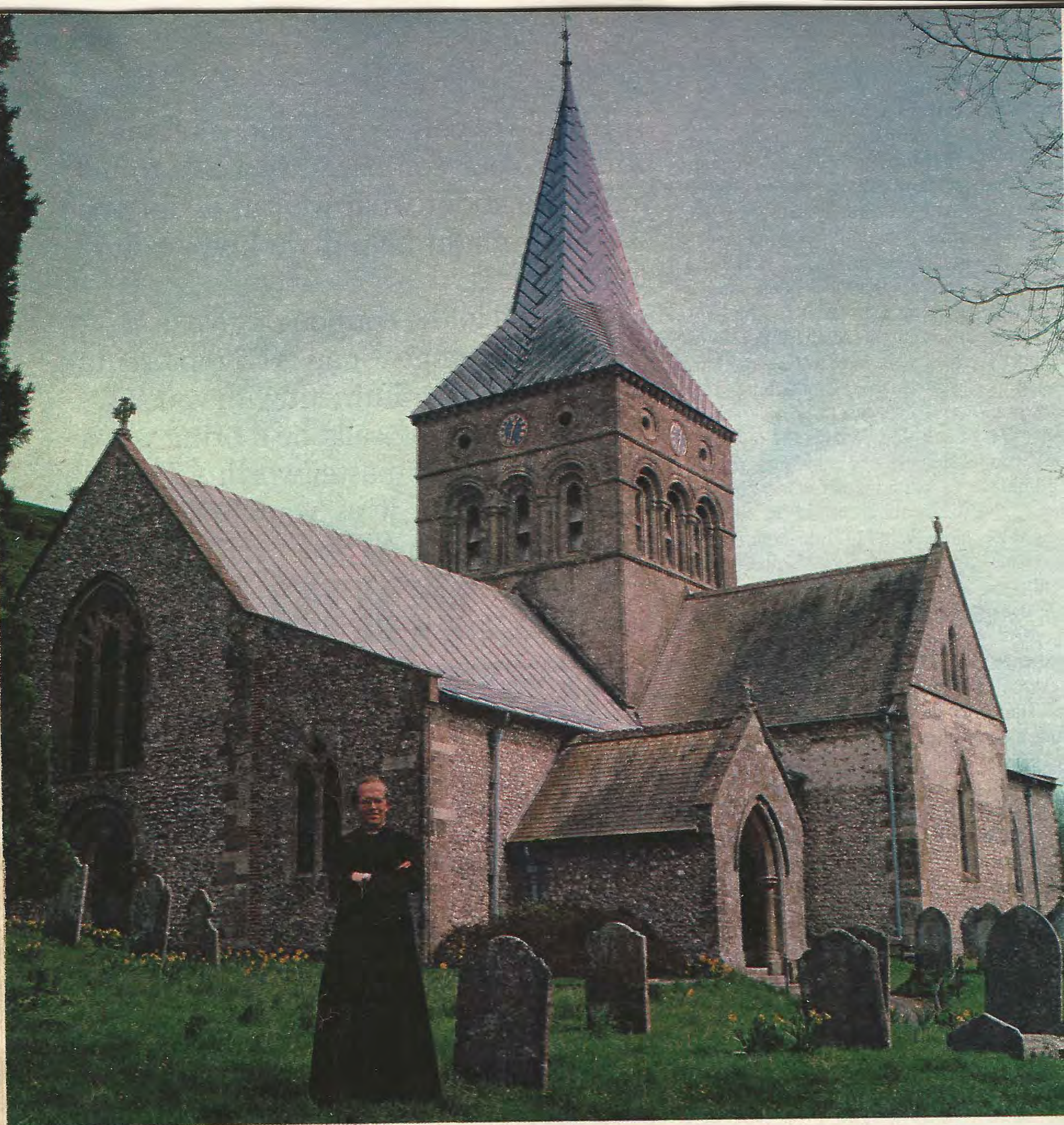


JAMES MERRELL

DOMESDAY

THE CONQUEROR WHO SHAPED ENGLAND

Nearly 900 years ago, William, the Norman king of England, ordered an extraordinary survey of the country he had conquered some 20 years earlier. William's Domesday Book – an astonishing piece of national stocktaking – was completed the next year. It recorded in minute detail who owned what throughout the land. To celebrate the 900th anniversary of Domesday, *The Sunday Times*, Winchester – William's English capital – and Hampshire County Council will present an exhibition "Domesday 900" opening next Easter. On page 40, we outline the plans for the celebration with details of school projects and valuable prizes to be won. Here we begin a profile of the king responsible for one of the world's great historical documents. Above and on later pages are photographs of the Domesday village of East Meon which will be shown at the exhibition in model form as it was in 1086

