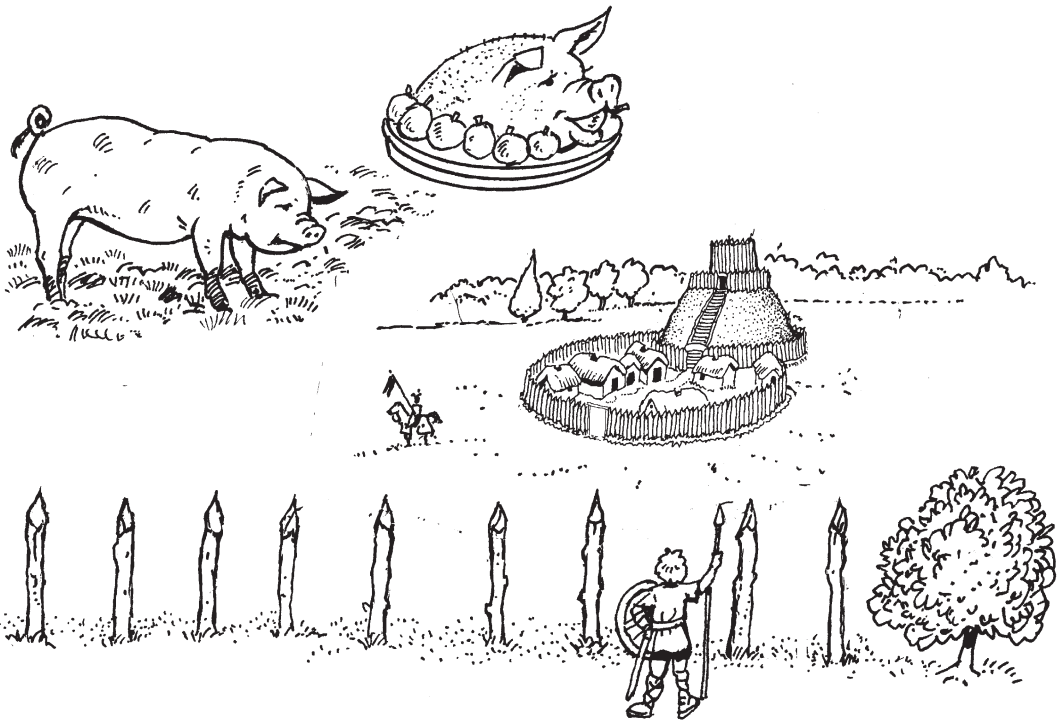


2

William the Conqueror and Norman Britain

When King Harold was killed at
Hastings, England got more than a
new king – it got a new language as
well!



Well, I never knew that . . .

. . . William the Conqueror christened Beachy Head

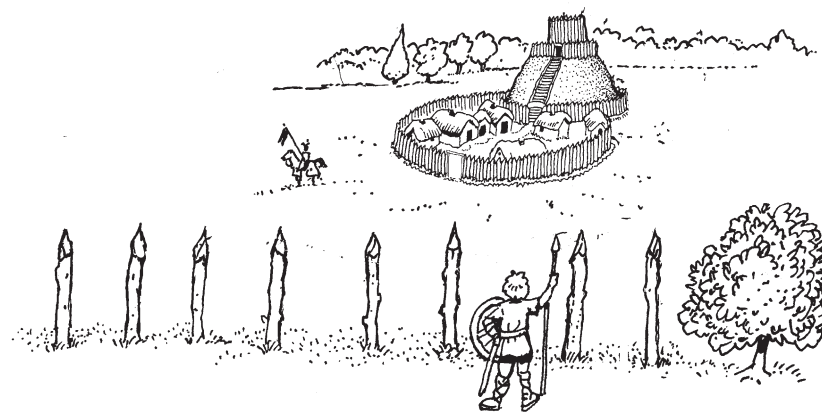
When Edward the Confessor died in 1065 the Witan ignored the old king's son, Prince Edgar, and instead chose his brother-in-law Harold Godwinson to be king – despite the fact that this man had sworn an oath to support the Duke of Normandy's claim to the throne. Though his territory was in northern France, this duke's recent ancestors had been Norsemen, from where we get the terms Norman and Normandy.

In the next year, 1066, that Norman duke, whom we know as WILLIAM THE CONQUEROR, invaded England, beating King Harold at the Battle of Hastings.

