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THE BATTLE OF STAMFORD BRIDGE

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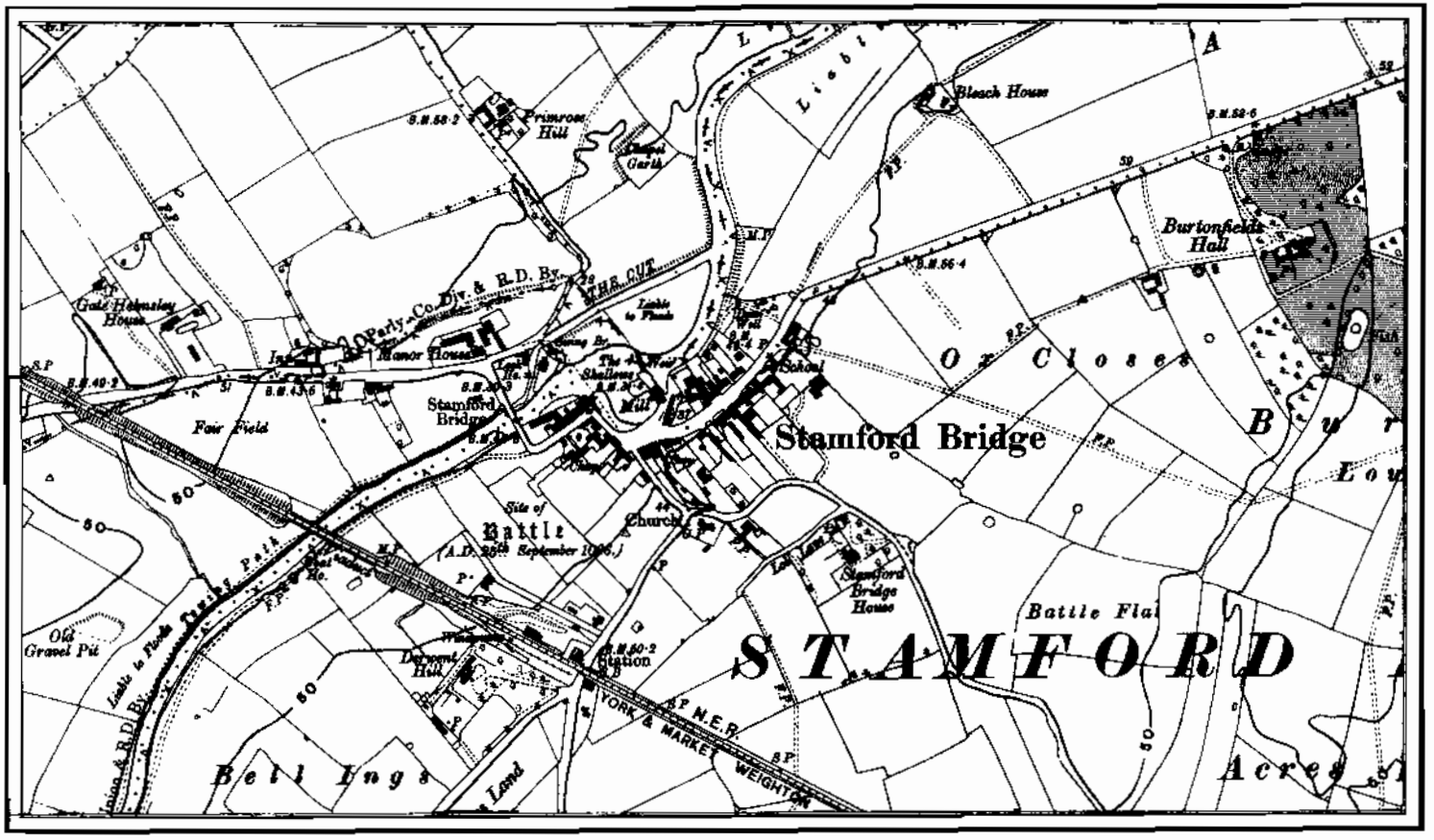

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THE BATTLE OF STAMFORD BRIDGE

IN the year 1055 Siward the Strong, Earl of Northumbria, died. His elder son Osbeorn had predeceased him, having fallen in battle against the Scots, and his younger son Waltheof, who later played no small part in events under William the Conqueror, was in all probability too young to govern the turbulent north. The earldom was therefore conferred on Tostig, second or third son of Godwin.

The appointment of a Saxon to govern the predominantly Danish or Norse earldom was an unusual step. Ever since the fall of the old kingdom of Northumbria, the dynasty of earls had been Norsemen, but possibly Edward the Confessor and his Witan thought it less risky to appoint an outsider than a native in such a feud-ridden area. If there was no suitable member of the family of Siward, the choice of any prominent Northumbrian would almost certainly have caused all manner of local jealousies. It is noteworthy, in this connection, that when the Northumbrians later expelled Tostig, they themselves chose, not a Northumbrian, but a Mercian, as his successor. These considerations, however, had probably less weight than personal ones. In 1055 the Godwin clan was at the height of its power, and the chance of extending its sway still further was, probably, too tempting to be missed. The choice of Tostig seems, in part, to have been personal. Edward the Confessor, who seems merely to have regarded the other members of the Godwin family as political allies, was genuinely fond of Tostig; perhaps the fact that he was undoubtedly the favourite brother of Edward's queen Eadgyth may have had some bearing on this. At any rate, the contemporary Life of Edward the Confessor gives the impression that the influence of the queen was a decisive factor.

