

Interpreting the Bayeux Tapestry

- Commentary on selected scenes

Scene 1 (on the left) - King Edward.

Scene 4 (on the right) - Here Harold sailed by sea

The event in Scene 1 takes place in a grand building, probably a Royal Palace. *"This building almost certainly represented either Westminster or Winchester."*

"The Tapestry palaces are not depicted in a consistent manner. For example, the royal palace at Westminster appears on at least two occasions, but the representations are quite different in each case. Likewise, the three representations of William's Palace at Rouen seem to have little in common with each other." (Rowley 2016)



Earl Godwin of Wessex, the father of King Harold II lived in Bosham. He had supported the Kings of the House of Denmark and his wife was Gytha Thorkelsdóttir, a Danish noblewoman. His son, Harold, thereafter became the 2nd Earl Godwin, Earl of Wessex and Lord of the Manor of Bosham. Bosham was one of Harold's favourite residences and his chief seat, where he had a grand hall, a private fleet and a harbour.

Dr Duncan Wright, Newcastle University, said in 2025: *"The realisation that the 2006 excavations had found, in effect, an Anglo-Saxon en-suite confirmed to us that this house sits on the site of an elite residence pre-dating the Norman Conquest. It is beyond all reasonable doubt that we have here the location of Harold Godwinson's private power centre, the one famously depicted on the Bayeux Tapestry".*

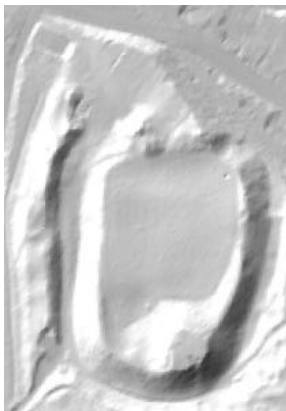
Harold set sail (**Scene 4**) and landed in Ponthieu north of Normandy, where he was captured by Count Wido, (Guy I of Ponthieu). Did he mean to land here or was he off course because of wind or tide? Was he trying to release his youngest brother and nephew held hostage by William? Did King Edward command him (**in Scene 1**) to confirm William's right to the English throne and to swear an oath of allegiance? The answers are disputed.



Scene 12 - Here the messenger comes to King William

In Scene 12, William is seen outside Rouen Tower. This served as a ducal residence, a military and administrative centre and a ducal prison.

The ancient Gallo-Roman city of Rouen was founded by the Romans on the right bank of the river. Rouen was then the second most important city in Gaul. It then became the capital of the Duchy of Normandy in 912, ruled by the Viking chieftain Rollo.



Harold is taken to Guy's Castle at Belrem (present-day Beaurainville). This is about 160 km from Rouen. The area is now tree covered but LIDAR (GOOGLE Earth) clearly shows the site with a large earthen motte in the lower right corner.

Duke Robert Of Normandy died July 1035 (aged 35) with his Crusaders at Nicaea, leaving William, only seven years old as his successor.

Benedictine monasteries began to flourish all over Normandy. Religion was responsible, at the same time, for at least one benefit to the land in the famous institution of the "Truce of God," which was fully confirmed later on and proclaimed that from Wednesday evening until Monday morning in every week the poor and weak were to be free from the oppressions of their overlords and from the tyranny of private war. Theodore Cook (1917)

While the Truce of God was a temporary suspension of hostilities, as distinct from the Peace of God which was permanent, the jurisdiction of the Truce of God was broader. And a still more valuable result of the prevalent religious enthusiasm was the gradual drawing together of Normandy and the Papal See which had its greatest outcome in the "Crusade" against England. (Wikipedia.)

At last in 1054 the King (of France) roused all the cities of Central Gaul, Burgundian, Gascon, Breton and Auvergnat in one combined onset, and gathered them at Mantes, the natural frontier between Normandy and France. Duke William's strategy and daring were equal to his task. He divided the invaders into two, annihilated one division at Mortemer with very little loss, and watched the other with grim merriment as it vanished from his Duchy, afraid to strike a blow. Four years later France and Anjou came on for another attempt. Again the Duke was ready. He caught their hosts where the river Dive cut the army in twain, and fell suddenly with all his knights and clubmen and a thundershower of arrows on the division that held the lower bank. King Henry had to watch in idleness above, while his rear-guard was being helplessly cut to pieces. Theodore Cook (1917)

Scene 16 - Here Duke William and his army come to the Mount of St Michael

The figure in the top right of Scene 16 (below) is thought to be Abbot Scolland, who later became Abbot of St Augustine's, Canterbury. Whilst at Mont-St.-Michael he was a scribe and Treasurer. He is thought to have been involved in construction of the Tapestry at Canterbury.

