

William the Conqueror and England

Alfred the Great

Since the 790s, the Vikings had been using fast mobile armies to raid the coasts of England for goods and plunder. Such raids were evolving into permanent Danish settlements; in 867, the Vikings seized York and established their own kingdom. Finally, in 870 the Danes attacked the only remaining independent Anglo-Saxon kingdom, Wessex. They were able to hold the Vikings off, at least for a while. As King of Wessex Alfred (reigned 871-99) was a strong-minded battle veteran at the head of the resistance to the Vikings in southern England.

Realizing that he could not drive the Danes out of the rest of England, Alfred concluded peace with them. Alfred spent a period of time building the English defenses against the Vikings. Together with a navy of new fast ships, southern England now had a defense in depth against the Vikings.

Alfred soon established a legal code; he assembled the laws of his predecessors, adding his own administrative regulations to form a definitive body of Anglo-Saxon law. He also focused on an increase in education focused mostly of Latin, philosophy, and religion.

By the 890s, Alfred's charters and coinage referred to him as 'king of the English.' Alfred died in 899, aged 50. By stopping the Viking advance and consolidating his territorial gains, Alfred had started the process by which his successors eventually extended their power over the other Anglo-Saxon kings. It is for his valiant defense of his kingdom, for securing peace with the Vikings and for his reforms in the reconstruction of England, that Alfred is known as 'the Great'.

1. What are some accomplishments of King Alfred?
2. How did Alfred become known as “the Great?”

Harold Godwinson vs. William of Normandy

England in 1066 was full of many problems. On 5 January 1066 Edward the Confessor, king of England, died. Edward had no children and therefore there was no rightful successor. William of Normandy believed he had rightful claim because Edward had named him his heir. However on 6 January, Harold Godwinson, after having ridden all night, was crowned king in London. He claimed that Edward changed his will and designated him as successor and true king. He even produced a document proving it.

William was ready to claim his rightful throne. The two men met at the Battle of Hastings. Harold took a position on some low hills and the Normans attacked that position. It was a hard fought battle that lasted the entire day, neither side able to get the better of the other. As the day wore on, however, superior Norman discipline began to show. Some of the Saxon forces began to melt away. Toward the evening, Harold himself was killed by an arrow, but by the time he died the battle was clearly lost. Norman knights pursued Saxons well into the night, and by the next day there was no one to stand against the invader. William called his men back and set about securing his position. He had won a great battle, but he had not yet won England, and he needed to keep his army together.

1. What happened at the Battle of Hastings?

Conquering England

William sent out news of his victory and invited the Saxon lords to recognize him as the legitimate king. He waited for five days and none did. They chose to defend their own interests. When

the lords did this William resorted to brute force to convince the people of England that he was king. By the end of November, William controlled most of the English lands. By December, more and more lords submitted to him. He was crowned king on Christmas Day, 1066.

Now that he was a crowned king, William set about imposing his rule on England. He spent five years suppressing rebellions and establishing Norman authority, building many castles and stocking them with men brought from Normandy. Those who fought with him at Hastings did very well, receiving lands all over England as fiefs.

After the conquest, William decided on another ambitious undertaking, which was detailing the general inventory of his new realm. He appointed surveyors, inspectors who were empowered to visit every fief and village in England, there to record in detail the wealth and legal obligations of each. The resulting collection of records is known as the Domesday Book. It records how much land a knight held, how many villages were there, how many buildings in the village, even the number of cattle and yield of grain. Historians have long used this source to understand the social and economic structure of 11th century England. William used it to assess the wealth and military strength he had at his command as king of England. The book also helped in assessing taxes throughout his kingdom.

