.

In1016 the English king, Æthelred, died and his son Edmund Ironside soon after. His other children were either killed, disappeared or fled to the continent. The children of his third wife, Queen Emma, went to her native Normandy - among them Edward, Edith's future husband.

Most of the surviving English nobility came to terms with the new regime. Edith's father, Godwine, was one of its key supporters. He married the Danish Gytha, a relative of King Cnut. Queen Emma, Æthelred's widow and Edith's future mother-in-law, married Cnut as her second husband.

Cnut's death in 1035 saw a range of claimants to the English throne - his own sons by two different wives, and the surviving sons of Æthelred, including Edward, known to history as 'the Confessor'. After 7 years of disputed succession Edward became king in 1042. He came to terms with Edith's powerful father, Godwine, and advanced her brothers - and in January 1045 he married Edith.

The ruins of Wilton Abbey as represented in stained glass.



Impression of the Anglo-Saxon church in Oakham based on the West Stow church drawing and archaeological remains of the wooden church building found at Brandon.

## 2. Edith's upbringing

t her marriage in 1045 Edith became queen consort. There could never have been any guarantee that she would wed a king. But her upbringing certainly prepared her for that role.

She was born in Wessex. As with many medieval people we do not know precisely when, most likely in the early 1020s. She was probably the eldest daughter among eight siblings. She had an English father and Danish mother. Her name was English, though half of her siblings had Scandinavian names. Her name may have been changed at marriage, as happened in the case of her mother-in-law Emma/Ælfgifu. Whether her parents' or husband's choice 'Edith' was a West Saxon royal name, borne by her husband's sainted aunt, Edith of Wilton.

Wilton nunnery [Wiltshire] was where she was raised. This did not mean that she was destined to be a nun. It did mean she came into contact with learned religious women and other noble women being educated there.

Wilton was a royal house which lay close to the West Saxon court. It had been connected with royal women since the tenth century. It had produced two royal female saints - Edward's great-grandmother Ælfgifu and his aunt Edith. It was a wealthy house but also noted for its learning.

Edith herself was skilled in languages - Latin, French, English, Danish and Irish. She was interested in Saints' Lives, and commissioned a Life of her husband. Its author hoped she would 'read, reread and consider'. At Wilton she would have absorbed exactly such habits of monastic reading - reading, meditation and reflection.

This woman with a Danish mother, English father and Norman-French speaking husband, educated at the royal nunnery of Wilton, was well-prepared for the multi-lingual court of mid eleventh-century England.

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Edward and Edith's coronation from Aelred's 'Life of Edward.' Reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

# 3. Queen Edith

dith, wife of Edward the Confessor, was a queen consort, not queen in her own right. She was, however, consecrated and crowned. It is in this new role that we see most of her activity.

Edith was married and consecrated on 23 January 1045. The practice of consecrating queens was relatively new in England, largely a product of the tenth century.

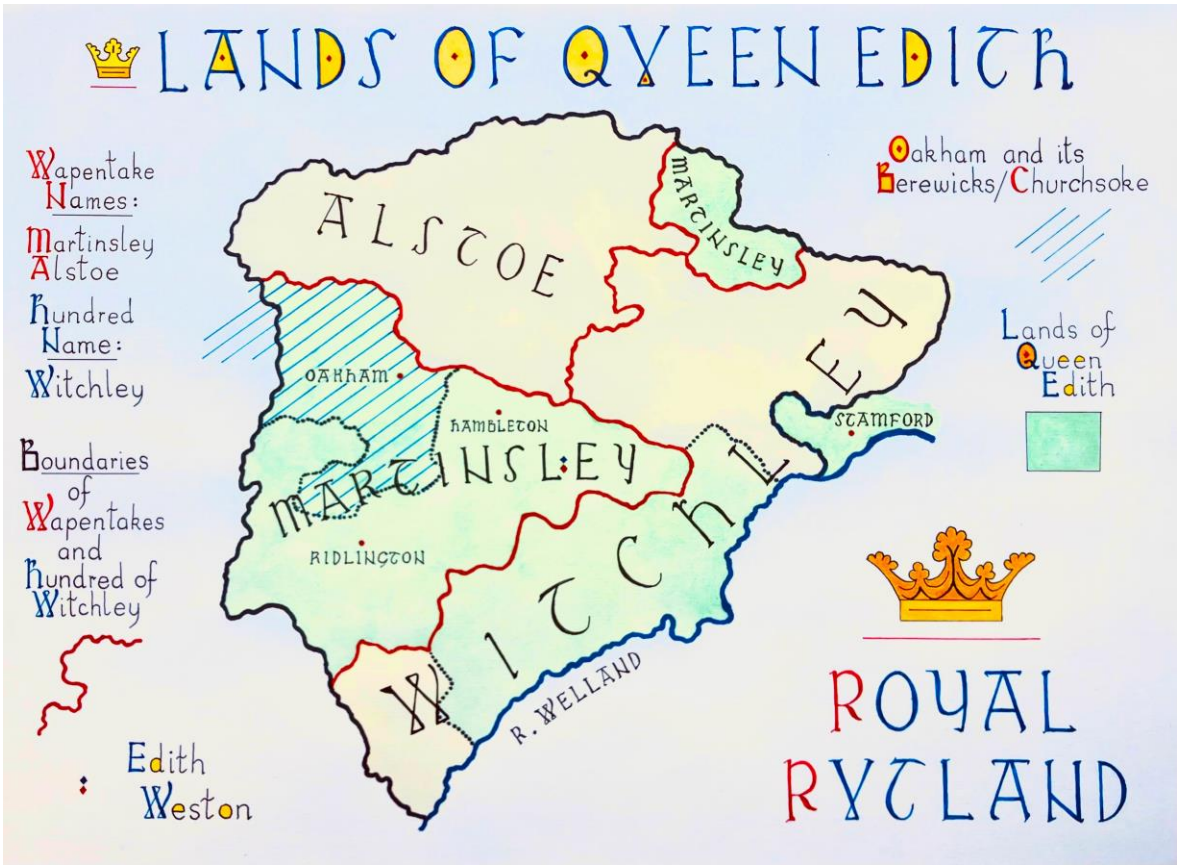
The ceremonies of queen-making stressed to her the making of a new woman. They began with prostration before the altar. They involved crowning and most importantly anointing, a transformatory rite also found in baptism and the ordination of priests. As well as a crown she received a ring, with prayers emphasizing her role in spreading the Christian faith and combatting heresy - the 'ring of faith, the sign of the holy Trinity'.

