John O’Farrell, an utterly impartial history of britain. London: Black Swan, 2008.

**The Battle of Hastings: England finish as runners-up** (pp. 76–77)

Back in 1066, nobody would ever have guessed that they were living in the most famous year in English history. There had been countless invaders in the preceding centuries and there would surely be many more to come. But there was definitely a sense of crisis approaching. Saxon spies reported an invasion fleet being prepared over the Channel. Overhead, Halley’s comet blazed a portentous trail across the sky, while the threat of armed revolt from Tostig of Northumbria added to the Saxon’s worries. The non-royal Harold II had only received the English crown a few months earlier in rather controversial circumstances and England was a divided and poorly prepared kingdom. Harold was doing his best to hold it all together but we all know what it is like trying to organize large groups of people to do anything.

‘No, listen, everyone, listen. Can you *not* keep wandering off because we have got to stay here on the south coast in case we need to fight a big battle – excuse me, where are you going?’

‘I’m just popping home to my estate, I won’t be long.’

‘No, no, that’s what I’m saying – it’s really important that we all stay right here. Hang on, I’ve got a message – Oh. Change of plan, listen, everyone, we all have to go up north to fight the Scandinavians...’

‘But you said we had to stay here to fight the Normans...’

‘I thought the Normans were Scandinavians?’

‘Listen, Harold, is it all right if I meet you up there?’

‘NO, IT IS NOT. Everyone, please try and stick together and listen for instructions.’

Harold II’s army had waited on the south coast all summer for William. But isn’t it always the way? You wait ages to fight one army and then three come along at once. Harold’s disloyal half-brother Tostig had lost power in Northumberland and was sulking by pillaging the Isle of Wight, Kent, Norfolk and Lincolnshire. He then teamed up with the King of Norway who also believed the English crown to be his. Leaving the south coast undefended, Harold was forced to march north to take on this invading army. Tostig and Hardrada United had already won their first local fixture in the qualifying stages, which put them through to face King Harold in the second round. But the Saxon army was too much for the plucky part-timers from Norway. They were so comprehensively beaten that of the three hundred longboats in which they had arrived only twenty-five were required to take survivors back home. The Battle of Stamford Bridge finally ended the Scandinavian threat to England and would provide an easy headline for sports writers every time Chelsea home game involved a minor scuffle.

But fixture congestion being what it was at this time of the season, Harold now had to rush south because William the Conqueror had just landed in Sussex.

‘Er, why’s he called William the Conqueror?’

‘Oh, don’t worry about that, it’s just a nickname.’

In fact, during his lifetime, William’s nickname wasn’t ‘Conqueror’; he was actually known as ‘William the Bastard’, owing to the scandal of his illegitimacy. Oh, and the fact that he was a complete bastard. It’s hard to know how openly this nickname was bandied about. Since he was a ruler who thought nothing of having a man’s tongue pulled out and nailed to his front door, you’d probably exercise a certain amount of caution before calling him ‘William the Bastard’ to his face. ‘Oi, look, everyone, Bill the Bastard’s here! Oi, Bastard, do you want a drink? Hey, I’m talking to you, BILL THE BIG BASTARD!’ And yet you tried repeatedly pointing out this nickname when you are at school and for some reason they decide you are a disruptive pupil.