William the Bastard

From 1035, Normandy was ruled by Duke William, who was known as ‘William the Bastard’. This was because his father, Duke Robert, nicknamed ‘the Devil’, had not been married to his mother, Herleva. She was the daughter of a tanner (a leather worker).

William did not mind being called bastard. However, he hated being reminded of his mother’s humble background. In 1048, the Duke was attacking the castle of Alençon, in Maine. The defenders insulted him by spreading animal skins on their walls and shouting out, ‘Hides, bides for the tanner!’ William was so furious that, when he captured Alençon, he ordered that the defenders should all have their hands and feet chopped off.

William’s behaviour at Alençon terrified his enemies.

The next castle he attacked surrendered immediately. This was a useful lesson for the duke.

William’s early years

William was a hard man, but he had grown up in a violent world. He had become duke at the age of seven or eight. Over the next few years, all four of his guardians died violently, as rival nobles fought each other to get control of the young duke. Some of the nobles hoped to rule through him. Others wanted to kill him and seize the duchy for themselves. As a boy, William’s life was often in danger.

The greatest threat came from William’s own cousin, Guy of Brionne. In 1047, Guy tried to make himself duke, supported by some of the leading Norman nobles. William, who was about nineteen at the time, desperately asked for help from King Henry I of France. With the king’s help, William won a great victory over Guy, at Val-es-Dunes. It was his first battle.

As William grew more powerful, King Henry regretted helping him. The king joined forces with Count Geoffrey of Anjou. In the 1050s, they tried twice to conquer Normandy. Both invasions were defeated by William.

William was a good general and he also had wonderful luck. In 1060, his greatest enemies, King Henry and Count Geoffrey, both died. Their deaths left him free to conquer the neighbouring county of Maine, in 1062–4. In 1064, he also invaded Brittany, and forced the count, Conan, to accept him as his overlord.

By 1066, William the Bastard was the most powerful ruler in northern France.

The family tree showing the link between the English throne and the Dukes of Normandy in the eleventh century.