William I

is better known as William the Conqueror.

William was born in 1027 and he died in 1087.His father was Robert, Duke of Normandy and his mother was Herleve of Falaise. They never married and William was known as **"William the Bastard"** to his enemies - though this was never said to his face when he had grown up.

In 1035, Robert died and as his only surviving heir, William became Duke of Normandy at the age of 8. William's young age and the fact that he was born out of marriage, meant that many lords in Normandy did not approve of him ruling them. In 1040, they tried to kill William. The plan failed but William's guardian - Gilbert of Brionne - was killed.

In 1047, the lords in western Normandy rebelled against William again. They, again, failed but these two incidents taught William to trust no-one. He also became a victim of the violent time he lived in. He believed that if someone betrayed him, then he should show no mercy. If a village or town betrayed him, then he should show no mercy. In 1051, citizens in the town of Alençon, which William was besieging, taunted him about being illegitimate. Once the town had fallen to him, he ordered that those who had abused him should have their hands and feet cut off.

In 1051, William met Edward the Confessor. William claimed that at this meeting, Edward promised him the throne of England on Edward's death. However, there were no proper witnesses to this meeting - only those who wanted to keep on the good side of William.

In 1053, William married Matilda of Flanders. They had nine children, of whom seven survived. During the next ten years, William had to constantly fight off invaders to his territory. He was always successful and built up a feared and professional army. His army's main power was based on his **cavalry** - horse borne soldiers. These men were highly trained. They wore chain mail into battle, used a lance, sword or mace to fight with and rode horses that were bred to carry such a weight at speed.

After defeating Harold at the **Battle of Hastings**, William gained control over England by the use of the **Feudal System.** His control over the people was greatly extended by the **Domesday Book.**

He died in September 1087 after suffering from major internal injuries when his horse, scared by embers in a burning Norman village, reared and rammed the pommel on the saddle into William's stomach. He took several days to die. When he did, he was buried but he was too big for his coffin and his body had to be stuffed into it. Legend has it, that the body split open because it had rotted so much before burial.....

What was put into his coffin was stolen in 1562 - all except a thigh bone. This was removed during the French Revolution - no-one knows the whereabouts of the skeleton of the man who won the Battle of Hastings !!

What was William like?

What did people at the time think about William the Conqueror?

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Source A – A comment on William's character, taken from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.

'King William was a very stern and violent man. No one dared do anything against the King's will. He put nobles who annoyed him into prison. He built castles and cruelly kept the poor people down.'

Source B – This entry in the Peterborough Chronicle describes William's reign.

'During William's reign the great cathedral at Canterbury was built. Any man was allowed to become a monk, no matter how rich or poor he was. We musn't forget the good order he kept in the land.'

Source C – Orderic Vitalis, usually an admirer of William, wrote this about the 'harrying of the North' in the 12th century.

'Never did William show such cruelty. He did not trouble to restrain his resentment, striking down innocent and guilty alike with an equal fury. In this manner all the sources of life north of the Humber were destroyed.'

1. **What different views of William are given in Sources A to C?**
2. **What impression of William do you get from reading about him?**
3. **Explain why there are these different views of William?**
4. **What is your own opinion of William's character and personality?**

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