

William the Conqueror

Born 1028 Ruled 1066 – 1087

HAVING BEATEN HAROLD AT the Battle of Hastings, William of Normandy rode to London, looting and pillaging on the way. Then he gave himself a magnificent coronation at Westminster Abbey on Christmas Day. He was now King William the First and England was ruled by Frenchmen!

William was crude, shrewd and wore his crown a lot to show who was boss. He was full of energy, and determined that the French should have the best of everything. The English lords and churchmen were sacked and French nobles were given their jobs. Many ordinary English people rebelled or rioted. But they didn't stand a chance. William built castles all over the land, filled them with fierce soldiers and ordered them to burn people's land and belongings. There was so much hunger, misery and death that people just gave up.

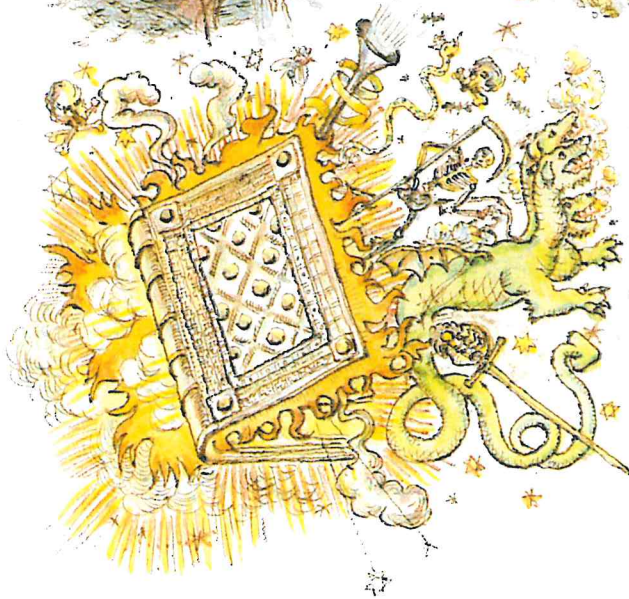
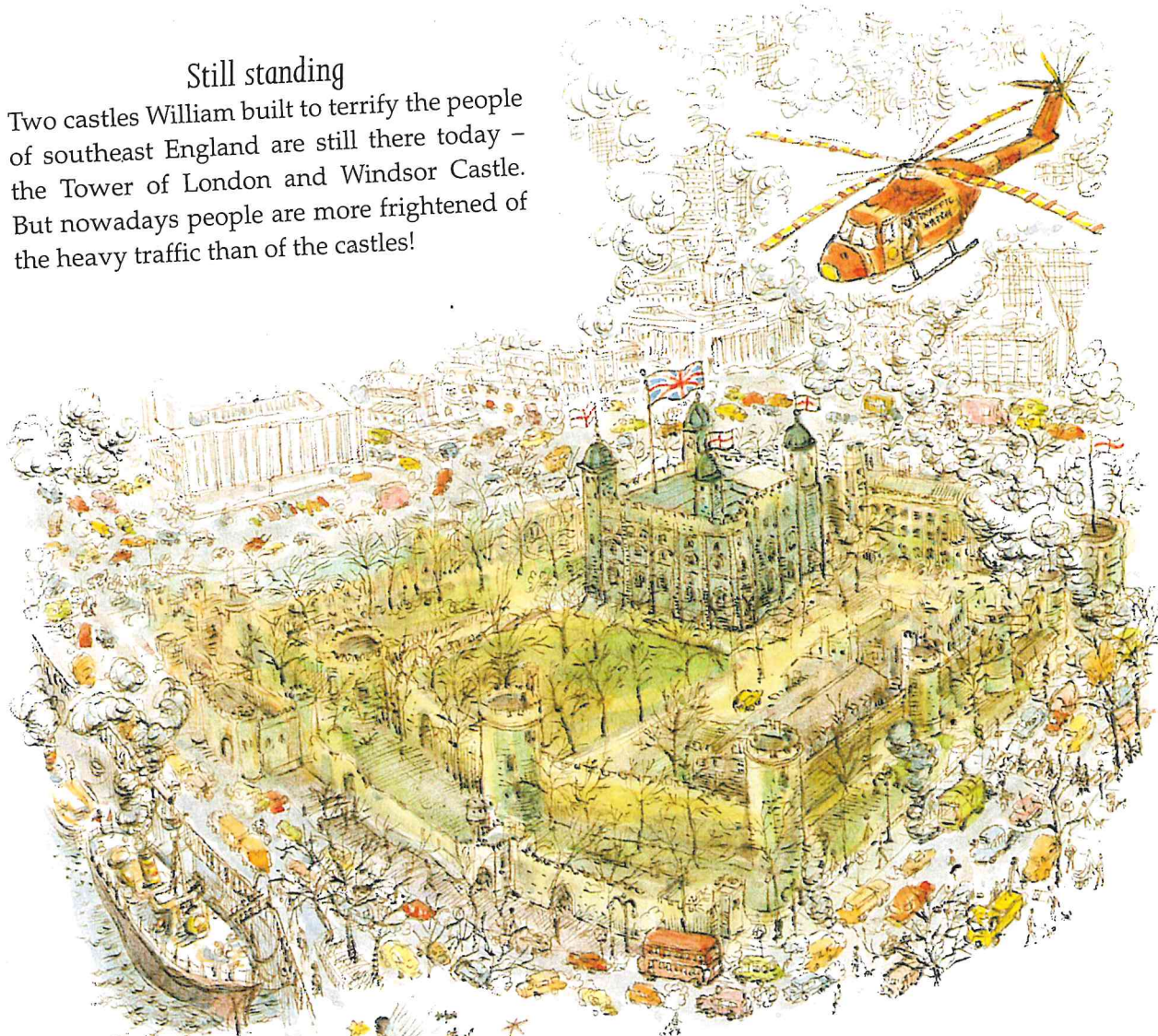
England's new rulers spoke a foreign language, were fearsome fighters and ruthless about collecting taxes. People hated them, but there was nothing they could do about it.





Still standing

Two castles William built to terrify the people of southeast England are still there today – the Tower of London and Windsor Castle. But nowadays people are more frightened of the heavy traffic than of the castles!



The Book of Doom

William didn't do all the conquering on his own. He brought over several friends and relations from France to help him. One of the cleverest was Archbishop Lanfranc. He sent Normans all over England to find out who owned every castle, every house, every cottage, even every pig and wrote it all down in a huge book. From this they worked out how much everyone must pay in taxes. People hated this book. They thought it was as dreadful as the day of doom when the world would end. So they called it the Domesday Book.

Women's unliberation

Until William's time, women had been more or less equal with men. But the Normans changed all that. They decided that men were the superior sex and from now on young women must obey their fathers, married women must obey their husbands and only rich widows could have a say in anything.

The New Forest

King William's hobby was hunting. He already had sixty-eight royal forests, but still wanted a bigger one. So he flattened 150 square miles of Hampshire, planted trees, brought in some deer and called his creation the New Forest. It's still called the New Forest today, even though it's now over 900 years old.



A clumsy horse

As well as being king of England, William still ruled Normandy. In 1087 he went to war with the French king and threatened to set the whole of France ablaze. But while his men were lighting fires, William's horse stumbled, throwing him painfully against the pommel of his saddle. His injuries were so bad that he died a few weeks later. He was buried in France, but his tomb was broken into during the French Revolution 500 years later and his bones scattered.

William had three sons. The eldest, Robert, became Duke of Normandy and the middle one, William Rufus, inherited the English throne. The youngest, Henry, got 5,000 pounds in silver but no royal title at all – but that was soon to change!