William de Volpiano, the Italian architect who had built the Abbey of Fécamp in Normandy, was chosen by Richard II of Normandy to build the church of the abbey on Mount Michael in 1060. His Romanesque design placed the transept crossing at the top of the mount. Many underground crypts and chapels had to be built to compensate for this weight, forming the basis for the supportive upward structure that can be seen today

The Abbey is shown in the Tapestry on the top of the Mount supported at each end by pillars built lower into the hill.

The River Couesnon (Scene 17) is the boundary between Normandy and Brittany. Its estuary was notorious for its quicksand and Mont-St-Michael is where the River joins the sea. The tides vary greatly, at roughly 14 metres (46 ft) between highest and lowest water marks.



Scene 21 - Here William gave arms to Harold

Scene 23 - Where Harold made an oath to Duke William

Scenes 21 and 23 involve for Harold, an acceptance of military service by receiving arms, and an oath of allegiance to William sworn upon two sets of holy relics.

When Harold was declared King of England after the death of Edward, William felt that Harold had violated his oath by perjury; this is the offence of wilfully telling an untruth or making a misrepresentation under oath.

Whilst the Danes (Cnut and his descendants) were on the throne, Edward spent many years in exile before becoming King of England; he found sanctuary with the Dukes of Normandy.

Documents show that Edward was in the coastal town of Fécamp, where the Dukes maintained a palace and lavishly supported the Abbey.

Queen Emma, mother of Edward the Confessor, was a great acquirer of relics, most of which she gave away. To the Christian faithful of the early medieval period, relics were far more than just mementos of the dead; or talismans offering protection and healing; or reminders of the afterlife of the soul. They were tangible links to the Divine, and they bestowed honour and privileges on the possessor.

They were enshrined in churches all over Christendom, becoming focal points for pilgrimage. They were carried at the heads of armies as they went into battle—emblems of divine support.



Scene 26 - Here the body of King Edward is carried to the Church of St Peter Apostle (Westminster Abbey)

Scene 27/28 - Here King Edward in bed speaks to his faithful followers and here he died.

Scene 26 shows King Edward's body being carried to Westminster Abbey after his death on 5th January 1066. The Abbey was only consecrated on 28th December 1065, and Edward had been too ill to attend.

Scenes 27/28 (on right) appear to be in the wrong order after 26. But it is unwise to say the Tapestry is in error - perhaps they are a flashback. Note Queen Edith at Edward's bedside together with Earl Harold (her brother). She is one of only three women to appear in the Tapestry - Queen Edith, an unknown woman fleeing from a burning building (Scene 47) and Aelfgyva, a woman who stands framed in a doorway while a tonsured cleric reaches out to touch her face (Scene 15).



Scene 30/31 Here sits Harold King of the English - Archbishop Stigand

Scene 32 - These people marvel at the star (Halley's Comet)

Scenes 30/31 show Harold on his Throne wearing the Crown during his Coronation, which has been officiated by Archbishop Stigand, who is presenting Harold to his people.

Norman sources and the Bayeux Tapestry explicitly depict Stigand standing beside Harold and officiating the January 6, 1066 coronation. **The Normans used this claim to argue the coronation was illegal, because Stigand's position as Archbishop of Canterbury was unrecognised by the Pope.** (See also commentary on Scene 38 in the next panel).

The chronicler John of Worcester states that Ealdred, Archbishop of York, actually crowned Harold.

Halley's comet is represented on the Bayeux Tapestry in Scene 32 and described in the title as a star. Surviving accounts from the period describe it as appearing in 1066 to be four times the size of Venus, and shining with a light equal to a quarter of that of the Moon.

The historian Flavius Josephus described the comet of 66 A.D. as a "star resembling a sword" and considered it a portent of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans.

Note that at the bottom of the Tapestry under the Comet are several ships at sea - **a portent of the Invasion of England?** Later that year Harold II of England died at the Battle of Hastings and William the Conqueror claimed the throne.



Scene 38 - Here Duke William in a great ship crossed the sea and came to PEVENESAE.