Throughout her life Edith was involved in Church affairs. She exercised influence in the choice of bishops, of Wells, Sherborne and Hereford. She had a chapel and chaplain - Walter her chaplain became bishop of Hereford. She had a role in the decision to move the see of the South West to Exeter.

Wilton enjoyed her special patronage. She rebuilt the old wooden church of the nunnery in stone in the 1060s; the actions of a grateful pupil, but also those of an English queen.

A queen was also a wife, and Edith's role here involved the presentation of her husband in a fitting regal manner. She was responsible for his sumptuous clothing - perhaps directly involved in making some. Like many queens and noble women she was accomplished in embroidery. She played a part in the making of a new crown and a new royal seal bearing his image. It is no surprise to find a goldsmith among her tenants in Domesday Book.

The eleventh century Great Seal of Edard the Confessor, designed in part by Queen Edith.



# 4 Rutland, a queen's dower?

hen her husband King Edward died in 1066 Queen Edith was the richest woman in England, and the richest individual after Edward himself, her brother Harold and Stigand, archbishop of Canterbury. Part of that wealth lay in Rutland. As Domesday Book records, she held a large part of the modern county.

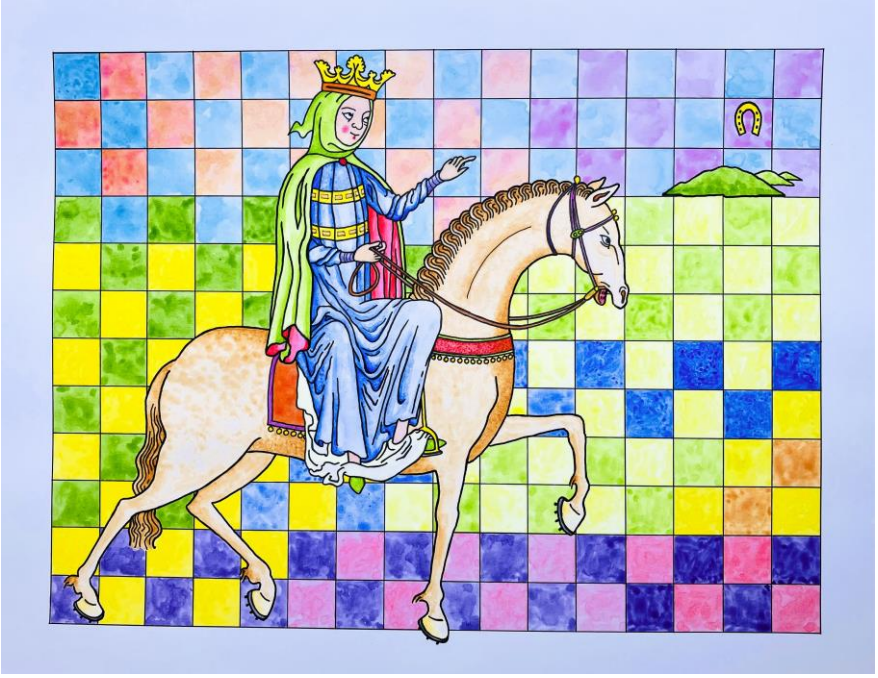
The basis of this wealth lay in her position as queen and king's wife. Her marriage would have involved a dower given by her new husband. Rutland was part of this.

Rutland was much older than the shires which neighboured it in the eleventh century. Its origins lay in royal lands of the old Mercian kingdom if not even earlier. Its identity was preserved by its use as dower for queens. Edith's mother-in-law, Queen Emma, had held it; her husband's grandmother Queen Ælfthryth before her and probably Mercian queens before that.

