WILLIAM I
r. 1066-87

William was born at about the time that his father, Robert, became Duke of Normandy (1028). William's mother was Herleva, daughter of a wealthy citizen of Falaise. Not long after William was born she was given in marriage to one of Duke Robert’s followers and by him she had two more sons: Robert, who became Count of Mortain, and Odo, who was made Bishop of Bayeux in 1049 when he was not yet twenty years old. William therefore was illegitimate and most contemporary writers refer to him as William the Bastard. But he was his father's only son and shortly before Duke Robert went on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem (1014), he persuaded the Norman barons to recognise William as his heir. On the way home Robert died in Asia Minor and so, in 1051, young William found himself Duke of Normandy.

In practice this meant that for the next ten years Normandy was without a ruler and a great deal of disorder went unchecked. William was lucky to survive these years. Several of his cousins would have preferred to see him out of the way. He had some narrow escapes, but survive he did – largely thanks to the support of his mother's kinmen. William's boyhood was spent among scenes of violence and intrigue. As a result he learned that not many men could be trusted, and those few in whom he did place his trust were mostly the friends he made in childhood.

In the mid-1040s William began to govern for himself. He was almost continuously at war, either against Norman rebels or neighbouring princes, or both. He became a hard and ruthless campaigner – though flatterers liked to say that he was the best knight in the world. His most powerful neighbours were King Henry of France, Count Geoffrey of Anjou and Count Baldwin of Flanders. Between 1052 and 1060 two of these, France and Anjou, were hostile to Normandy so it was well for William that he could count on the friendship of Flanders. He had asked Count Baldwin for the hand of his daughter Matilda, but in 1049 the Pope forbade the marriage, presumably on the grounds that William and Matilda were too closely related. Despite this William went ahead; the Flemish alliance was more important than papal disapproval. William and Matilda must have been an odd-looking couple. The evidence of the bones found in their graves suggests that he was about five feet ten inches tall and she about four feet two inches. But by all accounts it was a successful marriage. She bore at least nine children (four of them sons) and most contemporaries believed that William was never unfaithful to her.

In 1060 both King Henry and Count Geoffrey died. The heir to France was a small boy and in Anjou there was all the trouble of a disputed succession. The consequent weakness of his neighbours left the way clear for William to conquer the county of Maine in 1063 and then turn his eyes on England.

Although William was only a distant cousin of Edward the Confessor, in 1071, perhaps to win Norman support in a quarrel with his powerful father-in-law, Earl Godwin, Edward dangled before William the prospect of succeeding to the English throne. Edward himself was childless and since mon-