1. How did William finally gain control of England?
2. What was the Domesday Book? What was its purpose?

The Magna Carta

There were a number of kings after William, one was King John. The King of England overtaxed the people and the nobles, and he abused his power. King John also failed to reconquer Normandy from the French king, so some English barons rebelled against him. In 1215 King John agreed to sign the *Magna Carta*, the Great Charter of liberties regulating the relationship between the king and his vassals. The whole purpose of the document was to define certain rights and privileges of the nobles, the people and the king.

1. In the first place we have granted to God, and by this our present charter confirmed for us and our heirs for ever that the English church shall be free, and shall have her rights entire, and her liberties uninjured; ... We have also granted to all freemen, for us and our heirs for ever, all the underwritten liberties, to be had and held by them and their heirs, of us and our heirs for ever.

39. No freeman shall be taken or imprisoned or diseased or exiled or in anyway destroyed, nor will we go upon him nor send upon him, except by the lawful judgment of his peers or by the law of the land.

60. Moreover, all these previously described customs and liberties which we have granted shall be maintained in our kingdom as far as it concerns our own relations toward our men.

The Magna Carta contained two basic ideas that would shape government. First was that nobles had certain rights, and over time those rights extended to all English citizens. And the second idea was that the monarch **had** to obey the law. The king also agreed not to raise taxes without consulting the great council of lords and clergy to get their opinion. These laws set the structure for most modern government throughout the world.

1. What was the purpose of the Great Charter?
2. What are the two most important points of the Magna Carta?

The Magna Carta

After the dismal failure of King John to reconquer Normandy from the French king, some of the English barons rebelled against their king. At Runnymede in 1215, King John agreed to seal the Magna Carta, or Great Charter of liberties regulating the relationship between the king and his vassals. What made the Magna Carta an important historical document was its more general clauses defining rights and liberties. These were later interpreted in broader terms to make them applicable to all English people.

John, by the grace of God, king of England, lord of Ireland, duke of Normandy and Aquitaine, and count of Anjou, to the archbishop, bishops, abbots, earls, barons, justiciaries, foresters, sheriffs, stewards, servants, and to all his bailiffs and liege subjects, greetings.

1. In the first place we have granted to God, and by this our present charter confirmed for us and our heirs forever that the English Church shall be free, and shall have her rights entire, and her liberties inviolate; and we will that it be thus observed; which is apparent from this that the freedom of elections, which is reckoned most important and very essential to the English Church, we, of our pure and unconstrained will, did grant, and did by our charter confirm and did obtain the ratification of the same from our lord, Pope Innocent III, before the quarrel arose between us and our barons: and this we will observe, and our will is that it be observed in good faith by our heirs forever. We have also granted to all freemen of our kingdom, for us and our heirs forever, all the underwritten liberties, to be had and held by them and their heirs, of us and our heirs forever.

13. And the city of London shall have all its ancient liberties and free customs, as well by land as by water; furthermore, we decree and grant that all other cities, boroughs, towns, and ports shall have all their liberties and free customs.

39. No freemen shall be taken or imprisoned or dispossessed or exiled or in any way destroyed, nor will we go upon him nor send upon him, except by the lawful judgment of his peers or by the law of the land.

60. Moreover, all these aforesaid customs and liberties, the observances of which we have granted in our kingdom as far as pertains to us towards our men, shall be observed by all of our kingdom, as well clergy as laymen, as far as pertains to them towards their men.

63. Wherefore we will and firmly order that the English Church be free, and that the men in our kingdom have and hold all the aforesaid liberties, rights, and concessions, well and peaceably, freely and quietly, fully and wholly, for themselves and their heirs, of us and our heirs, in all respects and in all places forever, as is aforesaid. An oath, moreover, has been taken, as well on our part as on the part of the barons, that all these conditions aforesaid shall be kept in good faith and without evil intent. Given under our hand - the above named and many others being witnesses - in the meadow which is called Runnymede, between Windsor and Staines, on the fifteenth day of June, in the seventeenth year of our reign.

1. Why is this document so important?
2. For each of the above articles of the Magna Carta, explain in your own words what they mean.