

SAINTS
&
SINNERS

IN DARK AGE ENGLAND

BY CHARLES
CHRISTIAN

**SAINTS AND SINNERS
IN DARK AGE ENGLAND**

Charles Christian

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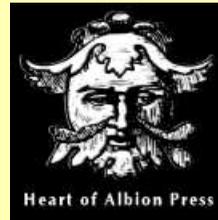
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INTRODUCTION:

PUTTING THE SEX BACK INTO WESSEX

Although I've always enjoyed history (even the dull, dry stuff – and some of it can be drier than an Egyptian mummy's wrappings) what really intrigues me are those weird, almost surreal moments that leave you shaking your head in disbelief wondering "Whatever were they thinking?" Such as the time King John of England sent an assassin armed with a poisoned boiled egg to kill an ex-girlfriend. Yes, you read that correctly, the murder weapon was a poisoned boiled egg – you won't find that in Cluedo.

For this brief publication, I have collected five tales taking us from misty years following the collapse of Roman rule in England, a time when it is hard to distinguish between history, myth and legend,

through until the arrival of the Normans when, after over 600 years of almost constant instability, some kind of normality returned to English life.

It's an era that's always fascinated me, precisely because of this blurring between the historical and the mythic but also because there are so many incredible characters, normally woefully overlooked in history books, whose lives wouldn't be out of place today in reality TV shows. As for the incidents they are involved in... truth really is stranger than fiction, even fiction as engrossing as the recent *Game of Thrones* series.

All five tales have previously appeared in articles I have written over the past five years for *Ancient Origins* although they have been updated and edited for this publication.

Incidentally, you will have noticed I use the term 'Dark Age' to summarise the temporal scope of this book. This is the period from the early 5th century, with the departure of the Roman legions from the province of Britannia, through the Saxon period up until the end of the Viking Age and the arrival of the Normans in the mid 11th century.

I appreciate most historians now prefer the term Early Middle Ages or Early Medieval Period but personally I feel the Dark Ages more evocative and better sums up the dystopian chaos of a period of history, when life for people at all levels of society was 'nasty, brutish, and short'.

So climb on board as we set off to explore five of the more weird, obscure and WTF corners of English history.

Charles Christian

April 2020



A VERY BRIEF HISTORY OF TIME

with apologies to the late Professor Stephen Hawking

When researching this book, one of the aspects that puzzled me was why there was so much discrepancy in the dates attributed to supposedly important historical events.

For example one account tells of a siege being raised on March 21st whereas another says the date was May 25th. Similarly, a king is recorded as being killed in AD 869 in one chronicle but one year later in 870 in another.

One simple explanation is the chroniclers recording these events were writing years later (in some instances centuries later) and almost inevitably were working from anecdotes and what we'd now call second or even third-hand hearsay evidence. In the circumstances it is hardly surprising accounts based on these less-than-reliable sources contain inconsistencies.

There is also the fact one thousand or more years ago, society tended to have a more flexible approach towards timekeeping.

Lives were lived according to the hours of daylight and darkness and such time-keeping devices as did exist (water clocks, sun-dials, candle clocks and the sand hourglass– the first mechanical clocks did not appear in Europe until the early 14th century) were primarily used to mark the passage of time without reference to the precise time of day. Thus, if three hours have elapsed since *Vespers*, at approximately 6:00pm, it must now be time for *Compline* (or the night prayer) before retiring to bed.

In fact it was not until the advent of the railways in the 19th century that England adopted a uniform approach to timekeeping so you could be certain that if it was 3:15pm in Budleigh Salterton, it was also 3:15pm in Sidmouth.

Another complication is that while we now measure our years from January 1st until December 31st, this was not always the case. From the 7th to the 12th century, the official year started on December 25th (Christmas Day). From the 12th century until 1751, it began on March 25th (Lady Day). And it was only from 1752 that New Year's Day shifted to January 1st. So, for example, Parliamentary record lists the execution of King Charles I on January 30th as occurring in 1648 (as the year did not end until March 24th), although if we adjust the start of the year to January 1st, the execution occurred in 1649.

The year 1752 also saw England move from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar systems (most of the rest of Western Europe made the change 200 years earlier in 1582) with the result the calendar was advanced

by 11 days, with Wednesday September 2nd 1752 being immediately followed by Thursday September 14th 1752.

Although stories that people in London and Oxford began rioting and demanding the government 'Give us back our Eleven Days' are now recognised as a historical fiction, we still see echoes of the 11 day calendar jump and shifting the start of the year from March to January in the fact the UK tax year still curiously starts on April 6th (March 25th plus 12 days, including the leap year extra day in 1800.)

Did I also mention many historical documents and parliamentary statutes from the time of King William I (the Conqueror) onwards use a *regnal* calendar counting from the first year of a particular monarch's reign? So, for example, the regnal year of Queen Victoria ran from June 20th to June 19th.

Rather than being surprised that sometimes old chronicles and legends have inconsistent chronologies, we should be amazed – and grateful – they can offer any dating timelines at all.



CHAPTER 1

SINNERS: VORTIGERN AND ROWENA

How lust for a blue-eyed blonde destroyed a kingdom

Wassailing is an old traditional, primarily rural English festivity, usually taking place around Twelfth Night or Plough Monday (the first Monday after Twelfth Night) that has enjoyed a huge resurgence of popularity in recent years. It involves music, singing, cider drinking, bonfires, and varieties of mumming, including traditional plays and performances by bell bedecked Morris, all supposedly designed to reawaken the spirits of the orchards from their winter dormancy for the new growing

season, while simultaneously scaring away any evil spirits or witches that might blight a good harvest of apples the following autumn.

It is all distinctly pagan in tone, with a strong element of sympathetic magic involved. One early 20th century anthropologist even suggested it was more akin to tree worship, with the cider representing the life-giving 'blood' of the sacred apple orchards – although for most people attending a modern wassailing, it is just an excuse for a party and to drink cider, lots of cider.

But what does the word *wassail* mean anyway?

The answer to this question takes us into the realms of early English history.

The Old English phrase *was hael* meant 'be hale', 'be in good health' or 'be fortunate' and, while originally used as a simple salute or greeting, it very quickly developed into a drinking formula where one person would say "was hail" and the other reply "drink hail". By the 8th century, the word was so well-known that it appeared in the epic poem *Beowulf*...

The rider sleepeth,
the hero, far-hidden; no harp resounds,
in the courts no wassail, as once was heard.

It is also reported that on the dawn of the Battle of Hastings in 1066, the Saxons toasted each other with shouts of "Wassail!" before they marched off to fight the Normans and, sadly for many of them, die...

Rejoice and wassail
Pass the bottle and drink healthy
Drink backwards and drink to me
Drink half and drink empty.

However tradition tells that the very first occurrence of the use on the word wassail in England dates back to AD 449, when the Roman Empire's hold on its province of Britannia had collapsed.

The rot had set in from as early as AD 383 when Magnus Maximus, a Roman general stationed in Britain, moved his troops to Gaul in what

would prove to be an unsuccessful attempt to seize the imperial throne in Rome. In the years that followed, more legions departed the island, either to reinforce the defences of Italy or in further imperial power struggles.

The culmination came in 410 when the Emperor Honorius wrote to the province's Roman cities to say (and here I am taking severe liberties with the translation from the original Latin) "So long and thanks for all the silver *denarii* but now you are on your own and will have to organise your own defences."

Into this power vacuum stepped local warlords and, by around 425, a shadowy character (as in occupying the borderline between history and legend) called Vortigern (or Vortigen – it may even be a title rather than a given name) had established himself as the 'King of the Britons'.

The historian Gildas, writing less than a century later, described Vortigern as "that proud usurper". Later chroniclers were even less flattering (Vortigern is on the receiving end of a universally bad press for the better part of 600 years), calling him "a man calculated neither for the field nor the council, but wholly given up to the lusts of the flesh, the slave of every vice: a character of insatiable avarice, ungovernable pride, and polluted by his lust".

In 447, Vortigern invited a group of "fierce and impious" Saxon mercenaries led by two brothers: Hengist and Horsa, to help him fight the Picts, who were invading Britain from north of Hadrian's Wall. In return for their services, the Saxons (technically they were Jutes from Jutland) were granted the Isle of Thanet, located at the eastern corner of what is now the English county of Kent and then still an island, as their own territory.

The Saxons duly fought for Vortigern and invited more of their fellow countryman to join them, swelling the numbers of the Thanet colony. There is a suggestion Vortigern had formed treaty of *foederati* with the Saxons, a late Roman political practice of settling allied barbarian peoples within the boundaries of the empire to furnish troops to aid the defence of the empire.

Not surprisingly the growing number of Saxons coming into Kent began to concern Vortigern, who tentatively suggested it might be time for them to go back home. However in 449 Hengist and Horsa, joined by more Saxons from the Continent including Hengist's beautiful daughter, known to history as the Lady Rowena, invited Vortigern to a feast to celebrate their friendship.

It was at this fateful feast that Rowena (or Ronwen or even Ravenna, the spelling differs) approached King Vortigern with a wassail bowl, greeted the king with the salute "Wassail", drank from it, and then past it to Vortigern to drink from.

And thus the tradition of wassailing began – except the consequences were far more momentous than just a new drinking challenge.

Vortigern became obsessed with Rowena, eventually taking her for his wife. Later chroniclers depicted Rowena as a brazen temptress who seduced Vortigern. Whoever was the initiator, it was a move that, not surprisingly, upset his existing wife Severa, as well as his mistress Cateym, who also happened to be one of his illegitimate daughters.

As part of the wedding settlement, he gave Hengist and Horsa the whole kingdom of Kent (much to the annoyance of the existing King of Kent) and generally opened the way to the Saxons gaining more and more power.

Eventually war broke out between the Britons, led by Vortigern's sons, and the Saxons, with Vortigern, in the invidious position of being married to the daughter of his nation's enemy, reduced to a puppet monarch. Some accounts say he was actually held prisoner by the Saxons.

In the fighting that followed, Vortigern's two sons were killed, as was Horsa, and, by 455, Vortigern was holed up, along with his many wives and mistresses in a fortress in North Wales. There they were besieged by two British leaders who had just returned from exile in Brittany (France), namely Ambrosius Aurelinus and his brother Uther Pendragon, better known to history as the father of King Arthur.

The fortress was set alight. One chronicle says fire fell from Heaven to engulf the castle, and everyone inside (including Vortigern and Rowena) was burned to death.

In a neat historical twist, Ambrosius and Uther are described as being the sons of Constans, another general with ambitions to seize the imperial throne in Rome but who had been killed as a result of Vortigern's treachery.

As for Hengist, he may have lost a daughter but he continued to rule Kent until his death over 30 years later in 488 and sired a dynasty of Kentish kings. To this day, the emblem of Kent is a white horse (*hengist* is Old English for stallion) on a red background, said to be Hengist's original battle flag.

And with that we end our first encounter with Dark Age sinners: a randy, old British king whose lust for a blonde-haired, blue-eyed Saxon temptress destroyed the integrity of a kingdom and opened the way for the subjugation of the old Roman province of Britannia by the Anglo-Saxons.

