



# HOW ENGLISH IS THE BAYEVX TAPESTRY?

With a major conference about the Bayeux Tapestry at the British Museum this month, **David Musgrove** considers where it was made and by whom, and asks historians whether the tapestry should be displayed in England





The charging Norman cavalry shown in glorious technicolour at the Battle of Hastings in this masterpiece of storytelling

**T**HE NORMAN Conquest of England – 1066 and all that – is one of the most-told tales in history. When William the Conqueror brought his Norman knights over and felled the cream of Anglo-Saxon England at the Battle of Hastings, he ushered in a dramatic change at the top that's been troubling the English national psyche ever since.

And the conquest is all the more noteworthy for the document that records it, the gloriously colourful embroidery that we now know as the Bayeux Tapestry. Feted as the most famous cartoon strip in history, this masterpiece of needlework has been reproduced, caricatured, discussed and examined so many times that it is surely one of the most recognisable historic documents in the world. It's a quintessential source for English history, and yet its home is in France and it hasn't been seen in England for centuries. So how far is it 'English' and is there a case to be made to ask for it to be brought 'home' for exhibition in England?

The tapestry describes the events immediately prior to and during the Norman Conquest. It starts with Earl Harold of Wessex, the foremost Englishman after the king, Edward (who was later dubbed the Confessor), going to France for an unspecified purpose, probably in 1064, where he ends up in the court of Duke William of Normandy. After some military adventures together in Brittany, Harold makes an oath to William. The tapestry does not make it explicit what that oath is, but the presumption is that Harold is pledging to support William's right to succeed Edward as king of England.

The action then cuts back across the Channel, where the ailing Edward finally expires at the start of 1066. Harold acts swiftly, in apparent contradiction of his oath, to secure the throne for himself. William gets wind of this, prepares a mighty fleet and then embarks from Normandy to avenge himself on Harold.

The armies clash at Hastings in

October that year, with the result that Harold is vanquished and perhaps is shown killed by an arrow in the eye. The tapestry ends with the Anglo-Saxon

army fleeing the field, though there appears to be a missing final panel after this, which most commentators suggest would once have showed William being crowned king of England.

It's an enigmatic source in many ways, which is no doubt why so much has been written about the tapestry. The principal pictorial scenes are accompanied by an extremely terse Latin commentary, thus making the whole document an excellent vehicle for interpretation and debate, all the more so as the upper and lower borders carry further illustrations of often unfathomable meaning.

Justifying Duke William's invasion and conquest of England appears to be the tapestry's main aim. William is portrayed positively throughout, but curiously so is his enemy Harold, who comes across as a man of action and considerable bearing. Whoever was responsible for the tapestry seems to have been walking a fine line between being pro-English and pro-Norman, and that's why the identity of its creator has been a subject of considerable debate by historians in recent years, with several academics putting forward fascinating new theories.

## Who had it made?

It used to be assumed by most tapestry scholars that its author and originator was William the Conqueror's wife, Queen Matilda, who commissioned the piece in loving homage to her illustrious husband. That view is not popular today, with most scholars now plumping for William's half-brother Odo of Bayeux.

Odo was Bishop of Bayeux and then Earl of Kent after the Conquest. As such he was a key ally of Duke William and it's been mooted that he had the tapestry made to demonstrate his support for his king. Alternatively it's possible that Odo had it made to try and work his way back into William's favour after he had fallen from grace in 1082.

Michael Lewis, the organiser of the British Museum conference, explains that circumstantial evidence supports the theory that Odo was the driving force behind the tapestry: "I think it was produced for Odo. There are lots of reasons for that. One is that Bayeux plays such a central role in the tapestry's narrative. It's at Bayeux, according to the tapestry – and in contradiction to other contemporary sources – that Harold made his famous oath to

## Fact file Bayeux Tapestry

### Who had it made?

Leading contenders are Odo of Bayeux, Edith of Wessex and William the Conqueror – though Eustace of Boulogne is one of several others who have been suggested as well

### Where was it made?

Canterbury in Kent, Wilton in Wiltshire, Winchester in Hampshire, Saumur in the Loire Valley, Bayeux in Normandy are all in the frame

### When was it made?

Most scholars agree that it was made very shortly after the Norman Conquest, ie within a couple of decades of 1066

### Why was it made?

Principally to commemorate and authenticate the invasion of England by William of Normandy

### Where is it now?

Bayeux, Normandy, though there is a replica in Reading Museum

William. The tapestry doesn't say what the oath was about but most people agree that it's to do with the relationship of Edward's promise of the crown to William. There are also individuals mentioned in the tapestry that are not named in other contemporary accounts of the conquest, and these individuals are retainers of Odo of Bayeux."

