

William II and His Death in the New Forest

William II loved hunting. On 2nd August, 1100, he went out hunting with a party of friends in the New Forest. He was very nervous because of a bad dream he had had the night before. He had dreamt that a doctor had cut his arm to let some blood out of his body and that the blood had flowed into the sky, blotting out the sun.

SOURCE A

After dinner he went into the forest with a few people, including his closest friend, Walter Tirel. Only this man stayed with him, while the others were spread out in the chase. The sun was going down, when the King let fly an arrow, slightly wounding a stag which passed in front of him; he stared after it for a long time. At this moment, Walter decided to shoot another stag which came near him. Unable to stop it, he pierced the King's chest with an arrow. The King said nothing but broke off the shaft of the arrow and fell on the wound. As a result, he died more quickly.

Walter leapt on his horse and escaped by speeding away. No one followed him. Everybody was busy with other matters.

An account written by William of Malmesbury in about 1125

SOURCE B

William sprang to his feet, mounted his horse and galloped into the wood. His brother Henry and other important men were there. They entered the wood and sent the huntsmen off into different places as usual. The King and Walter Tirel were in place in the wood with a few friends. As they waited for their prey, with their weapons ready, a beast suddenly ran between them. The King drew back from his place and Walter let fly an arrow. It sped quickly over the beast's back, grazing its hair, and wounded the King who was standing right in its path. He fell to the ground and died at once. Terrible shouts that the King was dead rang through the woods. Henry galloped at top speed to Winchester Castle where the royal treasure was. Many nobles made off from the wood. Some of the servants covered the King's body as well as they could with poor cloths. They carried him like a wild boar stuck with spears to Winchester where he was quickly buried in the old church.

The moment the deed was done, Tirel hurried to the coast, crossed the sea and made for his castles in France. Here, he laughed in safety at the threats of those who wanted to harm him.

An account written by Orderic Vitalis in about 1135



SOURCE C

For there had come from Normandy, to visit king William, a very powerful baron, Walter Tirel by name. The king received him with the most lavish hospitality, and having honoured him with a seat at his table, was pleased, after the banquet was concluded, to give him an invitation to join him in the sport of hunting. After the king had pointed out to each person his fixed station, and the deer, alarmed at the barking of the dogs and the cries of the huntsmen, were swiftly flying towards the summits of the hills, the said Walter incautiously aimed an arrow at a stag, which missed the stag, and pierced the king in the breast.

The king fell to the earth, and instantly died; upon which, the body being laid by a few countrymen in a cart, was carried back to the palace, and on the morrow was buried, with but few manifestations of grief, and in an humble tomb; for all his servants were busily attending to their own interests, and few or none cared for the royal funeral. The said Walter, the author of his death, though unwittingly so, escaped from the midst of them, crossed the sea, and arrived safe home in Normandy.

Peter of Blois c1105

Points to consider

- 1.** William II had upset many barons and bishops during his reign. Many supported Robert.
- 2.** William II had drunk a lot of wine with his dinner before going on the hunt. Was he drunk? - accident?
- 3.** Richard, another son of William I had been killed in a hunting accident in Normandy!
- 4.** Once Henry had got the royal treasure, he rode to London and was crowned King on August 5th 1100. Some say his actions were a little too quick - disrespectful to his dead brother. Some say he was right to rush or the throne may have been claimed by supporters of Robert or other barons!
- 5.** The summer sun was very low in the sky that evening and anyone looking in the direction of the sun would have had difficulty seeing. Possible accident
- 6.** Both Robert and William had made a pact to stop Henry becoming King of England or Duke of Normandy upon either of their deaths. They also limited his land in Normandy and England.

7. William had forbidden a marriage between Henry and Edith a Scottish Princess. William feared this would prove a threat to him. Edith was so upset that she joined a nunnery. Henry later married Edith after William's death. - Motive?
8. Robert who was a potential heir to the throne of England was still on crusade and did not return to Normandy until September. Motive? When Robert did return he was beaten in battle by Henry and imprisoned in Cardiff Castle till his death in 1134.
9. William I and William II has created a Royal Forest and in the process many Saxons had lost their homes. Many were very angry and upset.
10. After Henry became king, he gave jobs and lands to people who had supported him. Amongst the families who received gifts were the Clare and Giffard families. Two members of the Clare family had been in the hunting party on the day William II died. Walter Tirel's wife's maiden name was Clare. Tirel was also related to the Giffards. Was this hush payment? Possible evidence
11. Tirel left the country in a hurry, but later claimed that he had not shot the King. He admitted being in the hunting party, but had not seen the King that day and was certainly not with him when William was killed. Even when Tirel himself was dying, he still denied killing William II. Evidence?
12. At the time, no one accused Henry of killing his brother. All agreed that it had been an accident.
13. Rufus had taxed the Church very heavily and argued with the Pope and Anselm. Priests were seen in the woods on the day of the murder. Anselm fled to exile in Lyons after the murder.
14. Henry I suffered from bad nightmares in which he saw himself being assassinated. Was this his guilt showing through?
15. Finally in the words of a modern historian, "If William's death was an accident, Henry was a very lucky man."

William's death is still one of the greatest unsolved historical mysteries. What really happened on that fateful day in August 1100, we will never really know. Not too many people were concerned. As it said in the book '1066 and All That' "William Rufus was always very angry and red in the face and was therefore unpopular, so that his death was a Good Thing."