

Part 1 - Introduction to the Bayeux Tapestry

The Viking Age (c. 793–1066 CE) in England started with the sacking of Lindisfarne - the first recorded Viking raid. It is said to have finished with King Harold's victory on 25 September 1066 at Stamford Bridge over the Norwegian King, Harold Hardrada, and Harold's brother, Tostig Godwinson.



On 8 June 793 Lindisfarne suffered a devastating raid by Viking pirates – their first significant attack in western Europe. The raid caused horror across the continent.

The raid was physically and psychologically devastating: one of England's holiest shrines had been attacked by pagans. (English Heritage)

The United Kingdom of England

Alfred defeated the armies of the Viking monarch of East Anglia, Guthrum, at the Battle of Edington (878). A treaty was then agreed that set out the lasting peace terms between the two kings that included the boundaries of each of their kingdoms.

The areas to the north and east became known as the Danelaw because it was under Viking political influence, whilst those areas to the south and west remained under Anglo-Saxon dominance.

In 927, these areas were united as the Kingdom of England by King Æthelstan, Alfred's grandson.



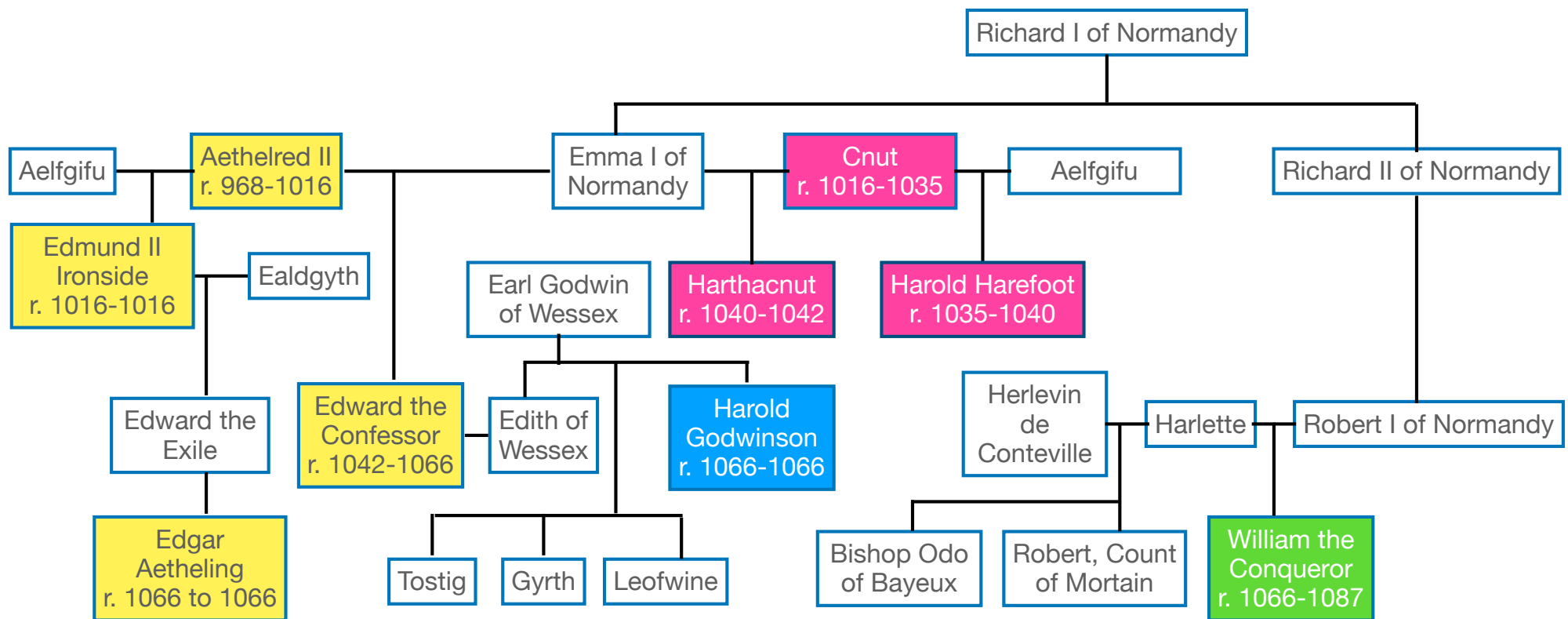
Danish rule (1016-1042)

In 1013, Swein Forkbeard launched a full-scale invasion of England. He received the submission of the north and the midlands, and although an attack on London was unsuccessful, the town submitted when the south-west surrendered. Swein was recognised as king and Æthelred fled to Normandy after Christmas. Swein died in early 1014 and Æthelred returned, driving out Swein's son Cnut.

