

HAROLD GODWINSON, LATER KING HAROLD II

His connection with Bosham and the Bayeux Tapestry—a short history

With all the recent excitement at the possibility of the Bayeux Tapestry coming on loan to England, I thought that some background information might be of interest to *Bosham Life* readers.

The reason why Bosham is depicted in the Bayeux Tapestry: Harold Godwinson's father, Earl Godwin had gained considerable power during King Cnut's reign. Later, when Edward the Confessor came to the throne in 1042, Godwin steadily increased his power and as Earl of Wessex became the most wealthy and influential earl in England. As the Anglo Saxon Chronicle recorded in 1052, 'Godwin had risen to such great eminence as if he ruled the King and all England; his sons were earls and favourites of the king and his daughter was the King's wedded wife'. Godwin's vast wealth included the valuable secular Manor of Bosham and when Godwin died in 1053 a great deal of this wealth and power was left to his son Harold. Harold also became Earl of Wessex, an area that stretched from Land's End to Kent. The family home was at Bosham where he, and his father before him, kept a substantial fleet of ships, so it was not surprising that Harold rode to Bosham to see his family and pray in the church, before setting sail in 1064 to meet Duke William of Normandy, later the Conqueror.

At the very beginning of the Tapestry the first four scenes concern Harold and Bosham. The year is 1064 and Harold is shown with Edward the Confessor who is sending Harold to Normandy to tell William, Duke of Normandy that he, William, is to succeed to the throne of England. Harold is then shown riding to Bosham with his retinue. He has his hawk and his hounds with him which would seem to indicate he is on a peaceful mission and hoping for some hunting. The next scene shows Harold going into Bosham church with a companion to pray. As with most buildings in the tapestry it is a stylised view of the church but clearly the church was already known for its arch. Then Harold is shown feasting at his manor house before embarking from Bosham on what proved to be an ill-fated visit to Normandy.

THE BAYEUX TAPESTRY

Despite its name the Bayeux Tapestry is embroidered and not woven. This confusion may have arisen as the word 'tapestry' was used at one time to mean any form of wall hanging. It is believed to have been commissioned by William the Conqueror's half brother, Bishop Odo, to adorn his newly re-consecrated cathedral at Bayeux in 1077. It is now considered to have been designed and worked in England. Bishop Odo was made Earl of Kent after the Conquest and it is thought to have been made at the known School of Embroidery in Canterbury. The Tapestry is approximately 70 metres in length and 50 cm wide and one of the most important historical documents, providing as it does a near contemporary record of the last successful invasion of English soil. There are nearly forty buildings shown, but Bosham Church is one of the few buildings that is not only named but exists today and is still being used for its original purpose.

For nearly a thousand years the Tapestry has survived wars, revolutions, theft and neglect. An inventory of Bayeux Cathedral of 1467 describes 'a very long and narrow hanging of linen, on which are embroidered figures and inscriptions comprising a representation of the Conquest of England'. Each summer this old hanging was un-rolled and draped around the nave on 'the Feast of relics and throughout the Octave'. Then for over two hundred years there is no mention of the Tapestry until in the 18th century when, for the first time, it became known to the outside world. A drawing of the first section was seen by an eminent French historian who tracked it down and arranged for an accurate sketch of the whole work to appear in print in 1752. Over the years it survived the wear and tear caused by the rolling and un-rolling and general neglect, the French Revolution, a perilous journey across France during the Second World War and possible seizure by the Germans from the basement of the Louvre in Paris before it was returned to Bayeux in March 1945. Today, beautifully presented in the Musée de la Tapisserie de Bayeux, it is seen by over 400,000 visitors a year. Now there is the exciting possibility we may have the chance of seeing this quite remarkable piece of history and craftsmanship nearer to home.

Joan Langhorne



UBI HAROLD DUX ANGLORVM ET SUI MILITES EQVITANT AD BOSHAM: ECCLESIA

Where Harold, Earl of the English, and his retinue ride to Bosham: the Church

HIC HAROLD MARE NAVIGAVIT ET VELIS VENTO PLENIS IN TERRAM WIDONIS COMITIS.

Here Harold took to the sea and came with full sail to the territory of Count Guy.

(Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry—11th century. Copyright the City of Bayeux)