woodland at 10 pigs; fro...
16 in (East) MEON Hundred
(East) MEON. Archbishop Stigand held it before 1066 for the use of the monks; later he had it for his life-time. Then there were 72 hides; it paid tax for 35 hides and 1 virgate. Land for 6... ploughs. In lordship 8 ploughs;
70 villagers and 32 smallholders with ...
15 slaves; 6 mills at 40s; m...
at 200 pigs fro...
Value befo...

Profile by Professor R. Allen Brown
Portrait by Alan Manham

"If anyone wishes to know what sort of man he was, or what dignity he had or of how many lands he was lord – then we will write of him even as we, who have looked upon him, and once lived at his court, have perceived him to be." So begins what is surely the earliest profile of William the Conqueror, written soon after the king's death in the 'E' version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, compiled by a contemporary and presumably a monk at St Augustine's, Canterbury.

William was, we are told, "a very wise man, and very powerful and more worshipful and stronger than any predecessor of his had been". He was also "gentle to the good men who loved God, and stern beyond all measure to those people who resisted his will. In the same place where God permitted him to conquer England, he set up a famous monastery [Battle Abbey, Sussex, on the site of the Battle of Hastings] and appointed monks for it, and endowed it well. In his days the famous church at Canterbury [Christ Church, the cathedral] was built and many another over all England. Also this country was very full of monks, and they lived their life under the rule of St Benedict . . ."

As the chronicle proceeds we are shown a Christian prince, pious and victorious (ideally the two attributes went together), wise and stern, who ruled over Normandy, Maine and England; held, we are assured, Wales and Scotland under his sway; and would have conquered Ireland also had he lived longer. He kept good peace, an essential function of a ruler. "Amongst other things the good security he made in this country is not to be forgotten – so that any honest man could travel over his kingdom without injury with his bosom full of gold; and no one dared strike (or kill) another . . . And if any man had intercourse with a woman against her will, he was forthwith castrated."

In words which still echo across the centuries from an age when ceremonies mattered, we are told that he presided over his court and his realm and his principalities with the necessary majesty of an anointed king, God's vicar upon earth. "Also he was very dignified: three times every year he wore his crown, as often as he was in England. At Easter he wore it at Winchester, at Whitsuntide at Westminster, and at Christmas at Gloucester, and then there were with him all the powerful men over all England, archbishops and bishops, abbots and earls, thegns and knights." It was at Gloucester at Christmas in 1085, at one of these great crown-wearings which were the social and political high points of the year, that the king had "very deep discussion with his council about this country", and launched the Domesday survey.

It is an informative and authentic piece. Yet there are several qualifications which need to be made at the outset. First, it is very solemn as befitted the occasion, a kind of lying-in-state. One would like some glimpse of the conqueror in convivial mood – with his knightly companions as well as his monks and bishops, hunting as well as praying, dispensing drink as well as justice. Second, it is to be remembered that after 1066 the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, the principal and quasi-official source for the history of pre-conquest England, becomes inevitably more the voice of the defeated, so that the king depicted in its pages is more the reluctantly praised conqueror from overseas than he is an inspiring leader. Third, the monarch shown is in the autumnal fullness of his final maturity – old age, we may almost say, though there is nothing senile.

Conviviality, in fact, is hard to come by in contemporary writing about the conqueror. Indeed, a tract on his death (the *De obitu Willelmi*) insists upon his personal abstemiousness in drink and dislike of drunkenness in others, and though it is known to have taken its description almost verbatim from Einhard's *Life of Charlemagne* is not necessarily wrong on that account. We are given a glimpse, in a later and unsympathetic ⟶

hat accoun... arily wrong on ... is not necess... Charlemag...