But, in 1015, Cnut returned with a fleet of 200 ships, launching a war that would last for over a year. Æthelred died in April 1016 and was succeeded by his son Edmund Ironside, who fought a vigorous campaign until defeated by Cnut at the Battle of Assandun on 18 October 1016.

Cnut and Edmund then agreed to divide England between them, Cnut taking the north and Edmund the south. Cnut became king of England upon Edmund's death on 30 November, and ruled over a North Sea Empire of Denmark, England and Norway.

Following Cnut's death in 1035, England was ruled successively by two of his sons until Harthacnut's death in 1042. (Wikipedia) They were followed by Edward the Confessor.



 House of Wessex
 House of Godwin
 House of Denmark
 House of Normandy

Abbreviated family tree of the leading figures in the Bayeux Tapestry

After the death of Edward the Confessor, the competitors for the crown of England were Edgar Aetheling (who was appointed King by the Witan after the death of Harold), Earl Harold Godwinson and Duke William of Normandy. The fourth competitor was Harold Hardrada, King of Norway - his claim was based on an alleged agreement originating from a pact between his predecessor, Magnus 1 of Norway, and the former Anglo-Danish King Harthacnut.

What is the Tapestry - a Medieval Saga or a Morality Tale?

George Wingfield Digby was Keeper of Textiles at the Victoria and Albert Museum from 1947 to 1972. In 1957 he wrote:

"It (The Bayeux Tapestry) was designed to tell a story to a largely illiterate public; it is like a strip cartoon, racy, emphatic, colourful, with a good deal of blood and thunder and some ribaldry. But it is also very exact in detail, full of contemporary life, and it shows an artist's imagination which seizes on essentials and has the power of transmitting them over the centuries."

According to Sylvette Lemagnen, conservator of the tapestry, in her 2005 book *La Tapisserie de Bayeux*:

"The Bayeux tapestry is one of the supreme achievements of the Norman Romanesque Its survival almost intact over nine centuries is little short of miraculous ... Its exceptional length, the harmony and freshness of its colours, its exquisite workmanship, and the genius of its guiding spirit combine to make it endlessly fascinating."

Alternative interpretations of the Tapestry

1. *"A grand medieval saga with William the Conqueror at its centre,"* or *"The central character is not William but Harold"* and the story is of *"his punishment for sin by God"*.
2. *"The Bayeux Tapestry tells the story of the events surrounding the conquest of England in 1066 by the Duke of Normandy. All the details of a great medieval epic unfold before your eyes",* or *"Much of the imagery is the product of the art historical tradition of the period, and little of what is portrayed should be taken literally"*.
3. The American historian Stephen D. White, in a study of the tapestry, (Paston & White 2014) has *"cautioned against reading it as an English or Norman story, showing how the animal fables visible in the borders may instead offer a commentary on the dangers of conflict and the futility of pursuing power"*
4. The Invasion landing was at PEVENESAE translated as Pevensey, or in the Brede Valley, or a "distributed landing" including Bulverhythe.
5. The Site of the Battle was not mentioned in the Tapestry, but from other sources, the site was identified as Senlac Hill or Ridge in the grounds of present-day Battle Abbey. One alternative view is that the Battle was fought near Sedlescombe in the Brede Valley.

Why was the Tapestry constructed?

The Bayeux Tapestry unfolds the tale of the 1066 conquest of England by the Duke of Normandy. Depicting Viking ships at sea, arduous journeys, shields and chain mails, mythical beasts, and battle scenes, it captures the essence of a grand medieval saga with William the Conqueror at its centre. (Bayeux Museum).