As we shall see in Chapter 3, the Anglo-Saxon kings were no better at preventing lust from overcoming their better judgment – especially given the ruthless, scheming nature of some of the women they encountered. But, before that, it is time for the saga of a saint who ultimately vanquished his enemy from beyond the grave.



CHAPTER 2

SAINT: THE STRANGE DEATH AND AFTERLIFE OF KING EDMUND

Did a martyred Saxon king return from the grave to kill a Viking warlord?

Over the past decade, there have been a couple of public campaigns in the UK to drum up support for replacing St George as the patron saint of England with St Edmund, who was the country's original heavenly patron for over 400 years from the early 10th century. Both campaigns failed but they did serve to reignite interest in St Edmund.

So who was he and what was his story?

The setting is the Saxon kingdom of the East Angles, which occupied modern-day Norfolk, Suffolk and part of the Lincolnshire Fens, in the year AD 869. On the throne is King Edmund, a young and devout Christian monarch, who was only 14 years old at the time he was crowned on Christmas Day 855.

For the previous 60 years, Viking raiders from Scandinavia had been carrying out ever more bloody hit-and-run attacks on England but in 865 thousands of Danish and Norwegian Vikings, described in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* as 'the Great Heathen Army', landed in their longships along the coast of Suffolk and launched an all-out invasion.

History says the king was on a pilgrimage at this crucial time so in his absence, his courtiers and *ealdormen* (nobles) supplied the Vikings with horses, both as a bribe to deter them from looting and pillaging the local area but also as a none-too subtle hint for them to move out of East Anglia and raid other parts of the country.

Such apparently treacherous disloyalty in the face of a common foe might seem shocking by modern standards but there was no love lost between the England's seven rival Saxon kingdoms. (The Anglo-Saxon heptarchy comprised four main kingdoms: Northumbria, Wessex, Mercia, and East Anglia, along with three smaller kingdoms: Kent, Essex, and Sussex.) This was particularly so in East Anglia where, over the previous two centuries, several of its monarchs had been deposed, executed, murdered or killed in battle by rulers of the other kingdoms.

The East Anglian bribery stratagem certainly seems to have worked and, for the next few years, the Vikings fought their way up and down England, destroying the old dynasties and eventually creating their own separate province, known as The Danelaw, across the North and East of the country.

Among the Saxon rulers overthrown was King Aella of Northumbria who was killed in battle outside the city of York in March 867. (In Saxon times 'Northumbria' meant all the land north of the River Humber and south of the Scottish border.) And at this point we must pause our narrative for a brief comparison of almost contemporaneous

historical chronicles written by Saxon churchmen versus the Norse sagas, which were composed by poets some two to three centuries later primarily as entertainment.

As already mentioned, according to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, King Aella was slain in battle. However according to the Norse sagas, he was hunted down by the semi-legendary six sons of the equally legendary Viking hero Ragnar Lodbrok who Aella had had executed by being thrown into a pit of poisonous snakes.

The Vikings of the Great Heathen Army, who had a long memory for grievances (as King Edmund would subsequently also learn to his cost), took their revenge on King Aella by subjecting him to the ritual of 'the Blood Eagle'. This was a prolonged torture leading to death, involving disembowelling, evisceration, and pulling the victim's lungs over his shoulders so they looked like the blood-stained folded wings of an eagle.

It's worth noting there is some controversy as to whether the Blood Eagle was an actual historical ritual or merely a literary device created by the authors of the Norse sagas and later embellished by Victorian-era writers for maximum horror. Similarly, apart from the sagas (and more recently the TV series *Vikings*) there is no proof Ragnar Lodbrok actually met his end in a pit of snakes. The revisionists, who tend to take the view Vikings were misunderstood economic migrants on the receiving end of a bad press from contemporary Christian monastic chroniclers, will tell you the concept of the Blood Eagle was just a mistake in translation. There is also a suggestion the phrase refers to the Viking habit of leaving their foes lying dead, face-down on a battlefield, for their backs to be torn open by birds scavenging for carrion.

But, as we'll see in this and later stories, the Vikings fully deserve their traditional reputation for being greedy, bloodthirsty psychopaths. But let's return to the Great Heathen Army.

After ravaging the rest of England for the better part of five years, the Vikings returned to East Anglia, attacking the kingdom's towns and

slaughtering its population. This time the offer of bribes did not work, there was to be no peace treaty, and in November 869 King Edmund's army met the Vikings in battle near the town of Thetford. But what had happened to change the Vikings' attitude towards the East Angles?

The Mortal Fates of Ragnar Lodbrok and King Edmund

Among the leaders of the Great Heathen Army were two warriors called Ivar the Boneless (also known as Hyngwar – it is thought Ivar suffered from the genetic bone condition *osteogenesis imperfecta* aka brittle bone disease) and Ubba. They were two of the many sons of the legendary chieftain Ragnar Lodbrok who we met. The name 'Lodbrok' incidentally means hairy-breeches, a nickname Ragnar earned when he clad himself in the skin of a bear to protect himself from the poisonous breath of a dragon he subsequently fought and killed. In the 1958 movie *The Vikings*, Ragnar is played by Ernest Borgnine and his sons by Tony Curtis and Kirk Douglas.

According to the legend (and once again we are in that grey area where historical events and Norse sagas merge) some years previously Ragnar had been sailing a small boat on a wildfowling trip along the western coast of Denmark, when a storm had suddenly blown up and swept him far, far away from the coast and across the North Sea. Eventually he washed up on the coast of East Anglia, where he was rescued and taken to Reedham, which is where King Edmund's royal court was based at that time.

Physicians nursed Ragnar back to health and in due course King Edmund and his mysterious foreign guest struck up a friendship, as both men loved hunting. Ragnar was soon regularly accompanying Edmund on hunting trips, much to the ire of the king's chief huntsman – a man called Bern – who became increasingly jealous of the royal favour being shown to the Viking.

Tragedy struck as one day, when the king was travelling elsewhere in his kingdom, Bern challenged Ragnar to a secret competition to test their respective hunting skills. Two men left Reedham that morning but only one returned. Naturally the king and his courtiers wondered what

had happened to Ragnar but Bern merely shrugged his shoulders and said he hadn't seen him all day.

Ragnar's fate might have remained a mystery were it not for his hound Garm. The dog had accompanied him across the North Sea but been left behind the morning of the secret hunting trip, and began acting aggressively towards Bern, snarling and snapping whenever he caught sight of him. Eventually Garm escaped and led some of King Edmund's men to a shallow grave in small, lonely wood a few miles from Reedham. In the grave they found the body of Ragnar, with wounds revealing that he had been stabbed to death.

It was murder – and there was also evidence pointing to the culprit, for still gripped in Ragnar's cold, dead fingers was a scrap of fabric he'd torn from the clothing of his assailant in a final death struggle. The fabric was identified as part of the tunic of a royal huntsman and, when Bern's chamber was searched, the king's men found a tunic containing a matching rip in its sleeve.

Bern was pronounced guilty by King Edmund who ordered that his punishment was to be cast adrift on an ebbing tide in the very same boat that had carried Ragnar to England. It was at this point Fate took an ironic turn, for Bern did not perish in the boat but was instead swept back across the North Sea, washing up on the very same Danish shore where Ragnar had gone missing several months previously.

Recognising the boat as having belonged to their father, Ivar and Ubba were keen to learn from Bern what had happened to Ragnar. Bern's treacherous explanation was that King Edmund had ordered their father be killed and his body abandoned in a wood to deny it a proper burial.

Now back to November 869 (some chronicles suggest it was the year 870 see *A Very Brief History of Time*) and in the words of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the Great Heathen Army "rode across Mercia into East Anglia, and took winter-quarters at Thetford; and that winter King Edmund fought against them, and the Danish took the victory and conquered all that land".

In the aftermath of the defeat, Edmund and some of his retainers fled east but became separated about 20 miles away, near a settlement called *Haegelisdun*, where Edmund was captured by the Vikings who caught him hiding beneath a bridge. Another legend has it Edmund was captured after a wedding party, making their way across the bridge that evening, saw the glint of the moonlight reflecting off his golden spurs and betrayed him to the Vikings. As he was dragged away, Edmund placed a curse on all bridal couples who should ever cross the fateful bridge.

Once in the hands of Ivar, Ubba and their henchmen, Edmund was roped to an oak tree, then beaten and whipped in an attempt to force him to renounce his Christian faith and accept Ivar as his king. When Edmund refused to submit, saying he was “ready to die for his people and his God,” the Vikings duly obliged by shooting arrows and throwing spears at him “as if it was a game, until he was entirely covered with their missiles, like the bristles of a hedgehog”.

But still Edmund didn’t die and still he continued to pray to God, so the Vikings cut his head off. Mindful of Bern’s tale of Ragnar’s fate, the Vikings threw Edmund’s body into a communal rubbish pit, to deny it a proper Christian burial, and then played football with his head until the grew bored and tossed it away into a thicket of thorns and brier.

Edmund’s death occurred on November 20th (still observed as St Edmund’s Day) and a few days later, when the Vikings had moved on, some of Edmund’s followers returned to the area. They recovered his body but at first couldn’t locate his head. However as they searched, calling out “Where are you friend?” they heard the king’s voice calling back “Here, here, here.”

They followed the source of the sound to where they found the king’s head, protected from scavengers and carrion by a giant grey wolf that cradled it between its paws. The wolf immediately yielded up the head, then meekly followed Edmund’s men as they took the body back to a nearby village. Once it was certain the king had received a proper burial, the wolf returned to the forest and was never seen again.

There are a number of places across East Anglia that claim to be the location of *Haegelisdun* but the village Hoxne in Suffolk's Waveney Valley is the one with the longest and firmest association, including the site of Edmund's oak, which stood in a field just outside the village until it fell during a storm in 1848.

Reports at the time describe the oak as being "ancient with a trunk over 20 feet in circumference" within which were found "old iron arrow heads". (Sceptics say they were merely rusty nails.) The village even has a Goldbrook Bridge, said to be the site of Edmund's capture and which, until as recently as the early 20th century, wedding parties would take a detour to avoid for fear of invoking the curse.

As for the wolf, in 1890 a vicar found an old stone chest in the crypt of a church near Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk. Inside was a collection of bones later identified as belonging to a large wolf. It is also worth noting King Edmund was the last member of a Saxon royal dynasty called the *Wuffingas*, who had ruled East Anglia since 6th century. The family name is derived from "the Kin of the Wolf" – so perhaps Edmund's wolf knew it was guarding the last of the line? (The greatest of the Wuffinga kings was Raedwald (ruled 599 to 624) who, in the latter part of his reign was the *bretwalda* or overlord of all the Saxon kingdoms and is widely believed to have been buried in the famous Saxon ship-burial at Sutton Hoo, near Woodbridge.)

The Immortal Adventures of Edmund in the Afterlife

But, our story does not stop with Edmund's death and his burial within a small and hastily built wooden chapel near Hoxne. Within 25 years of his death, miracles were already being ascribed to the late king's intervention and even the Vikings, who now ruled the area, were minting commemorative coins carrying the inscription *St Edmund the King*.

