WHAT DID THE NORMANS DO FOR US?

Not a Conquest….

The Battle of Hastings had major consequences for the ensuing centuries and some of them are still to be observed today. Yet the term “Norman Conquest” implies that a country of two million people in 1066 (some historians think as many as six million) could be changed suddenly by a small number of Normans – many fewer than 7000 in 1066 after discounting mercenaries, and perhaps only 25000 when William died in 1087. The reality was more complex and nuanced. William, for example, insisted that there was continuity with the past because he was Edward the Confessor’s true heir.

…but a new town at least

However the impact of the Normans nationally is assessed for Battle, the Norman arrival meant the difference between it being a piece of heath on which there was no settlement to being a thriving Abbey town which by 2016 will have stood the test of time, 950 years after the battle which created it. The town owes its name to William who, tradition has it, personally named it.

How the architectural landscape changed in England

Superficially, several changes to the landscape made by the Normans would have been evident within one or two generations of 1066. The Saxons had few if any castles; by 1087 William had overseen the construction of 86 royal castles, built of stone to show that the Normans were here to stay. Castles built by other Normans up to 1100 are thought perhaps to number 500. Norman churches with characteristic semicircle arches and zigzag patterns went up all over the country, in the vast majority of cases replacing the Saxon

equivalents. By 1087 nine of the 15 Anglo Saxon cathedrals had been demolished and replaced by Norman ones. Battle Abbey and the accompanying Church of St Mary – finished in 1095 and begun in 1102 respectively – were the *raison d'être* of Battle and would have dominated it. Royal forests were established arising, among other reasons, from William's interest in deer hunting: trespass by unauthorised people, eg poachers, was usually punished by death.

Still a medieval town today

The grant of land to the first Abbot of Battle in the late eleventh century created a "leuga" with significant delegation and power for the Abbot which lasted until the dissolution of the monasteries in 1538. It was this which resulted in the highly unusual preservation of early mediaeval plot structures in Battle, still visible today – in the centre the plots have recently been measured in perches as they would have been in medieval times.

Land tenure and its medieval consequences

The Norman feudal system was a rigid system of land-based obligations between nobles, knights and villeins. In England, William changed the system of land tenure so that it drew its source from the King, who could remove it from the nobles if he so chose; and he often did. This seemed a shrewd move in the years after 1066 when grants of land rewarded effort in the Norman cause. But in the view of some scholars, in later centuries of the medieval era the removal of land as a punishment to nobles and the promotion of individuals through grants of land became one of the causes of disputes between the ruling élite and the King, notably in the reign of King John. After the Black Death shortages of people created new labour markets which undermined the feudal system.

From the point of view of those working on the land Norman rule would have been noticeable to the extent that slavery – widely practised by the Anglo Saxons – was less common. This was a gradual process – for example in 1086 Battle had twelve slaves – and it was not until 1130 that historians think slavery was absent from England. Some attribute this change to the Norman belief that serfs paying rent and covering their own costs was better financially than having slaves who had to be fed and housed. On the other hand others point to evidence that some parts of Norman society considered slavery morally unacceptable. But at the same time there were fewer freedmen who could move from one property to another. Most labourers were villeins under the Normans: they were obliged to provide their services to a specific land owner or tenant.

What's in a name..

Another consequence of the Normans' strong focus on land ownership was that in due course the settlements were to bear the owners' names: Helions Bumpstead in Essex, Milton Keynes in Buckinghamshire and very many more. Similarly the names given to children tended to be Norman up to the eighteenth century – Robert, William, Geoffrey – and only later did some Anglo-Saxon names such as Alfred and Harold return. Even then names such as Godwin and Ethelfreda remained dormant.

Domesday – a new ruling elite

Another change in land tenure was to date titles of land from the time of Edward the Confessor (endlessly referred to in Domesday by the acronym TRE) or William himself as a means of legitimating land seizures since 1066. As well as formidably demonstrating Norman willpower and reach, the Domesday Book gave form to, and drew a line under, the Norman takeover of land tenure. The Book showed that by

1087 56% of the major landholdings were in the hands of the Norman nobility; and of that 56%, 40% belonged to ten families. William himself owned 17% of the land in England (double that of Edward the Confessor) while the Church owned 26%, including the holdings of 12 members of the clergy. Only four major landholdings were in Anglo Saxon hands. This preponderance of Normans in land ownership was reflected in the virtual absence of Anglo Saxons from the ruling elite. In Battle, there may have been more of a mix: at the time of Domesday, the three main landowners appear to be Reibert, Geoffrey and Alvred, presumably an Anglo Saxon.

Continuity of governance

Ironically, some think, the information for the Domesday Book was collected by means of a network of local officials which was invented by the Anglo Saxons. The previous financial systems were retained as well – England was attractive to William among other reasons because there was an established system for levying taxes. In general the Normans did not seek to impose centralised systems unless the local ones were dysfunctional. At his level, William used a Great Council which was similar to the Anglo Saxon *witena gemot*, although it met more frequently with more pomp and ceremony. One area of governance where William did make an innovation was the creation of a Chancellor in charge of and coordinating the royal clerks: although his role was nothing like as significant as that of later holders of the office, Herfast is the first person who can be proved to have been appointed Chancellor, around 1068. Another reform was the breaking up of the massive earldoms which dominated and damaged political life under the Anglo Saxons.