Alternatively, recent studies have concluded that this traditional interpretation of images in the Tapestry, taking them at their face value, may not be correct. Instead *“much of the imagery is the product of the art historical tradition of the period, and that little of what is portrayed should be taken literally”*.

Many examples of iconography have been identified in manuscripts that were in the library of St Augustine’s Abbey in Canterbury at the time the Tapestry was made. An example from the Parker Library, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge MS. 286, fol. 125r. is (left) the Last Supper in the Augustine Gospels

Compare this with the Bishop in section 43 of the Tapestry, (on the right) “And here the bishop blesses the food and drink”.



This approach reflects the approach of scholars such as Stenton who argued for a more theological view. It is described clearly by Mark Damen.

“The Tapestry does indeed read like a Medieval mystery play. The heroes and their deeds are larger than life. Their passions and crimes are Biblical in scale. The story seems intentionally framed so that it focuses on the fulfilment of fate and the execution of God’s wrath against Harold who swore an oath on holy relics and then recanted.

The central character of the Tapestry is not William but Harold—Harold is depicted at least 23 times, William closer to 15 and only twice in his triumph at Hastings—and the theme is the downfall of a noble but misguided hero (Harold) who, much like Macbeth, falls through ambition.

The Tapestry is notably generous to Harold, as one might expect if it was made by English hands. He is shown as possessing great dignity and prowess but also a tragic greed for power.

In conclusion, the Bayeux Tapestry does not tell the story of the Conquest of England so much as the punishment of sin by God. As such, it is a tale appropriate for a church where, in fact, we know it was once housed.” - <https://www.usu.edu/markdamen/bayeuxtapestry/text.pdf>

What is the Tapestry made of?

The Tapestry

It should more correctly be called an embroidery as the designs on the Bayeux Tapestry are embroidered rather than in a tapestry weave.

The Bayeux Tapestry is 68.3 metre long and about 50 cm wide. Nine linen panels, between fourteen and three metres in length, were sewn together after each was embroidered and the joins were disguised with subsequent embroidery.

Norton (2019) has attempted to estimate the size and architectural design of the 11th-century Bayeux Cathedral. *“His new evidence shows, not merely that the tapestry was intended for Bayeux Cathedral, but that it was designed to hang in a specific position in the nave - along the south, west, and north arcades of the nave and that the scenes it depicts can be correlated with positions of the arcade bays in a way that would have been dramatically satisfying.”*

He agrees with earlier speculation that a final panel is missing—one that shows William's coronation and which he thinks was some three metres long.

The Material

The assumption has been that the Tapestry is made of flax linen, although apparently no known tests have been carried out to determine if this is correct.



The picture is of flax grown at the Wealden and Downland Living Museum. The complete stems are harvested in stooks to dry out.

Linen made from hemp (*Cannabis sativa*) is stronger - the plants are taller and the fibres longer. Hemp was often used in ships' sails and ropes.

The website "How To Differentiate Linen and Hemp?" states: *“But when it comes to the fabric, it is almost impossible to distinguish hemp from (flax) linen as they look identical.”*

The organic dyes

The Bayeux Tapestry features ten original colours, obtained from four organic dyes – namely madder, weld for yellow, and indigotin, plus and unidentified material yielding brown hues. Michael Lewis and Richard Gameson (2024)



All the yarn in the picture was dyed with just three ancient plant dyes - madder and weld plus woad, in place of indigotin. (Sally Pointer at Heritage Education on Facebook (8th June 2025)).

Where was the Tapestry designed and created?



The Tapestry was probably commissioned by William's half-brother, Bishop Odo of Bayeux (left). The reasons for the Odo commission theory include:

- three of the bishop's followers mentioned in the Domesday Book appear on the tapestry;
- it was found in Bayeux Cathedral, built by Odo;
- it may have been commissioned at the same time as the cathedral's construction in the 1070s, possibly completed by 1077 in time for display on the cathedral's dedication.

Alternatively it was commissioned by Count Eustace II of Boulogne as a gift to Odo

In 1957, the art historian Francis Wormald identified the designer of the tapestry as having drawn inspiration from illuminated manuscripts produced at, or in the hands of, the religious houses in Canterbury in the 11th century. The majority of these were in the ownership of St Augustine's Abbey. (English Heritage).

