

## William the Bastard in Normandy c.1028 – 28 September 1066 and some English connections



William 'the Bastard' was born at Falaise in 1027, 1028 or 1029 – there is no birth record, and calculation of his birth date varies according to other recorded life events, e.g. his recorded age at the departure of his father to Jerusalem and the record in *De Obitu Willelmi* which states that in September 1087 he was 59.

There was no formal marriage of his father Duke Robert to Herlève, William's mother, and possibly the daughter of a tanner, so William was illegitimate. This was of less concern at that time in Normandy with its Viking heritage than in most realms of Europe. But it did mean that William's father had not taken advantage of a formal noble marriage, which might have conferred some feudal advantage and obligation on both parties.

It is probable that William had a full sister by Robert and Herlève, Adelaide/Adeliza. Robert's liaison with Herlève only lasted about two years, and after that she was married off to Herluin, viscount of Conteville, with whom she had two more boys, half-brothers to William: Odo who was to become bishop of Bayeux then earl of Kent, and Robert to be count of Mortain. Herlève died in about 1050. She had two brothers Osbern and Walter, and William's uncle Walter is later recorded as having been a 'watcher' of the young duke, on at least one occasion saving him by hiding him amongst the poor.

There is no further Norman record of Robert having more liaisons or marriages, or of any more children. There are some comments from outside Normandy of a possible marriage to a sister of king Cnut of England, which if it occurred did not last long. There is also a surprising paucity of information about William's early childhood.

We do hear, however, that after his father Robert became duke that the former Duke Richard III's young illegitimate son Nicholas was promptly sent into the care of the abbey of Fécamp, then moved on to St Ouen in Rouen where he eventually became abbot. Robert I had reigned as duke from 1027 following the sudden suspicious death of Richard III.

The circumstances of Robert's accession had lit a fuse of discord and local wars sprang up between neighbours, many of the dispossessed leaving the Duchy, some ending up in Sicily where the Normans founded a kingdom. The ecclesiastical bodies also complained bitterly about being robbed of valuables and lands. Robert I was involved in the mayhem, and in

1028, Robert, archbishop of Rouen and Robert I's uncle, was besieged at Evreux by his nephew. The archbishop was forced into exile, promptly placing Normandy under an interdict. Robert also found himself at war with Alan III of Brittany, who was his cousin. Normandy was slipping into anarchy, but this was avoided thanks to the intervention of the above archbishop Robert in 1030. This Robert, brother of Richard II, was a powerful man, not only archbishop of Rouen but also count of Evreux. Robert I recalled his uncle Robert from exile, the interdict was lifted, and the duchy stabilised. The archbishop called his troublesome nephews Robert and Alan together at Mont-Saint-Michel, and the Breton war ended in a truce, with Alan becoming an ally on Normandy's western flank.

From 1031 until his death in 1037 archbishop Robert was a keystone of stability and, thanks to this, a core group of Norman magnates formed supportive of Robert I. This group included Osbern, brother-in-law of Duke Richard I, and Gilbert of Brionne. Duke Robert also made an alliance with Baldwin IV of Flanders which protected Normandy from the east.

Then, suddenly, late in 1034, Robert I made the decision to go on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Archbishop Robert and the other magnates tried to dissuade him, to no avail. At the end of their meeting the duke brought out William and persuaded the council to recognise him as the heir to the dukedom of Normandy and to swear oaths of loyalty to him. The 'consent' of King Henri of France was also given to recognise William as heir, and it may be that William was sent to Henri to do homage.

Robert I did not return, dying at Nicaea at the beginning of July 1035. William became Duke William II of Normandy at about the age of seven. His guardians were the supporters of his father. The particular support of Archbishop Robert was critical at this point as he could have claimed the dukedom for himself, given his lineage, but was now elderly. Nicholas, son of Richard III, who also had a claim was happy to stay in his monastery. Other potential contenders were Mauger and William, sons of Richard II by Papia, and Guy of Burgundy, grandson of Richard II, through his mother Adeliza, but no immediate claim was made by any of these.

At this time we also hear a bit about the English princes, Edward and Alfred, sons of Æthelred II and Emma, William's great-aunt, who were exiled in Normandy. They had many Norman uncles and first cousins through their mother, and must have moved from court to court, receiving favours but also gathering debts. They would have been in receipt of regular news from England and would have known that Cnut had also died in 1035, and that eventually Harold Harefoot had taken the throne of England.