Professor Gale Owen-Crocker, an Anglo-Saxon specialist at the University of Manchester, believes that Odo's prominence in the tapestry (he appears in four scenes) is indicative of his role in its commission: "I think he appears in the tapestry more often than has been acknowledged, which I deduce from costume. He is shown in both heroic



Bishop Odo (left) is prominent in the tapestry

## On the podcast



Hear more of the interviews about the Bayeux Tapestry in this month's BBC History Magazine podcast

Magazine podcast

► [www.bbchistorymagazine.com/podcast.asp](http://www.bbchistorymagazine.com/podcast.asp)



# 1066 and all that: Six key scenes from the Bayeux Tapestry



## 1. Edward and Harold

The tapestry starts with a seated King Edward talking to Earl Harold, perhaps ordering him to Normandy, perhaps warning him not to go



## 2. Harold the hero

When Harold is in Normandy, he goes on campaign with Duke William, and rescues some Norman soldiers from shifting sands in Brittany

guise and advisory guise. There's one scene where he seems to be advising William and he's actually higher and more authoritative than William."

Odo may be the prime suspect for being the tapestry's creator – he had motive, means and there is a lot of evidence in and around the tapestry that links it with him. However, there are other candidates in the frame.

## Was its creator a woman?

Carola Hicks, an art historian at Cambridge University, has proposed Queen Edith, who was Edward the Confessor's wife and then widow, and also Earl Harold's sister: "Looking at the motivation, Edith seemed to have everything that the other candidates didn't necessarily have. She was the daughter of the very powerful Earl Godwin, who had been a kingmaker in his day, and she was the sister of the ambitious Godwinson boys (including Harold). Yet after the Norman occupation Edith apparently recreated herself as the beloved kinswoman of William. So she actually flourished under the new regime, unlike most other Anglo-Saxons.

"The tapestry does seem to have been commissioned by someone who could see both the Norman and the English side of the argument. It shows William's successful and well-organised invasion and victory at Hastings, but at the same time it's actually very sympathetic to the English."

Hicks posits that Edith may have had the tapestry made to strengthen her new position in the Norman hierarchy, to show

her support for the new king William, and to demonstrate her role in the proceedings. Her theory is strengthened by the fact that Edith is one of only three clothed women actually portrayed in the tapestry, figuring prominently in

## Curiously, the vanquished Harold comes across as a man of action and considerable bearing

the important scene at Edward's deathbed. Edith also had prior form for self-promotion, having already had a book written about her and her family's achievements. Just as significantly, she had the wherewithal to have the tapestry made.

"Edith and other women of her rank were committed and experienced at commissioning and being patrons of works of art generally," says Hicks. "Aristocratic women were very thoroughly trained in all aspects of sewing and textile work, whereas male candidates for commissioning the tapestry like Odo most certainly weren't. At this time large-scale sewing projects of this sort were undertaken by women in nunneries and it was the queen's job to look after the nunneries. I think altogether that it wouldn't have been at all surprising if such a strong woman – a born survivor who'd been at the centre of events for many years – had been behind the tapestry. I think she intended it as a gift for William, as a work of reconciliation."

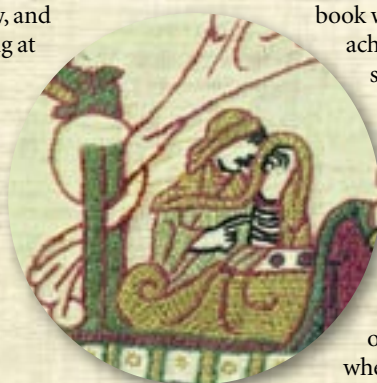
From a nunnery to an abbey, Western Michigan University's

Professor George Beech has highlighted the possibility that the tapestry was made in France on the orders of the most obvious, but often overlooked, patron – William the Conqueror himself. Beech has outlined his case in a recent book that the Abbot of St Florent at Saumur in the Loire valley was an acquaintance of Duke William's and that the duke, having seen the tapestry workshop in this abbey, commissioned the abbot to create the tapestry.

One of the planks of Beech's argument hinges on the depiction of Brittany in the tapestry: "There's a relationship that existed between the Abbot of Saumur and William, Duke of Normandy, before and after the Conquest," says Beech. "This centred around the fact that the abbot came from a small town – Dol de Bretagne – in north-eastern Brittany which had allied itself with William of Normandy against the Bretons in the struggle for control of the frontier of Normandy and Brittany. That struggle led to the Breton campaign of 1064, which is documented in detail in the tapestry.

