DOMESDAY

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Northumbria 367–867

DOMESDAY

1,000 MILES ON FOOT THROUGH THE ENGLAND OF THE NORMAN CONQUEST

MAX ADAMS



First published in the UK in 2026 by Head of Zeus,
part of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (HB): 9781803284989; ISBN (ePub): 9781803284965

Cover design by Jessie Price
Typeset by Six Red Marbles India

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

MIX
Paper | Supporting responsible forestry
FSC® C018072
FSC
www.fsc.org

Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
Bloomsbury Publishing Ireland Limited,
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, D02 AY28, Ireland

HEAD OF ZEUS LTD
5–8 Hardwick Street
London, EC1R 4RG

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For the Crofts grandchildren:

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Caroline, Matthew
Simon, Charlotte, Timothy
Sophie, Isobel
Clare, John, Emma
Richard, Bill, Tom
Anya, Christian
Kate, Charles
Richard
Zenda, Scott, David
Andrew, Chris, Matthew

A French bastard landing with an armed banditti, and establishing himself King of England against the consent of the natives, is in plain terms a very paltry, rascally original.

It certainly hath no divinity in it.

Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* 1776

Contents

Introduction 1

PART ONE

SIGNS OF THE TIMES I – 1042–65 9

1. **Lincolnshire** 15

SIGNS OF THE TIMES II – 1065–66 55

2. **Northamptonshire** 61

SIGNS OF THE TIMES III – 1067–70 99

3. **Yorkshire** 109

SIGNS OF THE TIMES IV – 1070–73 143

4. **Gloucestershire** 149

SIGNS OF THE TIMES V – 1074–84 193

5. **Devon into Somerset** 199

PART TWO

6. **Worcestershire into Staffordshire** 243

SIGNS OF THE TIMES VI – 1085–86 287

7. **Norfolk** 293

SIGNS OF THE TIMES VII – 1086–88 331

8. **Kent into Sussex** 337

SIGNS OF THE TIMES VIII – 1088–1183 377

9. ***Boldon Book* – Northumberland and Durham** 381

Domesday on Location 419

Acknowledgements 426

Bibliography 427

References 432

Image Credits 435

Index 436

Introduction

There is nothing quite like *Domesday Book,* the national asset register and tax roll of William I, compiled in the last year of his reign, 1086–87. On its more than 800 vellum folios the names of 13,418 English places are recorded, many for the first time in their history. Often, on a display board or an enamelled plaque, a village boasts its antiquity by virtue of a *Domesday* entry. The existence of more than a quarter of a million householders is attested in its double columns. They are recorded in lists detailing their land-holdings or by the rents, taxes and services they owed to just over 200 men: their Norman lords, tenants-in-chief under the greatest landlord of them all, King William. In *Domesday*'s folios we come across beekeepers (16 of them), merchants (20), priests (1,027) and potters (5); but, by far the majority of the English population belonged to one of several grades of peasant. These ranged from what one might think of as minor squires or yeomen, down through the undifferentiated 'men of the *vill*' who dominate *Domesday* statistics, to smallholders, cottagers and slaves.[1] Then there are the enigmatic burgesses of the 150 or so places named in the survey as boroughs – town-dwellers with particular sets of rights, privileges and obligations. There are sheriffs, cast almost inevitably, even by King William's inquisitors, as self-serving mafiosi, and reeves,

the stewards who administered their lords' lands in their absence. *Domesday* statisticians estimate a total population, including women and children, of something like 1.5–2 million across the 34 English counties whose statistics were entered in the book.

Domesday Book was compiled after the expedient purpose of the survey – an asset register in preparation against invasion – had lost its immediate relevance. But administrators, the king's treasury and his tenants-in-chief, secular and ecclesiastical, quickly saw its value as a document of high legal standing, to which appeals and claims might be addressed. Reference to the book is first found in a charter of 1099–1101, in which it is called *Liber regis*, the 'king's book'. In the twelfth century, it was sometimes known as the *Liber de Wintona*, 'the book of Winchester'.[2] Historians have identified the date by which it had acquired its popular English name in a late-twelfth-century treatise on the Exchequer by its then treasurer, Richard fitzNeal. He wrote:

> The natives call this book Domesday, that is, the day of judgement. This is a metaphor: for just as no judgement of that final severe and terrible trial can be evaded by any subterfuge, so when any controversy arises in the kingdom concerning the matters contained in the book, and recourse is made to the book, its word cannot be denied or set aside without penalty. For this reason we call this book the 'book of judgements', not because it contains decisions made in controversial cases, but because from it, as from the Last Judgement, there is no further appeal.[3]

From the early thirteenth century, when the royal treasury was moved from Winchester to Westminster, the two volumes of the book were kept in London, unless they were carried in the chancellor's baggage train on his travels through the country. They were removed twice in the twentieth century: in 1918–19,* when they were taken for safe-keeping to Bodmin Prison in Cornwall; then again in 1939–45,

* Because of increasing air attacks on London.

when they were kept at Shepton Mallet Prison in Somerset. They now reside for the most part in the vaults of the Public Record Office at Kew. Various extracts have been made from time to time and the volumes have been rebound on more than one occasion. Very occasionally their folios are still consulted for legal precedent.

Nothing on the scale of the *Domesday* survey was again attempted by an English royal administration, despite the state's assiduous gathering of information on everything from land ownership to legislation to manorial court judgements, coroners' inquests and much more besides. The first comprehensive modern land registry survey, covering England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland, was undertaken in 1872–74. Entitled the 'Return of Owners of Land', it records ownership by size of holding and estimated yearly rental income, although it does not record the location of the lands it lists. Like *Domesday*, it was conceived on a county-by-county basis, sub-divided by landowners. It is sometimes known as the Modern *Domesday*.[4] In the following decades, the *Kelly*'s county and town directories compiled a level of detail about the life, commerce and administration of England's *Domesday* Counties that historians of the Conquest can only dream of. And, since 1801, a census of the British population has been taken every ten years.

As a source of social, legal and fiscal history, *Domesday Book* is unmatched. But it is also frustrating. It is, in the first place, incomplete: lands north of the River Tees are not included and pages reserved for the key cities of London and Winchester are left blank, awaiting returns that never made the final compilation. It lists watermills, churches, fisheries and salt houses, but it does so inconsistently. And surely there were more than twenty merchants and five potters in eleventh-century England. *Domesday*'s language is tricky for the uninitiated, highly abbreviated and encoded in clerical Latin. Entries superficially describing the same circumstances vary in their terminology and coverage and, most importantly, they are divorced from the fieldwork data – the inquisition or inquiry returns – from which the book was compiled. Those returns, where they survive in some form for one or two counties, reveal a more

comprehensible picture of English society in 1086, and are useful in showing how the book was created.

To unscramble the statistics and recover a picture of *Domesday* England, its communities, infrastructure, economy and territorial landscape, is no straightforward matter. Several weighty volumes of invaluable *Domesday* geographies have appeared over the years to tease the book's raw numbers into some sort of order; even so, only fools and angels are entitled to say that they really understand it all.

Why, nearly 1,000 years after the Conquest, should I have set out to study *Domesday Book* and its people and places on the ground? Why walk close on 1,000 miles, one for every intervening year, through England's historic counties in order to visit, at the pace of a mule, some of its old villages, towns and churches? The answer, I hope, will become obvious soon enough; but some word about my choice of walks is necessary. Thirty-four English counties are described in *Domesday*. I had to be choosy about which nine or ten I thought would be most interesting or enlightening to walk through and to write about and I had, from the start, to think in terms of logistics. I wanted to explore counties that I hadn't walked through before during the research for *In the Land of Giants* or other books. I wanted a good geographical spread. I also needed to reflect the different treatment given to various counties in the *Domesday* folios. I read and researched enough to pick out some historical and architectural highlights and I tried to plan walks with topographic interest of their own: Dartmoor; the northern edge of the Fens; the South Downs and Weald and the industrial West Midlands. I narrowed the list down to eight walks through ten counties, knowing that I was thus doomed to miss much that was interesting and of special *Domesday* relevance. I added the 'beyond *Domesday*' *Boldon Book* walks by way of contrast and because that record, made a century after *Domesday*, fills out much interesting detail about the lives of English peasants under what is commonly called the 'Norman Yoke'. My own expectations of what I would find on my travels barely survived a week on the trail – a trail full of surprises and irritations, disappointments and minor triumphs – on which

I sketched my own *Domesday* England more by slow realization than by revelation. Like the book itself, the English landscape and its people are complex entities, not susceptible to simple analysis. I have come to know them a little better now.