William the Conqueror: an artist's impression of how he would have looked and dressed when he ordered the Domesday survey at Gloucester in 1085. Opposite: the Rev Peter Wadsworth in front of the Norman All Saints Church, East Meon

(Arab) source, of one of the other great Norman *conquistadores* of this age, Roger I of Hauteville, the "Great Count" of Sicily, rebutting unwelcome advice in council by lifting up his leg and farting. We also know that William Rufus, the conqueror's son and successor in England, could descend to a similar Rabelaisian humour. But if the conqueror himself ever did so we hear nothing of it in the generally reverential accounts and other evidence of his life at our disposal.

Yet if it is difficult to find the conqueror in his cups – and not a breath of sexual scandal attaches to him or his wife Mathilda – we certainly do not have to see him perpetually old, as is the fate of some historical, forever patriarchal, figures (notoriously his predecessor in England, Edward the Confessor). A full-length biography (though now lacking start and finish) by William of Poitiers – once the duke's knight, then his chaplain, and writing in about 1073 as archdeacon of Lisieux – shows him in the first, fine, careless rapture of his manhood, when all the world was young – youth on the prow if not pleasure at the helm. Poitiers relates, with obvious but proud exaggeration how, when the duke was knighted a tremor ran through all France, for armed and mounted he had no equal. "It was a sight at once both delightful and terrible to see him managing his horse, girt with sword, his shield gleaming, his helmet and his lance alike menacing."

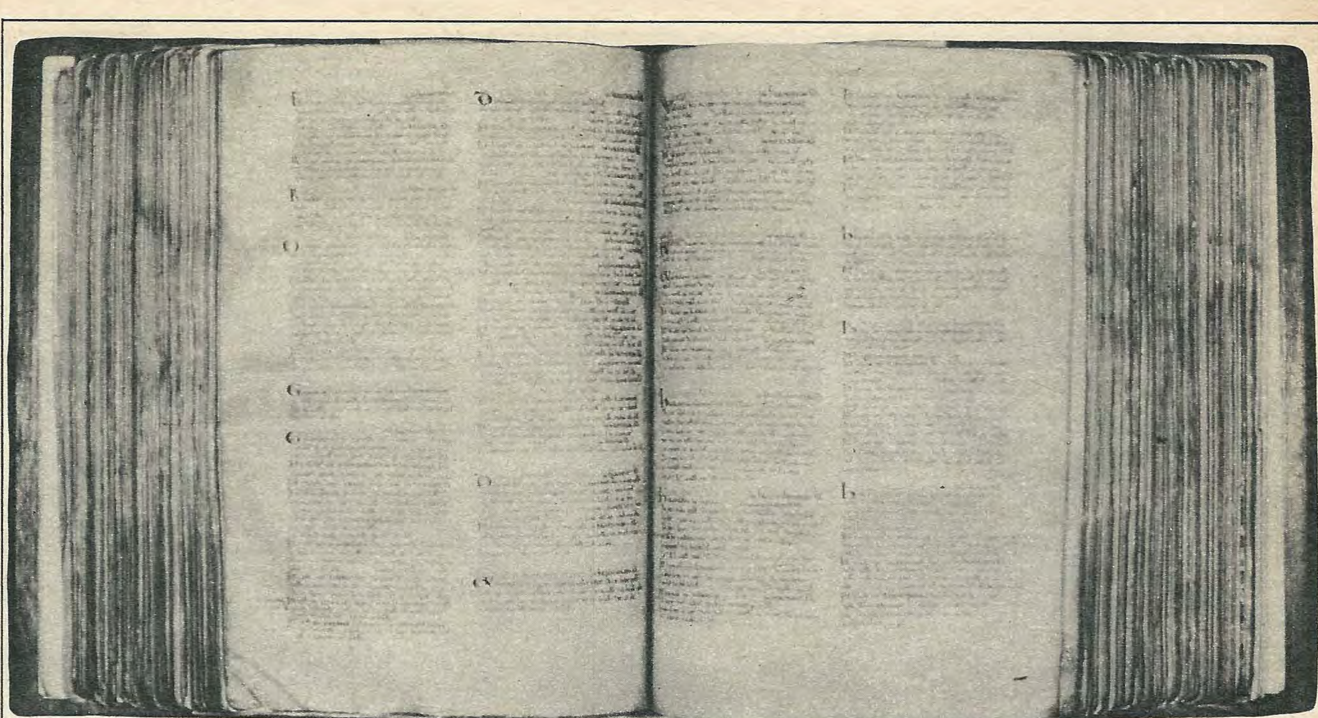
His courage was such that he had to be reprimanded by his suzerain, Henry I, King of France, for exposing himself to too much danger, and his admiring biographer illustrates this reckless pride with a number of military anecdotes of the sort which he, as a former knight himself, knew and appreciated. Thus once, probably in the spring of 1051, on campaign with the French king against Geoffrey Martel, Count of Anjou, the young duke, then in his early twenties, gave the slip to his contingent and, with four companions only, attacked an enemy squadron of 15 knights. He himself unhorsed their leader and pursued the rest for four miles.

