

## The Taxing of Worcester

Great Britain has a long and distinguished history of tax evasion. Unlike the French, we may not go to the barricades for purely political reasons, but, when we feel unduly put upon in monetary terms, the cudgels come out. Poll taxes were thrown back in the face of both Richard II and Margaret Thatcher, and the 19<sup>th</sup> Century is full of passive resistance to church rates and war taxes.

Few, however, have taken it as far as the people of Worcester did in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Whatever you might think of a final demand from the Inland Revenue, you're unlikely to threaten to remove the inspector's skin and nail it to the wall. Far better to ask your accountant to do that.

Nevertheless, this is what happened in 1041, with pretty devastating consequences for all concerned.

But first we need a little context. In 1035 Cnut (or Canute) the Great, King of England, Denmark and Norway, breathed his last. Having established an empire of the North Sea, stretching all the way from the Arctic Circle to London, Cnut was passing on his sovereignty to two sons hardly capable of organising a knees-up in a mead hall.

"Hardly capable" would, in fact, have made an appropriate name, but in reality they were called Hardicanute (or Harthacnut) and Harold Harefoot, half-brothers, in fact. Half-brotherly love ended as soon as Cnut was laid to rest. Both men claimed the throne, supported by various factions. Harold had the support of Leofric, earl of Mercia; Harthacnut had the backing of the Earl of Wessex and Cnut's widow, Emma. Of all England's civil wars, this is the least known and the least effective. When Harold was chosen king in 1035, Harthacnut was away, sorting out his Danish kingdom. Queen Emma fled to the Low Countries, and the two of them plotted an invasion, with a fleet of 62 warships at the ready.

Even that turned out to be unnecessary, for Harold died unexpectedly in 1040, and Harthacnut returned peacefully to Kent to claim the throne. Unwilling to let a sleep brother lie, the new king had Harold's body exhumed, decapitated, and slung into the Thames. You should probably blame the parents.

His position secure, Harthacnut could now begin to make himself unpopular with the whole of his kingdom, instead of just half of it. And, as we have established already, the easiest way to achieve this was to impose punitive levels of taxation. The famous tale of Godiva, riding naked through the streets of Coventry in protest at unfair taxes, may date from exactly this time.

A large proportion of these levies was intended to pay for the king's ships, a bill estimated (in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle) to be more than £23,000.

But it was in the city of Worcester that the reaction was strongest. The 12<sup>th</sup>-century chronicler, Florence of Worcester, takes up the story.

"In 1041 Hardicanute sent his housecarls over all the kingdom to collect the tribute which he had imposed. But the citizens of Worcester and the Worcestershire men rose in rebellion, and on Monday, May 4, slew two of them, named Feader and Turstan, who had hidden themselves under the roof of one of the towers of the monastery of that city."

There may have been underlying tensions triggering this extreme response. As a leading city in the earldom of Mercia, Worcester was probably no enthusiastic

supporter of Harthacnut anyway. And the request for cash from a Danish king brought back all those bad memories of Danegeld, or, as we might call it, Viking protection money.

Nevertheless, it was a highly risky strategy, not likely to endear the Midland town to its master.

Harthacnut reacted as any overlord, with a streak of Danish Viking in him, would. Six months later the English earls and the king's personal troops marched up to Worcester to extract revenge, 'with orders,' Florence of Worcester goes on, "to slay all the inhabitants if they could, to plunder and burn the city, and to lay waste the country round about."

The six month delay, however, had given the citizens of Worcester time to consider how to duck summary execution. The inhabitants decamped to Bevere, a little island on a bend of the River Severn, close to Claines and north of Worcester. Here they set up temporary fortifications, and withstood all that the royal army could throw at them.

The land adjacent to Bevere Island is still known locally as "the battlefield" today, presumably in reference to that skirmish almost a thousand years ago.

Thwarted, therefore, in one half of their instructions, the king's forces returned to the other, burned down the town and looted all that they could get hold of. And on the fifth day they set off home, mission partly accomplished. As a warning against tax dodging, it was still pretty effective.

We could speculate that the events at Worcester might have sparked a more widespread rebellion against Harthacnut's regime and his tax-and-spend policies.

But, as it happened, there was no need. In 1042 – a year after the events at Worcester – the king was no more. "He died," reports the Chronicle gleefully, "as he stood drinking; he fell suddenly to the earth with a tremendous struggle..."

The people chose Edward the Confessor as their new king, and a line was drawn under the whole sorry business. Harthacnut was gone, after just two years of personal rule. He was by then, you could argue, not a Cnut at all.