

William I 1066-1087

William Establishes Control

What did William do after the Battle of Hastings?

He marched towards London but took a roundabout route, making sure that some towns surrendered to him on the way. He was crowned king at Westminster Abbey in London on Christmas Day, 1066.

Did the Saxons want him as their king?

No! William and his barons were hated French-speaking foreigners on English soil. William took land away from Saxon earls who had been killed in battle or had fled the country and gave it to his barons and bishops.

Did the English fight back?

Yes. There were rebellions in lots of places such as Kent, Yorkshire and East Anglia.

It took five years of hard fighting before William really conquered England. After the rebellion in York, where thousands of English rose up against him, he destroyed every village he could find in Yorkshire. Cattle, sheep and pigs were slaughtered and stores of food were set on fire. Thousands of peasants died of cold and hunger that winter.

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William the Conqueror was an innovator in government. He built a strong centralized administration staffed with his Norman supporters. He was also not about to put up with any backchat from the newly conquered English. He subdued the south and east easily, but the north rose in rebellion. William's response was the ferocious "Harrying of the North" (1069-70), which devastated the land in a broad swath from York to Durham. The results of this burning and destruction left much of the area depopulated for centuries.

Hereward.

Following on the heels of northern resistance the most famous English rebel of them all, Hereward the Wake, stirred up resistance to the Norman conquerors in East Anglia from a base at Ely, deep in the fenland. Eventually, Hereward, too, was subdued, perhaps bought off, and the land was William's to hold.

Early Castles.

One of the ways he insured that he held control was to build castles everywhere. These were often hurried in a continental 'motte and bailey' design, usually in wood, only later replaced with stone. Most were built with forced local labour on land confiscated from the English rebels. The castles were given to Norman barons to hold for the king. In theory every inch of English land belonged to the crown and William's vassals had to swear fealty directly to the crown. Contrast this with the earlier Saxon practice where each man swore allegiance to the person of his lord.

William's Church.

Anglo-Saxon churchmen were replaced gradually by Normans appointed by William. Under the administration of Lanfranc, Norman Archbishop of Canterbury, new monasteries were founded, while rules and discipline were enforced more stringently. Church and lay justice were separated; the bishops were given their own courts, allowing common law to evolve independently. William retained the right to appoint bishops and impeach abbots. He used these churchmen as his major administrators, which made perfect sense, for they were by far the best educated members of society. Indeed, they were often the only educated members of society.

The Domesday Book.

The thing for which William I is best remembered, aside from winning the battle of Hastings and making England a European kingdom, is the Domesday Book. The Domesday Book was, in effect, the first national census. It was a royal survey of all England for administration and tax purposes. William needed proper records so that his new, efficient Norman bureaucracy could do its job, especially when it came to collecting all the revenues due to the crown. Inspectors were sent into every part of England to note the size, ownership, and resources of each hide of land. Contrary to popular belief, some small areas did seem to have escaped the assessors notice, but for the times the Domesday Book represented an amazing accomplishment. It also left exact records behind which gave historians a lot of data about Norman English life.

What were William I's Greatest Achievements?

Introduction

- Greatest achievement was winning at Hastings, conquering England and introducing the Feudal system to England. William brought order, control and Government, but never won the love of his conquered people.

Early Life

- William was the illegitimate son of Robert, Duke of Normandy and was a surprise choice as his father's successor.
- Became Duke at the age of 7 and had to survive numerous assassination attempts.
- After the Battle of Val des Dunes in 1047, he ruled Normandy safely.
- Conquered Brittany, Maine, Touraine and Anjou.

Hastings Campaign

- Claimed he had been promised the throne by Edward the Confessor and Harold (Holy Bones).
- Cleverly secured the support of the Pope for his invasion.
- Carefully prepared 7,000 men and 600-800 ships.
- LUCKY as Harold was in the North on England when he landed.
- Good generalship. Strategic use of archers, infantry and knights.
- When Bretons thought he was dead, William saw and remembered the indiscipline of the Fyrd.
- Used feigned retreat and archers firing high as part of his battle plan.

After Battle

- Showed fierceness at Dover and marching around London.
- Crowned at Westminster on Christmas day 1066.
- Brutally put down revolts on Ely and Exeter. In the 'Harrying of the North', he ordered the destruction of the land – 100,000 died of famine and disease.

Castles

- Ordered building of motte and bailey castles which were gradually replaced with stone keeps and curtain walls + stone keeps, e.g. Tower of London.

Feudalism

- Introduced the Feudal System – land for service (cash or men). In this 2,200 Normans controlled 1 ½ million Saxons.
- Built royal castles next to untrustworthy barons.
- Split baron's lands up to prevent revolts.
- Just about made peasants slaves in system lasting until around 1450.

Domesday

- 1086 ordered complete survey of England for tax purposes.
- Produced 2 Domesday Books.

Normandy

- Kept England and Normandy under control, putting down revolts.

Conclusion

- Perhaps fitting that he died as a result of war injuries (split spleen) – He died a king feared and obeyed but never loved, but he had helped drag England out of the 'Dark Ages' into the Middle Ages.

The Death of William I

It is a mistake, however, to view William as suddenly becoming English. Most of his time was spent in Normandy. England was a much treasured prize, not his home. Normandy itself remained under threat from her neighbours. His growing empire was threatened by the Scandinavian Kings, and so William was occupied for much of the time with further wars and endless diplomacy. It was during one of his many campaigns against the French kings that William lost his life. In later life, William had become very fat. In 1087, William was told that King Philip of France described him as looking like a pregnant woman. William was furious and mounted an attack on the king's territory.

On 15th August he captured Mantes and set fire to the town. Soon afterwards his horse, scared by embers in the burning Norman town, reared and rammed the iron pommel on the saddle into William's stomach. He fell from the horse and was fatally injured with a split spleen.

William was taken to the priory of St. Gervase. Close to death, he directed that his eldest son, Robert Curthose, should succeed him as the Duke of Normandy and his second son, William Rufus, should become King of England. His third son, Henry, was given 5000 gold coins. This act demonstrates what William considered to be his most prized possession: England, most certainly, not that! He also ordered that his wealth should be distributed between the poor and the Church.

He took several days to die, finally dying on September 9th 1087, and was buried in the Church of St Stephen in Caen.

Even in death, William was not beyond causing a commotion. His body, swollen by several years of excessive eating and drinking, proved too large for the stone coffin in which he was to be buried and he had to be 'stuffed' into it. Legend has it that the body burst, leaving his remains on the floor of the chapel and a vile smell of rotting flesh.

His body was mostly destroyed in the 16th Century (possibly 1562) by a Calvinist mob, and the final remaining piece, a thigh bone, was destroyed in the French Revolution.