The heart of Edith's lands lay in Martinsley wapentake, where she held three huge manors - Oakham, Hambleton and Ridlington. Each one had berewicks, attached settlements which paid various dues to the central manor.

Edith Weston, a berewick of Hambleton, preserves the queen's name. Langham, Brooke, Egleton, Gunthorpe and Knossington [Leics] were linked to Oakham. Domesday Book uses the unusual term 'Churchsoke' - literally 'church-seeking' - to describe the fact that their inhabitants paid church dues and attended church at Oakham, their mother church.

Like so many queens before her, Edith held her lands in Rutland as dower. But the emerging kingdom of England had underlined the strategic significance of Rutland. This was an area remote from the centre of the new kingdom in Wessex, but a key in holding that new kingdom together. A major North/South route - Roman Ermine Street - ran to its east. Edith's lands were a form of southern royal presence, administered by her loyal royal servants. We do not know whether she ever came in person to visit them, but her name endures in the Rutland village of Edith Weston.



Impression of Queen Edith's triumphant return to court in 1052. Detail taken from the thirteenth century illuminated manuscript depicting Queen Emma on horseback.

Illustration of the pre-Norman Anglo-Saxon royal hall within Oakham castle manor, based on archaeological information found at the royal Saxon manors of Rendlesham and Wychurst.

# 5. Edith and the politics of family.

In the eleventh century the royal family stood at the heart of politics. Kings ruled in person; who succeeded to the throne was a central political question and the rules governing that were still not firmly fixed. In these circumstances the internal politics of the royal family became national politics. A Queen consort, wife and mother, was a central figure.

All royal marriages in the eleventh century were meant to produce children, preferably sons. The marriage of Edith and Edward the Confessor was not fertile. This was a political as well as a personal problem. It left the succession uncertain, doubly so since the Danish conquest in 1016 resulted in Scandinavian claimants to the English throne. Childlessness was a threat to Edith's position.

In 1051 Edward sent her from court to the nunnery of Wherwell where his sister was abbess. Her father Godwine and her brothers fled from England. This was a major crisis between the king and her family in which the childless marriage and the fate of Edith's family were entwined. The power of that family ensured its triumphant recovery in 1052. Edith returned to court.

The rest of Edward's reign was inevitably concerned with the succession to the throne. Edward's father King Æthelred had had many children; their grandchildren were still alive. Some of these were now brought to court, the 'royal boys' to whom Edith became a mother.

Most prominent among them was Edgar the Ætheling, grandson of Edward's half-brother King Edmund who had briefly ruled in 1015-16.

Edgar appears in the book of remembrance, the *Liber Vitae* or Book of Life, of New Minster Winchester. He is part of a family group alongside Edward and Edith. Edith had no children, but was still a royal mother nurturing her husband's choice as successor.

Image of the Bayeux Tapestry section detailing King Edward the Confessor's funeral with Queen Edith at the foot of his deathbed. 'Copyright Reading Museum (Reading Borough Council). All rights reserved.'

# 6. Edith, survivor of 1066.

dith's husband, King Edward, died on 5 Jan 1066. Her brother Earl Harold immediately took the throne. Edward's Norman cousin, William, claimed it. Almost a year of turmoil ensued. King Harold was killed at the Battle of Hastings.

On Christmas Day 1066 William was crowned king. Edith was now widow of one king, sister of another. Her mother Gytha, mother of Harold and grandmother of his children, resisted William. She and Edith's sister Gunnhild eventually fled to the continent. Edith remained in England.

During these troubled times she commissioned a '*Life*' of her husband King Edward. In it she is presented as a wife and queen, but also as his daughter sitting at his feet. On the Bayeux Tapestry she is pictured at the foot of his deathbed. The *Life* claims the king's dying wish was that she and the kingdom be cared for by Harold.
It was William who succeeded, but he too honoured Edith. She was the widow of the man through whom he claimed the English throne.

Edith spent her retirement at the nunnery at Wilton. On the Wednesday of Ember week in Lent 1072 she was one of a group of survivors of the pre-1066 regime who gathered in the West work of Wilton church. They witnessed a gift of land to the bishop of Wells. There were priests, deacons and nobles in attendance. It was a religious as much as a secular occasion. The choir sang the psalm 'Remember thy mercies O Lord'.

This was Queen Edith's last recorded appearance. She died in 1075. On William's command she was buried alongside her husband in Westminster abbey, the church which Edward had built. The Conqueror ordered splendid tombs for them both. In death she was remembered as wife and queen.

# Rulers of England from 959~1087 A.D.

## Anglo~Saxon

Edgar the Peaceful 959~975
Edward the Martyr 975~978
Aethelred the Unready 978~1013

## Scandanavian

Swein Forkbeard 1013~1014

Battle of Hastings in 1066

Aethelred the Unready 1014~1016
Edmund Ironside 1016

Cnut the Great 1016~1035
Harold Harefoot 1035~1040
Harthacnut 1040~1042

Edward the Confessor 1042~1066
+ Queen Edith

Harold Godwinson 1066

1075

## Norman

William the Conqueror
1066~1087