Around 1035/36 there is a Norman story (written after the Conquest and not well corroborated from English sources) that Edward (the future King Edward the Confessor) with about 40 Norman boats landed at Southampton. His party took some booty, but was

promptly repulsed, and sent packing back to Normandy. Soon afterwards, in 1036, his brother Alfred Ætheling presumably with indirect support from the ducal court, made another probe via Flanders into England. His party was promptly seized on arrival by Earl Godwin, who is said to have handed Alfred over to Harefoot's men, who blinded him and left him to die with the monks of Ely. In the future this matter would come into play when his brother, Edward Ætheling, became king of England and had dealings with the Godwin family.

Back in Normandy things remained under control with justice being dispensed by a court of magnates until the beginning of 1037, when Archbishop Robert died. Once more the duchy's chief feudal families felt the need to safeguard or enlarge their holdings by the sword. More private wars occurred, but somehow there seemed to be an underlying wish to retain some sort of residual ducal authority. For several years control over William was in chaos. Count Alan III died suddenly in 1039–40, and Gilbert who followed him was assassinated on the order of one of the sons of Archbishop Robert. A steward was killed in William's bedchamber and his uncle Walter, brother of Herlève, took to sleeping in the room, frequently taking William into hiding for safety. So the period of 1037 onwards was a dark one for Normandy. Most of the records available are monastic and paint particularly black pictures, for the private wars were bloody indeed.

Fortunately, sometime after 1040, King Henri of France took some measures to support William, in co-operation with members of the ducal family. Baldwin V of Flanders who was married to King Henri's sister Adèle also gave some backing, possibly with a view to marrying his young daughter Matilda strategically to William, and thus protecting his western flank, as he was in dispute on another border with the German king.

In 1041 Edward Ætheling was invited by his half-brother Harthacnut who had become king of England in 1040 on Harefoot's death, and his mother Emma, now Queen Dowager, to join the English royal family in England. He went, which must have taken some courage, and a year later he became King Edward the Confessor, being crowned on Easter Day 1043. Now Normandy had a real friend in England and the future scene was being set.

Mauger and William, the sons of Duke Richard II by Papia and half-brothers of William, now gradually increased their profiles. Mauger became archbishop of Rouen and William count of Arques. They and Nicholas became prominent in the ducal court and other members of the ducal family gained in authority and placements.

William's personal authority remained weak and depended a great deal on the backing that he could obtain from the factions around him, as well as the support of his overlord, king Henri I of France and the administrative functions of the loyal viscounts (sheriffs). He was

also helped by the continuing rivalry between dissenting families. Somehow much of the traditional authority and machinery of government survived through to 1047.

Then the western areas revolted. The chaos started to become more organised into a potential coup against William, led by Guy of Burgundy who had received the fiefdoms of Vernon and Brionne on the death of Gilbert, who had himself succeeded Alan II of Brittany. Guy was seeking to become duke. He involved other leading feudal families in this quest, including Nigel, viscount of the Cotentin, and Rannulf I of the Bessin. They nearly caught William, but he escaped and eventually found sanctuary at Falaise. He then directly appealed to king Henri to help him. Henri decided that the threat to his vassal was also a significant threat to France and led an army into Normandy, advancing towards Caen and on to the plain of Val ès Dunes. There he and William, who had gathered a small force of his own, met the rebels who had come from the west and crossed the River Orne. The battle of Val ès Dunes, from the sparse reports available, was a somewhat chaotic, spread-out affair with multiple engagements. But it turned out to be a decisive event and a comprehensive defeat of the rebels. In the final rout the rebels were chased into the Orne and many drowned. Val ès Dunes was the king's victory, not William's. William was on the winning side, but he still had much to overcome. He was about 19 and his minority was now over.

The anarchy of Normandy still had to be dealt with. Later in October 1047, an ecclesiastical council met with William and the chief churchmen of Normandy, including archbishop Mauger of Rouen and abbot Nicholas. A 'Truce of God' was proclaimed and sworn to on Holy relics. This meant that private war was prohibited from Wednesday evening until the next Monday morning and during all the seasons of Lent, Easter, Pentecost and Advent. This only left 36 hours a week for private wars, and a full rest from these during the Holy seasons! How easy would this be to enforce? The chief penalty was to be excommunication and denial of spiritual benefits, but the king and duke were specifically excluded, and could maintain troops and use them in the interest of all.