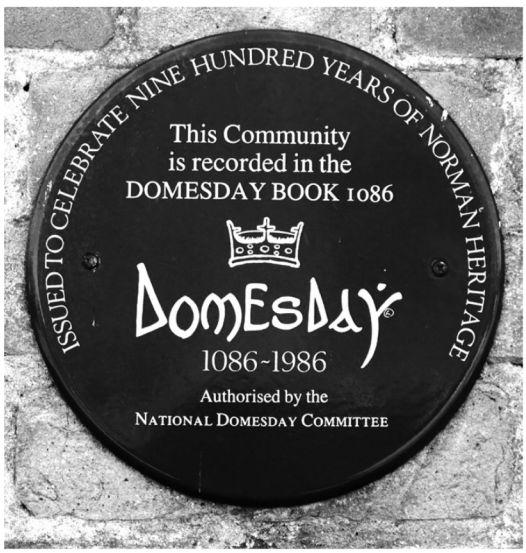
Our understanding of the Norman Conquest, the most dramatic social and political event in English history, is framed by the propagandist narratives of its victors and by the terse but telling twilight entries of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Above all, it is told in the landscape. The tale spun by that dazzling, cinematic embroidered strip cartoon, the Bayeux Tapestry, is all action: kings die; warlords hunt and fight and swear oaths on holy relics, strap on their armour, dash across land and sea to fight for glory and the ultimate prize of the English throne. A perjured, oath-breaking usurper, Earl Harold, gets his just rewards on the field of battle at Hastings; stout Anglo-Saxon defence is overcome by superior, God-blessed Norman military muscle; Duke William claims his promised inheritance; warriors die and carrion feed on their corpses; women and children flee destruction. Castles are built, cities burned; a new king rides off into the sunset, exiting stage right towards his triumphant coronation, before the tapestry's *Finis* is abruptly cut short, uncompleted.

The highly partisan political back-story and the bloody aftermath of these unforgettable scenes are told principally by two Norman historians, William of Poitiers (*c.*1020–90) and William of Jumièges (*c.*1000–after 1070). They are lit from a different angle by the doom-laden, fatalistic account in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Later historians had their say on the Conquest and were generally condemning of William's ruthless imposition of Norman rule, his evisceration of a sometimes over-sentimentalized Anglo-Saxon nobility and his rapacious bleeding of England's wealth to finance his wars and reward his followers.

The landscape itself provides a more dispassionate testimony of conquest – motte-and-bailey castles, Norman churches and cathedrals, stone bridges, walled borough towns and neatly planned villages built on the ruins of wasted *vills* – these sites are

their own text, to be read with patience and care. But the thousands of entries in *Domesday Book* and its satellite texts are, in the end, the most compelling of these narratives. They tell of the rewriting of ancient social contracts, of the suppression of peasant rights, of the ruthless extraction of profit from every acre of English land. They are the *damnatio memoriae* of the Anglo-Saxon state and its last king, Harold. They open narrow windows on the careers of arriviste Norman chancers and the dismal fates of English earls and thegns. And, what is more, they reveal much about the antecedent workings of Anglo-Saxon society and royal administration – the 'beyond' of *Domesday*.

Domesday Book is its own monument: the book of final judgement. But to read between the lines of its neat, coded Latin entries, to penetrate its hidden pathways, I had to explore its physical realities, its *vills* and manors, hundreds and shires, fields, woods and pastures, rivers and mill races; meet the latter-day counterparts of its radknights, reeves, cottars, burgesses and *ceapmen*. And I had to do it on foot.



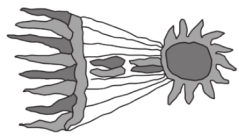
An English village's badge of honour and antiquity:
an entry in *Domesday Book*.

PART ONE



SIGNS:OF THE:TIMES I

Tempore Regis Edwardi – 1042–65



The days of King Edward the 'Confessor' were long, but troubled. He was born shortly after the turn of the first millennium to King Æðelred* II '*Unrede*' and his queen, Emma of Normandy. The complex dynastic entanglements of the last Anglo-Saxon kings of England, which were to shape the tumultuous course of England's history, start with Æðelred's two marriages: first to an English noblewoman, Ælfgifu of York, who bore him many children; then, after her death, to Emma, a daughter of the Norman Count of Rouen. Of Ælfgifu's six sons, just one, Edmond 'Ironside',† would rule England – and only very briefly. Emma gave Æðelred two more sons, Edward and Ælfred. But after Æðelred's death in 1016 and Edmund's few months on the throne, the kingdom was seized by the Danish prince Cnut 'the Great' at the head of a great Viking army. Princes Edward and Ælfred and their sister Godgifu fled to the Continent; the widowed Queen Emma stayed behind and expediently married the new power in the land.