It is very difficult to form an opinion of the personality of Tostig. The eleventh century annalists and chroniclers were not, as a rule, given to attempts at character study and Tostig was of little interest to post-Conquest writers like William of Malmesbury or Ordericus Vitalis, who occasionally try to tell us something about the men whose actions they describe. We therefore know something superficial about Tostig, but little that really makes us see the man. Norse heroes, like Olaf and Hardraada seem, thanks to the sagamen, much more alive than Tostig.

He had married Judith, daughter of Baldwin of Flanders, and was therefore brother-in-law to William the Conqueror, who married Matilda, another daughter. Judith was something of a benefactress of the Church and seems to have had a particular veneration for

St. Cuthbert. This leads to one of the few anecdotes we have about her. It seems that she resented the ban on women approaching the tomb of St. Cuthbert (a not unnatural attitude for a wealthy benefactress) and therefore sent a servant maid by night to approach the tomb. But no sooner had the unfortunate wench entered the churchyard than a sudden wind threw her bodily to the ground, bruising her severely.

Tostig himself seems to have been a hard and forthright man. We can ignore the apocryphal story told by some of the Norman chroniclers, that after a quarrel over precedence with Harold at Westminster, he went to Hereford, knowing that Harold proposed to go there, slew most of his servants, and cast their arms and legs into pickling tubs, and sent a message to Harold to say he would find plenty of provisions awaiting him. But the story of his visit to Rome shows him in another light. After Aldred had been elected Archbishop of York, Tostig went with him to Rome to seek papal confirmation. This was refused, and the disappointed embassy set off for home. Before they had gone far, they fell among thieves and had to return to Rome stripped of their clothing and property. According to one version of the story, the Pope was so sorry for them that he relented, gave Aldred the pallium and accepted him as archbishop, and gave the party new clothing and money for their journey. Another version, however, makes Tostig speak his mind to the Pope, whom he accused not only of failing to keep his subjects in order, but of actual complicity in the robbery. He pointed out that England paid Peter's pence to Rome in order to have the roads kept safe for pilgrims, and threatened that, on his return to England, he would induce the king to stop payment.

Tostig seems to have dealt harshly enough with his earldom. We are told that whereas in Siward's days, travellers had to move in companies of at least twenty for safety from robbers, Tostig ensured that a man might go alone, with a bag of gold, from one end of Northumbria to the other. Behind this exaggeration there probably lies the truth that Tostig was not unsuccessful in restoring some degree of law and order. Northumbria had need of it. It was a wild land, thinly populated by a mixture of Saxons, Danes, Norse and Irish Vikings; a frontier province, too, bounded by Scotland to the north, and the anarchic remains of the old kingdom of Strathclyde to the north-west. The activities of the eleventh century archbishops, the absence of monasteries at the time of the conquest, and such casual evidence of church building as the Kirkdale and Aldborough inscriptions, to say nothing of the numerous cross shafts which date from the eleventh century, all indicate that Christianity, though reviving and reorganising itself, was far from strong.

It was a land of feuds and vendettas, for the Norsemen seem to have despised the man who took compensation for an injury,

and respected the man who prosecuted the feud. Old Siward's disgust at dying a " cow's death " in his bed at York is typical of the Northumbrian and Viking. A good illustration of the Northumbrian attitude is given by the feud between the house of Uchtred and that of Thorbrand. The feud may have begun when Thorbrand murdered Uchtred in 1016 when the latter went to Wiheal to make his submission to Canute, or this may have been an episode in an older feud. Actually, it would seem Uchtred had married the daughter of a rich citizen of York on condition of killing Thorbrand, her father's enemy. His failure to do this seems to have resulted first in the dissolution of his marriage, and secondly in his own murder. After the murder of Uchtred, his son, and successor to the northern part of the earldom, slew Thorbrand. The feud went on: Carl, the son of Thorbrand, was reconciled to his father's murderer, Ealdred, and they planned to go on a pilgrimage to Rome together. They were delayed by bad weather and returned to Carl's house, probably at Rise in the East Riding. There the quarrel flared up again and Carl slew Ealdred in Risewood. He was succeeded by his brother Eadwulf, in Bernicia, whilst the southern part of the old earldom, Deira, fell to Siward, who married Aethelflaed, Eadwulf's sister. A generation later, after the Conquest, Waltheof, their son, avenged his grandfather by murdering all the sons of Carl, except for two, when they were feasting at Settrington.

If the leading men of Northumbria set an example like this, it was certainly a land in which law and order could only be enforced by stern measures. Tostig, however, seems to have gone too far when, in 1064, he had had two Yorkshire thegns, Gamel the son of Orm, and Ulf the son of Dolfin, murdered. At Christmas in that year too, another Northumbrian thegn had been murdered at the king's court, at Tostig's instigation. Tostig had also levied extremely heavy taxes; and probably Northumbria seethed with discontent during the summer. After harvest the storm broke. Tostig, as usual, was absent; it was indeed one of the complaints against him that he spent far too much time in the south with King Edward. The rebels, in his absence, seized his hall at York, plundered his treasure, proclaimed Morcar, the brother of Edwin, Earl of Mercia, as their new earl, and slew all Tostig's housecarls, English or Danish, upon whom they could lay hands, to the number of 200. This was open rebellion, but, for the time being, there seems to have been no question of denying the overlordship of Wessex. The rebels, however, marched south, being joined on the way by the men of the Danelaw, especially Lincolnshire, to attack Tostig's earldom of Huntingdon. Twenty years later the pages of Domesday Book show the damage which the Northerners did in Northamptonshire, in the reduced values of the villages which they plundered. Edward the Confessor, furious at this attack upon his beloved Tostig—they were probably hunting together when the rebellion broke out—