

A Rhyming History of Britain

James Muirden

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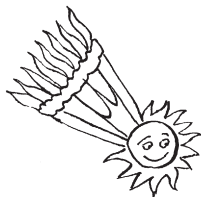
Extract

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House of Normandy 1066—1154



Charlemagne r. 771–814

The Normans were a Nordic race
In urgent need of living-space,
Who grabbed, without a word of thanks,
Some land belonging to the Franks
(They'd swept right through the whole domain
Of Gaul, urged on by Charlemagne).
The Frankish kings, to their dismay,
Saw other districts break away,
Creating Flanders, Anjou, Maine,
And also wealthy Aquitaine.
From now on, these French realms will be
A part of Britain's history.

King Harold had big problems looming.
In Norman shipyards, trade was booming,
And up north there was nervous talk
Of Nordic plans to capture York:

Harold Hardraada

Harold, the king of Norway (who
We'd better label Harold Two),
Had teamed up with the younger brother
Of Harold Number One (the other).

Tostig Godwinson

The heavens themselves would underline
These portents with a fearful sign:

A comet, which shone out so bright
They screened a special *Sky At Night*.

Halley's Comet Apr 1066

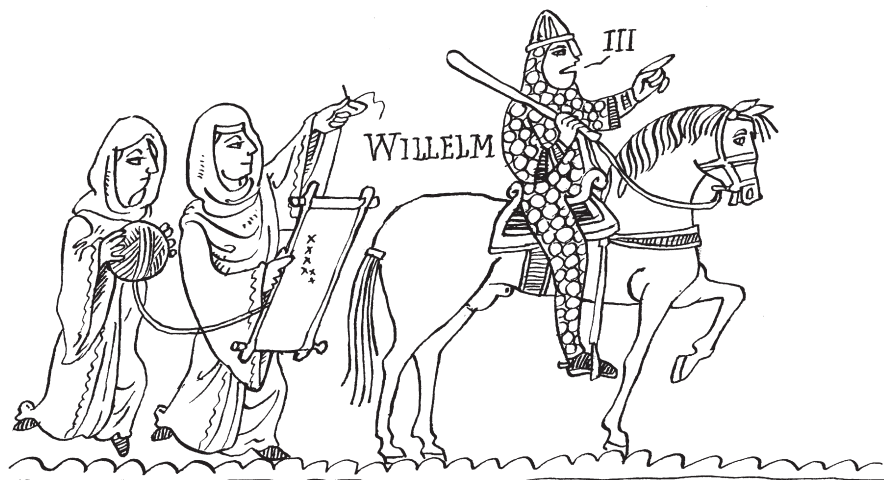
Then came the news that Harold Two
Had taken York, so off One flew
(That's metaphorical, of course —
It took about a week by horse)
To play out this dramatic round
At Stamford Bridge, a neutral ground,
Collecting players on the way.
Against all odds, he won the day;
But they were hardly in the shower
When word arrived that William's power,
Landed near Hastings, must be crushed.
A pint or two, and off they rushed.

Battle of Stamford Bridge 25
Sep 1066

Pevensey Bay 28 Sep 1066



It may sound as if William made
That shrewd decision to invade
When Harold's army was up north –
The perfect time to venture forth.
In fact, he didn't have much say.
His ships would only go the way
The wind was blowing; if it faltered
They stopped; or (much worse) if it altered,
His expeditionary force,
Blown on to quite a different course,
Might now invade, thanks to the weather,
A different country altogether.



As soon as Harold's lads got back
 He launched a desperate attack,
 At Battle, quite a way inland,
 Where William's army made its stand.

The butchery went on all day.

14 Oct 1066

How Harold fell, we cannot say —

The 'arrow in the eye' could be

Unwarranted embroidery.

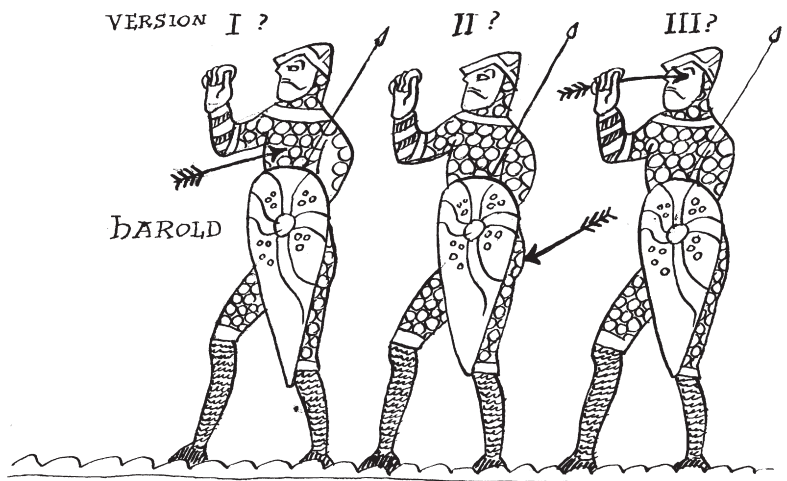
Bayeux Tapestry scenes 71-2

His mother, it was later told,

Offered his corpse's weight in gold.

'He isn't worth it,' William said:

'Get something for the house instead!'



WILLIAM I 1066–87

King William wanted to create
An adjunct to the Norman State.
At Westminster, on Christmas Day,
He was crowned king; but on the way
He made clear his innate desire
To set each place he passed on fire.
Wherever his lieutenants went
Their dedicated efforts sent
Flames (and insurance costs) sky-high,
No doubt attracting passers-by,
To see what quadruped or chicken
Had been thus rendered finger-lickin'.

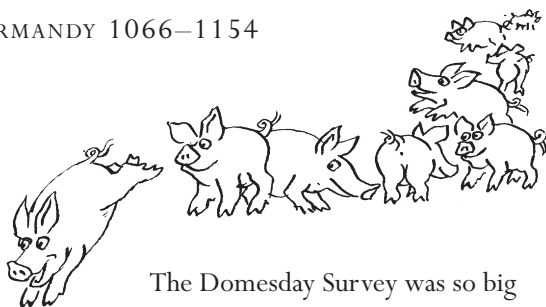
He knew he was the enemy
Of Saxon aristocracy:
The earls he banished in disgrace,
And Norman barons took their place.
Each one of these was told to build
A castle, which the owner filled
With knights (and paid their keep, of course),
Creating a repressing force
At the disposal of the king,
Which hadn't cost him anything.
But though rebellion could be scotched,
Armed barons needed to be watched.

The Tower and the Domesday Book
 Were major tasks he undertook.
 Beside the Thames he found a site,
 With river views to left and right
 And water buses on the hour,
 On which he built his famous Tower.

Completed before 1100

Though called White, it's a dirty brown –
 A high-rise block just out of town;
 Though on his visits, he'd prefer
 To stay with friends in Winchester.
 The Tower would be used by kings
 To house all sorts of awkward things.





1085–86



Kept in the
Public Record
Office

The Domesday Survey was so big
It counted every single pig
South of the Tees: this work was done
In twelve months flat. It was begun
Because he felt he really ought
To have meticulous report
Of what land everybody held,
Which set their dues in tax or 'geld'.
The two books (one was not enough)
Fall in the class of weighty stuff:
Page after page of Latin screed
That's quite impossible to read.

9 Sep 1087