Scholars have stressed the role played by the first post-Conquest abbot at St Augustine's Abbey, Canterbury, Scolland(us) (1070–87). He was a former monk-scribe of Mont Saint-Michel, one of Normandy's foremost centres of book production and illumination.

Scolland instigated works that saw the abbey's three separate Anglo-Saxon churches replaced by a grand new abbey church. Over 100 metres long, it was almost two-thirds the size of Canterbury Cathedral. The Suppression of the Monasteries under Henry VIII saw much of the once great abbey destroyed (upper right).

St Augustine's Abbey has been 'rebuilt' in virtual reality as part of a collaboration between English Heritage and the University of Kent (see below right).



Map of Harold's 1064 journeys to France and William's 1066 Invasion

This is a map of South-East England together with Normandy and the adjacent dukedoms of Ponthieu to the north-east and Brittany to the south-west. It shows places mentioned in the latin inscriptions on the Tapestry. (From Stenton et al 1957).

The following three sheets show the Tapestry inscriptions (tituli) with their English translations as per Wikipedia. The Scene numbers are inked onto the top of the Tapestry.

Scenes 1 to 23

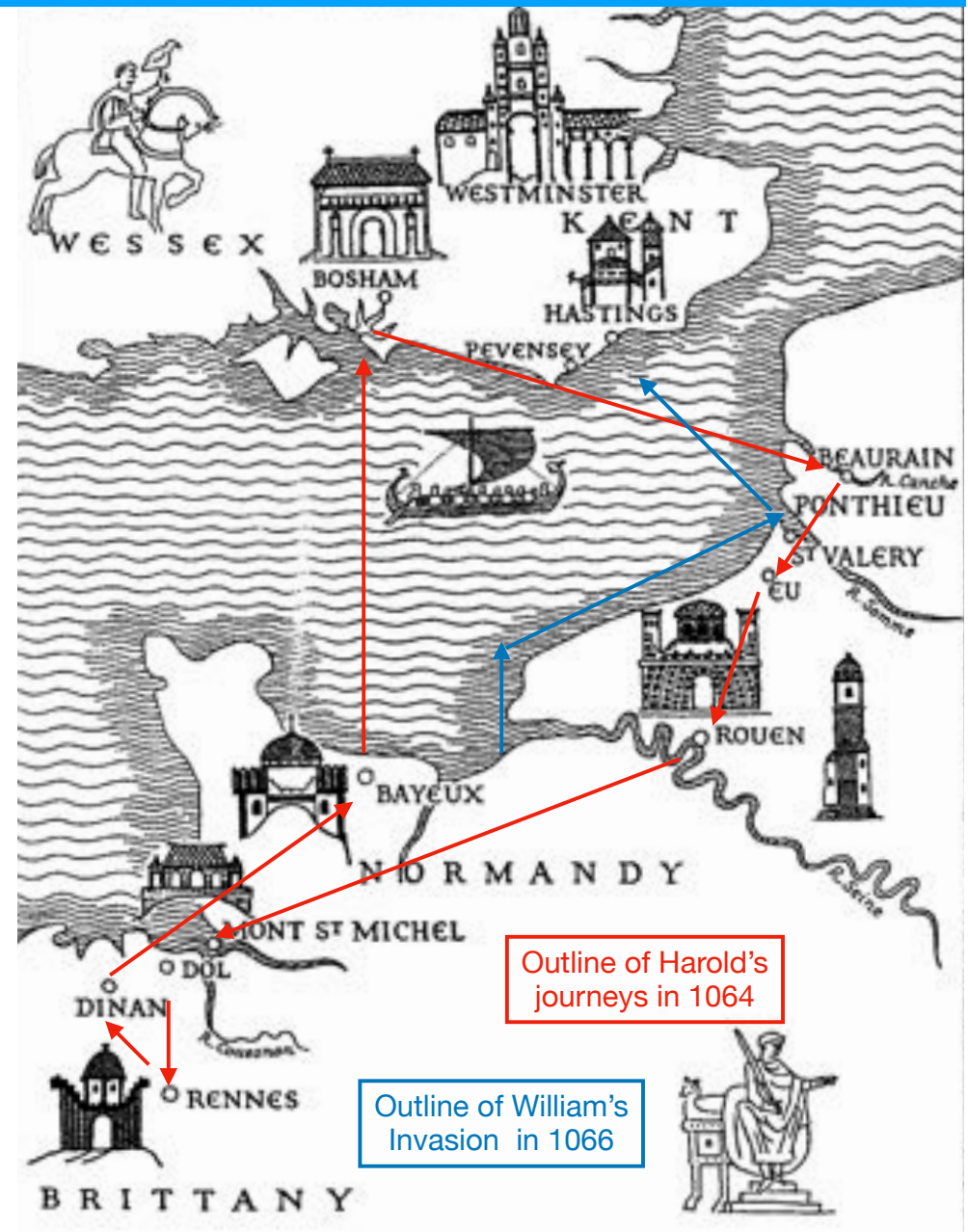
1. Harold's journey to Ponthieu
2. Harold in France
3. The Breton Campaign
4. Harold's Oath of Fealty