Was the Papal banner on the lead ship? Was Harold breaking his oath to William, the only reason for seeking Pope Alexander's support for the invasion? Additional reasons are:

1. When Cnut's stepson Edward the Confessor succeeded Harthacnut, Bishop Stigand in all probability became England's main administrator. Monastic writers of the time accused Stigand of extorting money and lands from the church, and by 1066 the only estates richer than Stigand's were the royal estates and those of Harold Godwinson.

Stigand was excommunicated by several popes for holding two bishoprics - Winchester and Canterbury - and so whilst he attended Harold's Coronation, the ceremony was performed by the Archbishop of York. The coronation of William was also performed by the Archbishop of York. *In 1070, Stigand was deposed by papal legates and imprisoned at Winchester. His intransigence toward the papacy was used as propaganda by Norman advocates who argued that the English church was backward and needed reform.* (Wikipedia).

2. Pope Alexander 11 was the first Pope elected by the Cardinals rather than the Holy Roman Empire. Honorius, described as an anti-Pope was backed by the Emperor.

In 1052 Earl Godwin (Harold's father) had taken back the manor of Rameslie from Fecamp Abbey - a gift from King Canute to Pope Benedict V in 1017.

In contrast, one of Duke William's trusted advisors was Abbot Lanfranc of St. Etienne in Caen, who had taught the young Alexander at Bec. Lanfranc was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury as soon as Stigand had been canonically deposed on 15 August 1070. He was speedily consecrated on 29 August 1070.

"In the eyes of Pope Alexander's supporters, it was no longer simply a battle for a crown (of England), but a struggle against those they regarded as followers of Satan," Licence(2026) - supporters of anti-Pope Honorius.

3. Pope Alexander was thus likely to support William's removal of Harold from the throne of England. This would help William raise the required resources if the invasion of England was seen as a Holy War.



Sites of Hastings, Pævenisel and Novus Portus



Part of "Ptolemy's Map" of Roman Britain



Roman roads in the early 2nd century -
Starkey at https://www.momentousbritain.co.uk/go/novus_portus

Durovernum Cantiacorum was a town and hillfort in Roman Britain at the site of present-day Canterbury in Kent. It occupied a strategic location on Watling Street at the best local crossing of the river Stour, which prompted a convergence of roads connected to the ports of Dubris (Dover), Rutupiae (Richborough), Regulbium (Reculver) and Portus Lemanis (Lympne) (see lower diagram).

The Regni were an ancient Celtic tribe living in southern Britain before and during the Roman conquest. **The site of Portus Novus at the eastern end of the area occupied by the Regni tribe has been disputed.**

The discovery of a substantial Roman road in and near Icklesham has been identified as the Rochester to Winchelsea road, via Maidstone and Bodiam (Margery's M13). Roman roads were built by the Roman army to move troops between garrisons. So where was the garrison based?

Roman settlement has been found at Icklesham together with cultivation in roman times near Wickham Manor Farm. Thus it is possible that there was a Roman garrison near the mouth of the Brede river. **Was the port, Portus Novus associated with this garrison?**

The Brede estuary had the largest number of saltpans on the south coast, not far short of the rest combined; they were probably of Roman origin. These saltpans were already well developed in 795 when "the salt pans of the Brede estuary were gifted to the Frankish Abbey of St Denys (Barker translation with the original placenames): "And by this deed of gift I also grant for the use of the monks there serving God, ports/harbours belonging to me, called **Hastinas and Pævenisel**, situated on the sea-coast in the same neighbourhood, with saltpans and all things pertaining thereto." (Starkey); **in other words Hastings and Pævenisel were at or near the mouth of the Brede estuary.**

Scene 40 - and here the knights have hurried to HESTINGA to seize food



How big was the invasion force? Where would they find food and water for the horses and people?

Simon M in the website saxonhistory.com has assumed that William's Force of fighting men was about 6000 men (the same figure is from Tyson and Wace) including cavalry and archers.

This might have been made up of Fighting men (6,000) - Infantry (4,000), Archers (500), Cavalry (1500). In addition there would have been 3000 horses.

From that he has estimated the required number of non-combatants at 7,000 - Direct Logistics & Support (1,700), Skilled Trades & Maintenance (900), Cavalry Support Personnel (2,100), Sustenance & Domestic Roles (1,300), Medical, Religious, & "Morale" (300), Family Members (700).