The period of 1047 to 1060 has been called William's 'war for survival'. From 1047 there was a continuing crisis until 1054. First, Guy of Burgundy had to be dealt with; he had been wounded in, but survived, the battle of Val ès Dunes, and fled to his fortress at Brionne. William had to lay siege to this massive castle on an islet in the Risle valley, and it took three years to force Guy to surrender, when he was banished from Normandy. This delay was also to hold up William's ability to rule all of Normandy, but he must have decided at around that time that it was important to amalgamate Upper and Lower Normandy. As part of this he encouraged the growth of Caen, which would become the second city of Normandy. It was also the place where he and his wife Matilda would build twin abbeys, the Abbaye aux Hommes and the Abbaye aux Dames.

More problems occurred from 1051, which would see a significant change in allegiances. The count of Anjou started to press northwards into Maine, occupying its capital in 1051, and war spread to the southern border of Normandy. King Henri felt obliged to act and, with his consent, William entered Maine, besieging Domfront but also suddenly storming Alençon. He allowed terrible atrocities to be carried out there, and the terrified inhabitants of Domfront, having seen what happened, surrendered. The war between Anjou and the king dragged on, and they eventually reconciled, in spite of efforts by William to prevent this.

This changed the balance of power and, in the face of yet another revolt, William, who was somewhat disconcerted by the turn of events, found himself opposed by the king. Henri had become concerned that William was becoming too powerful and therefore dangerous to the kingdom of France. William had married Matilda of Flanders at about that time, and Henri may have also been concerned about a possible alliance between Flanders and Normandy. At the same time, Duke William's uncle, William of Arques, decided to desert him and Duke William then promptly besieged his uncle at Arques. In spite of some help to William of Arques from King Henri of France, William of Arques finally had to surrender and fled to Eustace of Boulogne. He and his family were never restored.

1051 was also the year William is supposed to have visited Edward the Confessor in England. This event is recorded in only one version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (D), corroborated (?copied) by John of Worcester, who says that Edward 'gave earl William many gifts'. William does seem to have been rather busy in Normandy, but it is just possible that it did happen, and that during his private discussions with Edward the succession to the English throne was discussed. Further messages about this possibility may have been received by William from Robert Champart, who had been appointed by Edward to the archbishopric of Canterbury, when en route to Rome to receive his pallium. In 1052, when the said Robert was chased out of England by Earl Godwin, Edward may have transferred the Godwin hostages to him. He is believed to have brought to William as hostages Wulfnoth, the youngest son of earl Godwin and brother of Harold, and Hákon, the nephew of Harold and son of Sweyn Godwinson, his dead brother.

William had to face another, this time two-pronged, assault towards Rouen from king Henri in early 1054. But this time he was able to generate a wide response to his call to arms, and having taken Arques had no hostile force within Normandy to deal with at the same time as this incursion. William's force was large enough to deploy on each side of the Seine, to confront Henri's approaches, with the count of Eu and Walter Giffard commanding the east and William the west. Eu and Giffard caught their opponents unprepared early in the morning, and this resulted in a complete rout of the French to the east. To the west, hearing this result, Henri withdrew. This was the Battle of Mortemer, where William himself did not

need to engage, and after this William would never again be faced with so strong a direct threat to his power.

In 1054/5 an ecclesiastical meeting deposed Mauger, another uncle of William, as archbishop of Rouen and appointed a reforming archbishop. William seemed to be firmly back in control, and supported by the Church.

Once again in 1057 Henri and the count of Anjou attacked, entering the Hiémois along the Orne valley and pushing towards Bayeux and Caen. William massed a large force near Falaise and watched. As the enemy reached the Dives marshes west of Caen they crossed the Dives estuary at a narrow ford near Varaville but were caught by the incoming tide. William opportunistically pounced and massacred the part of the army that had not crossed. Henri, king of France, having lost half his army, beat a hasty retreat. This was not a pitched battle, more a very large ambush, although for convenience it has been recorded as the Battle of Varaville.

In 1058 William felt strong enough to take on his previous overlord who had turned against him. He opened hostilities in the southwest, but the affair moved to stalemate. Then William had some good fortune with the deaths of two of his main adversaries. On 4 August 1060 Henri I died, and his young son Philip inherited under the guardianship of Baldwin V of Flanders, who was William's father-in-law. As a bonus, the count of Anjou, Geoffrey Martel, died on 14 November of the same year with no direct heir, and his nephews immediately squabbled, not sorting things out until 1068. The last count of Maine, Herbert II, then died in 1062 without a male heir, and William promptly strategically married Herbert's sister Margaret to his son Robert Curthose.

The pattern of power was changing and William conquered Maine, eventually taking Le Mans following a prolonged period of terror across northern Maine during 1062/3, laying waste the land and burning towns, at the same time seizing or creating strongholds. His main opponent was Geoffrey of Mayenne whose castle he destroyed by fire in 1063. There is a little story told that William had smuggled two children with pyromaniac tendencies into the castle to do this.

