

The Norman Conquest



1. Use in the classroom or as homework

This module contains a sequence of maps showing the events of the years 1066-87: the war for the throne of England in 1066, followed by the consolidation of Norman power.

Please see **Appendix A**, below, for more on what the module is about.

It seeks to contribute towards the teaching and learning of history at Key Stage 3 of the English National Curriculum, and a series of suggested activities are included below to help in this (please see **section 3**).

Key Concepts and Activities:

Key Concept	Activity
1.1.: Chronological Understanding	Activity 1. Sequencing activity Activity 2. Analysis
1.2.: Cultural, ethnic and religious diversity	Activity 3. Normans and Saxons
1.3.: Change and continuity	Activity 4. What changed, and that didn't! Activity 5. Causes of Conquest
1.4.: Cause and consequence	Activity 5. Causes of Conquest Activity 6. William the Conqueror Activity 7. Scattered power
1.5.: Significance	Activity 7. Scattered power Activity 8. The Battle of Hastings

The controls are very simple.

- The date label shows the date of the map on the screen, and the “forward” and “back” buttons on either side allow you to navigate through the sequence of maps.
- The “info” button, below the date label, switches information hotspots on, and the “info off” button switches them off.

These controls allow the module to be used in several ways. If what is required is a simple background summary to the Norman Conquest, a quick run through the map sequence, using the “forward” and “back” buttons, will give the class an attractive, visual overview, giving them a grasp of the key events and processes involved in the topic. To help you in this, **Appendix B** gives a commentary on the maps.

If on the other hand a more in-depth look at the Norman Conquest is required, these maps will provide an effective tool, either as a background resource or as the main focus for the topic. The resource can be used on an interactive whiteboard, or on desktops with small groups of pupils, or as homework on pupils’ own machines at home. The notes below (see **section 3**) will help achieve this.

2. Purpose

The purpose of the unit is to give pupils an overall understanding of the Norman Conquest:

- In what period of history did this episode occur?
- What was the historical setting?
- Who were the key personalities?
- What were the key events?
- What were the causes and outcomes of the Conquest?
- Why is the Conquest regarded as so significant in English history?

To fulfil these objectives in a way that fits in with a teacher’s own approaches, the modules have been designed to work at two levels, (1) to provide an overview of the topic, and (2) to allow in-depth enquiry work by the pupils.

1) Overview

A quick run through of this module will offer a clear visual overview of the Norman Conquest, and therefore provide the required historical background for the study.

2) Depth

There is a large amount of information about the Norman Conquest stored in the maps and text boxes of this module. These will enable pupils to conduct their own enquiries, and allow fruitful consideration of a range of questions and issues.

3. Student activities:

Below is a selection of exercises, one or more of which you may decide to undertake with your pupils depending on their age or level of ability, and your time commitment to this topic.

The activities are all relevant to the English National Curriculum KS 3 Programme of Study (see above for a table showing which activities match which key concepts). In undertaking them, pupils will be involved in enquiry work, either as individuals or as a group. They will be asked to identify and investigate specific historical questions or issues, and reflect critically on historical questions or issues.

To access the huge amount of information linked to the maps, pupils will need to use the “info” button, below the date box, which switches the information hotspots on. The “info off” button next to it switches them off again.

1. Sequencing activity

Does the Norman Conquest = the Battle of Hastings?
If not, describe what the Norman Conquest entailed.

Write a list of what, in your opinion, are the key events of the year 1066, in chronological order.

2. Analysis

[The purpose of this exercise is to encourage students to think about the nature of historical processes – and how that nature changes over time: different factors at play, different kinds of events, different results, and so on.]

Can you divide the Norman Conquest into two or more phases?
If so, what were the different characteristics of those phases?

[There are no right answer here, but pupils must be prepared to give reasons for their choice. Possible division might be the death of Harold at the Battle of Hastings, or the coronation of William in London.]

3. Normans and Saxons

A recent film described the Saxon soldiers as referring of the Norman invaders as “orcs” – that is, hostile strangers (or even demons). Were Normans as foreign to England in 1066 as spacemen would be to us?

What were the differences between Normans and Anglo-Saxons (who, it must be noted, by this time also included a large element of Norse blood), and what the same...

In race?

In religion?

In language?

In anything else?

4. What changed, and what didn't!

In 1066 and the years after, in what ways did life change for..

A. One of William's chief followers (or tenants-in-chief), who before 1066 possessed lands in Normandy?

- B. A Norman knight in William's army, who before 1066 held land in Normandy under A (above).
- C. A Saxon lord in Sussex
- D. A Saxon peasant in Kent
- E. A Saxon peasant in County Durham

5. Causes of Conquest

List the causes of the Norman Conquest of England in 1066.