A few years later, as the late king's cult grew, his remains were transferred to the city of *Beadoriceworth*, soon renamed St Edmund's Bury (modern day Bury St Edmunds) and the abbey built to house his shrine became a popular site of pilgrimage.

The reputation of Edmund, the king and now a saintly martyr, had received a further boost after the original grave was opened. Not only was Edmund's body found to be incorrupt (in other words, showed none of the expected decomposition, always a plus point for anyone considering becoming a saint as it is a sure sign of divine intervention) but the wounds on his body had healed and his head was once more attached to his body – all that remained to show where it had been severed was a thin red crease on the neck.

The last reported opening of Edmund's tomb was in 1198, when the body was found to still be incorrupt. One account says a sceptical monk tugged the king's hair to see if the head really was reattached to the body and was promptly slapped by the saint for his lack of faith.

The next twist in the story comes in 1013 during the chaotic reign of King Aethelraed, forever known to English history as Ethelred the Unready. (Ethelred crops up in our next two stories.) The Saxons and Vikings were still at war and, after Ethelred had been forced into exile, Sweyn Forkbeard, the King of Denmark and Norway was also declared King of England on Christmas Day.

Five weeks later King Sweyn was dead. The official explanation was he died in his bed from injuries sustained following a fall from his horse. However another version of the story says "divine vengeance put a stop to his blasphemy".

The background is Sweyn and his Vikings were not only seizing as much *Danegeld* (what we'd nowadays call protection money) from his new English subjects but had also threatened to burn down the city of Bury St Edmunds and its abbey, as well as slaughter all its inhabitants, unless they paid over an additional sum of ransom money.

It was then divine intervention struck when, in the early hours of February 3rd 1014, the ghost of St Edmund, mounted on a white charger, appeared in Sweyn's bedchamber and fatally ran him through with a spear. According to the legend, although he was surrounded by his Vikings, he alone saw St Edmund coming towards him.

Terrified, he began shouting "Help, fellow warriors, help! St Edmund is coming to kill me!" But the Vikings could not see the ghost which "ran

him through fiercely with a spear," leaving Sweyn "tormented with great pain until twilight, he ended his life with a wretched death."

You may scoff at this story but six years later in 1020, when Sweyn's son Cnut (or Canute) was king of England, the new monarch visited the shrine of St Edmund and bestowed on it sufficient money to replace the old wooden abbey and fund the building in stone of a grand new Benedictine monastery. Perhaps Cnut was fearful of a similar haunting unless he atoned for the sins of his Viking ancestors?

Sweyn, incidentally, was never actually crowned king of England and his reign was the second shortest of any English monarch. Lady Jane Grey, the 'nine day queen' holds the dubious record for the shortest rule.

Our story is however not yet over, for in the year 1217, during one of the many barons' revolts and rebellions that plagued England during the Middle Ages, a group of French knights stole Saint Edmund's body (or at least part of it) and whisked it away to the Basilica of Saint-Sernin in the French city of Toulouse. The relics and the saint's intercessions are credited with saving the city from the plague in the 17th century

The next development came in 1901, when the Archbishop of Westminster received some of St Edmund's relics from Saint-Sernin that were intended for the high altar of the new Roman Catholic cathedral then under construction at Westminster in London. On their arrival in England, the relics were housed in the Fitzalan Chapel at the Duke of Norfolk's castle at Arundel. However plans were stalled when the antiquarian Dr. Montague Rhodes James (better known as the ghost and supernatural horror story writer M.R. James) expressed concern about the relics' validity. At the time of writing, nearly 120 years later, those plans are still stalled and St Edmund's relics remain to this day remain in a box at Arundel. (As we shall see, this is a common fate for the relics of martyred monarchs.)

There is however another version of the story which says the monks at Bury St Edmunds moved the saint's still incorrupt body to prevent the French from stealing it, so whatever relics they made off with, they did not belong to Edmund.

Edmund's shrine was destroyed in 1539, during King Henry VIII's Reformation, and in November of that year the abbey was dissolved and the monks expelled, taking with them the secret of the location of the saint's final resting place. Historians now think the body of St Edmund is still buried in the former monks' graveyard at Bury St Edmunds, which now lies beneath the tennis courts in the town's Abbey Gardens.

Then along came George

Although the cult of St Edmund was established within 20 years of his death, he was very much a Saxon martyr and saint and, as such, did not sit well with the Norman and Plantagenet kings who followed.

For the Normans, Edmund was a constant reminder that they, like their ancestors the Vikings, were only in power because they had invaded the kingdom and killed its rightful monarch – in the case of the Normans, this being King Harold who died during the Battle of Hastings.

The Norman kings could also trace their lineage back to the first Duke of Normandy, a Viking freebooter called Rollo who was doing to France what the Great Heathen Army was doing to England at approximately the same period in history. (Norman = *Nortmann* or Northman/Norseman.) In fact one of the Vikings who led an earlier raid into France and captured the city of Paris after a siege in 845 was called Ragnar, and has traditionally been linked with our Ragnar Lodbrok.

As for the Plantagenets, Edmund was just a little crude and old-school, unlike the more fashionable St George, who better echoed their notions of knightly chivalry, with all those romantic tales of him rescuing damsels in distress and slaying dragons.

The decline of St Edmund can be traced to the Third Crusade (1189 to 1192), when King Richard the Lionheart visited the tomb of St George in Lydda on the eve of a battle. The next day he was victorious and subsequently adopted St George as his personal patron and protector of the army. Then, 150 years later in 1348, King Edward III founded a new order of chivalry, called the Knights of the Garter, and named St

George as both the patron of the Order and patron saint of England.

And that is why a Roman soldier, who was born in what is now Syria and never set foot in this country, is now the patron saint of England (and also of Georgia, Portugal and Malta, as well being one of the official patron saints of at least another dozen countries with multiple patrons) whereas Edmund, who was English and died fighting for his country, is a historical footnote. But let's get back to the Saxon kings and their women...



CHAPTER 3

SAINTS AND SINNERS: THE SCANDALOUS LIVES OF THREE SAXON QUEENS

The only way is Wessex

The Queens of England (as in the consorts of Kings) during the Saxon and early medieval periods rarely receive any coverage in the history books. Hands up anyone who can name the wife of William the Conqueror? (It was Matilda of Flanders and she was crowned Queen of England at Westminster in May 1068.)

As for the earlier Saxon queens... their fame is not helped by the fact they have some distinctly unmemorable Old English names: Ealhswith, Aethelflaed, Eadgifu, Aelfthryth, Eadburh, Aelfgifu. (Lots of

Aelfgifus.) Even where they are mentioned, they have distinctly minor walk-on parts to play. For example King Alfred the Great's mother Osburh vanishes from history after giving Alfred, when he was still a child, a book of poetry as a prize for reciting a poem.

Oh yes, and she was also very pious, devout and noble of character, as were almost all the queens of this period, spending most of their spare time founding nunneries which they would then retire to upon widowhood. (Or when their husbands wanted to trade them in for a younger, perkier model but more of that later.)

Well, almost all the queens... as we are now going to look at three of them who achieved a level of notoriety that today would ensure they were all over the tabloid newspapers, trending on social media, and the subject of TV mini-series.

Queen Aelfgifu: from a threesome in the bedroom to the throne

We start with Queen Aelfgifu who briefly crosses the pages of history in the mid 10th century.

Her name, also known as Elgiva (the modern equivalent would be Ethel or Eliza although there is a suggestion Godiva is derived from the same source) was very popular as a result of St Aelfgifu of Shaftesbury. The latter was married to King Edmund the First (and mother of two subsequent monarchs Eadwig and Edgar) and became revered as a saint after her death. (Not to be confused with St Aelfgifu of Exeter, though there is a possibility they are one and the same person.)

We first encounter 'our' Aelfgifu in November AD 955 at the coronation of 15-year-old King Eadwig (also known as Edwy or Edwin) and yes, this is the son of the late St Aelfgifu of Shaftesbury. Bored with listening to his advisers and church officials discussing politics, he crept out of the coronation feast and was next encountered "minus his crown" in his private chamber "cavorting" with two women: a noblewoman called Aethelgifu and her daughter Aelfgifu. (Obviously nothing Freudian going on there.)

It is not exactly clear from the accounts whether the mother was present merely to encourage Eadwig and Aelfgifu to get to know each

other better or whether they were enjoying a threesome. Certainly one report does describe him as having to be “dislodged” from the bed where he was found lying between the two equally amorous women, while another says the king “retreated to his chamber to debauch himself with two women, an indecent noblewoman and her daughter of ripe age”.

It is worth noting Eadwig was regarded at the time as being very good looking and usually referred to as King Edwy the All-Fair, so we are talking about a Saxon-era babe-magnet.

The problem for Eadwig was the churchmen who found him in bed and forcibly dragged him back to the coronation feast (with his crown once more properly back on his head) were the Bishop of Lichfield and Dunstan, the Abbot of Glastonbury, the latter being the most influential cleric in the kingdom. Dunstan even forced Eadwig to publicly renounce Aelfgifu as a “strumpet”. (Dunstan would go on to be an Archbishop of Canterbury and was subsequently canonised as a saint.)

The problem for Dunstan was he realised that in his anger he had gone too far and made a permanent enemy of the new king, so he took the precaution of seeking sanctuary in the cloisters of his own abbey. Eadwig subsequently married Aelfgifu and either at her behest banished Dunstan or else Dunstan, realising his life was in danger, fled the kingdom to go into exile in Flanders for the remainder of Eadwig’s reign.

However matters didn’t end there. Although an examination of charters and deeds of that era reveal Eadwig was remarkably generous in terms of making donations and grants to the Church and other religious institutions (his enemies dismissed this as being caused by political weakness and uncertainty) because he had clashed with leading church officials (not just Dunstan but also Archbishop Oda of Canterbury) relations between the king and his advisers rapidly deteriorated.

The crunch came in 957 when the *thanes* (nobles) in the Northern provinces of Mercia and Northumbria switched allegiance to Eadwig’s younger brother Edgar and the kingdom was split in half.

At the same time Archbishop Oda annulled Eadwig's marriage to Aelfifu on the grounds they were "too closely related by blood". In this era the Church held that any marriage within seven degrees of consanguinity was incestuous (this was later reduced to four as the gene-pool for suitable aristocratic partners became shallower) and poor Aelfifu was a third cousin once removed.

Although consanguinity was a common ground for annulling inconvenient royal marriages, usually so one partner could enter into a more politically strategic or financially advantageous marriage, this annulment was unusual and clearly politically motivated as it was made against the couple's will.

Two years later, in October 959, Eadwig conveniently died at the still young age of 19 and the kingdom of England was reunited under his brother Edgar. As for Eadwig's cause of death, this has never been satisfactorily explained and the suspicion remains that he was murdered.

Was Eadwig a 'bad' king? For the standards of his age the answer is no. Perhaps young and headstrong with an eye for the ladies, and, no doubt, convinced all the thanes and bishops, who were forever advising him what to do, were just a bunch of boring old farts.