Of the many instances of more controlled courage during his mature years, perhaps the best is William of Poitiers's story of the invasion of 1066 itself. As the Norman fleet crossed the Channel on the night of September 27, the duke's ship, faster than the rest, found itself alone at dawn with nothing in sight but sea and sky. The intrepid duke ordered the anchor to be dropped, sent a look-out aloft, and coolly ordered breakfast which he consumed "as if in his chamber at home". In due course the fleet caught up. As for leading from the front, the conqueror set such an example on the field at Hastings that three horses were killed under him during that day.

No prince, perhaps, has ever been more conditioned by his youth for the future which awaited him. His huge success has sometimes been too easily explained by declaring him "Fortune's Favourite", but there was little fortunate in his beginnings. Born at the castle of Falaise in 1027 or 1028, he was the love-child of Duke Robert the Magnificent and Herleva (Arlette was her pet name), whose father, traditionally represented as a tanner, may then in fact have been chamberlain in the ducal household. The boy was nominated and accepted as his father's heir when the duke went on pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 1035, and he succeeded to the duchy at the age of seven or eight when news reached Normandy of the duke's tragic death at Nicaea in July the same year.

In a society dependant upon personal lordship and rule, a minority could be politically lethal. William's succession was disputed and led to civil war in Normandy, and his premature accession was vitiated by the charge of bastardy which was now brought against him. (To this day French historians love to call William the Conqueror William the Bastard.) For Duke Robert the Magnificent had taken Arlette to wife "in the Danish manner" (*more Danico*) as opposed to Christian marriage (*more Christiano*), and this was beginning to matter in a Normandy first settled by Vikings in 911 but now less Scandinavian and more respectably Frankish. In the internecine wars of Duke William's minority ("while Mars the god of war rampaged, whole troops of warriors lost their lives in vain," wrote the Norman historian, William of Jumièges), three of the boy's own guardians were slain, one in his presence, and he himself was never safe. Only in 1047 when he rode victorious off the field of Val-ès-Dunes, near Caen, having overcome the most serious of the revolts against him, was he master of his duchy, aged 19.

All this and more accounts for what has been called his "precocious maturity". In the dying speech – a judicious summary of his reign put into his mouth by Orderic Vitalis – the king-duke is made to say that from his father's death in 1035 he had borne continuously the weight of arms for 52 years. Even after 1047 there were threats to be overcome and wars to be fought. His uncle, William, Count of Arques, rebelled against him – his castle of Arques-la-Bataille was beseiged and taken in 1052-3. Then William's own lord and suzerain, Henry I, turned against him and, in alliance with his neighbour ⋙→



The chronicles of the kingdom

The Domesday Book is one of the more astonishing survivals from the European Middle Ages and we show below how early writers reported the making of it. Its 834 folios, divided between two volumes, Large Domesday (above) and Small Domesday (right) is our most valuable source of information about the state of the nation in the late 11th century. Large Domesday covers most of England except for East Anglia and is written in the same clerkly hand from information gathered by commissioners in the shire courts. Small Domesday, which covers East Anglia, represents an "earlier" stage – the raw evidence collected in the shire courts which, but for the King's death in 1087, would no doubt have been edited and condensed like Large Domesday.

Anglo-Saxon Chronicle

[The king] sent his men all over England into every shire and had them find out how many hundred hides there were in the shire, or what land and cattle the king himself had in the country, or what dues he ought to have annually from the shire. Also, he had a record made of how much land his archbishops had, and his bishops and his abbots and his earls – and though I relate it at too great length – what or how much everybody had who was occupying land in England, in land and cattle, and how much it was worth. So very narrowly did he have it investigated that there was no single hide nor a yard of land nor indeed (shame it is to relate it but it seemed no shame to him to do) was one ox or one cow or one pig left out that was not put down in his record. And all these writings were brought to him afterwards.