Law and order

William enforced law and order with energy. He clarified the respective roles of ecclesiastical and civil courts. Otherwise the law was much as it had been under the Anglo Saxons. The great leap forward in the law of England was to be less than a hundred years later in the reign of Henry II, who from 1154 oversaw the codification of laws – Anglo Saxon largely albeit with Norman laws on land tenure – in what came to be known as the Common Law. Henry left us the legal term ‘ from time immemorial’, referring to the law as it was before his death in 1189. He also strengthened the old shire courts and weakened the baronial courts brought in by the first generation of Norman invaders.

The military

Not much changed in the first few decades in respect of the system of calling up infantry: the fyrd. William used Harold’s system, requiring his Norman lords who had supplanted the Anglo Saxons to provide fyrd troops, well beyond the 1080s. In 1079 William’s life was saved by Toki, son of an Anglo Saxon theign, Wigot of Wallingford.

Language

It was not until the late 14th century that it could be said that an English language recognisable in modern times emerged from some 350 years of incremental admixture of Norman and Anglo Saxon families; and hence of the Norman and Anglo Saxon tongues. By then Chaucer was on the scene. Henry IV would become the first King to address Parliament in English, in 1399. To begin with, however, the signs for this fusion did not seem promising because from 1070 the Normans required official documents to be in French or Latin, not Anglo Saxon, which reverted to being an oral instrument for use by those outside the Church and the ruling élite. Intermarriage however, with thousands of Norman men looking for wives, caused an

intermingling of Norman and Anglo Saxon. Nevertheless some fragments and reminders of Norman French remain. The royal motto is: *honit soi qui mal y pense* . When Acts of Parliament are agreed by the Queen, Parliament is told *Le Reine le vault*. And we talk of mutton from a sheep and pork from a pig, using the French for the meat and the Saxon for the living animal. Within a hundred years of Hastings, some of the most creative minds such as William of Malmesbury, Orderic Vitalis and Henry II himself, had Anglo Saxon ancestry. By 1220 the biographical poem of 22000 lines which commemorates the life of William the Marshal – a fourth son[i] of a minor noble who was Regent of England in 1216/17– was written in a form of Anglo Norman which begins to look a little like the language of Chaucer almost 200 years later. The bringing together of Norman and Anglo Saxon proceeded during the twelfth century along another track as well: in that century Kings were referred to as Kings of the French and English, while Magna Carta in 1216 refers only to the English. (This however did not stop English kings until 1801 claiming the French throne and including the *fleur de lys* in their coat of arms.) The post-John crisis of 1216-18 was a turning point in Englishness, it could be argued, as the conflict forced the nobility in England to choose whether they were French or English due to the loss of French lands through the King's incompetence. In 1244 Henry III decreed that no Englishman could hold lands in France, thus cementing the separation.

William and Europe

From 1066 William pursued a policy of close involvement in European affairs: he and the Normans were an integral part of shifting alliances in Europe. A further consideration was that the Papacy had helped William in his efforts to win the English throne, declaring the invasion a holy war on the grounds that Harold had defied Edward the Confessor's wish that William should succeed him. This meant that William fostered close

ties with the church when he was King, at home and abroad: he was personally devout but at the same time the Normans returned the backing they had received from the Pope in the form of assistance with campaigns across Europe, notably in Sicily. This change of emphasis should not however be stressed too strongly, because Harold was not without his own European connections.

Religion

William replaced Stigand – generally seen as corrupt at the time - as Archbishop of Canterbury with Lanfranc in 1070, with the result that the customs of the Anglo Saxon church were tightened up and regularised. Lanfranc was suspicious of local saints, often related to the royal families of the old tribal kingdoms. Monastic practice was standardised and uniformity of building encouraged. Anglo Saxon bishops and abbots were gradually replaced during William's reign so that by 1087 only two were not Norman. According to William of Malmesbury the Anglo Saxons resented the Norman Romanesque style of church building and in some places the monks persisted in the old liturgical practices. At Canterbury opposition to Norman innovations caused riots and at Glastonbury observance of the new religious order was encouraged by the stationing of archers in the organ loft. The presence of Wulfstan, however, one of the two surviving Anglo Saxon bishops/abbots, also led to the preservation of tenth century monastic reform. In general the Norman arrival stimulated religious observance in England.

Drink

Some authors think that the Normans had a preference for wine and that this changed the previous preference for mead in the Anglo Saxon period. The evidence for this is scanty. Wine would have been the privilege of the few in both Anglo Saxon and Norman times; mead then ale have been drunk in England for over 1000 years. William of Malmesbury writes in his *De Gestis Regum* that in 1066 the Anglo Saxons were "accustomed to eat until they became surfeited and to drink until they were sick": perhaps echoed in some of today's behaviour? Amusingly in the 1966 Programme for the Battle of Hastings commemoration, there is an advert suggesting that during the battle Harold would have regretted the absence of Guinness to strengthen the resolve of his men!