Scenes 24 to 40

5. Westminster
6. William prepares for War and Invades

Scenes 41 to 58

7. The Beachhead at PEVENESÆ
8. Preparations for Battle at HESTENGA
9. The Battle



Harold's journey to Ponthieu

Scene	Text	Translation
1 *	EDWARD[US] REX	King Edward
2-3	UBI HAROLD DUX ANGLORUM ET SUI MILITES EQUITANT AD BOSHAM ECCLESIA[M]	Where Harold, a leader of the English, and his knights ride to Bosham Church
4 *	HIC HAROLD MARE NAVIGAVIT	Here Harold sailed by sea
5	ET VELIS VENTO PLENIS VENIT IN TERRA WIDONIS COMITIS	and with sails filled with wind came to the land of Count Wido
6 - 7	HAROLD. HIC APPREHENDIT WIDO HAROLDU[M]	Harold. Here Wido seized Harold

Arrest by Count Wido and rescue by William

Scene	Text	Translation
8	ET DUXIT EUM AD BELREM ET IBI EUM TENUIT	and led him to Beurain and held him there
9	UBI HAROLD ⁊ WIDO PARABOLANT	Where Harold and Wido confer
10	UBI NUNTII WILLELMI DUCIS VENERUNT AD WIDONE[M]	Where the messengers of Duke William came to Wido
	TUOLD	Tuold

Scene	Text	Translation
11	NUNTII WILLELMI	The messengers of William
12 *	† HIC VENIT NUNTIUS AD WILGELMUM DUCEM	†Here the messenger comes to Duke William
13	HIC WIDO ADDUXIT HAROLDUM AD WILGELMUM NORMANNORUM DUCEM	Here Wido led Harold to William Duke of the Normans. (They met at Eu, at the northern border of Normandy with Ponthieu.)
14	HIC DUX WILGELM[US] CUM HAROLDO VENIT AD PALATIUM SUUM	Here Duke William comes with Harold to his palace (at Rouen).
15	UBI UNUS CLERICUS ET ÆLFGYVA	Where a cleric and Ælfgyva ...

The Breton Campaign

Scene	Text	Translation
16 *	HIC WILLEM[US] DUX ET EXERCITUS EIUS VENERUNT AD MONTE[M] MICHAELIS	Here Duke William and his army came to the Mount of Michael
17	ET HIC TRANSIERUNT FLUMEN COSNONIS	and here they crossed the river Couesnon
	HIC HAROLD DUX TRAHEBAT EOS DE ARENA	Here Earl Harold dragged them from the sand
18	ET VENERUNT AD DOL ET CONAN FUGA VERTIT	and they came to Dol and Conan (Duke of Brittany) turned in flight
19	HIC MILITES WILLELMI DUCIS PUGNANT CONTRA DINANTES	Here the knights of Duke William fight against the men of Dinan
20	ET CONAN CLAVES PORREXIT	and Conan passed out the keys