"Academics have wondered why the Breton campaign was shown on the tapestry because it doesn't seem to contribute to William's invasion and subsequent conquest of England. I find that this interpretation of the way the events were pictured fits in with the way it was seen by the lords of Dol. There is a good chance that William of Normandy commissioned the tapestry after having made the acquaintance of Abbot William, and after having seen the tapestry workshop there, commissioned it to commemorate his conquest of England."

The Loire Valley isn't the only location in France that's been cited as



Edith (above) mourns her husband Edward the Confessor, while William reveals his face in battle (below)







### 3. The fateful oath

Harold swears a sacred oath in William's presence. We aren't told what the oath is, but it may have been to support the duke's bid to be king of England



### 4. The old king dies

Edward dies not long after Harold's return from Normandy, and the battle to succeed him begins

the place where the tapestry might have been made. For instance, in the 1990s German art historian Wolfgang Grape published a detailed study designed to support his claim that it was produced in Bayeux itself.

### Was it made in England?

However, to many, the suggestion that the tapestry was made in France is in itself a contentious one, and goes against the academic orthodoxy that it was actually produced by English embroiderers in England. The pro-English lobby principally base their argument around the theory that the style of the tapestry is reminiscent of that displayed in 11th-century English illuminated manuscripts. Also, the text on the tapestry has long been cited as evidence for an English origin – as Sylvette Lemagnen, curator of the tapestry museum in Bayeux, explains, “I think it was made by English people because the Latin text is written as an

English man or woman would have written it in the Middle Ages”.

Some academics even go as far as to suggest a more precise location for the manufacture of the tapestry. Gale Owen-Crocker is one of many scholars who believe that Canterbury has a strong case: “I think the person who chose the design was clearly at Canterbury, because so many images [in the tapestry] are taken from manuscripts we know were in the Canterbury library, at St Augustine's Monastery. I think the designer and his sub-designers were based at Canterbury. That doesn't mean to say it was worked there, but the designer had to have access to the Canterbury library and I believe must have been someone who knew the manuscripts at the library well.”

Whatever the tapestry's provenance, what's indisputable is that it depicts events that are of enormous significance to England and English

## What will be discussed at the British Museum conference?

AS THIS FEATURE shows, much research has been carried out recently on where and for whom the tapestry was made. However these are not the only research threads being pursued, and the fruits of some new labour will be revealed at the conference. Some of it is based on detailed analysis of the images: **Gale Owen-Crocker**, for example, will be explaining what we can learn from the faces in the tapestry, while **Michael Lewis** has been considering the link between the tapestry and a manuscript probably made in Canterbury.

The fascinating history of the tapestry itself has also come under scrutiny, and one particularly fruitful area of study has been exploration of the previously

unstudied German documents pertaining to the Second World War analysis of the tapestry, which is what **Shirley Ann Brown** will be discussing at the conference.

One of the thorniest issues is whether it does actually show King Harold being shot in the eye and **Martin Foy**s will be explaining why he thinks we've been foxed by a 12th-century revision. Finally **Sylvette Lemagnen** will be considering what we can learn from the one big unexplored area of the tapestry: its reverse side.



## Our experts



**Michael Lewis** is the deputy director of the Portable Antiquities Scheme. His book *The Real World of the Bayeux Tapestry* will be published in September 2008



**Gale R Owen-Crocker** is professor of Anglo-Saxon Culture at the University of Manchester. Her books include *King Harold II and the Bayeux Tapestry* (Boydell, 2005). She is writing a book *The Design of the Bayeux Tapestry*



**Sylvette Lemagnen** has been the curator of the Bayeux Tapestry Museum in Bayeux, Normandy since 1989



**Carola Hicks** did a PhD on the Bayeux Tapestry at Edinburgh University and taught history of art at Cambridge University. Her books include *The Bayeux Tapestry* (Vintage, 2007)



**George Beech** is professor emeritus of history at Western Michigan University. His books include *Was the Bayeux Tapestry Made in France?* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005)



**Shirley Ann Brown** is professor of art history at York University Toronto, and author of *The Bayeux Tapestry: History and Bibliography* (Boydell, 1988).





