



Essential Histories

Campaigns of the Norman Conquest

Matthew Bennett

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Introduction

As dusk fell on 14 October 1066, Harold Godwinson, king of England, lay dead. He had fought a day-long battle against foreign invaders but had been wounded in the eye by an arrow, knocked over in a mounted charge, and hacked to death by the horsemen's swords whilst defenceless on the ground. The result of the battle of Hastings is usually seen as 'The Norman Conquest'. There is more to war than battles though, and William, duke of Normandy, had many long years of campaigning ahead of him before he could be certain of keeping the crown that he received on Christmas Day 1066. The long-lasting impact of the invasion was a new, largely French-speaking,

ruling elite accompanied by sweeping reforms in the practice and personnel of the Church, and closer economic, political and strategic ties with the Continent now that the king was also a French prince. This was

Invasion! The Norman fleet sails for Pevensey overnight (27/28 September 1066). The ship depicted is Duke William's, with a lantern at her masthead and the golden figure of a boy blowing a trumpet. This is just as she is described in written sources, named the *Mora*. Although called a tapestry, the source is a 70m-long (230ft) embroidery created within a decade of the events shown. Odo, bishop of Bayeux, had it made and possibly first displayed at the consecration of his new cathedral in 1077. (Bayeux Tapestry. With special permission of the town of Bayeux)



to affect the development of England for the next century and a half (after which Normandy was lost to the French Crown), and through the entire medieval period. Henry V's reconquest of Normandy in the early fifteenth century lasted a generation, Henry VIII's campaigns revived the policy, and English monarchs retained a claim to the kingdom of France until 1801.

There was a moment during the battle of Hastings when the cry went up that William had been killed, which was only scotched by him galloping through his ranks with his helmet pushed back to show his face to his frightened men. Everything might have changed if he had taken a dangerous wound; all would certainly have been different if he had been less of a man than he proved himself to be in the years following 1066. When rebellion broke out against his rule late in 1067 he was abroad in his duchy, but he sailed across the Channel in November – usually considered an impossible time to make the crossing – and conducted a campaign deep into the south-west during the coldest months of the year. Three times in the succeeding years he marched north to combat rebellion and invasion at York. Everywhere he went he planted castles and left garrisons under trusted *vassals* to enforce his rule. He was ruthless in pursuing the most determined resistance to its end, laying waste the northern counties and crossing the Pennines in the mid-winter of 1069/70. He plunged deep into *the Fens* with men on land and in ships, bringing siege engines to Ely abbey against the last rebel, Hereward, in 1071. In 1072 he marched to Scotland, again accompanied by a fleet, to win submission from the King of Scots.

These wars secured William's kingdom, supported by administrative reforms and the creation of records of government, epitomised by Domesday Book. This remarkable survey was the product of a warrior king's need for money. Just two years before he died, William feared invasion from Denmark, and raised a huge force of paid soldiers and sailors to oppose it. The cost was so overwhelming that, during his Christmas court at Gloucester that year, the king demanded to know how much England could produce in tax revenue to pay for the defence of his realm. The action was typical of the man, of his obsessions and of his need to be in control. The result was a remarkable document which provides insights into English society of a thousand years ago that are unmatched elsewhere.

The Norman Conquest is not viewed by everyone in today's Britain as a welcome event, and its results are still much disputed, but its history was of successful military campaigns conducted by a remarkable warrior who has left his mark on much of our history. Nor did William achieve his goals single-handedly. He proved an adroit leader of men with the ability to create a loyal following that combined hard-bitten warriors and clever clerics. He proved himself capable of operating on all fronts: personally as a soldier and inspiring leader, and, less directly, through the agency of others with specialist skills in diplomacy, administration, law and Church reform. All these attributes combined to make the events in 1066–1072 not just an invasion but a conquest and a transformation of English society.

Chronology

- 1002 King Aethelred II of England marries Emma, daughter of Richard I, duke of Normandy
- 1009–13 King Swein of Denmark conquers England
- 1014 Aethelred seeks refuge at the Norman court with his family; Swein dies and is succeeded by his son Cnut
- 1016 Cnut defeats Edmund Ironside, Aethelred's son, and marries Emma
- 1016–41 Edward *aetheling* resides in Normandy
- 1026 Death of Richard II, duke of Normandy
- 1027/28 Birth of William to Herlève, daughter of the ducal chamberlain, by Duke Robert
- 1033 Robert leaves on pilgrimage after ensuring the loyalty of his barons to his illegitimate son
- 1035 Cnut dies and his illegitimate son Harold succeeds to the English throne
- 1035 Robert dies in Asia Minor; William becomes duke
- 1036 Edward and Alfred aethelings invade England. Alfred is murdered whilst under the protection of Godwin, *earl* of Wessex
- 1040 Murder of the young duke's guardian; civil war in Normandy
- 1040 King Harold dies; Harthacnut succeeds in England
- 1041 Harthacnut invites Edward to England
- 1042 Harthacnut dies and Edward succeeds to the throne
- 1045 Edward marries Godwin's daughter, Edith
- 1047 William is helped by Henry king of France to defeat rebels in western Normandy, at the battle of Val-ès-Dunes
- 1051 Godwin and his sons rebel against Edward and are exiled
- 1052 Godwin returns and forces Edward to restore his earldom; Welsh defeat Earl Ralph at Hereford
- 1053 Godwin dies and his son Harold becomes earl of Wessex; the Godwinson earls dominate England
- 1054 French invasion of Normandy defeated at Mortmer
- 1057 Edward the Exile returns from Hungary but dies leaving the infant Edgar as his heir; William defeats French invasion of Normandy at Varaville
- 1063 Harold and Tostig lead forces by land and sea to defeat Gruffydd of Wales
- 1064 Harold visits Normandy, is captured and handed over to William; he joins him on campaign in Brittany and swears an oath to support the duke's claim to the English throne
- 1065 Northumbrians revolt against their earl Tostig; Harold makes peace and Tostig is exiled
- 1066 **5 January** King Edward dies;
6 January Harold crowned on basis of deathbed nomination
Spring Tostig raises fleet in Flanders and raids south coast but is driven north to Scotland; William prepares invasion fleet
Summer Harold raises land and sea forces to guard the coast; disbanded on **8 September**;
12 September William's fleet sails to mouth of Somme
mid-September Tostig and Harald Hardrada, king of Norway, sail into the Humber