What were the reasons, do you think, that it so successful?

List the results of the Norman Conquest.

In each of the list above, highlight which, in your opinion, are most important.

6. William the Conqueror

If Normandy had been ruled by an unambitious duke in 1066, how might the history of England have been different

- in the short term?
- (indulge your imagination) in the long term?

In what ways did William's personality affect the events of 1066?

Is it true to say that, of the three main claimants to the English throne in 1066, William was the only one who was a great warrior and leader?

Do the events of 1066 support the idea that, whether a leader is good or mediocre doesn't really matter, as it doesn't really affect the course of history in the long term?

7. Scattered power

Towards the end of the module there is some information about the way lands came to be allocated amongst William's chief followers. Do you think this is significant in understanding Norman England, or not? Give reasons.

8. The Battle of Hastings

England had been invaded many times in the hundred years or so before 1066. Huge Viking armies had ravaged the country, and had led to a Danish king ruling England for a time.

The Norman invasion is seen as one of the great turning points in English history. Does the information provided in this module give any clues as to why this is so, when the earlier invasions have been more or less forgotten today?

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: What is this module about?

This module contains a sequence of maps showing the events of the years 1066-87: the war for the throne of England in 1066, followed by the consolidation of Norman power.

One of the purposes of the module is to show that the Norman Conquest did not come as a bolt from the blue; that there was a broader historical background in which the lands surrounding the North Sea all played a part. In particular, instability in England drew invaders in to fish in troubled waters, not just William, but also Harald and others of Viking affiliation – all of whom had links to England going back generations.

What the map sequence seeks to show is that what made the Norman invasion stand out was the course of events which came in the years following 1066, with the complete replacement of one ruling class by another, and with the change in orientation of the country from the North Sea world to the French world which that involved.

APPENDIX B: Commentary of Maps

The following notes give background details to each map in the sequence. If you do not want to go into depth, and just give a brief overview of the Norman Conquest, the first paragraph (in bold) for each date will give you a summary of the information.

Some questions are included for discussion.

1066: The Last Saxon King

Edward the Confessor was the last king of the old Wessex royal line of English kings descended from Alfred the Great (reigned 871-901). However, in the 30 years or so before he had come to the throne, England had been part of a Danish empire, and the history of England had for more than a century become entangled with those of other countries bordering the North Sea, all with strong links to Scandinavia.

The royal families and ruling classes of England, Denmark, Norway and Normandy (a territory ruled by a Scandinavian family) were all closely related to one another. These links formed the backdrop to Edward the Confessor's reign, and to what came next.

Edward himself was half-Norman. He had spent most of his youth in Normandy, and was known for favouring Normans followers. These Normans were a useful counter-weight to the powerful Saxon earls of Wessex and their

relatives, who between them controlled more than half of the entire country. They were of course hostile to the pro-Norman faction at court.

Normandy

Normandy was an area of northern France which had been settled by Vikings in 911 by the French king on condition that he help defend northern France against other Viking invaders. Since then the Normans had become French in language and culture. The duke of Normandy, their ruler, was one of a number of counts and dukes of large areas of France who owed allegiance to the king of France as their overlord, but who ruled their states as independent princes.

Northern France was one of the homelands of a militarized organization of society which many modern scholars have called “feudalism”. In this, the king gave lands to his subordinates – barons – on condition that they provided him with military assistance. This assistance was in the form of mounted soldiers, called “knights”, to fight in the royal army. The barons therefore came to control forces of knights, and their power was reinforced by their ownership of castles – a new type of fortified building which was almost impossible to capture by anything other than a large army with plenty of time to starve the defenders into submission.

The Normans themselves had remained amongst the most militarized of all the peoples of France. Norman soldiers were noted throughout Europe for their military skills, and were at this date carving out kingdoms for themselves as far afield as southern Italy and Sicily.

The Earl of Wessex

The earl of Wessex, Harold Godwinson, was the leading Saxon nobleman. He controlled almost a third of England. He was the son of Godwin, earl of Wessex, who, although born into a humble family, had become the most powerful man in England in the early years of Edward the Confessor’s reign. Harold was the king’s brother-in-law, but was also related to other leading Saxon lords including Edwin, earl of Mercia and his brother Morcar, earl of Northumberland. The earls of Wessex, first Godwin and then his son Harold, were the leaders of the anti-Norman party at court.