### 5. Battle is joined

The tapestry climaxes with the Battle of Hastings in October 1066



### 6. The Saxons flee

The last scene is of Saxons running from victorious Normans, but there may be a missing final panel

history. And yet, it's not been shown on this side of the Channel for many centuries – if ever. We don't actually know what happened to the tapestry for the first 400 years of its existence (academics are in general agreement that it was made shortly after the conquest). It seems likely that it travelled in the baggage train of William the Conqueror as he criss-crossed the Channel after 1066, and if that's the case it would have been displayed in the great halls of castles he stayed in on his perambulations (the idea that it was designed for Bayeux Cathedral has fallen out of favour in recent years).

### Should we ask for it back?

George Beech has recently suggested that the tapestry was kept in the Louvre in Paris in the early 15th century. However we cannot say with certainty where it was until we get to 1476, when it was included in an inventory of Bayeux Cathedral. From that point on, we do know that it has remained in this pretty Norman city apart from two brief episodes: when Napoleon Bonaparte sent it to Paris in 1803; and during the Second World War, when it was stored in a remote chateau, then fetched to Paris by the Nazis. Thus, if the tapestry has ever been shown in England, the last display was at least 550 years ago. In the new spirit of Anglo-French co-operation recently espoused by the French president Nicolas Sarkozy, is it time to ask for this most famous of historical documents about England to be put on show here?

We're stepping into murky nationalistic waters, but that's nothing new as far as the tapestry is concerned, as Professor Shirley Ann Brown, a medievalist at Toronto's York University

and expert on the historiography of the tapestry, reveals. "In the 19th century the French decided that it was the great monument of Normandy and the English decided it was the great monument of England. In the 20th century the Germans decided it was a great Germanic monument and recently there's been a movement to bring the Scandinavian element to it, not that it was made in Scandinavia, but that it is reflective of the greater Scandinavian uniformity of the Normans, the Anglo-Danes and of course the Vikings."

Nevertheless, Michael Lewis would like to see the tapestry displayed in England. "I think it would be lovely to see it in this country. I think it would be nice to see it in Canterbury. If the

tapestry was returned, it would be possible to display it along with the works that it was influenced by – that would be a fabulous exhibition – to have the tapestry displayed with the primary sources as far as we can ascertain them."

George Beech agrees:

"I would have no

objections at all. I think it's a good idea. But I'll say immediately that the people at Bayeux might resist. There was an exhibit on French Romanesque art at the Louvre and they wanted to get the tapestry but it couldn't be moved because it's too large and there are too many problems involved in moving it around. However, if the tapestry could be rolled up and shipped, I think it would be in the interests of the French to have it shipped over so that more English people could see it."

**We're not sure if the Bayeux Tapestry has ever been shown in England. If so, it was at least 550 years ago**

Gale Owen-Crocker isn't quite so sure. "It's unique and it's very fragile and it's enormous. It's 68 metres long. In order to display it properly, you would have to have a huge display area. It's in a humidity-, light-, and temperature-controlled case so it would be very difficult to move it without damaging it. And let's face it, it's great fun going to Bayeux to see it. It's a lovely place. So from that point of view, I wouldn't see it moving."

"I'm quite sure the design is English, but it depends who paid for it as to who owns it. If in fact Odo of Bayeux bought it and he was bishop of Bayeux and sent it there, then it's theirs isn't it? So I think I'm going to say leave it where it is. I'm not sure that the exhibition is ideal for it even now, for its fragile nature. Some of it does not look in good condition, but it is relatively safe."

### Is it too fragile to move?

Carola Hicks also thinks it's better off left where it is: "I'm not sure that great works of art, especially one as delicate and with such unusual dimensions as this, should become a kind of travelling tourist attraction. You'd get epic queues,



DETAIL OF THE BAYEUX TAPESTRY, BY SPECIAL PERMISSION OF THE CITY OF BAYEUX





you'd get visitors crowding through, reading their catalogue or listening to their headphones, and not actually looking at it. Also you'd destroy the tourist industry in Bayeux. If people in Britain want to experience the tapestry without going to France, they should go to Reading Museum and look at the absolutely excellent Victorian copy that was sewn in the 1880s."

Shirley Ann Brown agrees that it would be dangerous to move it: "I would say no, mostly because of concerns for the physicality of the Bayeux Tapestry. I'm sidestepping politics but just looking at what the tapestry is, I don't think it should be moved anyway. It is very fragile and any time it's moved, it will be damaged."

Finally Sylvette Lemagnen thinks any such loan would be very unlikely. "It's not the transport issues which would be difficult to resolve, but the issues of displaying it securely. In Bayeux, the tapestry is displayed in a special fortified case, made to measure and fulfilling all security criteria. Visitors can look at it through four layers of armoured glass. Whoever wanted to borrow the tapestry would

IRRESPECTIVE OF whether or not the Bayeux Tapestry crosses the Channel to be exhibited in England, many scholars would make a case for the current tapestry display to be reconsidered.