Unfortunately in an era when the Church had almost a monopoly on literacy and the compiling of chronicles anyone who, like Eadwig, crossed the ecclesiastical establishment was guaranteed a bad press. There is no doubt his character (and that of Aelfifu) was deliberately tarnished by the authors who wrote the subsequent hagiographies of his arch-enemy St Dunstan. This smear campaign would have also helped bolster Edgar's claim to the throne, particularly in the aftermath of Eadwig's mysterious death.

Incidentally Eadwig's brother Edgar, known as King Edgar the Peaceable (or Peaceful) went on to rule for another 20 years and, according on one historian, enjoyed a reign "singularly devoid of recorded incident". This is not exactly true as according to legend there was one very dark secret in Edgar's life that was to have disastrous consequences for the Kingdom of England but that is a story for later in this chapter.

What, you ask, happened to Eadwig's "strumpet" and ex-wife Aelfgifu?

It would be nice to think that she, with or without her mother, found another good-looking man to "cavort" with in bed, rather than spend the rest of her life like some has-been reality TV star dwelling upon her 15 minutes of fame.

Something certainly did happen to her. According to one chronicler Aelfgifu initially went into exile and subsequently returned to England and kept a low profile. According to another chronicler, one of the more sycophantic members of the St Dunstan fan club, she was hamstrung in an ambush by Mercian rebels and subsequently died of her injuries. As for the truth?

According to the will Aelfgifu left in the mid-960s/early-970s she became a wealthy landowner holding substantial estates in the south of England which she subsequently left to members of the royal family, the Church, and other religious institutions. Where her fortune came from remains another mystery. There is no indication she ever remarried so it may have been derived as a result of her short marriage to King Eadwig or possibly inherited from her own wealthy family.

Whatever the explanation, in later life Aelfgifu was undoubtedly on better terms with her ex-brother-in-law, with King Edgar describing her as "a certain illustrious matron". After a distinctly raunchy start to her career then, Aelfgifu faded into genteel middle-age, became pious, devout and noble of character before, no doubt, ending her days in a nunnery.

Saint Dunstan and the Devil

No history of this era is complete without making some mention of St Dunstan (909 to 988) the most important churchman of the time. In fact he was also the most popular English saint for a couple of centuries until he was eclipsed by St Thomas Becket of Canterbury.

He served as an adviser to the courts of King Aethelstan, and King Edmund, as well as Eadwig's successors King Edgar and King Eadweard (or Edward). During this period he rose up the Church hierarchy from being a humble monk, to Abbot of Glastonbury, Bishop of Worcester, Bishop of London and, finally, Archbishop of Canterbury. It was during

these final years as Archbishop he devised an elaborate coronation service for King Edgar involving rituals still followed in the United Kingdom's present day coronation ceremony. Dunstan was canonised (made a saint) in 1029, about 40 years after his death.

Although he was a driving force behind the reform of the Church and is credited with restoring monastic life in England by introducing the Benedictine rule, his career saw several major setbacks. Along with being forced into exile during the reign of King Eadwig, his position as a court favourite under Aethelstan also resulted in him making a number of powerful enemies among jealous courtiers.

Eventually a plot was hatched which saw him accused of witchcraft and black magic, and banished from the palace. He was then physically attacked by his enemies who beat him up and threw him in a cesspool. He managed to escape but his body was afflicted with swellings first thought to be leprosy but later recognised as blood poisoning.

As a monk, Dunstan read, wrote, played the harp and also practised numerous handicrafts, including silversmithing and blacksmithing – and it is this latter skill that is associated with the legend of Dunstan's two encounters with the Devil.

According to one legend, when Dunstan was still a monk, he was in his cell playing his harp when the Devil came to tempt him. The Devil took the form of a pretty young girl but as 'she' danced around the cell, Dunstan spotted the cloven hoofs beneath her billowing skirts. Undaunted, Dunstan picked up a pair of blacksmith's tongs that had been heating on his forge, and pinched the Devil by the nose. As the rhyme tells it...

St Dunstan, as the story goes,

Once pull'd the Devil by the nose
With red-hot tongs, which made him roar,
That he was heard three miles or more.

In the second tale, the Devil had heard Dunstan was such a good farrier that his shoeing could make lame horses sound again. However when the Devil asked Dunstan to re-shoe his own horse, Dunstan

nailed a red-hot shoe to the Devil's own cloven foot. This caused Old Nick great pain but Dunstan only agreed to remove it after the Devil promised he would never enter a home that had a horseshoe nailed above its front door.

This is said to be the origin of the superstition about lucky horseshoes although I can find no agreement as to which way the horseshoe should be nailed. Some people say the open end should be at the top, so your luck will not escape, whereas others say it should be the opposite way around, so the luck will pour down on everyone who walks beneath it. But let's get back to our wicked Saxon queens...

Queen Eadburh: from palace poisoner to poverty in Pavia

Queen Aelfgifu's life may have not progressed the way she may have anticipated that night in 955 when she entertained young King Eadwig in his room but at least she died reasonably comfortably in her own bed. This was definitely not the fate of Queen Eadburh, another Saxon queen whose career path also came dramatically off the rails.

Eadburh (also spelled as Eadburgh or Edburga – the modern equivalent would be Edith) was born in circa AD 773 and was the daughter of King Offa of Mercia (the man who gave his name to Offa's Dyke) and his wife Queen Cynethryth. In the latter part of the 8th century, Offa was the most powerful king in England, while Cynethryth was the only Saxon queen who had coins issued in her own name, a clear indication her power and status. But, there was also a darker side to Cynethryth.

Although her name suggests she may have been descended from the family of the early 7th century Mercian King Penda, there is a legend that Cynethryth was actually of Frankish origin and as a consequence of (unspecified) crimes she committed, was condemned by King (later Emperor) Charlemagne's justice system to be set adrift in a small open boat and left to her fate. Readers will recall this was a similar punishment to that handed out to Bern the royal huntsman by King Edmund (*see previous chapter*) – the North Sea in those days must have been littered with open boats being blown hither and thither, carrying the condemned to their fates.

Cynethryth survived her enforced sea crossing and eventually washed up on the English shore, where she claimed she was a member of the Carolingian royal family who had been cruelly and unfairly persecuted for (unspecified) crimes she did not commit. Her story apparently convinced Offa, who promptly fell in love with her, married her, and made her his Controller of the Royal Household.

It was however towards the latter part of Offa's reign (he died in 796) that Cynethryth achieved her notoriety when she allegedly organised the assassination of King Aethelberht II of East Anglia in 794. Aethelberht was a 'client-king' (a less powerful monarch under the sway of Offa) and engaged to marry another of Offa's daughters Aelfthryth. But, on a visit to one of Offa's royal palaces, he was treacherously seized and beheaded, possibly because he was showing signs of becoming too independent.

Aethelberht would subsequently be locally canonised and become known as St Ethelbert the King. There are still a number of churches dedicated to St Ethelbert, the majority in Norfolk and Suffolk, and one of the main entrances to the precinct of Norwich Cathedral is called St Ethelbert's Gate. (Ethelbert's fate is also one of the reasons why, a century later, the East Angles initially helped the invading Vikings.)

Not to be outdone in the religious devotion stakes, Aethelberht's shocked fiancé Aelfthryth split with her father King Offa, retired from public life and spent the rest of her life, about 40 years, as a recluse at Crowland Abbey. She was later canonised as St Aelfthryth of Crowland.

You'll probably not be surprised to learn that even evil Queen Cynethryth became pious, devout and noble of character in widowhood, ending her days as abbess of a monastery at Cookham. But what about the other daughter: Eadburh?

In 789 Offa married off Eadburh to King Beorhtric (or Brihtric) of Wessex. Although independent and occupying a far less subservient position than the Kingdom of East Anglia, Wessex was still very much a junior partner to Mercia and for King Beorhtric the marriage represented a valuable political alliance.

Unfortunately Eadburh took a different view, regarding the match as a little below her status and that a marriage into the Carolingian royal family would have been more appropriate. (Ironically she would later be offered such an opportunity but blow it spectacularly.) Nevertheless, Eadburh soon began playing an active role in the governance of Wessex, even signing charters in her own name, using the title *Regina* (Queen). But, then she started interfering.

Whether she was doing it to further her own interests, those of her father's kingdom of Mercia, or even because she thought it was in the best interests of Beorhtric is unclear but anyone she regarded as an enemy, including favourites who she feared might weaken her own influence over the king, would be denounced as traitors. If they were not banished from the court or, in some instances, executed, Eadburh would despatch them in her own way by poisoning their food and drink.

Some reports describe her as a royal serial killer while the chronicler John Asser (later the Bishop of Sherborne and definitely not a fan of the queen) wrote this about her...

“As soon as she had won the king's friendship, and power throughout almost the entire kingdom, she began to behave like a tyrant after the manner of her father – to loathe every man whom Beorhtric liked, to do all things hateful to God and men, to denounce all those whom she could before the king, and thus by trickery to deprive them of either life or power; and if she could not achieve that end with the king's compliance, she killed them with poison. This is known to have happened with a certain young man very dear to the king; whom she poisoned when she could not denounce him before the king.”

With the benefit of modern psychology we now can see Queen Eadburh suffered from the dark triad of personality traits, namely toxic narcissism, machiavellianism, and psychopathy. The use of the term 'dark' implies people possessing these traits have malevolent qualities. Unfortunately Queen Eadburh did not have access to a psychologist,

so she blundered on through life, lurching from one self-inflicted disaster to another.

Her downfall began in 802 when she attempted to assassinate an *ealdorman* called Worr, who happened to be the latest court favourite. She poisoned his flagon of wine but unfortunately the king also drank from it and was accidentally poisoned. Both men subsequently died whereupon, to quote Bishop Asser again "The people revolted in great crowds, and running to the palace, and thundering at the gates, cried, Down with the wicked queen who poisons men!"

Queen Eadburh, pausing only to steal as much of the Wessex treasury as she could carry, fled the court and was next spotted in the court of the Emperor Charlemagne in Aachen (now in western Germany). Despite his age (he would have been 60) the recently widowed Charlemagne, the last of whose five wives had died a couple of years previously, seems to have been smitten by this wealthy and still young royal widow and, bringing in one of his sons asked her who she preferred, him or his son, as a husband.

Eadburh's answer was "If the choice is left to me, I choose your son, as he is younger than you."

Unfortunately this was the wrong answer and the choice was most definitely not left up to her as Charlemagne apparently replied "Had you chosen me, you would have had both of us. But, since you chose him, you shall have neither."

By way of a consolation prize, Charlemagne secured Eadburh the position of abbess at a Frankish convent but she promptly forgot her vows as, soon afterwards, she was caught "fornicating" with an English exile, expelled from the covenant and banished on the direct orders of Charlemagne.

Eadburh ended her days wandering across Europe with just one servant, possibly a slave, for company and surviving on charity before dying in Pavia (Italy). According to Asser, again...

