

Chapter Eight

THE CONQUEST: LOSS AND GAIN

NOTHING was quite the same after 1066. The chronicler Odericus Vitalis summed up the effect of William I's conquest of England thus:

'... the native inhabitants were crushed, imprisoned, disinherited, banished and scattered beyond the limits of their own country; while his own vassals were exalted to wealth and honours and raised to all offices ...'

In this way the writer put his finger on the greatest change of all, the creation of a new ruling class. By the end of William's reign, the old English aristocracy had gone. In its place was a new foreign nobility made up of Normans, French and Flemings, men who had come over with the Conqueror. Between them they were to own half the territorial wealth of the kingdom. The result of this was to reduce the existing inhabitants to the status of a subject people.

As soon as it became clear that the king's initial desire to work with the old Anglo-Saxon aristocracy had failed, he set out to create a new one of followers who would be loyal to him and ensure his position as king of England. That was secured by two things: castles, and knights to man them. Castles were built at strategic points throughout the land, deliberately designed to subdue local communities. Initially these castles were constructed of wood with a mound called a 'motte' with a ditch around it and a tower on the top. There would also be a fortified area below which was called a bailey. Gradually these wooden castles were replaced by ones of stone many of which, such as Pevensey and Chepstow, stand today, albeit in ruins. The most famous of all was the Tower of London designed to hold the city in subjection to its new king.

The king needed five thousand knights to man these castles and it was that very practical need which contributed to the emergence of a system which later ages called feudalism. It eventually became more formalised but it began purely as a means whereby William could man his strongholds. He solved the manning problem by granting the confiscated lands of the defeated English aristocracy to his followers in

return for their guarantee to supply armed knights. William granted lands to a hundred and seventy of his followers who became thereby his tenants-in-chief. Only in the case of the earls who guarded areas of the country open to external attack, such as the Welsh borders, were grants of lands made forming a single unit. Usually they were scattered through several shires. Collectively each group of lands was called an honour and each honour consisted of several smaller units called manors. These in their turn were either held directly by the tenant-in-chief for his own use, and therefore part of what was known as his demesne, or granted by him to one of his followers in return for some specified service. The result was that each of the tenants-in-chief had two groups of knights on which to call for service to the king, one consisting of those who were permanently part of the tenant-in-chief's household and a second of those who came in return for land. William was a strong king who chose his tenants well and so the system worked. The trouble was that with a weaker ruler the system was to break down, leading to private castles and armies.

The same revolution was applied to the Anglo-Saxon church. In Normandy William had controlled all the appointments of bishops and abbots, filling them with his own friends and relations. Exactly the same thing was to occur in England as bishops and abbots from before 1066 either died or were deposed. They were replaced by Normans and, like the nobility, they had to render the king rent in the form of armed knights. Together the tenants-in-chief, bishops and abbots made up the new ruling class, for the higher clergy, being educated, were essential for the running of the government. In these changes William was aided by a new Archbishop of Canterbury, Lanfranc, who replaced the deposed Anglo-Saxon, Stigand. Together they set about reorganising the English church, moving sees to more populous areas such as Shrewsbury, Chester and Salisbury. Both believed that priests should be celibate and gradually the toleration by the Anglo-Saxon church of married bishops and clergy ceased. More significant for the future was the creation of special courts to deal with church cases only.

All of this activity precipitated a wave of new building in the handsome monumental style called Norman. This was an age of cathedral building with Durham, started towards the end of the reign, as its supreme masterpiece. Apart from architecture the Normans were culturally inferior to the people they had conquered whose sculpture, metalwork, embroidery and illumination were of European renown. Anglo-Saxon civilisation came to its end, a fate made worse because the language which had produced a remarkable literature was now deemed inferior. The new ruling class used French and Latin and made no attempt to learn Anglo-Saxon.

Women, too, found their status diminished. In Anglo-Saxon England they had

more or less enjoyed an equality with men. That was now taken away and St. Paul's attitude to women as being inferior prevailed. Women were subject first to their fathers and then, after marriage, to their husbands. Only when a woman became a wealthy widow did she gain any form of independence.

