

**WILLIAM
THE CONQUEROR
(1027-1087)**



**By
G. W. Prothero**

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Chateau de Falaise

WILLIAM I., KING OF ENGLAND, surnamed the Conqueror, was born in 1027 or 1028. He was the son of Robert, Duke of Normandy and Herleva, daughter of Fulbert, a tanner of Falaise. When he was about seven years old his father, intending to go on pilgrimage and having no legitimate sons, proposed him as his heir. The great men of the duchy did homage to the child, and a year later (1035) his father's death left him to make good his claim. Anarchy was the natural result of a minority. William's life was on more than one occasion in danger, and several of his guardians perished in his service. At the earliest possible age he received knighthood from the hands of Henry I. of France, and speedily began to show signs of his capacity for government.

In 1042 he insisted that the "truce of God" should be proclaimed and observed in Normandy. When he was about twenty years old his authority was threatened by a general conspiracy, which spread through the western half of his duchy. An attempt was made to seize him at Valognes, and he only escaped by riding hard all night to his own castle at Falaise. Bessin and Cotentin, the most Norman parts of Normandy, rose in rebellion. William sought and obtained aid from King Henry, and completely defeated the rebels at Val-es-Dunes near Caen (1047). The battle was but a combat of horse, but it decided the fate of the war and left

William master of his duchy. The debt which he owed to Henry was repaid next year. War broke out between Geoffrey, Count of Anjou, and Henry (1048), and William came to his suzerain's assistance. Alençon, one of the chief border fortresses between Normandy and Maine, which had received an Angevin garrison, was captured by the duke. The inhabitants had taunted him with his birth, and William, who had dealt leniently with the rebels after Val-es-Dunes, took a cruel revenge. Soon afterward Domfront, another important border fortress, fell into his hands.

In 1051 William visited England. Two years later he married Matilda, daughter of Baldwin, Earl of Flanders, and a descendant of Alfred. The marriage had been forbidden by a council at Rheims as uncanonical, and was opposed by Lanfranc, Prior of Bec. This produced a quarrel between Lanfranc and William, who ravaged the lands of the abbey and ordered the banishment of its prior. Lanfranc, however, soon came to terms with the duke, and engaged to obtain a dispensation from Rome, which, however, was not granted till 1059.

Strengthened by this alliance with Flanders, William showed himself more than a match for all his enemies. Henry, who had hitherto been for the most part friendly, now turned against him. After the suppression of some isolated revolts, William was threatened in 1054 by a great confederacy. His dominions were invaded by the forces of the French king, in combination with those of Geoffrey of Anjou, Theobald of Blois, and others. William remained at first on the defensive; then, falling suddenly on one of the French armies at Mortemer, in the north-eastern corner of his duchy, he cut it to pieces. This blow put an end to the war; Henry made peace (1055), and William took the opportunity of extending his dominions in a southerly direction. He built fresh fortresses and exacted homage from Count Geoffrey of Mayenne.

In 1058 Henry and Count Geoffrey made a final effort to crush their dangerous neighbor; but the effort failed, like those which preceded it. William again allowed the allies to enter and ravage his territory; but, while the French army was crossing the Dive at Varaville, he attacked and completely destroyed their rear-guard, which was cut off from the van by the advancing tide. Henry again made peace, and soon afterward died (1060). The death of Geoffrey of Anjou in the same year relieved William of his most formidable rival for the possession of Maine. Herbert

Wake-Dog, the lawful ruler of that territory, who had been dispossessed by Geoffrey, recovered his dominions on the latter's death. He at once "commended" himself to William, thus making the duke his heir. On his death in 1063, William took possession of Le Mans and the county of which it was the capital—an acquisition which extended his southern frontier nearly to the Loire, almost severed Brittany from the rest of France, and paved the way for the subsequent junction with Anjou.



It was apparently soon after this event, in the year 1064, that Harold, then Earl of Wessex (left), visited Normandy, and, according to legend, was entrapped into an oath to support William as heir to the English throne. When Harold was elected and crowned King of England (1066), William's first step was to send an embassy to him demanding the fulfilment of his promise. The purport of the demand is as uncertain as that of the pledge; but, whatever it was, Harold rejected it. The duke there-

upon summoned a council of his supporters, who advised him to call together an assembly representing the whole duchy. This assembly, a typical feudal parliament, met at Lillebonne. While acting together it appears to have opposed the scheme for the conquest of England which William laid before it, but its members were won over singly. He then made a compact with Tostig, the banished brother of Harold; he came to terms with the Emperor Henry; he conciliated Philip, King of France, by offering to hold England as his vassal; and—most important of all—he obtained the sanction of Rome.