"When years passed away, some travellers came home from Italy, and said that in the town of Pavia they had

been a ragged beggar woman – who had once been handsome, but was then shrivelled, bent, and yellow – wandering about the streets, crying for bread; and that this beggar woman was the poisoning English queen. It was, indeed, Eadburh; and so she died, without a shelter for her wretched head.”

The young King Alfred, before he took the throne, is said to have seen Eadburh’s tomb when he passed through Pavia with his father on their pilgrimage to Rome to meet the Pope.

Rather more significantly, Eadburh’s behaviour permanently damaged the standing and status of subsequent queens of Wessex, so instead of ‘Queen’ they were called merely ‘Lady’ or ‘the King’s wife,’ and prohibited from sitting beside the king on the throne.

Queen Aelfthryth: the original wicked stepmother

Let’s finish this chapter by returning to the story of Eadwig’s brother King Edgar the Peaceable and his dark secret that would subsequently have disastrous consequences for the Kingdom of England.

Edgar, in common with most Saxon kings, practised what we’d now call serial monogamy. Kings would only have one wife or mistress/concubine at a time but they would be discarded – the consanguinity rules were a popular way of ending no longer convenient marriages – and sent to a nunnery when the monarch took a fancy to another woman.

So, for example, Edgar had a relationship with a woman called Aethelflaed by whom he had a son Eadweard (Edward). Then he had a relationship with Wulfthryth (Wifrida) by whom he had a daughter Eadgyth (Edith). And then along came Aelfthryth (Elfrida) by who he had two more sons: Edmund, who died while still an infant, and Aethelraed.

Edgar’s dark secret relates to how he first met and wooed Aelfthryth. The king had heard that an *ealdorman* called Ordgar, in what is now Devon, had a beautiful daughter whose mother was a member of the royal family of Wessex. As he was looking for a queen, Edgar

commissioned an East Anglian *thegn* called Aethelwold to visit her and offer her a royal marriage if she really was as beautiful as everyone said.

Apparently she really was as beautiful as everyone said but, concealing his true mission from both her and her parents, Aethelwold wooed and married the girl himself, reporting back to Edgar that Aelfthryth was a “vulgar and common-looking” and “unworthy of a royal marriage”.

Initially Edgar accepted this explanation but as he continued to hear reports of her beauty, he decided to visit the happy couple himself. News of the pending royal visit threw Aethelwold into a panic and, while begging Aelfthryth to make herself as unattractive as possible and wear her plainest clothes, he inadvertently revealed how he had deceived both her and the king.

As all contemporary reports suggest Aelfthryth was an ambitious woman, the realisation she had missed out on becoming queen did not go down at all well. Repaying Aethelwold’s deceit in kind although she agreed to appear dowdy but actually went full ‘The Only Way is Wessex’ (or *Jersey Shore*) and was presented to the king wearing the Anglo-Saxon equivalent of hair extensions, spray tan, and a gown that was slashed to the waist and split to the thigh.

It was lust at first sight and the couple quickly came to an understanding they would marry, regardless of the fact Aelfthryth already had a husband and Edgar had a wife. This issue was resolved when, shortly after their meeting, Aethelwold was invited to go on a royal hunting expedition and Edgar accidentally speared him with a javelin and killed him. As we will see both later in this chapter and in Chapter 5, royal hunting expeditions could be conveniently lethal.

Soon afterwards Edgar divorced his wife Wulfthryth on the grounds of consanguinity and married Aelfthryth. A few years later still, during the elaborate coronation ceremony (it was actually a second coronation for Edgar) devised by Archbishop Dunstan, Aelfthryth was anointed with holy oil and crowned queen, giving her a higher status than almost all the Wessex queens of that era.

And then they all lived happily ever after.

Except they didn't as Edgar unexpectedly died in 975 (of natural causes) just a couple of years after his coronation and while he was still in his early thirties.

Edgar's death immediately prompted a succession crisis between his two surviving sons. Eadweard was the older, aged about 12 or 13 years, but there were doubts over his legitimacy, while Aethelraed was legitimate but just nine years old. A further complication was the royal court was split, almost to the point of breaking out into a civil war, between nobles who supported the late King Edgar's religious policy, which included generous grants of land and properties to the Benedictine abbeys, and the anti-monastic reactionaries who wanted to reverse these policies so they could claim or (in the case of those nobles who had been dispossessed by the grants) reclaim the religious estates for themselves.

Not surprisingly the ambitious Dowager Queen Aelfthryth was a vociferous supporter of her own son's claim to the throne. But, in the event, the pro-Eadweard camp, championed by Archbishop Dunstan, was victorious and Eadweard took the throne.

However then came that fateful day in March 978 when the young king was out hunting and, late in the afternoon, visited Queen Aelfthryth at her home at what would later become Corfe Castle in Dorset.

While still mounted on his horse, King Eadweard accepted a welcoming flagon of mead from Aelfthryth's own hands but then, as he was drinking from the cup (and, according to one version, while "allured by her female blandishments" – she would still have only been 33 at the time) her attendants and retainers fatally stabbed him in the back with their daggers.

There are various theories explaining the killing and all raise as many questions as they seek to answer:

- ❖ Were the murderers in Aethelraed's service seeking to place their master on the throne?

- ❖ Were the murderers acting on behalf of a member of the Wessex nobility who was concerned the king was becoming too independently minded? (Which also echoes the fate of King Aethelberht II of East Anglia a century earlier.)
- ❖ Was the murder motivated by a personal quarrel with Eadweard who, according to many accounts, did have a spiteful temper?
- ❖ Was the murder part of a plot personally devised by Aelfhryth to propel her son to the throne, as was suggested by the chronicler John of Worcester?
- ❖ Did Aelfhryth herself actually plunge a knife into King Eadweard, as the chronicler Henry of Huntingdon later (over a century later as it happens) wrote?
- ❖ And, even if she didn't actively participate in the murder, is Aelfhryth still implicated in the regicide for allowing the killers to go free and unpunished?

Whatever the actual cause, the effect was the same: a change of monarch with Aethelraed being crowned a fortnight later on March 31st although because of his youth (he was only 12 at the time of his coronation) his mother Queen Aelfhryth ruled as regent for the next six years.

One of the few things we can be certain of is Aethelraed not only had no involvement in the murder of Eadweard but was also unaware of any plots. In fact in a story reminiscent of the incident in the book *Mommie Dearest* about the actress Joan Crawford traumatising her daughter by beating her with a wire coat-hanger, it is claimed Queen Aelfhryth beat Aethelraed with a candlestick on seeing him mourn for the half-brother who had blocked his path to the throne. The memory of this beating apparently stayed with Aethelraed for the rest of his life, giving him a terror of candlelight.

Aethelraed's coronation was the last state event in which Archbishop Dunstan took part. When the young king took the usual oath to govern well, Dunstan addressed him with a solemn warning, criticising the

violent act whereby he became king and prophesying it would result in misfortune befalling the kingdom.

We can assume Dowager Queen Aelfthryth dismissed these warnings as merely sour grapes by a bad loser whose influence at court was now dwindling but Dunstan turned out to be correct in his predictions. Ruling as King Aethelraed II Unraed, better known to history as Ethelred the Unready, Aelfthryth's son would prove to be one of England's most disastrous monarchs – as we shall see in the next chapter...

Bones of contention

According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, after his murder Eadweard was buried at Wareham “without any royal honours” adding...

“No worse deed for the English race was done than this was, since they first sought out the land of Britain. Men murdered him, but God exalted him. In life he was an earthly king; after death he is now a heavenly saint. His earthly relatives would not avenge him, but his Heavenly Father has much avenged him.”

A couple of years later his body – which was found to be incorrupt (see previous chapter on St Edmund the Martyr) was disinterred and moved to Shaftesbury Abbey, where it was given a lavish reburial. Subsequently, with the assistance of grants on land by King Ethelred, his body was moved to an even more prominent shrine within the abbey as the cult of ‘St Edward the Martyr’ began to grow in the early 11th century.

The very process of ‘translating’ (transferring) his body from Warham to Shaftesbury in 981 is credited with healing cripples and restoring sight to the blind. Although Edward was never formally canonized, he is recognised as a saint by the Anglican, Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches.

Following King Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries, during the English Reformation in the 16th century, many holy places were demolished however the nuns at Shaftesbury managed to hide St Edward's relics and save them from desecration. Unfortunately they were so well hidden they were not recovered until an archeological

dig in 1931 and it would be a further 40 years before an osteologist confirmed them as belonging to Edward.

However the story does not end there as a dispute erupted between the archaeologist who found the remains and his brother, with one wanting the relics to go to the Orthodox Church and the other wanting them returning to Shaftesbury Abbey. The dispute was finally resolved in 1984 when the relics were placed in what is now the St Edward the Martyr Orthodox Church at Brookwood Cemetery in Woking, where they are cared for by the St Edward Brotherhood of monks under the jurisdiction of a traditionalist branch of the Greek Orthodox church.

Lovers of irony will appreciate the fact that during the decades long dispute over the fate of the relics of St Edward, who was killed by being stabbed in the back with a knife, his bones were stored in a cutlery box in a bank vault at the Woking branch of Midland Bank.

But what about his alleged murderess, the Dowager Queen Aelfthryth?

As is the way with many of these notorious Saxon queens, in widowhood Aelfthryth became pious, devout and noble of character, founding an abbey at Wherwell, Hampshire, close to site of her first husband's murder, as a Benedictine nunnery. Later in life she retired there – supposedly to seek forgiveness for her crimes – before dying in November 1000 or 1001.

The church chroniclers of the time remained unconvinced of her piety, one recording in the *Historia Eliensis* that a certain Abbot Byrhtnoth, while travelling through the New Forest, spotted Aelfthryth preparing magic potions that transformed her into a mare “so that she might satisfy the unrestrainable excess of her burning lust, running and leaping hither and thither with horses and showing herself shamelessly to them, regardless of the fear of God and the honour of the royal dignity”.

This account goes on to claim Aelfthryth later attempted to seduce the Abbot to ensure his silence and when he refused “desperate not to be unmasked as a witch and an adulteress, Aelfthryth summoned her ladies and, together they heated up sword thongs on the fire and murdered the Abbot by inserting them into his bowels”.

Aelfthryth's treatment by the church is in mark contrast to the rest of Edgar's family. As we have already seen, Eadweard would go on to be revered as St Edward the Martyr. Edgar's second wife Wulfthryth became venerated as St Wifrida of Wilton (there is a suggestion King Edgar originally abducted her from the nunnery at Wilton Abbey) while their daughter Eadgyth became venerated as St Edith of Wilton.

Incidentally, at Harewood Forest in Hampshire is a 19th century stone monument called *Dead Man's Plack* which commemorates the killing of Aethelwold by King Edgar. The inscription reads:

About the year of our Lord DCCCCLXIII upon this spot beyond the time of memory called Deadman's Plack, tradition reports that Edgar, surnamed the peaceable, King of England, in the ardour of youth love and indignation, slew with his own hand his treacherous and ungrateful favourite, owner of this forest of Harewood, in resentment of the Earl's having basely betrayed and perfidiously married his intended bride and beauteous Elfrida, daughter of Ordgar, Earl of Devonshire, afterwards wife of King Edgar, and by him mother of King Ethelred II. Queen Elfrida, after Edgar's death, murdered his eldest son, King Edward the Martyr, and founded the Nunnery of Worwell.