Bishop of Hereford

In the twentieth year of his reign, by order of William, King of the English, there was made a survey of the whole of England, that is to say of the lands of the several provinces of England, and of the possessions of each and all of the magnates. This was done in respect of ploughlands and of habitations, and of men both bond and free, both those who dwelt in cottages, and those who had their homes and their share in the fields; and in respect of ploughs and horses and other animals; and in respect of the services and payments due from all men in the whole land. Other investigations followed the first; and men were sent into provinces which they did not know, and where they were themselves unknown, in order that they might be given the opportunity of checking the first survey, and if necessary, of denouncing its authors as guilty to the king.

Ely Inquiry

. . . the inquiry concerning lands which the king's barons made according to the oath of the sheriff of the shire, and of the barons and their Frenchmen, and of the whole hundred court – the priest, the reeve and six men from each village. They inquired what the manor was called, and who held it in the time of King Edward; who holds it now; how many hides there are; how many ploughs in demense; and how many belonging to the men; how many villeins, how many cottars; how many slaves; how many freemen; how many sokemen; how much woodland; how much meadow; how much pasture; how many mills; how many fisheries; how much has been added to, and how much taken away from the estate; what it used to be worth altogether; what it is worth now; and how much each freeman and sokeman had and has.

and enemy, Geoffrey, Count of Anjou, twice invaded the duchy, twice to be defeated at Mortemer (1054) and Varaville (1057). When the great challenge came in 1066, Duke William had never fought a battle which he had not won nor beseiged a fortress which he had not taken. He had long since become a war leader of renown, the respected leader of warrior aristocracy, a champion of the new chivalry, able to attract men to his service in the confident expectation of victory and rich rewards.

The warfare waged by the Normans of Duke William's day was of the latest kind – the *blitzkrieg* of the age – based on cavalry and castles. The former were the military and social élite. They dominated Normandy as they dominate the Bayeux Tapestry and of them and their like, Anna Comnena, daughter of the Eastern Emperor at Constantinople, was to write that the charging Frankish knight would pierce the walls of Babylon.

In that age, rulers were required to be war-leaders, and the higher you were socially the better you were expected to fight. But even in that militant, feudal society, great lords and princes had to be more than warriors. William certainly was that. He excelled in contemporary politics. As feudal prince he used his inherited regalian powers (Count of Rouen was his preferred title), his great wealth, and his power of feudal patronage to make himself the undisputed lord of all Normandy and almost to create a hand-picked aristocracy ever more closely bound to him by feudal bonds as well as sheer prestige.

Building on the firm foundations of his predecessors, it was William who finally shaped a unified Normandy, still a proudly conscious entity today in spite of modern post-war development, the Revolution of 1789, and, before that, some seven hundred years of rule by the Crown of France (and sometimes England). This was done by the penetration, colonisation and takeover of Lower or Western Normandy, led and directed by the duke from the new ducal base of Caen, a second Rouen. In the conqueror's time also, and before 1066, a feudal suzerainty or overlordship was imposed on Brittany to the west and Ponthieu to the north. By the same means, the county of Maine to the south was absorbed altogether in 1063 with the duke's son Robert as its count. In addition, alliance of a more modern kind was obtained with Flanders when, in 1051 or 1052, William married Mathilda, daughter of Count Baldwin V.

That marriage, carried out in the defiance of papal prohibition because of consanguinity, was a happy one. The only record of the conqueror's tears is when Mathilda died (1083). They lie now as they have always lain in their penitential foundations at Caen: she in the church of the Holy Trinity, the Abbaye aux Dames, and he in the church of St Stephen, the Abbaye aux Hommes. (Their tombs were later violated, his especially in the 16th-century Wars of Religion and at the Revolution, but are now restored. Modern examination of their bones shows William to have stood some 5ft 10in in height, while Mathilda is said to have been a remarkably diminutive 4ft 2in.)