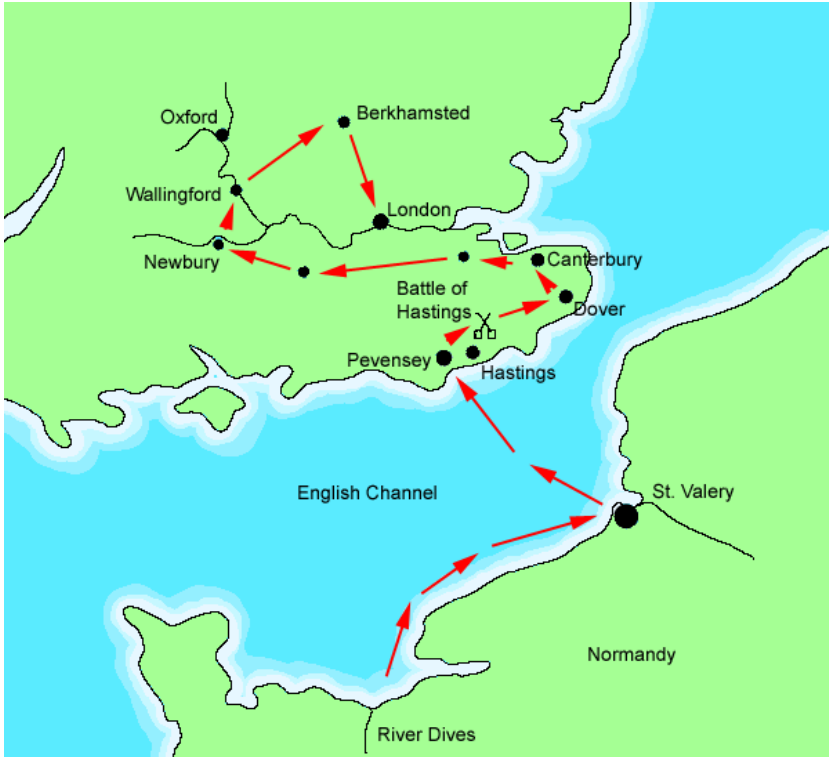
Pope Alexander II., not only issued a bull declaring William to be the rightful heir to the throne, but sent him a ring and a banner as symbols that the blessing of heaven was on his claim. Embarking at St. Valéry, William landed, on 28th of September, at Pevensey. The battle of Senlac or Hastings (October 14, 1066), was a decisive victory for the Duke of Normandy; but it took five years more to complete the conquest of England.

Early in 1067 William made a progress through the eastern and central parts of his new dominions. All that had as yet submitted to him was comprised in the old kingdoms of Wessex and East Anglia, and a small