Norway

Norway had been the main homeland of the Viking Norsemen. Like the Danes, they had invaded England in force in the 10th and early 11th centuries. The country had only recently become united, and the Norwegian kings, like the Danes, still hoped to extend their rule to the British Isles.

1066, January: The earl of Wessex becomes king of England

In January 1066, Edward the Confessor died, leaving no son and heir. The earl of Wessex is elected king in his place.

There was one last surviving member of the old Anglo-Saxon royal family, Edgar Atheling, but he was only 15 years old, and in any case was unknown to most of the leading men of the country, as he had spent most of his life abroad. Instead, the Witan, the council of leading men, elected Edward's brother-in-law, Harold Godwinson, the earl of Wessex, as the new king.

1066: January: The Duke of Normandy prepares

But there were other claimants to the throne. William, duke of Normandy, was also related to the old Anglo-Saxon line through his mother (which made him more closely related to the old Saxon royal family than Harold). He also claimed that Harold had on one occasion promised the succession to him, and that Edward, too, had regarded him as his successor.

He therefore set about collecting together an army of invasion. This was made up of Normans, but also of soldiers from other parts of France, particularly Brittany and Flanders.

1066, May: King Harold prepares to meet an invasion

In response to the threat of invasion from William, King Harold of England collected an English army together and stationed it on the south coast. He himself was based on the Isle of Wight.

1066: Tostig attacks

Tostig, King Harold's half brother in exile in Flanders, decided to attack England. He was driven off, first by Harold's forces stationed on the south coast, and then by the earls Edwin and Morcar in Norfolk. Finally, he fled to the Orkneys.

1066, September: Harald Hardrada prepares

Some time in 1066 Harald Hardrada, king of Norway, decided to take advantage of the uncertainty in England and seize the English throne.

Harald Hardrada was one of the most famous warriors of his day, known to later generations as the "Last Viking". He had spent much of his time abroad fighting in the service of other rulers, as far afield as Constantinople. He had become king of Norway on his nephew's death in 1046, and was an ambitious, restless ruler.

1066, September: Harold disbands his army

No Norman invasion had yet taken place, as the winds had been in the wrong direction to allow William's fleet to cross the Channel. With the main fighting season now over, and with supplies for his forces stationed on the south coast running short, Harold disbanded his army. He himself returned to London.

The Norman force had spent the late summer stationed on the coast, waiting for the winds to change to allow them to cross to England. The winds had

stubbornly stayed blowing from the wrong direction, however. It was a great achievement of William's to have kept his army properly supplied and in reasonable morale despite their inactivity.

1066, September: Harald Hardrada invades

Harald was by now ready to move. He sailed with a large fleet and army across the North Sea to the Orkneys, picked up Tostig and his forces, and together they sailed to the mouth of the River Humber. There they soundly defeated the forces of earls Edwin and Morcar at the battle of Fulford, near York.

1066, September: The Battle of Stamford Bridge

On hearing of this invasion, king Harold immediately marched north with his household troops, ordering his other dispersed forces to join him on the way. He then surprised Harald's army at Stamford Bridge only six days after Harald's original arrival in England. In the battle that followed the invading army was destroyed, only a small remnant making it back to the ships. Harald and Tostig were both killed.

To arrange for an army to move so quickly over such a distance, gathering strength on the way, and then win a hard-fought battle against a veteran army led by one of the most famous leaders of the day, was a remarkable feat of leadership on Harold's part.

1066, October: William invades

While Harold was resting his army after their victory, he heard that William, duke of Normandy, had landed on the south coast.

It was to be at the very end of the fighting season, and certainly after the time when ships would normally sail across the Channel in that period, that the winds changed direction. The Norman force could at last sail across the Channel to England. Probably most commanders would have disbanded their army by this late date, planning to attempt the invasion again the following year. But not William; he was determined to invade immediately.

According to legend, William burnt his ships after landing in England, as a sign to his troops that there was no turning back: they would either succeed in their mission, or die in the attempt. After building a wooden castle at Pevensey, William moved his army eastwards, to Hastings. There he waited for Harold to arrive.

1066, October: The Battle of Hastings

On hearing of William's landing, Harold immediately led his army south again, as fast as they could go. This was a second great achievement of Harold's, showing that he was an excellent military leader. However, this second forced march meant that his army arrived at the south coast tired, meeting an invading army that was rested after several days at Hastings.

The battle of Hastings was a hard-fought and near-run affair, between armies of around 5000-7000 men each (when the invasions were reversed, in July 1066, the numbers of troops would be over a hundred times as large). Several times the Normans attacked up hill, but were repulsed by the close-formed soldiers of Harold's army. It was only the leadership of William, and his tactic of pretending to flee to entice the Anglo-Saxons down the hill and so break their strong defensive formation, that enabled him to turn the tables. Even so, it seems that only after Harold's death by a chance arrow was it that the Anglo-Saxon army began to break and run.