DUNCAN BAXTER

THE DOMESDAY HERITAGE The Hampshire village of East Meon (top), target for *The Sunday Times* Domesday project, spreads itself beyond its Norman church under soaring hills which once formed a medieval deer park. Though only five miles west of bustling Petersfield, the village retains an ancient calm such as existed during the reign of William the Conqueror. Above left: the gable end of a 14th-century manor house testifies to the site of an earlier manor held in Harold's days by Stigand, Archbishop of Canterbury before the Conqueror replaced the Anglo-Saxon with a Norman priest. Where the village ends abruptly at its southeast corner (above right), the farming fields begin: now modern allotments, they were worked in the 11th century on a field strip system by the villagers for their lord and themselves

In any profile of this prince and his times the dimension of religion cannot be omitted. It is no longer fashionable to call the Middle Ages the Age of Faith – but they were, particularly the 11th century. If many of us now seek to live without religion, we do no service to the past to deny it then also. In founding their convents of St Stephen's and the Holy Trinity at Caen, William and Mathilda were not only making an act of personal penance for their marriage, but following the policies of their predecessors in reviving and enriching the Church in Normandy. A great ecclesiastical revival, led by the dukes, in fact reaches its apogee in the conqueror's reign. All over Normandy cathedral churches (and parish churches too) rose in the restored dioceses, and bishops stood beside the duke and his lay vassals in the government of the duchy. Yet the main investment and chief concern were in and with monasticism.

In the dying speech attributed to William by Orderic Vitalis, he speaks of the nine abbeys of monks and one of nuns founded by his ancestors which he had further endowed, and of the 17 abbeys of monks and six of nuns founded in his reign. "These are the fortresses by which Normandy is guarded." In his time the movement spread from the duke to his nobles and vassals, and in another passage Orderic (himself a monk of St Evroult) described how "the barons of Normandy, seeing the great zeal of their princes for holy religion, urged themselves and their friends to similar undertakings for the good of their souls".

Clearly there was nothing philistine about the Normans of the mid-11th century, and with the Church and with monasticism go art and architecture and learning. The Normans excelled in all these things as they seemed to excel in everything. Over it all the duke presided – the guardian, the patron, indeed the head of his Church, a pious prince of impeccable ecclesiastical credentials with whom not even Gregory VII, most abrasive of medieval popes (1073-85), could find serious fault.

It is not mere coincidence that the Norman ecclesiastical revival of this age marches in time with the Norman Conquest of England, or with those other Norman triumphs and conquests in far-off Italy and Sicily – or indeed with the whole Norman achievement of which it is a fundamental part. The Normans identified with their Church, their churches and their saints: here is found much of their inspiration and even motivation. They believed in the justice of their wars as the conqueror believed in ⋙→

LANDMARKS IN TIME Two fine old Hampshire houses (above) stand at the site of an ancient bridge over the River Meon. On the left, Forge Sound, a rare 14th-century aisled building, faces a second timber-framed cottage of the 1300s, with a 16th-century extension. The Domesday Book records "70 villagers and 32 smallholders" living in this village in dwellings that might have looked much like these buildings, though smaller. Right, a handsome 17th-century house with a medieval core. Such a building in William's day might have housed the steward of the lord's estate

DUNCAN BAXTER

The River Meon (left) runs through the village. It was diverted in the past to feed the six mills recorded in the Domesday Book. The river, which reaches the Solent above Gosport, acted as a lifestream to villagers in the 11th century, providing them with fish and flooding their meadowland. Researchers are now worming their way back through ancient maps and bishops' accounts to produce a picture of Domesday East Meon; just as this summer thousands of schools all over Britain will be turning back the clock in the search for their Domesday origins (details, page 40)

the justice of his claim to the English throne. As victory followed victory they began to see themselves as a chosen people fighting the good fight, and were in the van of the developing concept of Holy War which was to lead to the Crusade.

Spirituality and politics were entwined. The Normans fought and won in southern Italy as the allies of the Papacy, and Roger the Great Count received a papal banner after his victory at Cerami in Sicily against the Saracens in 1063. It is well to remember that William invaded England in 1066 also with a papal banner, and with papal blessing (of rather more consequence then than the backing of the United Nations today), to bring just retribution on the perjuror Harold and for the necessary reformation of the English Church. The Norman battle-cry at Hastings was "*Deus aie,*" (God help us), and they regarded their victory as the Judgment of God. One can get very close to the spirit of *Normanitas,* and the character of the conqueror who embodied it, not only among the superbly mounted knights on the Bayeux Tapestry and in Norman castles in England and Normandy, but also in the majestic austerity of their churches which still rise over the duchy (such as Jumièges, Mont-St-Michel, Caen, Cerisy-la-Forêt) and which were reproduced on an even grander scale in the English kingdom (Norwich, St Albans, Ely, Durham, for example).