The invading Normans called the 500-foot-high chalky headland on the English south coast Beau Chef (meaning beautiful headland); over the years the name has been corrupted into BEACHY HEAD. Some other headlands are considered to have strong resemblance to a duck's beak and

are named accordingly, for example PORTLAND BILL, SELSEY BILL, etc.

William brought with him to England a prefabricated castle – a sort of flat-pack fortress. The outer fence was made up of a series of wooden stakes called 'pales' that were hammered into the ground to make a PALISADE. The Normans built more castles on this pattern as they gradually conquered the rest of Britain. Eventually Ireland was invaded and a line of these stakes was set up around the town of Dublin. The knights ensured that the area inside these stakes was safe, but outside the ring the fierce local tribesmen would attack anyone they



came across. This dangerous area was called BEYOND THE PALE – nowadays meaning outside the norms of civilization.

Incidentally, the Irish word *smidirin* means to break something into very small bits. We use it when we speak of something being ‘dashed to SMITHEREENS’.

Well, I never knew that . . .

. . . you cannot count on an earl, though you can on his wife!

The original term used by Anglo-Saxons to differentiate high lords from lower-status people was derived from the Viking word for hero, *jarl*, from which we get the word EARL. This title ranks after dukes and marquesses but ahead of viscounts. The word for a more agricultural person was *coerl*, pronounced ‘churl’, from which we get the phrase for someone who is acting in a rough and impolite way: CHURLISH. The continental equivalent of an earl was derived from the Latin word *comes*, through the French, giving us COMTE. This word was forced upon the English people by William the Conqueror and for a short time the word ‘earl’ was replaced by COUNT, the wife of a

count being called a COUNTESS. This change was very unpopular, and eventually the increasingly anglicized kings allowed the word ‘earl’ to return in place of the foreign title ‘count’. However, the wife of an earl is still called a COUNTESS. A significant remnant from this debate about the word ‘count’ is the renaming of the old shires as COUNTIES. Where William considered that the rulers of these counties needed greater executive power to react quickly and decisively – for example, in the northern parts of England away from his power base in the south – he designated powers of the palace (*palatinus* in Latin) to the local knights. Hence the name ‘County Palatine’ that is still applied to Cheshire, Durham and Lancaster. (There were others at various times, but only these three remain today.)

William the Conqueror also brought with him to Britain the old Viking tradition that the eldest son of a king would automatically succeed his father as monarch, known by its Latinized name as the concept of PRIMOGENITURE. This superseded the role of the Witan in choosing the king, so the Witan was disbanded, and primogeniture has remained part

of English law ever since. Indeed, it is this law that states that Prince Charles should become our next King.

William the Conqueror was very fond of hunting and designated a vast tract of woodland and plain on the south coast as a new royal hunting park. This area was consequently called the NEW FOREST. He introduced an animal that had not previously been seen in this country to provide him with one of his favourite meats – venison. The deer was named after the colour of its coat, using an old word for a yellowy-brown colour, *fealhu* – hence FALLOW DEER. The same word gives us the term for a field that has been ploughed but has not been sown for crops and therefore remains earth-coloured: a FALLOW FIELD. In turn, the idea of a field not producing a crop for a year gives us the expression meaning a stretch of time that has not been productive: a FALLOW PERIOD.

Throughout medieval times, peasants were not allowed to kill or injure any animals in the King's parks (such as the New Forest), nor were they allowed to chop down any trees or bushes for firewood or construction. However, if branches

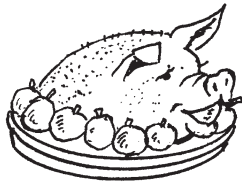
had blown or fallen down then they could be collected. Hence we get the word for an unexpected benefit: a WINDFALL. To reflect the fact that such windfalls could be picked up by commoners, a phrase developed using the nicknames for farmers and shepherds based upon the implements they used in their day-to-day work, a scythe-type tool for a farmer and a stick with a looped head for a shepherd: BY HOOK OR BY CROOK. The crook, of course, is still used by bishops to represent their role as SHEPHERD to the flock of their congregation.

As well as his deer, William also introduced another animal to Britain which was not native to the island. These animals were farmed within Norman castles for food and were very useful because, though small, they bred very quickly, so providing a continuous source of food. Unfortunately, before long, enough escaped to create wild colonies which are now the bane of modern farmers. The rapidity of reproduction which the Normans had found so useful gave rise to the phrase BREEDING LIKE RABBITS.