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* The Old English letter ð or 'eth' is pronounced like the voiced 'th' in that.

† Born to Ælfgifu in about 960, succeeded his father in April 1016 and died, possibly poisoned, in November of the same year.

King Cnut's nineteen-year reign (1016–35) saw the consolidation of royal power in four great earldoms, whose lords had once been kings in their own right: Wessex, Mercia, Northumbria and East Anglia. Through military successes he was able to extend his rule to Denmark and Norway and, for a while, to Scotland. Having paid his Viking mercenaries off with a huge one-off tax – the Danegeld – of £80,000, he restored something of the historic legal division between 'Danish' and English regions either side of Watling Street and the River Lea. He maintained a standing army and fleet, supported through a *Heregeld* or 'Army-tax'. Poacher-turned-gamekeeper par excellence, he oversaw an increasingly sophisticated royal administration and gained a reputation as a protector of the interests of the Church. Like all successful medieval kings, he assiduously maintained networks of patronage by endowing his favoured lords – many of them Scandinavian – with estates and privileges.

For half a decade after Cnut's death in 1035, England reaped a whirlwind of dynastic complexities. The king was succeeded in Denmark by his and Emma's son, Harðacnut (1035–42). In England, Harold 'Harefoot', Cnut's son by a previous wife, became a regent for his older half-brother. Æðelred's sons Ælfred and Edward separately returned to England after their long exile. A brief and unsuccessful attempt by Edward to raise an army against Harold, at Emma's invitation, was overshadowed by the appalling fate meted out to his younger brother. Prince Ælfred was arrested by Earl Godwin of Wessex and handed over to the regent; was blinded with red-hot pokers and died from shock, or sepsis. Edward returned to the Continent; Harold 'Harefoot' was chosen as king at a council or *Witan* held at Oxford in 1037 and expelled his stepmother Emma.

King Harold died three years later and his half-brother Harðacnut journeyed to England as undisputed king. A year later, in 1041, he invited Edward to return and, having no children of his own, seems to have made him his heir presumptive. When Harðacnut died in a convulsive fit in 1042, Edward, last surviving son of Æðelred II and great-great-great grandson of the legendary Ælfred of Wessex,

succeeded to the throne of England. Accompanied by Earls Godwin of Wessex, Leofric of Mercia and Siward of Northumbria, Edward was crowned at Winchester on Easter Day 1043. He confiscated his mother Emma's estates and 'an indescribable number of things of gold and silver, because she had been too tight-fisted with him'.[1] Beneath these surface tensions lie murkier political waters, now obscure.

If the new king, aged forty, came with impeccable lineage, he lacked the close relationships born from fighting alongside his chief men in battle or sitting in council with them; none of them had served his father. Earl Godwin of Wessex, the most powerful of them, had delivered up the new king's brother to a most horrible fate. A succession of uncontrollable natural events – a famine that led to a crippling rise in the price of wheat; a severe winter causing many deaths among people and livestock; a destructive earthquake and wildfire – cannot have inspired much confidence in the king. Rumours that King Magnus of Norway was planning an invasion forced Edward to raise a fleet at Sandwich.

The rules of political diplomacy are unvarying. Nine years after his accession, Edward married Godwin's daughter, Edith, sealing an alliance with his most powerful earl. Godwin's sons gradually took vacant earldoms as an older guard passed on: Swein Godwinson in the south-west Midlands; Harold Godwinson in East Anglia. Godwin himself was lord of all the lands from Cornwall to Kent in the South. Earl Leofric in Mercia and Earl Siward in Northumbria formed an independent bloc. Royal administrators and senior clerics were drawn from old English families, from Scandinavian stock and from a group of Continental acquaintances with whom Edward had spent much of his early life in exile, under the protection of Robert, duke of Normandy. That tensions existed between these parties is evident; that Edward the 'Confessor'* had

* In contradistinction to his uncle, King Edward 'the martyr' (*c.*962–978). The Confessor may have won a reputation for saintliness, but he died in his bed.

produced and would produce no heir raised the stakes in the game. These explosive tensions would be played out in the 1050s.