The pattern of William's warfare was clear. He was prepared to wait and watch, to sow terror, make alliances through marriages, banish (and worse) those who rebelled, take opportunities and be brutal. It was very effective. He may have remained relatively inexperienced with respect to large set battles, but Gillingham has pointed out that he must have engaged in some kind of fighting at least 13 times between 1047 and 1065.

William was now in his thirties. That he had survived all the above and more must have been down to a huge strength of character, luck, and to some extent the underlying

established ducal system of Normandy that he had inherited, plus the power of the Norman church. Now he turned his attention to Brittany and its duke, Conan II, who was besieging Dol, held by an ally of William's. This was the occasion when he took with him Harold Godwinson, earl of Wessex. The siege of Dol was lifted, Conan weakened, and the Normans progressed as far as Dinan, possibly Rennes, but they soon returned to the duchy.

Normandy's southern and south-western borders were now tranquil, and William could consider the situation in England, particularly after Harold's visit. It is thought that Harold's involvement in William's Brittany expedition was deliberate on the part of William, as he became clearly sub-ordinated to the duke. William's view was clear: Harold was his vassal, pledged on oath to support William in his claim to the English throne. He may also have become betrothed to one of William's daughters, Adeliza or Agatha during his stay: as we have seen, William used alliance through marriage a great deal.

Edward the Confessor died on 5 January 1066 and what seems to have been William's long game came to the fore. What was (retrospectively) at stake was the position of England *vis à vis* Scandinavian and Latin Europe, plus the ecclesiastical and political structure of western Christendom for the rest of the middle ages – not to mention William's own ambition. What he did not envisage, however, was that Harold would be crowned king of England within 24 hours of Edward's death. To William this must have been astounding and an affront, given the understanding that he had thought he had reached with Edward and the events of 1064 when Harold was his 'guest'. What William with his Norman heritage possibly did not understand was the role of the Witan in the selection of a new king.

William's first step was an immediate protest, which received the normal response to such formal protests. This was all a formality as he immediately realised that force was going to be required. He moved to obtain the support of his vassals and to split his rivals. He met with his magnates who had shared his rise to power, who at first were sceptical of the prospects of a successful invasion of England, but they became persuaded otherwise. The duke then held a series of assemblies at Lillebonne, Bonneville-sur-Touques and Caen and presumably there were more, as this was a grand war plan, which required full cooperation and 'ownership'. Being of Viking descent the prospect of extending their estates and possible plunder would not have been far from Norman minds.

William also ensured that the duchy would be in good hands during his absence or, in the worst case, his non-return. Duchess Matilda, in association with his oldest son Robert (then 14), took on special responsibilities, and Robert was proclaimed heir to the duchy. Roger of Beaumont, Roger of Montgomery and Hugh, son of the viscount of the Avranchin, were to assist Matilda and Robert. The Church was not forgotten, and was anxious to have confirmation of grants and ratifications and settlement of disputes before the departure of

William. Lesser men also gave grants to local churches in similar vein, which showed how the enterprise was affecting all.

The Pope was sent a mission led by the archdeacon of Lisieux to ask for his favour. Although no papal record of the actual case has survived, pope Alexander II proclaimed his approval and a papal banner was carried at Hastings. Ordericus Vitalis writes *'On hearing all the circumstances, the pope favoured the legitimate rights of the duke, enjoined him to take up arms against the perjurer, and sent him the standard of St Peter the apostle, by whose merits he would be defended against all dangers.'* It must have helped that the archbishop of Canterbury, Stigand, who had been placed there by the Godwins, had been excommunicated, and undoubtedly the unpleasant case of Alfred Ætheling, the events in England of 1051–1052, plus Harold's supposed oath on Holy relics were all mentioned.

Men from Flanders, France and Brittany and further afield joined the Normans in the invasion force, many simply mercenaries, but the expedition was regarded in some European circles as almost a crusade, having tacit support from France, the Pope and the Holy Roman Empire. These men had to be created into a disciplined force and merged with the forces of the duchy so that they could fight together.

Ships were also needed, and to those available were added many newly built for the occasion. Considerable numbers of various sized ships were required from the magnates of Normandy. The quota list of ships adds up to 776, but maybe some more were added by William himself, and small vessels were added to make the fleet up to about 1000. That these were acquired or made from new and then assembled at Dives was a triumph of organisation in a duchy that was now united. The eastern Sussex interest in this is that the original ship list probably originated from Fécamp Abbey in 1067–1072, and was copied in the Battle Abbey scriptorium sometime between 1130 and 1160. This and the preparations discussed above are well described by van Houts (1987). During these preparations William could receive reports on what was happening around the North Sea, and must have had spies watching Harold on the south coast. Once Harold disbanded on or about 8 September 1066 the time was ripe. All William needed was a south wind.