CHAPTER 4

SINNER: EADRIC STREONA, THE WORST MAN YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF

How one treacherous earl undermined the Saxon monarchy

According to an article published in the *BBC History Magazine* in 2005, a relatively obscure Saxon nobleman called Eadric Streona, who most people have probably never heard of, was “the 11th century’s worst Briton”. With the 1000th anniversary of Eadric’s most notorious acts of treachery in the AD 1016 just behind us, now is a good time to look at how he acquired this terrible reputation.

The year is 1007 and Viking raiders are continuing to plague the now unified Saxon kingdom of England. Far from appeasing them, the payment of *Dangeld* (bribes of gold and silver bullion to buy off the Vikings – today we'd call it protection money) is just encouraging their fleets of longships to return each year to demand yet more money.

As the poet Rudyard Kipling noted nearly some 900 years later "Once you have paid him the *Danegeld*, you never get rid of the Dane!"

On the throne (he ruled intermittently from 978 to 1016, including a period in exile when the Vikings took the crown) is one of England's most disastrous monarchs, namely King Aethelraed II Unraed. Known to history as Ethelred the Unready – we met him at the end of the last chapter – his unfortunate nickname is based upon a pun – *Aethelraed* meaning noble counsel, while *Unraed* means no or bad counsel.

Having paid out a record 36,000 lbs in weight of silver (that's over 16 tons) by way of *Danegeld* in 1007 to the Danish Viking leader King Sweyn Forkbeard, the following year Ethelred ordered the construction of a national fleet of warships to defend the country.

King Sweyn, it should be added, held a personal grudge against Ethelred as the Dane's sister Gunhilde was one of the victims of the so-called Saint Brice's Day Massacre in November 1002, when Ethelred ordered the slaughter of every Dane in England. There is still a dispute among historians as to whether the death toll amounted to thousands or just a few hundred.

And so it was that in 1008, a fleet of 300 warships assembled off the port of Sandwich in Kent. At the time, this was the largest English fleet ever seen. Unfortunately Ethelred's plans soon began to unravel.

The fleet was under the command of Sussex *thegn* (an aristocratic courtier) called Wulfnoth Cild. However another courtier called Brihtric, the brother of the powerful Ealdorman (later called earls) Eadric Streona of Mercia, accused Wulfnoth of treachery. Wulfnoth denied the charges and John of Worcester, a chronicler of these times, was also of the opinion the charges had been brought unjustly. But seeing the dangerous position he was in, Wulfnoth led a mutiny and sailed away with 30 ships from the fleet.

This, incidentally, was the first recorded mutiny in English naval history. Not content with mutinying, Wulfnoth and his ships then proceeded to commit acts of piracy and looting. According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, he “went harrying everywhere along the south coast and did all manner of evil”.

At this point Brihtric confidently announced that Wulfnoth’s ships could easily be surrounded and captured. Then, taking him with him 80 ships from the fleet, he sailed away in pursuit, the *Chronicle* reports, “thought to win great fame for himself by taking Wulfnoth dead or alive”.

Sadly Brihtric’s ships ran into a severe storm, which wrecked some boats and drove others ashore. But, worse was to come as Wulfnoth’s fleet chose this moment to return to the Sandwich area and commenced burning or sinking as many of Brihtric’s stricken ships as they could lay their hands on. After that, they left English waters and sailed away into exile.

With over one-third of their ships now either disabled or lost without ever having encountered a Viking longship, confusion and disarray descended upon the English fleet. Ethelred and his councillors left Sandwich and made their way overland back to the royal court, while the now leaderless fleet (the king was the notional commander-in-chief) split up and made their way back to their home ports.

Amazingly, this was not the end of this string of maritime disasters, as a few days later a new Viking fleet arrived off the Kent coast and landed at Sandwich. And there it remained until it was bought off several months later with a *Danegeld* payment of a further 48,000 lbs of silver. It is estimated that during Ethelred’s rule, the Vikings extorted more than 100 tons of silver from England by way of *Danegeld* payments – although after the events off Sandwich in 1008, the King’s priests claimed it was all thanks to Ethelred’s call for prayer and fasting (not increased taxes) that the Vikings finally departed!

But, as Kipling warned, “you never get rid of the Dane” and in 1013 King Sweyn Forkbeard was back with an army of invasion that swept away Ethelred’s regime, forcing the hapless king to flee into exile in

Normandy. Among those going into exile was Eadric Streona who we encountered earlier – but who was this Eadric?

The crafty enforcer

During the early part of the 11th century Eadric, the son of another Saxon *thegn*, began to earn himself a reputation for being the king's 'enforcer' – somebody who could be relied upon when there was dirty work to be done. There is a suggestion, he was one of the advocates of the Saint Brice's Day Massacre in 1002 although he is not mentioned in historical records until 1006 when, in the words of John of Worcester:

“The crafty and treacherous Eadric Streona, plotting to deceive the noble Ealdorman Aelfhelm, prepared a great feast for him at Shrewsbury at which, when he came as a guest, Eadric greeted him as if he were an intimate friend. But on the third or fourth day of the feast, when an ambush had been prepared, he took him into the wood to hunt. When all were busy with the hunt, one Godwine Porthund [which means the town dog] a Shrewsbury butcher, whom Eadric had dazzled long before with great gifts and many promises so he might perpetrate the crime, suddenly leapt out from the ambush, and execrably slew the Ealdorman Aelfhelm. After a short space of time [Aelfhelm's] sons, Wulfheah and Ufegeat, were blinded, at King Ethelred's command...”

After this, Eadric's rise to power was swift as the following year he married Ethelred's daughter Eadgyth (Edith) and was appointed Ealdorman of Mercia. In case you were wondering *Streona* is a nickname, meaning 'the Acquisitive' that he was later given by chroniclers, because he allegedly appropriated church lands and funds for himself. It is certainly true the chroniclers disliked him. This is what John of Worcester also had to say:

“He was a man, indeed, of low origin, but his smooth tongue gained him wealth and high rank, and, gifted with a subtle genius and persuasive eloquence, he surpassed

all his contemporaries in malice and perfidy, as well as in pride and cruelty.”

While a later chronicler, William of Malmesbury, said of him:

“This fellow was the refuse of mankind, the reproach of the English; an abandoned glutton, a cunning miscreant; who had become opulent, not by nobility, by specious language and impudence. This artful dissembler, capable of feigning anything, was accustomed, by pretended fidelity, to scent out the King’s designs, that he might treacherously divulge them.”

As far as our story is concerned, we have yet to see the full scope of Eadric’s ‘perfidy’ however it is widely believed he was one of the chief advocates of the policy of trying to appease the Vikings with payments of *Danegeld* (rather than retaliate with force and face them in battle) because he was also embezzling a slice of the *Danegeld* silver for his own personal use before it was handed over to the Vikings. Streona the Acquisitive indeed!

But back to the saga of Ethelred. Having conquered England and been declared king in late 1013, the Danish leader Sweyn Forkbeard died suddenly in early February 1014. (Apparently killed, you will recall from Chapter 2, by the ghost of St Edmund the Martyr.) His Viking troops immediately declared his son Canute (or Cnut) as his successor but the English invited Ethelred to return and, in one of the few military successes of his reign, his army marched on an inadequately prepared Canute and, in April, forced the Vikings to withdraw back to their Danish homelands.

Sixteen months later, in August 1015, Canute was back, landing at the fateful place Sandwich, with a fresh invasion force but only to find the whole political landscape had changed. Ethelred’s son and heir-apparent Edmund Ironside had rebelled against his father and now ruled much of the north of England, where the local population were willing to support anyone who offered an alternative to the chaos the Viking and Saxon kings were causing.

Over the next few months Canute began to capture more of southern England and, with Ethelred now ill, Edmund assumed command of all the Saxon forces. Or, more correctly, most of the Saxon forces for shortly afterwards Eadric chose to betray both his father-in-law and brother-in-law by switching allegiance to Canute, taking with him his own troops, along with some 40 warships.

The war rumbled on throughout the winter and in April of 1016, a sick and exhausted Ethelred died, and Edmund was elected king of England, or at least king of those parts of the country, including London, the Viking hadn't yet conquered.

Incidentally, Ethelred's afterlife was as chaotic as his life. He was the first English king to be buried in what became Old St Paul's Cathedral in London. Unfortunately his tomb, remains and monument were destroyed and lost, along with the entire cathedral, during the Great Fire of London in 1666.

The fighting between the Vikings and Saxons included one battle in the west of England where, at the point where it seemed Edmund's forces were gaining the upper-hand, Eadric (in the words of John of Worcester):

“Cut off the head of a man named Osmear, whose face and hair were very like King Edmund's, and, holding it up, cried out that it was useless for the English to fight, saying, ‘Oh! ye men of Dorsetshire, Devonshire and Wiltshire, flee quickly; ye have lost your leader: Lo! here I hold the head of your lord and king Edmund: flee with all speed.’ When the English heard these words they were terror-struck, more by the atrocity of the act, than by Eadric's threatening words.”

Edmund's forces did initially flee but, when they realised he was still alive, regrouped and fought on. Despite his earlier treachery, later that same summer Eadric switched sides once again, swearing loyalty to Edmund. As the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* commented at the time “No greater folly was ever agreed to than this one.”

So it proved on October 18th 1016 at the Battle of Assandun, either at Ashdon or Ashingdon Hill, both in Essex. This was a fight Edmund and the English could have won, as they attacked the Vikings as they were heading back to their ships, however at a crucial stage Eadric and his forces withdrew from the battlefield, leaving the English to be defeated.

As the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* recorded:

“Then Ealdorman Eadric did as he so often did before,
betrayed his natural lord and all the people of England.”

After the battle, Eadric organised a meeting between Edmund and Canute, where it was agreed to divide the country between them, with Canute ruling everywhere to the north of the River Thames and Edmund taking the south. They also agreed that if either of them died without issue then the other would take the entire country.

Unfortunately Edmund died just six weeks later on November 30th 1016, leaving Canute in control of the whole country.

Although it is possible Edmund died as a result of battle injuries or disease contracted whilst campaigning, there remains a strong suspicion that his conveniently timed death was murder – with the finger of suspicion pointing at Eadric Streona.

According to the chronicler Geoffrey Gaimar, writing a century after the events, Eadric hired a killer who, rather improbably, hid beneath the open outlet to a privy (toilet) and fired a crossbow bolt up at Edmund, as he was attending to a call of nature. (A historical event that subsequently found its way into an episode of the TV series *Game of Thrones*.) The bolt buried itself so far into poor Edmund's guts that initially nobody realised what was the cause of his death. Another version of this tale says it was a spring-triggered crossbow rigged to fire automatically when someone sat on the toilet seat.