The total number of people is 13,000 - this is about 70% of Nick Barratt's (2012) estimate of the size of London's population in the 1070s at 18,000.

The Landing was on September 28th so the storehouses after the harvest would have been substantially replenished.

Water would need to be obtained from local springs. However only 4 springs have been found on the OS map around Pevensey Bay - on the north side.

By contrast, the Brede Valley southern side has 7 springs marked on the OS map between Winchelsea and Doleham Ditch (this excludes 6 around Winchelsea which are associated with wells) and on the north side of the Brede Valley there are 8 springs between Brede and Udimore.

Isn't the Brede Valley a more attractive proposition?

Scene 44 - Bishop Odo, William, Robert

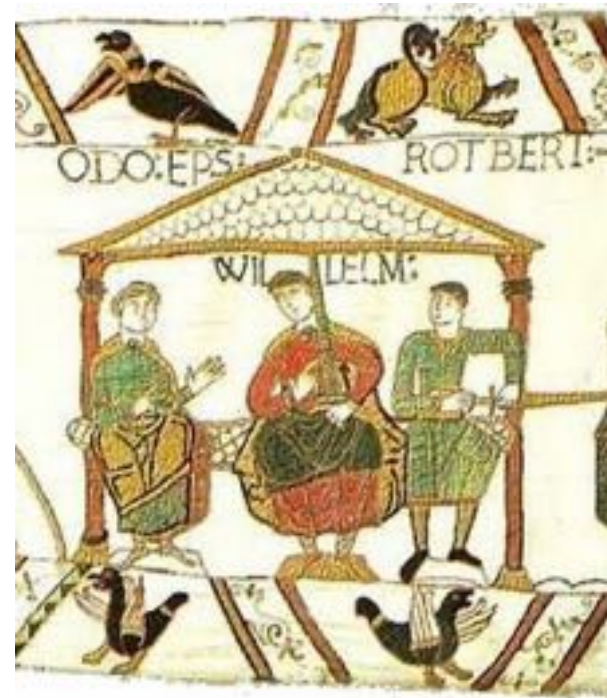
After the death of the English King, Edward the Confessor, Harold Godwinson was crowned king on **6th January 1066**. News of Harold's coronation travelled across the channel to William, Duke of Normandy.

The Council of Lillebonne was a meeting of the nobles and clergy of Normandy where, among other things, the expedition of William the Conqueror, then Duke of Normandy, was approved. It was held at Lillebonne, in the northeast of Normandy.

In early 1066, Robert, Count of Mortain, was present at both the first [Council of Lillebonne](#), that of William's inner circle, and the second larger council held to discuss the Duke's planned conquest of England. Robert agreed to provide 120 ships to the invasion fleet, which was more than any other of William's magnates.

Robert was one of those few known to have been at the Battle of Hastings in 1066.

Robert's contribution to the success of the invasion was clearly regarded as highly significant by the Conqueror, who awarded him a large share of the spoils; in total 797 manors at the time of Domesday. This included the Rape of Pevensey.



Scene 44 - at the beachhead one half-brother, William, and two brothers (Robert, Count of Mortain, a Norman nobleman and younger brother of Odo) (see family tree in Part 1, Sheet 2).