Harold's Oath of Fealty

Scene	Text	Translation
21 *	HIC WILLELM[US] DEDIT ARMA HAROLDO	Here William gave arms to Harold
22	HIE WILLELM[US] VENIT BAGIAS	Here William came to Bayeux
23 *	UBI HAROLD SACRAMENTUM FECIT WILLELMO DUCI	Where Harold made an oath to Duke William (on two reliquary shrines)

Westminster

Scene	Text	Translation
24	HIC HAROLD DUX REVERSUS EST AD ANGLICAM TERRAM	Here earl Harold returned to English land
25	ET VENIT AD EDWARDU[M] REGEM	and he came to King Edward
26 *	HIC PORTATUR CORPUS EADWARDI REGIS AD ECCLESIAM S[AN]C[T]I PETRI AP[OSTO]LI	Here the body of King Edward is carried to the Church of Saint Peter the Apostle (Westminster Abbey)
27/28 *	HIC EADWARDUS REX IN LECTO ALLOQUIT[UR] FIDELES ET HIC DEFUNCTUS EST	Here King Edward in bed speaks to his faithful followers and here he died
29	HIC DEDERUNT HAROLDO CORONA[M] REGIS	Here they gave the king's crown to Harold

Scene	Text	Translation
30/31 *	HIC RESIDET HAROLD REX ANGLORUM STIGANT ARCHIEP[ISCOPU]S	Here sits Harold King of the English - Archbishop Stigand
32 *	ISTI MIRANT[UR] STELLA[M]	These people marvel at the star (Halley's Comet - "portending a change in government")

William prepares for War and Invades

Scene	Text	Translation
33	HAROLD	Harold
34	HIC NAVIS ANGLICA VENIT IN TERRAM WILLELMI DUCIS	Here an English ship came to the land of Duke William
35	HIC WILLELM[US] DUX JUSSIT NAVES [A]EDIFICARE	Here Duke William ordered ships to be built
36	HIC TRAHUNT NAVES AD MARE	Here they drag the ships to the sea
37	ISTI PORTANT ARMAS AD NAVES ET HIC TRAHUNT CARRUM CUM VINO ET ARMIS	These men carry arms to the ships and here they drag a cart (laden) with wine and arms
38 *	† HIC WILLELM[US] DUX IN MAGNO NAVIGIO MARE TRANSIVIT ET VENIT AD PEVENESÆ	† Here Duke William in a great ship crossed the sea and came to Pevensey (translation of PEVENESAE).
39	HIC EXEUNT CABALLI DE NAVIBUS	Here the horses leave the ships
40 *	ET HIC MILITES FESTINAVERUNT HESTINGA UT CIBUM RAPERENTUR	and here the knights have hurried to HESTINGA to seize food

The Beachhead at PEVENESÆ

Scene	Text	Translation
41	HIC EST WADARD	Here is Wadard
42	HIC COQUITUR CARO ET HIC MINISTRAVERUNT MINISTRI	Here the meat is being cooked and here the servants have served (it)
43	HIC FECERUN[T] PRANDIUM	Here they have a meal
	ET HIC EPISCOPUS CIBU[M] ET POTU[M] BENEDICIT	And here the bishop blesses the food and drink
44 *	ODO EP[ISCOPU]S WILLEM[US] ROTBERT	Bishop Odo, William, Robert

Preparations for Battle at HESTENGA

Scene	Text	Translation
45 *	ISTE JUSSIT UT FODERETUR CASTELLUM AT HESTENGA	He ordered that a motte should be dug at HESTENGA
	CEASTRA	the camp
46	HIC NUNTIATUM EST WILLELM[O] DE HAROLD[O]	Here William was told about Harold
47	HIC DOMUS INCENDITUR	Here a house is burned
48 *	HIC MILITES EXIERUNT DE HESTENGA ET VENERUNT AD PR[O]ELIUM CONTRA HAROLDUM REGE[M]	Here the knights have left HESTENGA and have come to the battle against King Harold
49	HIC WILLELM[US] DUX INTERROGAT VITAL[EM] SI VIDISSET HAROLDI EXERCITU[M]	Here Duke William asks Vital (possibly a vassal of Bishop Odo) if he has seen Harold's army