And what of Eadric? According to Queen Emma of Normandy, who was the second wife of Ethelred the Unready and, later, the wife of King Canute, Canute invited Eadric and three other leading English earls to a feast at his palace in London on Christmas Day, 1017. There, Eadric rather foolishly asked Canute for his reward for having helped

the Vikings at the Battle of Assandun, namely by deserting Edmund at a key point in the battle.

Canute agreed, saying "I will return to you a worthy reward, but I do so to the end that deception may not subsequently be your pleasure." Then he turned to Eirik, one of his Viking commanders, and ordered him to "Pay this man what we owe him," whereupon Eirik "raised his axe without delay and cut off his head with a mighty blow."

Emma of Normandy says Eadric and the other three earls were all executed because they had not fought "faithfully for their liege Edmund" and Canute knew they had all treacherously hesitated to see who was winning before changing sides. Canute apparently added, in the case of Eadric "shall you who have deceived your lord with guile, be capable of being true to me... kill him lest he play us false."

Eadric's body was subsequently thrown over the walls of the city of London and left, unburied, to rot in a ditch, while his decapitated head was "placed upon a pole on the highest battlement of the Tower of London" to serve as a warning to other would-be traitors.

One of the great 'what ifs' of English history is what would have happened if Edmund Ironside had won the Battle of Assandun and not died in 1016? At the time he was still a relatively young man, no more than 30 years old, and subsequent historians have reckoned he was the most effective military leader the country had seen since the time of King Alfred the Great.

Had he lived, it is certain he would have beaten back the Viking invaders and prevented the establishment of a Danish dynasty on the English throne under Canute and his successors. This in turn would have also avoided the confusion and disarray that accompanied the final years of the reign of King Edward the Confessor (1042 to 1066), the last unchallenged king of the Saxon House of Wessex, whose death prompted the Norman invasion under William the Conqueror.

But, thanks to Eadric Streona's greed and treachery, Edmund didn't live and, 600 years of Saxon history in England came to an shuddering halt when King Harold's shield wall collapsed at the Battle of Hastings,

heralding in the Norman Age when, in the words of another chronicler, Orderic Vitalis:

“The English groaned aloud for their lost liberty and plotted ceaselessly to find some way of shaking off a yoke that was so intolerable and unaccustomed.”

Thank you very much Eadric. And talking of those Norman invaders, in our final chapter we return to the former kingdom of the East Angles...



CHAPTER 5

SINNER: THE VIOLENT LIFE AND TIMES OF ROGER BIGOD

How a lowly Norman knight built a dynasty that overawed kings

For almost 250 years, from the time of the Norman Conquest of England in 1066, one of the most important families in the Eastern Counties were the Bigods. In later years they would become the Earls of Norfolk and so powerful they could defy the Kings of England, running their territory like the bosses of an old-style mafia crime family.

We may be dealing with members of a family who lived and died hundreds of years ago but in many respects they were a thoroughly modern bunch of ruthless back-stabbers, liars and rogues who always had an eye on the main chance and didn't care who they had to trample over or betray to achieve it.

In an era of fickle monarchs, when a favourite could fall from power overnight and the following morning find his head nodding on a pike staring sightlessly into the rising sun, the Bigods were masters of playing this real-life *Game of Thrones* – and of keeping their heads while those all around were losing theirs. But where did they spring from?

The first Bigod to make his bloody mark on the pages on English history was Roger Bigod. The month was March. The year 1067.

Although Duke William of Normandy, better known as William the Conqueror although he was also called William the Bastard), had been crowned King of England on Christmas Day 1066, many parts of England were still resisting Norman rule. This included East Anglia, where one of the leading churchmen Abbot Aelfwald (or Ethelwold) had been put in command of the naval and military defence of the East Coast by Harold Godwinson, the last Saxon King of England.

By the spring of 1067, King Harold had been dead six months (killed by the arrow that hit him in the eye during the Battle of Hastings) leaving Abbot Aelfwald and his followers holed up in the isolated but seemingly impregnable island fortress of St Benet's Abbey, in what is now the carefully tended Norfolk Broads but was then just a maze of rivers, meres, estuaries, mud banks and salt marshes accessible only by boat or across a long narrow causeway from Horning. With all previous frontal assaults on the Abbey having failed, William now put young Roger Bigod in charge of the siege of St Benet's.

Until a few years previously, the Bigods (or *le Bigots* as it was originally spelled) had been a family of poor and relatively obscure knights from Calvados in Normandy. One source describes Roger, born in around 1040, as a 'hearth knight' in the service of Duke William's half-brother Odo, the Bishop of Bayeux. (The same man who commissioned the Bayeux Tapestry.)

The term hearth knight derives from knights who were landless and lived in the castle or fortress of a local noble. At night they would sleep on the floor of the castle's great hall but their status allowed them a place by the hearth, close to the fire, where it would be warmer.

Despite these lowly origins, the Bigods had earned themselves a reputation as useful people to have around, having earlier alerted Duke William to a conspiracy against him by his cousin and, later, sailing with the invasion fleet to fight at Hastings. Today we'd call Roger a chancer who rose to become one of William's enforcers or 'heavies'.

Recognising the strength of Abbot Aelfwald's position, Roger Bigod changed tack and opened negotiations to end the siege without further violence. Aelfwald for his part saw that while the Normans could not get into the Abbey, neither he nor his Saxons could get out so, playing for time, he agreed to a truce and appointed a respected and long serving monk called Essric (or Edric) as his intermediary.

Brother Essric may have served the Abbey loyally for over 20 years but Bigod was a better judge of character than the Abbot and was able to detect Essric was an unhappy man. A man seething with resentment because he felt he had been overlooked for higher office and was now caught up in a life or death struggle brought on by the Abbot's dabbling in politics.

It was at this point in the negotiations that Bigod, adopting an approach many centuries later associated with mafia godfathers, made Essric an offer he could not refuse.

If Essric would open the Abbey gates to the Normans in the middle of the night, then not only would Bigod spare the lives of the monks but he would also make Essric "abbot for life" and "raise him higher than any man living within the Abbey... higher than he would ever expect from a friend."

The deal was struck. Essric agreed to betray the Abbey to his new "friend" during matins (which in a medieval monastic order would have been celebrated at either 2:00am or 3:00am) on the morning of

May 25th 1067. (An alternative version of the legend places the date as March 21st, which would have also been the Spring/Vernal Equinox.)

So it was that in the dark early morning, the gate was opened, the Normans rushed in, the guards dozing in the gatehouse were overcome, and the Abbey was seized. Then, it was time for Brother Essric to receive his just rewards from Roger Bigod.

First an abbot's highly decorated *cope* (in effect a cape) was placed over his shoulders. Then the *mitre* (ceremonial head-dress) was placed on his head and a *crozier* (ceremonial staff of office) thrust into his right hand. But, Bigod had one further reward in store for the newly appointed abbot and that was to slip a rope noose over his head.

To Essric's horror, the other end of the rope had already been hung over the highest point of the gatehouse and, at Bigod's signal, the Normans began hauling on it, raising Essric "higher than any man living within the Abbey".

The Normans may have liked to get their own way and were ruthless in the methods they used to achieve this but they also didn't like traitors, no matter whose side they were on. (A trait shared with the Vikings, as Eadric Streona also found to his cost when he foolishly asked King Canute for his just rewards.)

And that was the short, unhappy career of Abbot Essric although it is claimed that on the anniversary of his treachery, his screams can still be heard and his ghost, with its heels kicking bumpity-bumpity-bump against the stonework, seen hanging by a rope from the now ruined abbey gatehouse.

Despite the large number of people who visit the Abbey to look for the ghost, it is now over 100 years since the last time anyone claimed to see Essric's ghost and that witness was apparently so frightened by the experience he promptly fell into the nearby River Bure and nearly drowned.

If you are wondering whatever happened to Abbot Aelfwald, he managed to escape out of a concealed *postern* (side) gate during the confusion following the seizure of the Abbey and eventually made his way to safety in Denmark. After a brief period in exile, ever the

politician, he made his peace with the Normans and in due course returned to St Benet's, where he continued as abbot until his death, peacefully in his bed, in 1089.

The Rise and Rise of Roger Bigod

Following his activities at St Benet's, we next encounter Roger Bigod two years later (in 1069) when he and two other Norman warlords, including the then Earl of Norfolk and Suffolk Ralph de Gael led an army that defeated the Viking king of Denmark Sweyn II Estridsson near Ipswich.

For these services Roger was generously rewarded by King William but this was nothing compared to five years later when Ralph de Gael fell from power in the failed 'Revolt of the Earls' against William and Roger acquired many of the dispossessed de Gael's estates and manors. (The Revolt of the Earls was one of an endless stream of rebellions, dynastic power struggles and mini civil wars that plagued England during the medieval period.)

In the years that followed, in his capacity as the Sheriff of Norfolk and Suffolk, he acquired so much more property that, by the time the *Domesday Book* was completed in 1086, the only person to own more land in East Anglia than Roger Bigod was King William.

The following year (1087) William the Conqueror was on his deathbed but, before he died, he ordered his realm be split between his eldest son Robert, who became the Duke of Normandy, and his second eldest son William (better known as William Rufus) who took the throne of England as King William II.

As Duke Robert and William Rufus were known to loathe each other (along with the usual sibling rivalry, young Rufus was also guilty of playing practical jokes on Robert, frequently involving the contents of chamber-pots) this presented a problem of divided loyalties for those barons who held estates in both Normandy and England, so a plot was hatched to depose King William and unite the two countries under Duke Robert.

Known as The Rebellion of 1088, it lasted less than six months and saw the rebels, including Roger Bigod of Norfolk, defeated and out-

manoeuvred by William thanks to a winning combination (still favoured by politicians today) of good luck, promises, and bribery. However, unlike the brutal punishment normally inflicted on defeated rebels, William Rufus took the advice of the barons who had remained loyal to him and opted for leniency.

In the words of one adviser: "If you temper your animosity against these great men and treat them graciously here, or permit them to depart in safety, you may advantageously use their amity and service on many future occasions. He who is your enemy now, may be your useful friend another time."

For Roger Bigod, the aftermath of the rebellion was that although he lost some of his lands, he kept his head and went on to regain those estates when he reconciled with the king.

William Rufus was actually a far smarter king than history credits him as being. Unfortunately history is written by the survivors and Rufus received very critical coverage from the Church, who were practically the only people who could read or write in those days. Roger Bigod went on to outlive William Rufus, who was killed in a still never adequately explained hunting accident in August 1100 in the New Forest, when he was struck by an arrow.

Was William's death a genuine hunting accident caused by the fatal arrow deflecting off a tree, in which case why did the alleged killer Walter Tirel, who was known to be an excellent archer, immediately flee the country, never to return?

Or was it an assassination engineered by William's younger brother Henry who, along with all the other courtiers who were out hunting with the king that day, including a certain Richard de Clare, promptly abandoned the king's body where it had fallen in the forest and galloped away to nearby Winchester to secure the Royal Treasury and claim the throne as King Henry?

Legend has it that before setting off to go hunting on that fateful day, William said to Tirel "It is only right that the sharpest arrows should be given to the man who knows how to shoot the deadliest shot." Tirel, incidentally, was married to Richard de Clare's daughter Adelize.