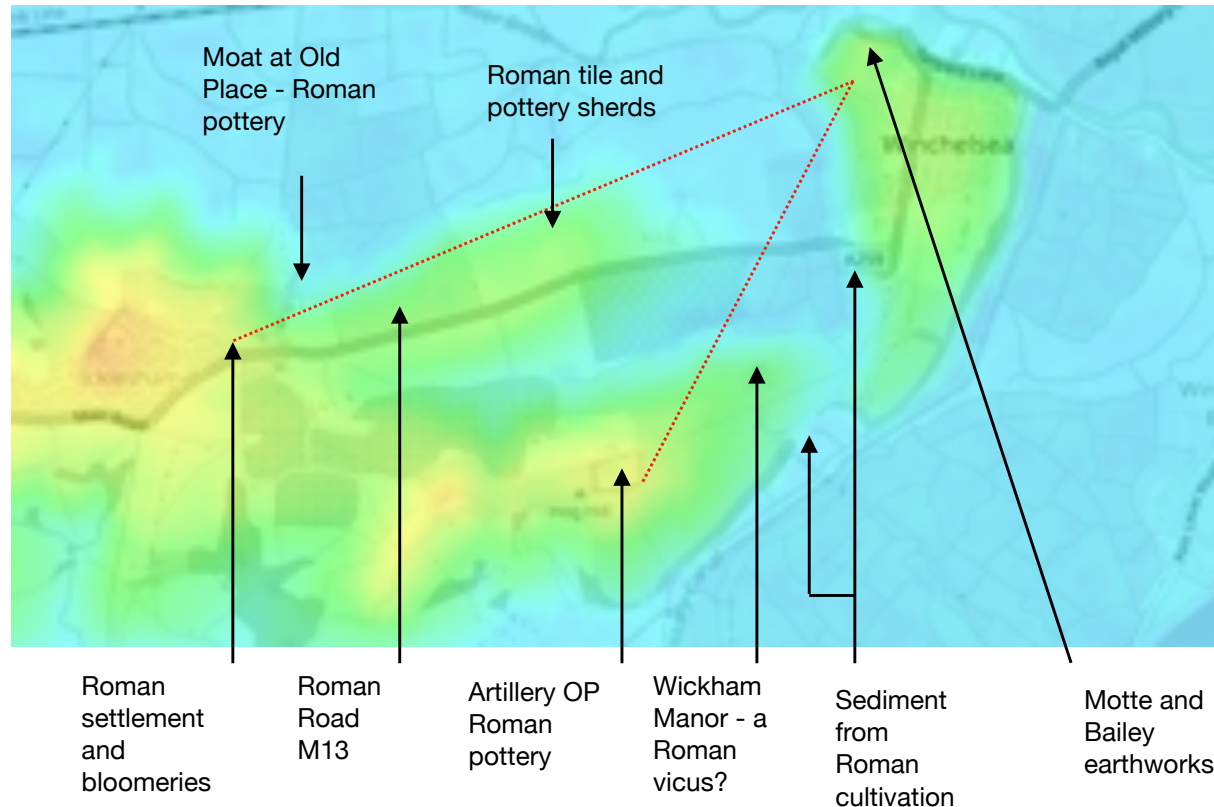
Their mother was Harlette, mistress of Robert I of Normandy when she gave birth to William. He was the great-great grandson of Rollo, the Viking, who founded Normandy.

Later she married Herlevin de Conteville and was mother to Odo and Robert

Odo (on the left) seems to be leading the discussion, William in the centre, is listening and Robert, the man-of-action is drawing his sword.

After William became King of England, In 1067, Odo became Earl of Kent, and for some years was a trusted royal minister. On some occasions when William was absent (back in Normandy), he served as regent of England.

Scene 45 - He ordered that a motte should be dug at HESTENGA. The camp.



"The Motte is being constructed immediately next to a Tower. It has been suggested that this represents a pre-Conquest church belonging to a Saxon community" (Rowley p97).

Could this be the Saxon Church of St Leonard's, Iham and could the motte be the one in Castle Field? This might explain why Edward 1 did not acquire Castle Field and Beacon mound for New Winchelsea. He ensured that Iham retained evidence of its history.

Where was the ceastra or camp?

In Scene 45, use of the place-name suffix 'ceastra' is invariably associated with Romano-British sites and there is no evidence of any significant Roman or Saxon occupation at Hastings. (Rowley p160). Yet the area between Winchelsea and Icklesham is yielding more and more evidence of a Roman connection.

The sites on the map above are at the end of the Roman Road from Rochester, so one might expect a garrison and port to have been present. These sites would have provided a suitable camp and access for Duke William's forces.

The dotted red lines show lines-of-sight from Castle Field, which contains motte and bailey earthworks - a good candidate site for Duke William's HQ, with a lookout at the Artillery OP and a main camp on each side of the Roman Road from Icklesham.

A different approach is to consider the Roman pharos at Dover, next to the Saxon Church of St Mary in Castro. A pharos or light tower was built by the Romans at Boulogne. Was there a similar light tower at Tower Knoll, offshore of Winchelsea Beach on a sandbank running about 1.6 km offshore almost parallel to Pett Level?



Scene 48 - Here the knights have left HESTENGA and have come to the battle against King Harold



The site of the Battle is not mentioned in the Tapestry. Starkey has reviewed the potential battle sites in his book, *Battle of Hastings at Sedlescombe* (2025) and on his website battleofhastings.info.

