Who were the Normans?

The Normans were a group of people who lived in northern western France more than 1000 years ago. Their ancestors were the Vikings from Norway and Denmark who raided France in the ninth century. The word Norman came from Norseman, a medieval word for a Viking. At first, the kings of France gave the Vikings money to go away. In 911, however, King Charles the Simple made a treaty with a Viking chief called Hrolf, or Rollo. This allowed Rollo and his followers to settle in the part of France that became known as the Duchy of Normandy. In return, they had to defend France against other Viking attacks. Rollo became Duke of Normandy. When he died the title passed to his son, William.

The Normans spread out

In the eleventh century, the Normans conquered southern Italy and Sicily. In 1082 William, a great-grandson of Rollo, added Maine to his territory in France. Then in 1086 William conquered England. From there the Norman influence spread to Wales, Scotland and Ireland.

The Normans took part in the Crusades to the Holy Land from 1096 until the end of the twelfth century. For some of this time Crusaders occupied Jerusalem, Antioch and Tripoli. In 1147 Roger II of Sicily occupied a long stretch of the North African coast and in 1191 Richard I of England conquered Cyprus.

When Richard I died in 1199, his brother John became King of England. John was also Duke of Normandy, Anjou, Touraine and Maine, but by 1204 he had lost all his French territory to the King of France. He tried to win it back in 1214, but failed. John was the last King of England who was also Duke of Normandy. After his death the two places became quite separate and were never reunited.

The Normans and the English language

When the French-speaking Normans came to England, the English people took over many French words. Words like royal, parliament, judge and tax come from French, and show that the Normans were important rulers. The Normans also increased the importance of the Church, and gave words like prayer, saint and miracle. English words for types of meat, like mutton and beef, also come from French. But English words for the animals themselves, like sheep and cow, come from words that were used in England before the Normans arrived. This is because the Normans were rich and ate most of the meat, while English people looked after the animals.

Typical Norman carvings around a door at Ely Cathedral in England. Norman craftsmen liked to decorate their buildings with arches like these around the doors and windows. They carved figures of people, animals and plants into the stone. Sometimes they carved a scene from the Bible on the panel above the door. This one shows Christ in heaven, being carried by angels.