

The Norman Conquest 1066

1. Normans Origin

To understand who the Normans were, we have to go back a little to 911. This year, a rather powerful Viking chief called Rollo attacked the north of France after some battles and negotiations with French authorities, he accepted the offer of a large area of Northern France from the then king of France, Charles II, as part of a peace treaty.

Rollo and his Norsemen settled in this area of northern France, now known as Normandy. Rollo became the first Duke of Normandy and over the next hundred years, the Normans adopted the French language and culture and lived in harmony with the French people.

2. Historical Facts about the Norman Invasion

On 5th January 1066, **Edward** the Confessor, King of England, died. The next day the Anglo-Saxon Witan (a council of high-ranking men) elected **Harold** Godwin, Earl of Essex (and Edward's brother-in-law) to succeed him. The crown had scarcely been put on his head when King Harold's problems started with other opponents over the British crown.

In Normandy, Duke **William** did not agree with the voting of the Witan. William claimed that years earlier, Edward had promised the crown of England to him. Besides, he believed that he had strengthened his claim further when in 1063, he made Harold swear to support his claim to the English throne. He was very annoyed because he felt that Harold Godwin betrayed him. Therefore, William prepared to invade and conquer Britain.

King Harold Godwin also had problems in the north of England – sibling rivalry. Harold's brother Tostig had joined forces with Harold **Hardrada**, King of Norway, and had landed with an army in Yorkshire. Harold Godwin marched his English army north from London to drive back the invaders. Arriving at Tadcaster on 24th September, he seized the opportunity to catch the enemy off guard. His army was exhausted after the forced march from London, but after a bitter, bloody battle to capture the bridge at Stamford, Harold won a decisive victory on 25th September. Harold Hardrada and Tostig were both killed.

On October 1st Harold Godwin and his tired army marched three hundred kilometres south to fight Duke William of Normandy, who had landed at Pevensey, East Sussex on the 28th of September. Harold's sick, exhausted Saxon army met William's fresh, rested Norman troops, on October 14th at Battle near **Hastings**, and the great battle began. At first, Harold's army was victorious over the Normans, but slowly, the Normans began to gain control. King

Harold was struck in the eye by a Norman arrow and was killed, but the battle continued until all of Harold's loyal bodyguards were slain (killed).

Although William of Normandy had won the Battle of Hastings, it would take a few weeks longer to convince the good folk of London to hand over the keys of the city to him. Anglo-Saxon resistance blocked the Norman advance at the Battle of Southwark. This battle was for control of London Bridge, which crossed the River **Thames** allowing the Normans easy access to the English capital of London. Thus, the Norman troops were forced to find access to London from **Wallingford** in December 1066, where he was crowned king of England by Archbishop **Ealdred**, and he was called William the first.

3. The Norman Conquest Impact on Britain

The consequences of the Norman Conquest were many and varied. Further, some effects were much longer-lasting than others. It is also true that society in England was already developing along its path of history before William the Conqueror arrived yet; the momentous political, social, and economic changes of the Middle Ages had their roots in the Norman invasion. The following list summarizes what most historians agree on as some of the most significant changes the Norman Conquest brought to England:

- The Anglo-Saxon landowning elites were almost totally replaced by Normans, who took their lands and properties.
- The ruling system was centralized, with power and wealth being held in much fewer Norman hands.
- Most of Anglo-Saxon bishops were replaced with Norman ones and many religious headquarters were relocated to urban centres.
- Norman castles were introduced, which reshaped warfare in England, reducing the necessity for and risk of large-scale field engagements.
- The system of feudalism developed as William gave out lands to his vassals in return for military service and protection in case of war.
- Manors and large farms developed and spread further, where labourers worked on their lord's estate for his benefit. They were called serfs.
- The north of England was devastated for a long time following William's constant attacks against the probable remaining resistance of the Anglo-Saxons of the area in 1069-70 CE.

- Domesday Book, a detailed and systematic catalogue of the land and wealth in England, was compiled in 1086-7 CE.
- The contact and especially trade between England and European countries greatly increased.
- The two countries of France and England became historically intertwined, initially due to the crossover of land ownership, i.e. Norman nobles holding lands in both countries.
- The syntax and vocabulary of the Anglo-Saxon Germanic language were significantly influenced by the French language and a considerable number of French words were introduced to the English language.
- The French language was designated as the language of the church, schools, and literature and the language of the elite. However, the English language was spoken by the English common people only.
- Norman genius was also expressed in architecture. Saxon buildings had mostly been wooden structures. Massive stone castles, churches, cathedrals, and monasteries were erected, these imposing structures again clearly demonstrating just who was in charge. Richmond Castle 11th c, Rochester Castle 12th c, and Windsor Castles 11th century are among the surviving Normans castles.
- The Bayeux Tapestry was probably commissioned in the 1070s by Bishop Odo of Bayeux, half-brother of William the Conqueror. It is over 70 meters long and although it is called a tapestry it is embroidery, The Tapestry tells the story of the events surrounding the conquest of England by the Duke of Normandy.

4. Feudal System Or Feudalism In Britain

The feudal system was a way of organizing society into different groups based on their roles. It had the king at the top with all of the control, and the peasants at the bottom doing all of the work. All medieval people did homage, a promise to be loyal, to their 'lord' and there were no rules or restrictions on the power of the king. He was the absolute ruler and owner of everything in the country. Under the feudal system, the British society was organized in a peculiar hierarchy as follows: monarchs (the king, queen), barons or lords (landowners and nobles), knights (army), and peasants (serfs).

After his conquest of Britain, by 1085, William had a shortage of money and needed to raise taxes, to pay for his army. Also, many Norman Barons had begun to disagree amongst themselves over the land they had been given as a reward for helping conquer England.

William wanted to settle these disputes once and for all. Thus, he decided to order a survey. Therefore, he created the Domesday Book (1085). He sent official inspectors and agents all over England to assess and value the wealth of the land and who owned it. Through this survey, he recorded every property in England.

The Domesday Book shows how Normans came to dominate the country and how less than 250 Normans controlled the whole country. William granted most of the land to Normans and only a few Anglo-Saxon lords who owned lands during the time of Edward the Confessor were able to keep their land.