"If the battle was not fought at the orthodox Battle Abbey location, it was fought somewhere else. Five alternative battlefield candidates have been proposed:

- *Telham Hill by Nick Austin*
- *Caldbec Hill by John Grehan and Martin Mace*
- *Old Heathfield (ten miles west of Caldbeck Hill) by Rebecca Welshman and Simon Coleman*
- *Blackhorse Hill by David Barnby*
- *Near Sedlescombe, by Jonathan Starkey*

The first four alternative battlefield candidates are at least two miles from the Rochester Roman road, whereas all of Harold's possible strategies demand that he stayed on or near the Rochester Roman road.

IHRG, the metal detectorists used by Time Team to survey Battle Abbey and Caldbeck Hill, and who subsequently surveyed Nick Austin's proposed battlefield at Telham Hill, found nothing at any of these places."

In late 2024, they spent a few days detecting near Sedlescombe in an area that encompasses a section of the route through which the English fled. "They found two Saxon copper alloy strap ends, a Norman Type calkined horseshoe and a probable medieval arrowhead.

These items are rare. Only one Norman Type horseshoe is listed on the PAS database outside of London. The probable arrowhead is unique, tanged and barbed but with a flat back, as if made in a hurry or made for a single shot. Saxon strap ends are less rare, but they are usually found in association with burial sites because Saxons were buried fully clothed. Only a dozen or so have been found in East Sussex that are not associated with burials, and none in woodland.

While these items are rare, they fall short of proof that the English camp was near Sedlescombe or that it was on the English flight path. The strap ends might be up to 100 years earlier than the battle, tanged barbed arrowheads were in use for 100 years before the battle, the Normans brought blacksmiths with them, and they made Norman style horseshoes in England for 100 years after the battle.

Nevertheless, IHRG's finds are exactly the sort of items that should be found on the flight path."

Scene 57 - Here King Harold was slain



Scene 57 - The well-known scene in which Harold appears to be trying to remove an arrow in his eye. The Tapestry is the only (near) contemporary source to refer to the arrow in the eye story, So is it true?

The title, "Here King Harold was slain", covers two English soldiers. (The Tapestry tends to show the English soldiers with a moustache whilst the Normans are clean shaven.) Could Harold be the one on the right being attacked by the Norman figure on horse-back.

The arrow that killed Harold in the Tapestry is thought to have been added during the 19th-century repairs. A modern aniline dye was used which has largely faded away, whilst the original organic dyes have retained their colour.

Edward the Confessor's brother, Alfred, was captured by Godwin, Earl of Wessex, who turned him over to Harold Harefoot. He had Alfred blinded by forcing red-hot pokers into his eyes to make him unsuitable for kingship, and Alfred died soon after as a result of his wounds. The murder is thought to be the source of much of Edward's hatred for Earl Godwin.

The *Carmen Widoonis* (written shortly after the battle) describes a group of four knights (including William the Conqueror) brutally killing Harold. The remnants of the English army fled.

The legend of Edith the Fair, Harold's wife, is about her being asked to identify Harold's body on the battlefield (*The Waltham Chronicle* - about 1180). Does this confirm the fact that Harold was so mutilated, that he could not be recognised by his face alone?



Where was Hastings port or Hastingsport?

The Bayeux Tapestry finishes with the title, “And the English have turned in flight”.

However the Carmen Widonis continues after the battle with Harold’s burial and in Line 597 - “He (William) remained in camp at the port of Hastings for five days.”

Tyson explains that line 597 “is the first use of the place-name *Hastinge portus* or *Hastingsport*. The 12th century coastal navigation guide, *De Viis Maris*, says the port of Hastings was at Winchelsea seven miles distant from the coastal castle and town.”

Starkey writes that, “according to *De Viis Maris*, ... Old Winchelsea was the only significant port on the Hastings Peninsula.”

So Hastings represented a substantial region serviced by Old Winchelsea (Winchelse), the port at the mouth of the Brede valley; Hastingsport was at Old Winchelsea.

Is the last part of the Tapestry missing?

It is thought that the last part of the Tapestry is missing; it may have shown William’s Coronation; this would then balance the start of the Tapestry showing Edward’s Coronation.



The coronation of William I, a 13th-century illustration from Flores Historiarum by Matthew Paris.