There's a rough consensus that the tapestry was probably designed for display in secular, rather than ecclesiastical, settings. The general feeling is that it was geared to be laid out on the walls of square or rectangular rooms, to be viewed at eye level and at close range, and with certain key scenes juxtaposed or opposed to each other across the room.

Currently in Bayeux, visitors follow the tapestry around a U-shaped corridor, which Sylvette Lemagnen admits is unsatisfactory: "The first time I saw the tapestry when I was a young student was in a building where it was presented in a rectangular room so you had a look at the whole tapestry and it was absolutely marvellous. I agree that the presentation nowadays is not

first have to build such a secure case. So the main issue would be the cost."

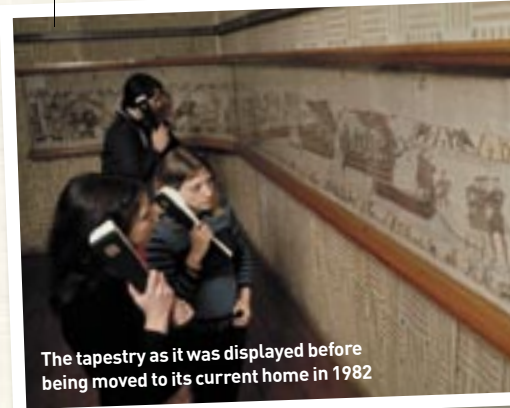
There have been two recent requests from England to the French government for a loan of the tapestry. The first was for the coronation of the queen in 1953 and the second was for the 900-year anniversary of the Battle of Hastings in 1966. Neither request met with a favourable response from the French – and, says Lemagnen, it would require high-level permission for such a loan today. "You have to ask the Ministry of Culture if it will authorise this; it's not my responsibility nor the responsibility of the town of Bayeux to answer such a question because the tapestry belongs to the French state. It is exhibited in Bayeux but it does not belong to Bayeux town." **IT**

the best one to discover the masterpiece, but it is a question of safety. It has the shape of a U so people can go very fast from one point of the gallery to another if there is a fire."

If the tapestry display was modified, this might allow for new scientific research. Before the tapestry was moved to its current display in 1982–3, some scientific study of the threads on the reverse of the tapestry was carried out, and Carola Hicks would like to see more of this: "The back needs intensive scrutiny – you could analyse the dyes, threads and the linen. So much can be done now by non-invasive proceedings. I think the world needs a major research publication about the tapestry – I'd rather have that than it coming to England and just touring around."

Gale Owen-Crocker agrees: "What we need is scientific testing here. Surely

with the progress that has been made in science, somebody could test the dyes and threads and see where the plants were grown. The base fabric is linen – that's a vegetable plant – they could test the composition of the linen. And you wouldn't have to disturb it to do that because a number of loose threads were removed from the back when it was last examined in 1982–83, which are still in store in France. You could also use Carbon-14 to date it."



## JOURNEYS

### BOOKS

**The Bayeux Tapestry** by Carola Hicks (*Vintage*, 2007); **King Harold II and the Bayeux Tapestry** ed by Gale Owen-Crocker (*Boydell*, 2005); **Was the Bayeux Tapestry Made in France?** by George Beech (*Palgrave Macmillan*, 2005); **The Bayeux Tapestry** by Lucien Musset (*Boydell*, 2005)

### PLACES TO VISIT

The tapestry is displayed in the town of **Bayeux** in Normandy [www.tapestry-bayeux.com](http://www.tapestry-bayeux.com)  
The replica of the tapestry is at **Reading Museum** [www.bayeuxtapestry.org.uk](http://www.bayeuxtapestry.org.uk)

### CONFERENCE

The conference to be held at the **British Museum on 15–16 July** will bring together many world experts on the tapestry. Cost: £10 a day or £15 for both days. To book a place, please send a cheque payable to the British Museum, together with your contact details, to Dr Michael Lewis, Department of Portable Antiquities and Treasure, British Museum, London WC1B 3DG. For further details, please email [mlewis@thebritishmuseum.ac.uk](mailto:mlewis@thebritishmuseum.ac.uk) or telephone +44 (0)20 7323 8611

## What do you think?

Should the Bayeux Tapestry be displayed in England? Have your say on our forum. **► [www.bbcistoryforum.com](http://www.bbcistoryforum.com)**