The incident that tipped the uneasy balance of power in 1051 was the visit of Count Eustace of Boulogne to the royal court. On his return home, his party billeted themselves on the town of Dover. There was a fight; a Dover man was wounded but killed his attacker; Eustace's men took their revenge and the resulting mêlée left a score of dead on both sides. The king ordered Godwin to exact retribution from his men in Dover; Godwin refused, rapidly assembling an army and confronting the king at Gloucester, demanding that he hand Count Eustace over to him. Mercian and Northumbrian levies immediately marched south in defence of the king. There was a stand-off; Earl Godwin and his sons were sent into exile; Queen Edith (Godwin's daughter) was deprived of her estates and treasure.

The following year, Godwin returned to England with a large force. There was a further stand-off, this time from opposite banks of the Thames at London – the river bristling with ships – and a truce was declared. Many Frenchmen were outlawed; the earls' lands were restored to them, as were the queen's to her. It seems unlikely that such a fragile peace would have held, had Godwin not died after a stroke in 1053 – some said it was divine punishment for his betrayal of the king's brother a decade and a half before. He was succeeded as earl in Wessex and the South by his son Harold, then aged about thirty. From that time, Harold Godwinson's rise to dominate the political and military landscape in England seems, in retrospect, almost inevitable. He won a reputation as a great warrior in wars against the Welsh and the lands over which he ruled as a satrap were vast. His brother Gyrð succeeded him as earl in East Anglia; another brother, Tostig, was made earl in Northumbria on the death of Earl Siward; the youngest, Leofwine, held Kent, Essex, Middlesex, Hertfordshire and Surrey. In some quarters Harold's sister, Queen Edith, was thought to wield unhealthy influence over the king in the elevation of her brothers.

A thousand years of debate among historians, from contemporaries onwards, has failed to resolve the question of King Edward's

intentions for the succession. The only surviving legitimate male heir of King Æðelred, known as Edward the 'Exile', died shortly after his recall from the Continent in 1057. The Norwegian king Harald 'Hardrada' believed he had a claim via Harðacnut; Duke William of Normandy (born *c.*1028) believed he had a claim as grandson of Edward's maternal uncle, Richard II of Normandy. In England, ancient precedent dictated that kings were elevated by election among royal councillors, meeting as the *Witan*. Norman historians, writing in the aftermath of the Conquest, spun a narrative that Edward had promised William the throne as far back as 1051. Whatever the truth of that claim, there seems little doubt that in 1064 Earl Harold Godwinson was coerced into supporting it.

The English historian Eadmer of Canterbury (1060–1126) believed that Harold crossed the Channel to Normandy with his armed retinue and a substantial treasure in that year, in order to ransom his youngest brother, Wulfnoð, who had been sent to Duke William's court as a hostage after the civil conflict of the early 1050s.[2] His ship having been blown off course, Harold found himself taken prisoner by Guy d'Abbeville, from whose custody he was bailed by Duke William. Harold consequently found himself at a diplomatic disadvantage and poor, having had the ransom money taken from him. It was during this sojourn at William's court that Harold was said to have promised William the crown when Edward died, swearing on holy relics that William later wore into battle against him. The French narrative says that Harold was expressly sent to William to offer him the throne.

In 1064, England's political structures lay under great tension, with an ageing, weakened and heirless king in his last days; great hereditary satraps ruling semi-independently in the former Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and eager rivals, armed to the teeth, watching and waiting in the wings from overseas. But the non-civil war of the 1050s, during which open, destructive conflict had been avoided, had shown England's political robustness, built on the foundations of half a millennium of institutions functioning much as they were intended. England was wealthy in resources and produce. Royal

administration was sophisticated and operationally effective, from earldom down to county, to hundred and *vill*, each member of this caste-ridden society knowing his or her place through bonds of patronage, protection and service built on the bounty of its fields, meadows, woods and waters. The Church provided a parallel hierarchy of metropolitan, diocesan and parochial priesthood, wealthy religious houses and a literate clergy that functioned in many respects as a civil service.

If the king was childless, he had a natural heir in Earl Harold, even if his elevation would not have been supported unequivocally by the earls of Mercia. But if England's political and religious institutions were robust, its fighting capabilities were absolutely unprepared – tactically, technologically and logistically – for the dual overseas onslaught to come.