1066, November: The Battle of Hastings

Victory at the battle of Hastings, and the deaths of Harold and two of his brothers, did not in itself give William control of England. Far from it. Very few Anglo-Saxons came over to William in the immediate aftermath of the battle. Indeed, Edgar Atheling, the surviving member of the old Anglo-Saxon royal family, was elected king by the Witan in London, in place of Harold.

William moved eastwards along the south coast to secure his lines of communication with Normandy. He ravaged many towns on the way, spreading fear among the population. He then moved inland to Canterbury, where at last the English lords of the Kent submitted to him.

1066, November: The first approach to London

William then marched towards London. Arriving at the south side of the river Thames at Southwark, his forces seem to have been beaten back by the Londoners to prevent him from crossing London Bridge.

At this date only one bridge crossed the River Thames at London. This was a long, narrow bridge, probably still made mostly of wood. Because it was so narrow it was easy to defend by a small group of soldiers.

1066, December: To Wallingford

William therefore moved on, burning with anger, his soldiers ravaging towns and villages along the way. He crossed the Thames at Wallingford, where Stigand, archbishop of Canterbury, submitted to William.

The submission of Stigand, archbishop of Canterbury, was a major breakthrough for William. In a deeply religious age, when the church played such an important part on society, it added greatly to his prestige to have the leading churchman in the country join him.

1066, December: To Little Birkhamsted

William then continued his march. Finally, at Birkhamsted, the leading Saxon nobles in London came to him with Edgard Atheling, and submitted to William.

1066, December: To London

William then proceeded to London, and was there crowned king on Christmas day, 1066.

However, he was far from in control of the country, and in the following year he had to secure his conquest.

In the decades before 1066 a new form of fortified building, castles, had been spreading in northern France. Under Edward the Confessor, some had been built in England, presumably through the influence of his Norman advisors. Now William had more castles built at strategic locations around the country, particularly in the South and the Midlands, and Norman garrisons stationed in them.

1067: Revolts

Almost immediately, however, revolts broke out in different parts of England. In 1067 there were risings in the South-East and the West.

The South-East

The Saxons in Kent rebelled against Norman rule and called in Eustace, Count of Boulogne, to help them. Eustace had fought with William at the battle of Hastings but his ambitions in England had not been satisfied. The forces of Eustace and the rebels attacked Dover Castle, but failed to capture it. The revolt then fizzled out.

The West

A Saxon leader called Edric the Wild raised a revolt in Herefordshire. Enlisting the help of Welsh leaders, he attacked the Norman-held Hereford Castle, but failed to take it. He then retreated to Wales, from which he launched further attacks.

1068: Revolts

The following year more rebellions in the West took place, and William's hold on these areas was threatened not just by native Saxon revolt but by attack from outside, from the sons of the dead king Harold, who were based in Ireland.

This year saw the start of the redistribution of lands from Saxon to Norman hands, beginning in the South East. As revolts were put down or lands were otherwise brought under firm Norman rule, the lands of Anglo-Saxon landowners were confiscated and parcelled out amongst the Normans. This allowed William to reward his followers, and give them a real stake in the long-term success of the conquest. The redistribution also spread Norman control deep into the villages of the areas, making it more secure.

Bristol

An invasion led by the sons of king Harold landed in Bristol, but was quickly repelled by local Norman forces.

Exeter

The Saxon inhabitants of Exeter rose in revolt against the Normans, angered by the Norman refusal to respect their traditional rights. Under the rebels, Exeter withstood an 18 day siege but then they submitted to William's rule.

Welsh Marches

Edric the Wild and his allies kept up their attacks on Norman positions in Hereford and the Welsh borders.

1069: Revolts

In 1069, large areas of the country passed into revolt, in some cases supported by adventurers from beyond England's borders – Harold's sons again in the west, and kings Swein of Denmark and Malcolm of Scotland in the North and East.

In the South the redistribution of lands from Saxon lords to William's Norman followers continued.

Exeter

The West Country was still restless and a rising in Dorset, Somerset and Devon broke out in this year. Another unsuccessful raid by the sons of Harold also occurred.

North East

The North was the scene of a widespread rebellion under the banner of Edgar Atheling, the last remaining member of the old Anglo-Saxon royal family. He was joined by Kings Swein of Denmark and Malcolm of Scotland, as well as by the Saxon leaders Edwin and Morcar. The rebels took York, where they carried out a massacre of the Normans living there, and then marched into northern Lincolnshire.