It is always said that 1066 is the one date that all English people remember. If so, they presumably also remember Hastings and the Norman Conquest and William the Conqueror. There can be no doubt that this was his greatest single triumph – the conquest of all England (and the subsequent penetration into Wales and southern Scotland) by a Normandy scarcely larger than the English province of East Anglia. Yet this was no act of sudden crude aggression. It is to be set in the whole context of Norman achievement in this age, and, more precisely, of Norman expansion. The Norman Conquest of 1066 had long been preparing, and we may even wonder whether "conquest" is the right word for it. The late John Le Patourel recently wrote that "Norman expansion began as it went on; its origins were the origins of Normandy itself." The pagan Viking warriors who began the history of Normandy (the land of the Norsemen) by settling in and about Rouen and the valley of the Seine in 911, went on in the next two centuries to take over all of what becomes the duchy and the neighbouring county of Maine, to expand devastatingly into southern Italy and Sicily, into England, Wales and Scotland, and eventually to break out of the confines of Europe altogether as leaders of the First Crusade and founders of the crusading principality of Antioch in northern Syria. Though, of course, there were circumstantial differences between the Norman "conquests" of Normandy, Maine, England, Italy, Sicily and Antioch, the pattern and method is nearly always the same – a kind of takeover by aristocratic penetration, settlement and colonisation; the creation and exploitation of claims and rights; the imposition of lordship. The Norman "conquest" of England begins not in 1066 but in 1002 with the marriage of King Ethelred II of England and Emma of Normandy, daughter of Duke Richard I. From then on, the ties between England and Normandy became ever closer. Through the policies and preferences of the childless and half-Norman Edward the Confessor (son of Ethelred an
Emma) who made William his heir, an
the policies and increasing involvement i
English affairs of dukes Robert the Ma
nificent and William, the latter had b
1066 the best claim to the English su
cession in his own eyes and in the eyes o
many others. What stopped what migh
have been a more or less peaceful takeove
was the self-interested opposition of Ea
Godwin and Harold his son especiall
Hence Hastings.

Clearly a short profile of William th
Conqueror cannot become a history of hi
reign in England. He reigned suprem
stronger than any of his predecessors, a
the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle rightly state
The Norman Conquest is also the la
invasion, arguably the last clean break i
English history. Its consequences includ
the imposition of a new and alien rulin
house and ruling class; the bringing up t
date, by 11th-century standards, of th
Old English Church, society and cultur
a vast increase in the powers of th
monarchy; a much greater degree of uni
in the realm; and, above all, the pluggin
in of England to northern France, when
comes most of that medieval civilisati
of which we are still the heirs today.

The only blot upon the conqueror
reputation in England appears to be th
"Devastation of the North" in the gri
winter of 1069-70. Even that, provoke
by constant rebellion, was an act of sta
of a kind by no means confined to h
reign and age; a price paid for politic
unity as the English monarchy, histo
cally southern based (Wessex), began t
get a grip on the recalcitrant north. A
it has been at least a degree distorted i
the record by the anti-Norman prejudi
of Orderic Vitalis who wrote the be
known account of it.

The conqueror died in the autumn
1087. It may seem characteristic that h
made a good end, in possession of h
faculties to the last, and was killed b
injuries received on campaign when h
horse stumbled in the burning streets
Mantes. They brought him to Rouen a
then, because of the noise and bustle
the city, moved him to the peace of th
priory of St Gervase, on a hill in th
western suburbs of the city.

"At last on Thursday, 9 Septemb
the king awoke just as the sun was beg
ning to shed its clear rays over the ear
and heard the sound of the great bell
the cathedral church. When he ask
what hour it was sounding the attenda
replied, 'My lord, the hour of prime
being rung in the church of St Mar
Then the king raised his eyes to heav
with deep devotion, and looking up wi
outstretched hands said, 'I comme
myself to my Lady, the blessed Ma
mother of God, that by her holy pray
she may reconcile me to her most de
son, our Lord Jesus Christ.' As soon
he had spoken these words he died
(Orderic Vitalis).

R. Allen Brown is professor of history King's College, University of London

Project details on page 40