*Well, I never knew that . . .
 . . . peasants next door were always bores*

When the Normans took control of Britain they brought with them a Latin-based French language. This was imposed on the higher echelons of society, although the peasants continued using their Anglo-Saxon words, learning just enough of the new language to be able to follow instructions from their new lords. A stark reminder of this divide comes from words used to describe food. The poor farmer's vocabulary for animals is all based on Old English (Anglo-Saxon), whereas the lord's 'table vocabulary', used by those who ate the food in great halls, is based on Latin and French. The table below shows some of the differences.

<i>French</i>	<i>Nobles' English</i>	<i>Old English</i>	<i>Peasants' English</i>
mouton	mutton	sceap	sheep
boeuf	beef	oxa	ox
porc	pork	picga	pig
veel/veau	veal	cealf	calf



The Norman French vocabulary also conveyed superiority in other areas of life, in subtle ways that still apply today. For example, the word derived from the French equivalent for the Saxon word 'room', *chambre*, still implies a better class of room: CHAMBER. Similarly, the French *commencer*, 'to begin', gives us a word meaning the same thing but with more formal, even regal, connotations: to COMMENCE; and the French word *demander*, 'to ask', gives us the more forceful and authoritative word DEMAND.

When the Normans took over in England, Latin and the Norman version of French became the standard languages for law and royal proclamations. In fact, to this day new bills in Parliament are formally approved by the Queen in NORMAN FRENCH, using different words for different types (public bills, private members' bills, taxation bills, etc.).

The Saxon language did not have words ending in '-ion'. Therefore any word ending in '-ion' is probably derived from a Norman French word. In fact, if you pronounce just about any English word ending '-ion' with a French accent with

emphasis upon the 'i' and pronouncing it 'ee' you will be probably be understood in France. The two exceptions to this rule are 'translation' and 'fashion'.

'Boor' was an Old English word for a peasant, a person considered by the Norman nobility dull and not worthy of attention – an idea that lives on in our words BORE and BORING. 'Nigh' was the old word for nearby, and so we get the word for a peasant who lives nearby: 'nigh boor' or NEIGHBOUR.

In the early feudal system the lowest-status peasants were those who were owned by the lord of the manor and whose first duty was to work for him in the fields. The name for these people comes from the Latin word for farm, *villa*: VILLEINS. The derivation is via the standard Latin process of adding '-anus' to the end of a word to change the meaning to 'of' or 'belonging to' the root word. The '-anus' was often shortened to '-an', so that, for example, 'a person from Morocco' became A MOROCCAN. Corn from Egypt became EGYPTIAN CORN and, of course, the army of Rome THE ROMAN ARMY. So *villan* means 'belonging to the villa' – as these villeins did, being indentured serfs.

As the Black Death and other factors led to shortages in farm labour, the term began to be used mainly for undesirable and troublesome peasants, such as those involved with the Peasants' Revolt in 1381. Hence our use of the word VILLAINS.

The old phrase 'wile he' (from 'willan', 'to will'), meant 'does he will/wish something?' This was combined with 'ne' (from French meaning 'not') to give the opposite – 'ne will he', meaning 'he does not will/wish something. Hence we get the phrase meaning that something will happen whether or not a person wants it to: WILLY NILLY.

The Latin words *de intus* meant 'from within', which the Normans evolved into a single word, *deinsain*, meaning someone living within a city's walls. This word then combined with the word 'citizen' to create a new word, DENIZEN. The opposite, someone living outside a town's walls, was created from the Latin word for without, *foras*, which similarly evolved into *forain*, from which we get FOREIGN.

The Norman name for an area of the western Midlands was Salopescira. The Old English name for the same area was Scrobbesbyrigscir – meaning ‘Shrewsburyshire’, after its principal town. Thus, while we know it as SHROPSHIRE, someone who comes from the county takes their name from the Norman root and is called a SALOPIAN.

Well, I never knew that . . .