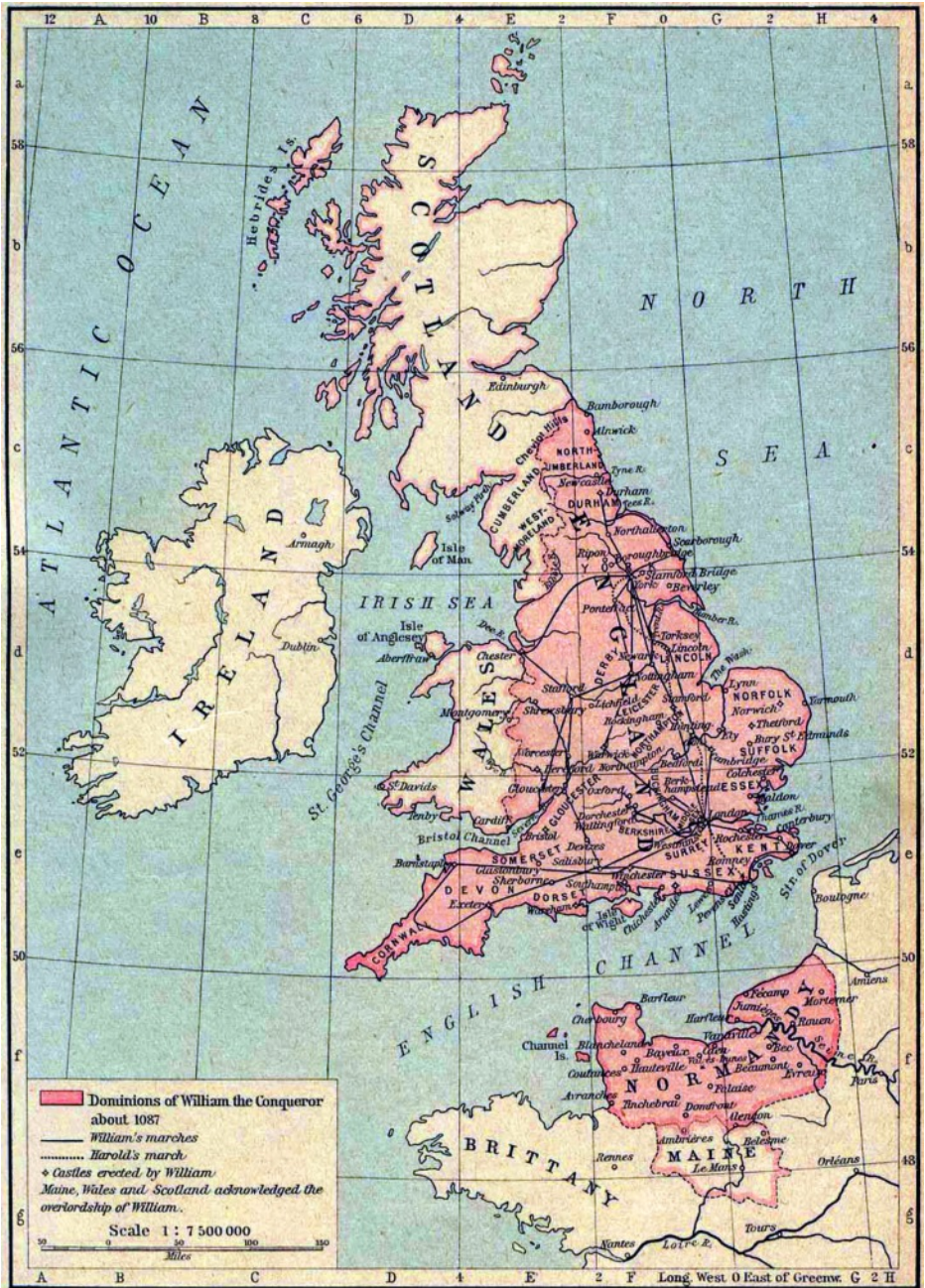
portion of Mercia. He at once secured his hold over these districts by the erection of fortresses in London, Norwich, and elsewhere. He received homage from the great men; he confiscated the lands of those who had resisted him; and, while keeping a large number of manors for himself, he granted others to his followers. Even those who had not resisted were regarded as having legally forfeited their title and had to submit to a re-grant on less advantageous terms. In March, 1067, William returned to Normandy, taking with him as hostages the Earls Eadwine, Morkere, and Waltheof.

The revolts which broke out in the north and southwest compelled him to return to England in December. Early in 1068 he marched on Exeter, as the centre of the western revolt. He took the town and built a castle, after which he subdued Cornwall, and then marching northward forced Bristol to submit. In the summer of 1068 there was a general rising of the North, of which Eadgar was the nominal head; but Eadwine and Morkere were the moving spirits. The insurgents were aided by Malcolm, King of Scotland. William had, however, only to show himself in order to put down the insurrection. He journeyed northward, by way of Warwick and Nottingham, to York, received the submission of Eadwine, Morkere, and Malcolm, and returned by way of Lincoln and Cambridge. His march was accompanied by heavy confiscations, and great castles, rising in places of vantage, rendered the Norman power at once visible and secure.

In the spring of 1069 a fresh revolt broke out. Robert of Comines, the newly appointed Earl of Northumberland, was slain at Durham; a Danish fleet entered the Humber, and a Danish army, joined by Eadgar and Waltheof, seized and burned York. The sons of Harold attacked Devon, while other isolated outbreaks took place in the west. These were speedily put down by William's lieutenants; and in the autumn the king himself, going northward a second time, recovered York, and harried Northumberland with ruthless deliberation. Returning to keep Christmas at York, he set out again in January, 1070, to oppose Malcolm, who had crossed the border in aid of the insurgents. He forced Waltheof to submit, and drove the Scottish king back into his own country; then, marching over pathless fells in the depth of winter, he reached Chester, took the town, and founded another castle.



**William landed in England on 28 September
1066, at Pevensey**



A Map of William's Domains

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