

Medieval England: Who Was King before 1066?

King Aethelred II the Redeless (978 - 1016)

- Aethelred's succession to the throne was due to his brother, Edward the Martyr, being murdered. This murder was probably orchestrated at the hands of Aethelred's mother. He spent most his life with true regret and unease at his coronation at only ten years old.
- A descendant of the House of Wessex, his name is old English for 'unready' or poorly counselled. Aethelred rarely took good advice and was a weak, self-indulgent and poor King.
- Aethelred was unpopular, and his marriage in 1002 to Emma of Normandy did nothing to improve this. Together, they were a self-entitled couple who alienated many and had few friends. Aethelred even tried to invade Normandy, the home of his wife, which was a disaster.
- Aethelred tried to buy off the Danish threat by paying Vikings in gold not to invade and raid English towns. This led to more Viking raids than ever! As a result, in 1002 he had Danish settlers massacred in Northern England. This included the sister of the King of Denmark, Sweyn I. This provoked King Sweyn to invade England for vengeance and Aethelred fled to Normandy in 1013 to be sheltered by his wife's family. He returned to England in 1014 following the death of King Sweyn but was replaced by the Witan Council in 1016 in favour of Cnut, King Sweyn's son.
- Aethelred spent the rest of his reign fighting King Sweyn's son, Cnut, and allegedly died as Cnut was at the gates of his home.



King Edmund II Ironside (1016)

- The son of King Aethelred the Redeless and a descendent of the House of Wessex.
- Led the Saxon resistance against Cnut's invasion in 1015.
- Edmund was elected to be King by the citizens of London, but the Witan Council elected King Cnut. Edmund was the leader of all resistance against the Danes and was brave and heroic in battle. His name derived from Edmund's great strength with a sword.
- King Cnut defeated Edmund at Ashingdon, but this was only because of treachery by Edmund's key advisors rather than being defeated in battle. To try and avoid more bloodshed, Edmund suggested a single combat between Cnut and himself with the victor emerging as the winner and King. Cnut refused, worried by the skill and size of Edmund, and suggested a treaty instead.
- The result was a divide in the kingdom of England between them with Cnut ruling the North and Edmund ruling the South. Edmund died months later and King Cnut took control of the whole of England.
- King Edmund Ironside was believed to have been murdered by supporters of Cnut.



King Cnut (Canute) (1016 - 1035)

- House of Denmark.
- King of Denmark from 1018 and Norway from 1018 uniting the thrones of England, Denmark and Norway.
- Reputation is of “the most effective King in Anglo-Saxon History” despite the fact his reign is overshadowed by the Battle of Hastings and the reign of the Normans.
- England prospered under Cnut’s leadership, mainly owing to Cnut’s protection against violent Viking raids.
- Married Emma of Normandy, Aethelred’s widow. His sons by Emma were made the heirs and his sons by Ælfgifu were sidelined.
- Initially, Cnut ruled brutally, crushing the Wessex family’s power, outlawing or killing his rivals and ensuring the heirs to the Wessex throne were exiled in Europe.
- Later into his reign, Cnut was a more secure King and allowed more Saxons into power, as well as being a fairer monarch who brought justice, continued the laws of Edgar the Peaceful and achieved peace with Scotland.
- Converted to Christianity and became a protector of the Church, going on a pilgrimage to Rome in 1027.
- Cnut split England into four administrative districts: Wessex (the seat of power), East Anglia, Northumbria and Mercia.



King Harold I (Harold Harefoot) (1035-40)

- Seized his father's throne two weeks after his death, even though Cnut had left the throne to his son Harthacnut.
- His father was King Cnut and his mother was Cnut's first wife Ælfgifu. Cnut's second wife, Emma of Normandy, tried several times to remove Harold from the throne in favour of her son, Harthacnut.
- Emma of Normandy had the support of the Wessex noblemen and Lord Godwine. Godwine retained control of Wessex because he was married to Cnut's sister.
- When news of Cnut's death broke, Ethelred's sons Alfred and Edward who were exiled in Normandy, gathered a fleet and sailed for England to regain their father's throne. However, once Edward reached the first village, the people turned him away as the son of the hated King Ethelred and so they returned to exile in Normandy.
- Harold was a brutal King and Earl Godwine switched loyalty to Harold and murdered Alfred Atheling, Edward's brother.



King Harthacnut (1040-42)

- The son of King Cnut and Emma of Normandy.
- Had planned a fleet of sixty warships to overthrow Harold Harefoot, but Harefoot's death at 24 years old meant Harthacnut could take the throne peacefully.
- Harthacnut was raised in Denmark where he was made the King by Cnut on his death in 1035.
- Harthacnut's reputation was poor. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle depicts him as "never having done anything worthy of a King of Anglo Saxon England".
- Whilst King, Harthacnut raised taxes substantially and dealt with any opposition ruthlessly. When the citizens of Worcester rebelled against the new taxation, Harthacnut had the town burnt to the ground. He also had the Northern Earl Edwulf murdered.
- In response to his brother Alfred Atheling's death, Harthacnut had the powerful Earl Godwine put on trial for murder. Incredibly Godwine was acquitted and managed to keep his great wealth and power. Harthacnut may have been swayed in his opinion by Godwine gifting him a new and beautifully adorned ship.
- In order to broker a peace with Norway's King Magnus, Harthacnut agreed to a treaty in 1039 that if either of them died without an heir, the other would inherit the lands and titles.
- Whilst at a wedding in 1042, Harthacnut raised a glass to the bride and collapsed from a stroke at the age of 24 whilst heavily drunk.
- Harthacnut was the last Viking King of England.



Edward the Confessor (1042-66)

- Edward's father was King Athelred the Unready and his mother was Emma of Normandy. Edward was the last Saxon King and from the Wessex line.
- He was brought up in Normandy under the protection of Dukes of Normandy and remained close to his Norman relations as well as influenced by them.
- Edward hated the fact that his mother had married King Cnut after his father's death and that she had favoured her sons by Cnut over Edward and his brother Alfred. Their relationship was never mended.
- Edward married Edith Wessex, the daughter of the all-powerful Earl of Wessex, despite his deep hatred for the Earl following his brother's murder. Stories tell of King Edward accusing Earl Godwine of being involved in his brother's death; Godwine's response was denial and that if he did may he choke on the bread that was on his plate. Mysteriously, Earl Godwine died a few days later.
- He was a devoutly religious man and was canonised in 1162. One of Edward's greatest achievements was the construction and founding of Westminster Abbey.
- Unable to have children Edward wished to appoint his nephew, Edward the Exile, as his heir. He recalled him to Court in 1051, but unfortunately, he died a few weeks later. His son Edgar Atheling was very young, but King Edward promised to protect him at Court.
- King Edward allegedly promised the throne to William Duke of Normandy on his death, but Harold Godwine, the Earl of Wessex, claimed he had been given the throne on Edward's deathbed in January 1066.