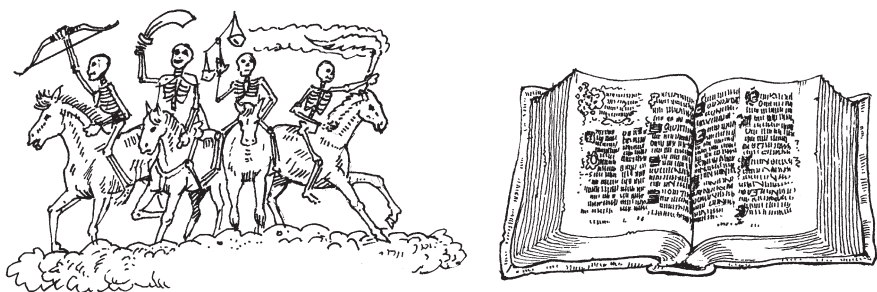
. . . the Norman Day of Judgement brought Britain to its census

Two years after becoming King of England, William the Conqueror was still concerned about Saxon unrest and potential revolt. In fact, while he was king he had fewer than 10,000 Normans with him and so his followers made up less than 1 per cent of the entire population of England. As a result he introduced a law that bells would be rung at eight o’clock every night, at which time all fires (*feux*) must be covered (*couvert*), all lights must be extinguished and all travel must cease. This came to be known as the CURFEW.



When William took control of England he wanted to raise money through taxes. However, there were very few records of who lived where and how much they owned. So he decided to run the country’s first comprehensive ‘census’, with his soldiers going to every town, village and castle in the land and writing down exactly who owned what. He wanted to convey to the whole population that there would be no escape from this census and that there would be dire consequences for anyone who tried to avoid it. England had officially been a Christian kingdom for centuries, and so he

named this census after the unavoidable 'Day of Judgement' described in the Bible, when every man, woman and child would be brought before God for a decision on their eternal fate, also known as the 'Day of Doom': THE DOMESDAY BOOK. The book itself still exists and can be seen at the British Museum in London.



It wasn't only the King who extracted money from his subjects. A story tells of how in the 11th century the wife of Leofric, Earl of Mercia, begged him to reduce the oppressive taxes that he was levying on his subjects. To dismiss her requests he came up with an absurd offer that if she were to ride through the streets of the city naked then he would do as

she requested. Incredibly, she agreed to the deal – at which point her embarrassed husband declared that no one would be allowed to look and that all windows on the route must be closed and barred; also, her long hair must cover her to protect her modesty so far as possible. The lady was called GODIVA and the city through which she rode was COVENTRY. Most of the townsfolk, appreciative of her efforts on their behalf, did as they were told and kept their windows shut: but one man called Tom tried to sneak a look without being seen. However, he was spotted and was punished by being blinded. Hence the phrase PEEPING TOM.



*Well, I never knew that . . .
 . . . the knight who used to hold the King's lance now only
 has to carry a flag*

In the Dark Ages and Middle Ages kings often had to be warriors in their own right, with personal strength and fighting skills. However, they would always have bodyguards and champions to protect them and often fight on their behalf at tournaments where it would be too dangerous and somewhat pointless for the King to fight for himself. One such role was formally established by William the Conqueror: a knight who would formally challenge the people of England to dispute William's right to be king. He was a formidable opponent and, not surprisingly, no one did! This challenge became part of the coronation ceremony right up until the accession of George IV in the early 19th century.

While the formal role and title still remain – held through hereditary succession all the way from the family of William's knight – the duties are now much lighter: simply to carry the Union Flag for the sovereign at the coronation (as most

recently at Elizabeth II's coronation in 1953). The role is called CHAMPION OF ENGLAND.

It was well known and accepted that William the Conqueror was the bastard son of Robert, Duke of Normandy. William's mother was a low-born girl called Harlette, one of his father's many female conquests. When in 1066 the dispute arose between William and Harold for the Crown of England the English abusively called all whores *harlets* or HARLOTS.

Interestingly, the Norman invasion also led indirectly to the survival of many local dialects in Britain. The Normans brought with them the Latinized version of French which was used by the King, his government and the new ruling Norman lords. The government needed standardized spellings for legal documents and so the official French-based language was regularized. This was not relevant for the peasants and the traders who dealt with them, and so they were allowed to continue to speak and even write in their own local ways, with the same words being spelt differently in different parts of the country.

When Caxton started printing books, literacy began to spread to the lower levels of society and so the standard spellings were largely applied to the local languages for the written word. However, there was still no need for the locals to give up the differences in their spoken language, which is why there is much more variety in the spoken word than the written word, and also why historically there has been an association of strong dialects with lower intelligence – because they would have tended to be used by the peasantry, or at least not by the Norman lords.