Knowledge Organiser – Normans Part 1: Anglo-Saxon England

What was England like in Anglo-Saxon times?

- England had a population of about 2 million people (less than half of London today!)
- Almost everyone farmed land.
- England was a Christian country, and religion played a large role in everyday life.
- For centuries England had been under threat from the Vikings, and parts of northern England had Viking settlers.
- Edward the Confessor was king from 1042 to 1066, but the kings before him (Cnut and his two sons) had been Vikings.
- England had a very well-organised government.

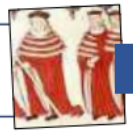
The Social System

King

The **king** was the **most powerful** person in Anglo-Saxon England. His job was to protect his people from attack and make laws.

Earls

Earls were the most important men after the king. The area of the country controlled by an earl was called an **earldom**.



Thegns

Thegns *("thanes")* were local lords who lived in a **manor house** and held more than 5 **hides** of land. Thegns had a duty to provide men for the fyrd (army) when needed.

Peasants

Peasants made up most of the population. They worked for their local lord. **Ceorls** *("curls")* were free to go and work for another lord if they wanted to, although they still had to do some work for their local lord as well.

Slaves

Slaves made up about 10% of the population, and were viewed more as property than people. Owning slaves was a normal part of life for the Anglo-Saxons, but the Normans thought it was cruel.

Peasants and **merchants** could work their way up to **thegn** status.

Slaves could be freed by their masters to become ordinary **peasants**.

Thegns could be promoted to **earls**.

A **peasant** could sell themselves into **slavery** to support their family.

An **earl** could be demoted to a **thegn.**

Government

The king decided who was on the Witan and when it met. He did not have to follow its advice.

The Witan was a council of advisers to the king, made up of important people like earls and archbishops. It discussed threats and disputes and had a large role in choosing a new king.

The Monarchy

Edward's strengths

- A powerful king was one who had success in battle and led a strong army.
- Edward was not a warrior king himself, but his earls and thegns were a **powerful military force**.
- He was a **respected law-maker** – someone who kept things peaceful.
- He was **pious (very religious)**. Kings claimed to have a special link to God.

Edward the Confessor was king from 1042 to 1066. Every boy swore an **oath** to the king when they reached 12 years old. The king controlled law-making, money, land ownership, the military and taxation.

Limits to Edward's power

- Half of the country, the **Danelaw,** still had strong Danish links from previous Viking invasions. These people wanted to live by their own laws and customs.
- The **Earl of Wessex, Earl Godwin,** was very powerful. He could put pressure on Edward to do things his way.
- Edward and Godwin fell out in **1050**. Edward forced Godwin into exile, but he returned in 1051 with an army, and Edward gave him his earldom back to prevent a war.

Edward the Confessor's Last Years: The role of the Godwin Family

Earl Godwin had been made Earl of Wessex by King Cnut in 1018. Godwin helped Edward the Confessor become king, and Edward was married to Godwin's daughter Edith.

Why were the Godwins so powerful in Anglo-Saxon England?

LAND

The Godwins had lots of land, making them almost as rich as the king.

LEADERSHIP

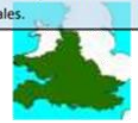
The Godwins were lords to many hundreds of thegns. This made them powerful war leaders.

CHURCH INFLUENCE

The Godwins convinced Edward to appoint bishops who were loyal to them.

DEFENSIVE IMPORTANCE

Wessex was England's defence zone attack against attacks from across the Channel. Harold also controlled the area around Hereford, often attacked by Wales.



MILITARY SUCCESS

The Godwins' only main rival by the 1060s was **Aelfgar, Earl of Mercia**, who teamed up with the Welsh king **Llywelyn**. After Aelfgar died in the early 1060s, Harold and Tostig swiftly defeated Llywelyn. Harold's second wife was Llywelyn's widow (who was also Aelfgar's daughter!).

POLITICAL LINKS

Political marriages gave the Godwins power – e.g. Edith Godwin to King Edward, and Harold Godwinson to Edith of Mercia.

Harold Godwin's Embassy to Normandy

Harold Godwinson went to Normandy on a mission for the King (an **embassy**) in 1064.

WHAT HAPPENED?

- Harold landed in Ponthieu, where Count Guy of Ponthieu took him prisoner.
- William of Normandy rescued Harold.
- Harold then spent time in Normandy, helping William in two military campaigns.
- Harold made an oath to William – possibly swearing **fealty** to support William's claim to the English throne.

WHY IS IT SIGNIFICANT?

- It shows that Harold was Edward's **trusted adviser**, as it was clearly an important embassy.
- The Normans used it to **boost William's claim** to the English throne.
- After Harold took over as king from Edward in 1066, the Normans used this embassy to portray Harold as an **oath-breaker.**

Edward the Confessor's Death

Edward died on the 5th of January 1066. He had no children, which meant there was a **succession crisis.** The Bayeux Tapestry shows Edward on his deathbed, holding out his hand to Harold. The Witan met quickly and Harold was crowned the same day as Edward's burial, 6th January 1066.

