



THE NORMAN CONQUEST (1066)



This is Pevensey Bay, on the Sussex coast. And it was here, on the 28th of September, 1066, that Saxon England was invaded by Norman troops under the command of William of Normandy – William “the Conqueror”. Two thousand knights, six thousand horses, eight thousand footsoldiers disembarked from four hundred longships. And two weeks later, on October the 14th, 1066, the Normans fought and won the Battle of Hastings. The

Saxon king Harold was killed.

For me, this is the right place to start this story, because what happened here – if you like – was the very opposite of democracy. Democracy is the right of people to choose the way they’re governed. The Saxons had no choice. The Normans came here, and they conquered England at the point of a sword.

Eight miles north east of Pevensey is the hill where the actual Battle of Hastings took place. The Saxons were up there on that ridge, armed mostly with axes, behind by a solid, defensive shield wall. The Normans had cavalry, and they rode in wave upon wave up the hill, hurling their lances, but the Saxon shield wall held until late in the day, when the Saxons got overconfident, and they broke ranks, and they pursued the Normans back down the hill: bad move. The Normans wheeled round, crashing into the now-defenceless Saxon lines. And it was all over – one in the eye for Harold.



These people are re-enactors. They learn about the past by acting it out. They show Norman and Saxon battle tactics. But also they put on displays of life in Saxon times, and that interests me, because I want to find out how the arrival of the Normans changed the lives of ordinary Saxons.

Was life much different, for the Saxons, before and after the Conquest? There were fields to plough, food to cook, taxes to pay. How much difference does it make, if one lord is replaced by another? How much difference does it make to whom you pay your taxes? But that's to underestimate the scale – for the Saxons – of this disaster.

I'm following the route taken by William as his army moved north, circling London, mopping up Saxon resistance. And along the way you can still see grim reminders of the oppression of the Saxon people. You find them in the centre of towns, you find them out in the countryside; they built five hundred of them in all across England. I'm talking about Norman castles.



This is what's left of Pleshey Castle in Essex. And it's typical of the motte and bailey castles the Normans built, at speed, in the early years of Conquest. That's the motte. It's basically just an earth mound, it would have had a wooden tower on top, and this is the bailey, with earth ramparts as a first line of defence. And this is where they'd have had blacksmiths, and pig sties, and stables for the horses.

It's at a place like Pleshey you sense the control the Normans achieved. From here they commanded the landscape in every direction.

The bottom line is, you don't need castles like this if you're at peace with the people you rule. The Saxon lords who'd ruled England before the Conquest, they built their manor houses down there amongst the villagers; there wasn't the same sense of tension. Ruler and ruled, they were all Saxon alike; they'd lived together for generations. But with the Normans, the separation between ruler and ruled was so much more visible. The Normans were up here, a foreign, conquering power; the Saxons were down there, and for the Saxons these castles were like a constant reminder of their own powerlessness.

Did the Saxons fight back? Of course they did. In the South West, the Fens, the borders of Wales. But resistance was met with savage reprisal. The Saxon Chronicles describe the scenes from 1069, when Yorkshire rose in rebellion.

William came here, we're told, consumed with anger. And he 'harried' the land, "killing the innocent alongside the guilty". Saxon food stores were torched, herds were butchered, crops were destroyed. Saxons that escaped death at the point of a Norman sword died of famine and disease in the months that followed. There were corpses littering the ground; apparently there was no one left to bury them.

England had never seen a King as powerful as William the Conqueror. This was a new kind of absolute royal control: control of people, and control of land.

The reason that William was so powerful, was that according to Norman custom, all the land was concentrated in the hands of the king. All England, now, was William's, by right of Conquest. And he gave out gifts of land to the bishops, and to the barons who'd helped him fight – but they only

owned that land in the king's name. And as a kind of rent they owed William loyalty, and knights and footsoldiers to fight for him in times of danger. So it was his very control of the land that kept William strong.



This is Richmond Castle in Yorkshire, begun in 1070, a year after William's "harrying of the North". The Normans, now, were building in stone; they were here to stay.

In 1086, a year before he died, William the Conqueror commissioned a survey of the land of England, the Domesday Book. It listed the contents of every acre in the kingdom: every house, every

barn, every sheep, every cow, every pig. William the all-powerful was doing his sums, establishing the worth of his kingdom.

This, then, is the starting point of our story – a country ruled by an all-powerful king, and a gulf between ruler and ruled. How and when in the centuries that followed was the power of kings brought into check?