William marched north to deal with this rebellion in person. He laid waste the area around York, and the rebels retreated to their ships in the Humber estuary. William then carried out the systematic destruction of the North's economic base in a campaign which came to be known as the "Harrying of the North".

The West

News of the rebellion in the North East put new heart into the resistance movement on the Welsh borders, and this spread north and east. Edric the Wild, together with Welsh and Saxon forces, burnt Shrewsbury (but failed to capture Shrewsbury Castle) and spread destruction over a wide area. Then William suddenly arrived in person with a large force, having put down the

rebellion in the North and then crossed the Pennines. He met the rebels at the battle of Stafford and defeated them. This ended the Saxon resistance in this area.

East Anglia

The broad marshlands of the Fens had been the scene of a localized resistance movement to the Normans under a leader called Hereward “the Wake”. This flared up into a serious threat to Norman control when the Danish fleet under King Swein arrived from the North. The high point of the rebellion came when Hereward and his followers burnt Peterborough Abbey.

1070: Revolts

By the start of 1070 the revolts in the North and the West had been put down; only the Fenland resistance continued, and this was fatally weakened when the Danish fleet left.

The Danish withdrawal left Hereward and his followers to their own resources. William put an end to this rebellion by having a causeway constructed across the marshes to Hereward’s base. The Saxon resistance rapidly collapsed.

The putting down of the revolts was followed swiftly by the construction of castles and the ruthless redistribution of lands from Saxon lords to Normans.

1071-87: Pacification

In the 1070s and 1080s many more castles were built and ownership of almost all the land in England passed into Norman hands. By the time of William’s death Norman control of England was secure.

Landownership in Norman England

At this period (as in all periods right up to the time of the Industrial Revolution) the bulk of a society’s wealth lay in land-holding. Those who owned much land were wealthy, whilst most of those who did not were poor. This diagram shows who held the land by the time that the Domesday Book was compiled, in 1085. It reflects the division of power and wealth in England after the Norman Conquest.

The landholdings of a leading Norman magnate

As can be seen from the preceding diagram, a huge amount of land was given to William’s chief followers, the Norman barons. However, whether through William’s deliberate design or as a result of the circumstances of the Norman occupation of England – a pattern of (1) revolt, followed by (2) suppression and (3) the redistribution of lands from Saxon lords to Norman followers – the vast lands these barons received were mostly not concentrated in one area.

This is illustrated on this map in the land-holdings of one such baron, Henry de Ferrers, earl of Derby. He was by no means the richest of the Normans, but even so he ended up owning 2.5% of all England.

Each “house” symbol shows a county where de Ferrers held land. The number in the symbol shows how many manors he held in that county.

This scattering of lands meant that the barons could not dominate a particular area and turn their lands into a state-within-a-state, as had happened on the continent, where nobles held lands in great blocks. These provided strong power-bases from which the nobles could challenge the power of the king and turn their estates into independent principalities.

In England, this could not happen. In de Ferrers’ case, the weight of his power was in Derbyshire (as is shown not only by the number of manors there but also by his three castles, at Tutbury, Pilsbury and Duffield). However, he could not afford to ignore his outlying lands, which together accounted for at least half of his wealth and power. He therefore could not treat his land-holdings as a single unit, as his lands were scattered and intermingled amongst those of other barons, as well as royal and church lands.

This interlocking landownership forced the great nobles to work with the king in running the country as a whole, rather than focussing on their own private domains. This helped to create a united, national nobility, and in due course a single country.

The Sub-Tenant

Henry de Ferrers was a “tenant-in-chief” of the king. That is, he held his vast lands directly from the king. In exchange for these lands he had to provide the king with different kinds of service, the most important of which was “knight-service”. This meant providing the king with a specified number of knights for his army. To help him fulfil this obligation, de Ferrers divided most of his lands amongst sub-tenants. These men held land from de Ferrers in exchange for undertaking military service as knights, or providing a man to do so in their place. All the great Norman baronies were organized in this way.

We know of at least eight sub-tenants of de Ferrers, one of whom was Hubert de Curzon, who held four manors from Henry de Ferrers. As this map shows, these sub-tenants, like their superiors, also had their lands scattered over a wide area.

This hierarchy of king, tenants and sub-tenants formed an important part of what modern scholars have called the “feudal system”.

One final point is that Henry de Ferrers’ sub-tenants all came from the same part of Normandy as he himself did – they had all previously been his tenants there. Furthermore, they all continued to have land in Normandy for many years – in some cases for many generations – after the conquest of England.