But there were 4 contenders for the throne.

Harold Godwinson

Claim:

Appointed by Edward on his deathbed. Family connection (brother-in-law). Proven military success and influence with the earls.

Strength of claim:

Good – supported by witnesses (though ones loyal to him). Good chance of success.

William, Duke of Normandy

Claim:

An agreement supposedly made with King Edward in about 1051, and confirmed during Harold's 1064 embassy.

Strength of claim:

Backed by the Pope, but no real evidence. **Good** chance of success – the Normans were strong warriors.

Harald Hardrada

Claim:

Complicated – he had essentially inherited the claim from previous Viking kings.

Strength of claim:

Weak, though the Danelaw may have welcomed a Viking king. The exiled Tostig went to Harald for support – together they had a strong army and fleet.

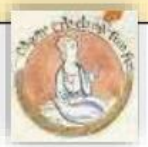
Edgar Aethling

Claim:

Royal blood – Edward's nephew and natural heir ("Aethling" = prince of royal blood).

Strength of claim:

Weak – he was a blood relation, but the Witan wanted a strong king to see off threats from Scandinavia and Normandy.



Why did William win?

William's tactics and leadership:

- William used **cavalry** to break up Harold's shield wall.
- The Normans tricked the English into false security by **pretending to retreat**.
- William **delayed his invasion** until Harold had disbanded the southern fyrd.
- Horses were specially bred and shipped over for the battle.
- The Normans stole food and destroyed houses when they arrived in England.
- William quickly adapted an Iron Age fort at Hastings into a defensible castle.

Harold's leadership and bad luck:

- Harold's army had been out since May.
- He rushed south to fight William. He could have stayed in London.
- His men were poorly disciplined, which caused the shield wall to break up.
- He didn't have the element of surprise.
- Harold's men were tired after fighting up north and then marching back south.
- William sailed over during winter storms, so he was lucky to make it.
- *The bad luck suffered by Harold could so easily have been William's!*

Harold's Coronation and Reign

Harold was crowned quickly because the Witan feared an attack by William. He faced several challenges as king:

- **Challenges from powerful earls** - including old rival the Earl of Mercia
- **The north** – would they accept Tostig's brother as their new king?
- **Tostig** – was looking for allies in Europe
- **William** – was reportedly getting ready to invade

Harold met with other Witan members at **York**, Northumbria's main city, to get their support. He positioned an army along the **south coast**, expecting an invasion attempt by William. They eventually stood down when the Norman invasion had still not come by September. Tostig sailed to England in May 1066, but he was put off by Harold's strong defences. A fight with the Mercians at Lincoln left him with only 12 ships.

1.Battle of Fulford Gate (20th Sept 1066)

Harald Hardrada and Tostig attacked in September 1066.
They were blocked just outside York by the new Earl of Northumbria **Morcar** and his brother **Edwin** (Earl of Mercia) at **Gate Fulford**.
The battle was a defeat for Morcar and Edwin.

Their mistake was fighting just outside York, rather than within the city walls.

Harold heard about the invasion and marched north. He must have been confident that William would not attack the south any time soon

2.Battle of Stamford Bridge (25th Sept 1066)

Harold surprised Hardrada and Tostig at Stamford Bridge. Both Hardrada and Tostig were killed.
Harold won because:

- The Vikings had left their armour on their ships
- He had the element of surprise
- Hardrada and Tostig had fought at Fulford Gate 5 days before
- The Vikings were (wrongly) under the impression that the English hated Harold
- Harold's men broke the Viking shield wall.

3.The Battle of Hastings – *14th October 1066*

After leaving York, Harold stopped in London for around 5 days to gather troops. He then continued south and met William at **Senlac Hill, near Hastings**.
The battle began in Harold's favour, but his strong **shield wall** gradually broke down.
At one point a rumour went round that William had been killed, so he tipped his helmet to show he was still alive.
Harold Godwinson and his brothers Gyrth and Leofwine held their position on the top of the hill. Eventually they were killed, but their housecarls fought on to the last.

Were the battles significant?

YES	*HOWEVER...*
Hardrada and Tostig's invasion distracted Harold from the south.	*Harold had already stood down the southern fyrd anyway.*
Edwin and Morcar made strategic errors at Gate Fulford.	*Harold expected they'd need help – he was already on his way north to help them before they were defeated.*
Harold's march south again made his troops less battle-ready than William's.	*Morale would have been high though – they had just won at Stamford Bridge.*
His Stamford Bridge success may have made Harold over-confident. He rushed to fight William.	*Harold and the Witan had been preparing for a battle with William for months.*
Edwin and Morcar were unable to fight with Harold at Hastings.	*The only evidence for this is the fact they aren't mentioned in sources on Hastings.*