



## Historical hearsay

When foreigners came to England in 1066 they were led by a famous conker champion known as William the Bastard – though that was not his real name; it was what people called him. At right is a rare photograph of a preliminary round of the 1065 All-Normandy Conker Challenge, in which one of the contestant's conkers can be seen. It is evident that at that time the game was rather more pro-active than the modern version. However, these matches were popular, and the final always drew a large crowd, as the runners-up were beheaded while the winner was allowed to keep their conkers, as well as his own. This traditional annual challenge ended when William retired as Supreme Champion – mainly due to the influence of his wife Matilda, who was particularly houseproud and became tired of wiping the dust off her husband's prize conkers. She also had several children, so she persuaded William to take his conkers to England and challenge the Saxons instead. This was a peaceful expedition, and the Saxons were keen to participate, as they had had several noteworthy champions since winning Britain from the Romans in the conkers final at Durovernum Cantiacorum more than 600 years earlier. Their most famous champion was Alfred the Great, who retained the title from 878 to 885 – though he had a considerable advantage, as Guthrum, the leader of the Vikings, always used tomatoes, which were not grown in England until the 1590s. Unfortunately, Norman–Saxon friendly rivalry soon turned to enmity. First, the Saxon contingent was penalised for arriving late; then one of the Normans was disqualified for deliberately aiming at his opponent's eyes; and at the end of the second day a dispute arose over who had eaten all the lime pickle during the post-match curry marathon. This erupted into a bitter feud, resulting in the so-called 'Battle of Hastings',



which actually took place near a village called Battle – a remarkable coincidence. William intended to return home after the battle, but due to a gas-fitters' strike at Le Havre docks, all cross-Channel ferries were cancelled until further notice, and by the time they were operational again he had spent all his money on building castles. So he stayed in England. Matilda thus lost her only means of support, and therefore took advantage of William's reputation to earn money as an itinerant conker-polisher. This became more difficult after her motor bike was stolen, as she could then only provide services at home. Hearing of her plight, however, many young men came to her aid, and she was soon surrounded by conkers. This train of events has, over the centuries, resulted in the repeated misrepresentation of William being known as 'the Conqueror', whereas during his lifetime he was called 'the Conkerer' (as well as 'the Bastard').

According to Will Shakespeare, in 1415 Henry V shouted 'Cry God for Harry!' But in fact he was ordering his dinner: 'Cry cod for Harry!', followed by mutterings about a 'feast' and a 'crispy'un'. However, some of his soldiers misheard, and instead of going to the local chip shop they besieged Harfleurs. This is substantiated by an early chronicle, which records that 'the Kinge he dyd allso orde an depefryde marris bar and spamm frittere'. Fortunately, Salisbury and Exeter had a Michelin restaurant guide and found a friary. The photograph is taken from a scene cut from the final version of Laurence O'Liver's *Henry V*, which was based on the First Folio of 1623. Instead, the producers decided to use the Second Folio of 1632, in which the editor, Robert Allot, had changed the sequence of speeches and removed all references to cod and chips so that it would appear that Henry was claiming the crown of France. Shakespeare was, of course, only a hack writer. His real job was selling women's cosmetics, which is why he is known as the 'Bard of Avon'.



William Webb Ellis enjoyed his time as a schoolboy at Roedean. One day, while playing football, he suddenly picked up a 3-inch refractor and ran with it, thus inventing the portable telescope. The tradition continues, but these days, with a tougher game, an instrument of at least 5 inches aperture must be used. (SCTs cannot be used, despite their popularity.) The modern rules stipulate that after the instrument is caught, at least one written observation must be produced before touch-down, so on cloudy days the score is always 0–0. The game has several unusual aspects. Only one player in a team, wearing steel boots, is allowed to kick, line throw-ins usually result in several injuries, scrums are never successful, and observations are completely unreliable. Nevertheless, with the persistence of blood-lust and schadenfreude, the game is very popular.