Scene	Text	Translation
50	ISTE NUNTIAT HAROLDUM REGE[M] DE EXERCITU WILLELM[US] DUCIS	This messenger tells King Harold about Duke William's army
51	HIC WILLELM[US] DUX ALLOQUITUR SUIS MILITIBUS UT PREPARAREN[T] SE VIRILITER ET SAPIENTER AD PR[O]ELIUM CONTRA ANGLO[RU]M EXERCITU[M]	Here Duke William speaks to his knights to prepare themselves manfully and wisely for the battle against the army of the English

The Battle

Scene	Text	Translation
52 x 2	HIC CECIDERUNT LEWINE ET GYRD FRATRES HAROLDI REGIS	Here fell Leofwine and Gyrth, brothers of King Harold
53	HIC CECIDERUNT SIMUL ANGLI ET FRANCI IN PR[O]ELIO	Here English and French fell at the same time in battle
54	HIC ODO EP[ISCOPU]S BACULU[M] TENENS CONFORTAT PUEROS	Here Bishop Odo, holding a club, gives strength to the boys
55	HIC EST WILLELM[US] DUX	Here is Duke William
56	E[USTA]TIUS	Eustace
	HIC FRANCI PUGNANT ET CECIDERUNT QUI ERANT CUM HAROLD	Here the French do battle and those who were with Harold fell
57 *	HIC HAROLD REX INTERFECTUS EST	Here King Harold was slain
58	ET FUGA VERTERUNT ANGLI	and the English have turned in flight

What is the Bayeux Tapestry Project?

Sometime after 1860, the Tapestry underwent a major restoration. Areas of missing embroidery were re-stitched with wool threads dyed with chemicals, brighter than the original threads. During this period, a new lining was attached after an early backing was lost during restoration work. According to Pierre Bouet and François Neveux, authors of “The Bayeux Tapestry,” the cloth was mended in 120 places; 518 fragments were added to patch it up.

For much of the 20th century, the Tapestry was housed in the town’s Hotel du Doyen (see upper right), but in 1980 work started on a purpose-built exhibition space within the fabric of the late 17th-century Grand Seminary building. The Tapestry was placed in its new home in 1983. Installed in a case at eye level behind bulletproof glass, the textile stretched out in a long straight line until the episode when William decides to construct a fleet; there it curved along a rounded corner and circled back down the other side of the hall. To preserve the linen fibres and wool threads, it was kept in a darkened space at a temperature of 18–20 degrees Celsius, with a humidity level of approximately 50 percent.

In work carried out during 2020, the restoration team noted 24,204 stains, 16,445 wrinkles, 9,646 gaps in the cloth or the embroidery, 30 non-stabilised tears, and more significant weakening in the first few metres of the work.

The Bayeux Tapestry Project (2025 to 2027) is intended both to enhance the way the public is introduced to the work and above all to improve its conservation and the way it is presented.

In January 2025, the operation began with the meticulous dusting (see centre right) of the linen canvas and the removal of its technical backing, a fleece affixed in 1983, which, although protecting the work on its back, stiffened and weighed it down.

The Bayeux Museum closed for a two-year renovation on 1 September 2025. On 17 September 2025, the Tapestry was extracted from its display case (see lower right), when it was packaged in a conservation crate followed by transport to temporary reserves prior to extensive conservation work.



The new Bayeux Tapestry Museum Extension

It was announced in 2023 that RSHP, previously known as the Richard Rogers Partnership, had won the architectural design competition for the rehousing of the Musée de la Tapisserie de Bayeux. The proposal involved construction of a new, adjoining building (see above right).

This will allow the Tapestry to be seen in one long sweep on an inclined table (see lower left for artist's impression).

France has loaned the Tapestry from September 2026 to July 2027 for display at the British Museum, where it appears to be on display in a horizontal position.

RSHP also designed the new World Conservation and Exhibitions Centre (WCEC) at the British Museum (centre right). It opened in 2014. In addition to housing the Sainsbury Exhibitions Gallery, the Centre provides state-of-the-art laboratories and studios for conservation and scientific research and world-class collection stores. The Gallery is 70 metres long and is where the Tapestry is being displayed during its London exhibition in 2026/27.