Passing peasants subsequently recovered the late king's corpse and carried it to Winchester, where it received a proper Christian burial – though the church chroniclers of the time regarded William's death as "an Act of God" and a suitable end for "a wicked king".

There again they were not entirely impartial as William and the Church had continually clashed throughout his reign and he had repeatedly appropriated ecclesiastical revenues and tithes for his own personal use. In fact in 1096, when the barons complained they did not have enough money to pay the latest tax he had imposed on them, William Rufus, possibly, but only possibly, in jest suggested they should rob the shrines of the saints.

For their part, the medieval chroniclers in their monasteries did their best to blacken William's name, suggesting he was not a committed Christian and still indulged in unnatural, pagan rites. In fact as recently as the 1980s, the English academic and specialist in medieval history Frank Barlow described King William Rufus as:

"a rumbustious, devil-may-care soldier, without natural dignity or social graces, with no cultivated tastes and little show of conventional religious piety or morality – indeed, according to his critics, addicted to every kind of vice, particularly lust and especially sodomy."

William Rufus never married.

The Perils of Royal Hunts

We've already encountered the dangers of royal hunting parties. The Saxon *thegn* Aethelwold lived just long enough to regret going hunting with King Edgar. Edgar's son King Eadweard made a fatal career move calling in to see his stepmother, the Dowager Queen Aelfthryth on his way back from a day's hunting. As for William Rufus... there's a certain irony about his death in the New Forest, which had been set aside by his father William the Conqueror as an area of land reserved for the hunting of wild boar and deer by the royal family. (The word forest is derived from Latin/Old French word *forestis* meaning a wooded area kept for hunting.) Not only was William Rufus killed

there but his older brother Richard died in a hunting accident there in 1074, but three months earlier in May 1100, one of his nephews was killed by a stray arrow.

Bigod's Death and Ecclesiastical Body-Snatching

But back to Roger Bigod who we next hear of being one of the witnesses recorded on the *Charter of Liberties* which the new monarch King Henry I made as part of his coronation promises. The *Charter of Liberties* is one of those overlooked events in English medieval history that can now be seen as a forerunner of the more famous *Magna Carta*.

That said this was no 'Bill of Rights' for the benefit of 'the Common Man' but rather a series of promises and implicit bribes to mollify the kingdom's earls and barons who were less than enthusiastic about Henry's accession.

Henry may have been the younger brother of the late King William Rufus but many nobles still favoured handing the crown to Duke Robert of Normandy. Whatever the merits of the coronation charter, it is worth noting Roger Bigod remained loyal to the new king when a further attempt unsuccessful attempt was made the following year, in 1101, to place Duke Robert on the English throne.

There again, Roger may have been influenced by the fact that following his coronation, King Henry granted Bigod a licence to rebuild his castles at Thetford in Norfolk and Walton in Suffolk (near Felixstowe) and to build new castles at both Bungay and Framlingham in Suffolk, which were to become the Bigod family's seats of power for the next two centuries.

Roger Bigod died in September 1107 at the age of 67, an impressive age for those times, and his body immediately became the subject of a bizarre (and distinctly ironic given his action 40 years earlier at St Benet's) dispute between rival clerics.

Because Roger had founded Thetford Priory, the monks there claimed the right to bury Roger's body (as well as those of his family and successors) as was the custom of the time and as had been set out in

the priory's foundation charter. The monks, incidentally, were not offering to bury Roger out of any particular affection for the man but to ensure the continued financial patronage of the Bigod family.

All those votive candles and chantry masses for the souls of the dead cost money and could provide a valuable source of income to a priory.

However Herbert de Losinga, the new Bishop of Norwich, argued that the body of the most important magnate in Norfolk should be buried in the new cathedral being built in the most important town in Norfolk, namely Norwich. The bishop also had ulterior motives. He had been the Bishop of Thetford but, six years previously, had transferred the see (the location of the bishopric) from Thetford to Norwich and wanted to build up the reputation of Norwich as East Anglia's premier ecclesiastical hub at the expense of Thetford. And, of course, having Roger buried in the new cathedral would secure the continuing patronage of the Bigod family.

In the event Bishop Losinga (another Norman used to getting his own way) had Roger's decomposing body stolen from Thetford Priory in the middle of the night (in a case of history repeating itself, while the monks were distracted celebrating matins) and (according to one version of the story) "dragged" away, presumably going bumpity-bumpity-bump against the roadway, all the way to Norwich Cathedral for reburial. The current resting place of Roger Bigod's mortal remains are unknown.

By quirk of ecclesiastical fate, the Abbot of St Benet's is also the Bishop of Norwich, so St Benet's Abbey, where the Roger Bigod saga first began, avoided being added to the list of abbeys and priories to be broken up during King Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries. However as the abbey was redundant by the mid-16th century, the then Bishop of Norwich had it demolished and its building materials recycled and sold off to help pay the diocese's debts.

Apart from some fragments of walls, all that now remains is a part of the gatehouse (where Essric came to grief) although these ruins are confusing as 200 years later, during the Georgian era, a large (and now also derelict but picturesque) windmill was erected in the middle of the

gatehouse. Several hundred yards away from the gatehouse stands a wooden cross (fashioned from oak donated from HM Queen Elizabeth II's royal estate at Sandringham in 1987) that marks the original site of the abbey's high altar – and also provides some indication of the scale of the original buildings.

AFTERWORD:

HAVING THE BENEFIT OF GOD ON YOUR SIDE

Aldous Huxley once wrote “That men do not learn very much from the lessons of history is the most important of all the lessons of history.” But what lessons, if any, can we draw from these five tales?

At the risk of sounding cynical, the most valuable lesson here would appear to be to ensure you had God (in these stories the Christian god) on your side if you wanted to have any hope of being remembered well in the history books.

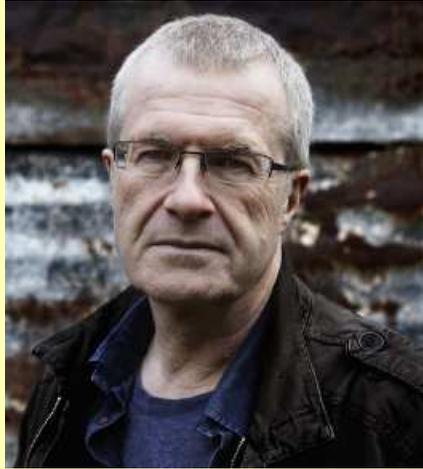
It is arguable that King Vortigern made a valiant but ultimately doomed attempt to hold back the hoards of invading Saxons in the 5th century. Contrast that with King Edmund of the East Angles who 400 years later initially attempted to betray the other Saxon kingdoms of England to the Vikings, before being murdered by his erstwhile allies. Yet Vortigern was condemned as a usurper polluted by lust whereas Edmund went on to become a holy martyr and saint.

Edmund not only had God in the shape of the Christian church on his side (and, thanks to pilgrimages, his shrine at what is now Bury St Edmunds became a major source of revenue for the church for over 600 years) but, more importantly, he also had the support of the people who wrote the histories of that era, including the authors of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and they were also all churchmen. Indeed at a time when just about the only people who could read and write belonged to the church, it was politic to ensure they viewed you favourably, if you didn't want them to posthumously drag your name through the mud for all posterity.

Young, handsome and foolish King Eadwig crossed Archbishop Dunstan and was remembered as a 'bad' king, whereas his brother Edgar the Peaceable was an adulterer and a murderous rogue who kept on the good side on Dunstan, and so was remembered as a 'good' king who enjoyed a reign "singularly devoid of recorded incident".

Even Roger Bigod's double-dealing, brutal 'might is right' ways were overlooked by the church on his death, to the extent there was even a scramble for the custody of his mortal remains.

Just as today 'celebs', socialmedia 'influencers' and reality TV stars recognize the importance of keeping the media on their side, so it was in Dark Age England that if you wanted to be remembered as a saint rather than as a sinner, so it was vital to have God on your side.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charles Christian is a barrister and Reuters correspondent turned writer, podcaster, radio show presenter and award-winning tech journalist.

He has always had a soft spot for history, legends and folklore. This may well be because one side of his family came over with the Vikings, liked the lootin' and pillagin' so much they decided to stay on and open a shop in Scarborough, while the other side is now best remembered for some unpleasantness aboard *H.M.S Bounty*.

He is the author of *Yorkshire's Weird Wolds: Inside the Wold Newton Triangle*, he writes and presents the weekly *Weird Tales Radio Show* (available as a podcast, as well as on internet and paranormal radio networks) which looks at witchcraft, ghost stories, urban myths and folklore. He is a regular contributor on folklore and medieval history to *Ancient Origins*. And, a national newspaper really once did commission him to go on a werewolf hunt – in Hull!

For more details visit Charles' website www.urbanfantasist.com

ALSO BY CHARLES CHRISTIAN

Writing Genre Fiction:

Creating Imaginary Worlds:

The 12 Rules (2014)

“What a brilliant book! Rule 13: Read this book. It can only help you write better genre stories. What’s to lose?” Vanessa Gebbie, award-winning author and editor of *Short Circuit: A Guide to the Art of the Short Story*

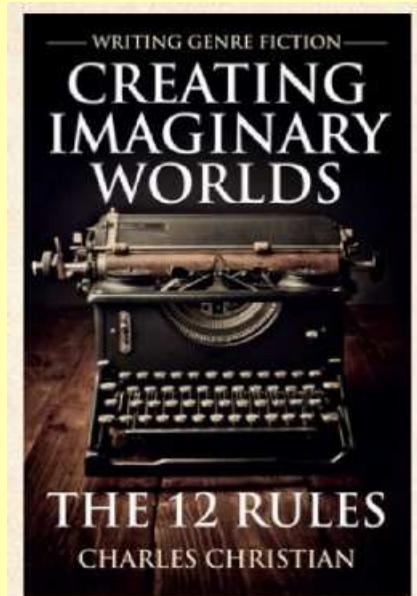
This is a guide for writers and readers of science fiction and fantasy that explains the 12 unwritten rules for creating believable imaginary worlds. Flout these rules and a good story idea can be destroyed losing the reader along the way. The conventions, tricks and the trips are explained and lots of examples given so authors, whether writing flash fiction or a full length novel, don’t strain their reader’s patience, sympathy and credibility.

Written also to entertain readers of genre fiction – science fiction, fantasy, paranormal, horror – the book is useful for beginning writers, established authors, writing groups and creative writing courses in schools and universities as a quick and fun 101 on creating imaginary worlds in books and film.

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ALSO BY CHARLES CHRISTIAN

*Yorkshire's Weird Wolds:
Inside the Wold Newton
Triangle*

includes New Werewolf Update
(2015 & 2018)

Here's an unusual travel guide for locals and holidaymakers to that part of East Yorkshire known as the Yorkshire Wolds, a guide that pulls together the secrets of the Wold Newton Triangle - where fact is even weirder than fiction. Includes update on the recent Old Stinker the Werewolf sightings in Hull.

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