William clearly believed, using Norman feudal logic, that the throne of England was his by right, and prepared an invasion. The ships were gathered together and loaded at Dives (near Caen), waiting for a favourable wind from the south. It is thought that from Dives he would have wished to cross to the Isle of Wight and the adjacent mainland, but direct routes to landing beaches west of Brighton and to the shallow harbours east of Beachy Head but west of the Fairlight Cliffs were other possibilities. Sailing in those days was hazardous and it was normal to take the most direct or fastest route with optimal wind directions and favourable tides.

### **SAILING FROM DIVES TO ST VALÉRY-SUR-SOMME**

There are two possible explanations as to why William first sailed his fleet eastwards from Dives along the hazardous Côte d'Albâtre to St Valéry-sur-Somme before crossing to Sussex.

The first is that William, having waited in vain for a south-west wind to take the fleet across to England, on or about 13 September 1066 made the decision to use an incessant west wind to sail along the Norman coast to the haven of St Valéry at the mouth of the Somme which, at the very least, would reduce the distance the fleet would need to cross to England.

The second is that on about 13 September the awaited southerly wind appeared, and the fleet departed. The wind soon turned westerly and much stronger, and the endangered fleet which must have gone too far out to run back into the Seine estuary, ran before the wind for whatever safety could be sought, up the dangerous coast to St Valéry-sur-Somme in Ponthieu, fortunately the land of William's vassal.

As almost always in accounts of these events it is difficult to be certain which story was more accurate. Even before embarkation, morale in William's army was deteriorating and desertions occurred; indeed his decision to embark at this time may have been a deliberate attempt to remedy this. Unfortunately for William, losses were incurred on the voyage (some reports estimate as many as 100 ships), and this only added to morale loss, to the extent that William ordered any burials to be done secretly. At St Valéry-sur-Somme William gave prayers and vows, even processing the remains of St Valery before his soldiers. Somehow William kept the army and navy on-side, but now had to aim for a specific landing place with room for his ships to re-muster on the English side of the Channel.

### **CROSSING THE CHANNEL, LANDING IN ENGLAND**

Eventually a light southerly arose again. The mariners would have advised leaving on a high tide when the tidal flow would help ships leave harbour and arriving on a rising tide, when the tidal inflow would help carry the ships into their destination. High tide on 27 or 28 September was at about 1500, and they set sail on the falling tide between then and sunset at 1730, aiming for the lands of the Abbey of Fécamp – and the shallow harbours between what are now Eastbourne and Rye. The English coast would have come into view of the leading ships at about 0600 the next morning, and the fastest boats held their anchors in the offshore shoals, waiting for the slower boats to catch up, so that they could enter harbour on the rising flood tide from about 0900 on 28 or 29 September.

Landfall is said to have been at Pevensey, but even 700 ships would have required a lot of space. Allowing only 10 metres between boats that have run to the shore bow first, and not

very differently if there had been multiple parallel mooring, would have required a landing zone 7km [4½ miles] long, and if there were 1000 ships 10km [6¼ miles]. It would seem entirely logical, if William was heading for the Hastings peninsula, that as many as possible would have landed on the eastern side of the bay of Pevensey (i.e. the Hastings side near Hooe and Ninfield), and some into the much smaller Bulverhythe harbour, and the even smaller Priory harbour, both nearer Hastings, and even directly onto the beaches. But it would also have been very important to land enough men and matériel to secure the western flank and the Roman shore fort and to build and then defend a new Norman wooden castle at Pevensey.

The wind was light southerly, and the ships would have sailed at varying speeds. They would have been much influenced by the strong tidal flows in the English Channel – so the landings may have been over a wider area than just Pevensey and Bulverhythe, maybe extending to the shingle bar across the Rye Camber and more beach landings. We know that two ships ended up as far east as Old Romney, which was the main entrance to the Rye Camber and that their crews met a sticky end. If the weather had remained favourable, some of the ships may well have returned to Normandy for further supplies, men and horses, whilst the army ‘dug in’ at Hæstingaceastre. During the two weeks before the Battle of Hastings they built pre-fabricated wooden forts at both Pevensey and Hastings, rested, foraged the local area, and created a strong defensive forward supply position.

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