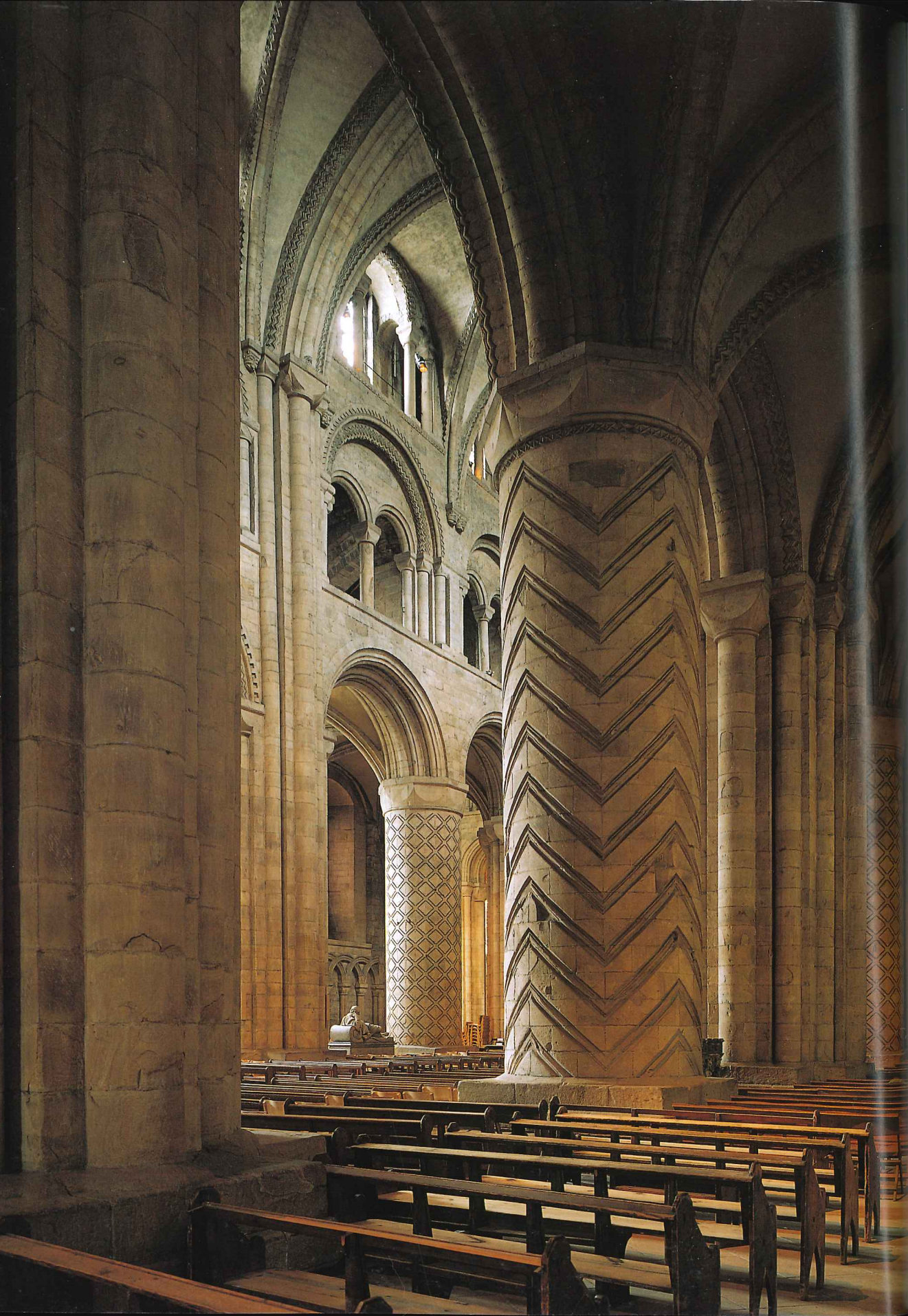
All these changes brought order and peace to the country through strong government. But it is a history which inevitably can only be written from the evidence of the winning side. This has left us one of the greatest of all documents in English history, the Domesday Book. In 1085 William feared invasion from Denmark; needing to find out the wealth of his kingdom in order to extract the maximum in taxation, he ordered this mighty survey to be undertaken. He '... sent his men all over England into every shire to ascertain how many hundreds of hides [a unit of land] there were in each shire and how much land and livestock the king himself owned in the country and what annual dues were lawfully his from each shire. He also had it recorded how much land his archbishops had, and his diocesan bishops, his abbots and his earls ... what and how much each man, who was a landowner here in England, had in land and livestock, and how much money it was worth.'

This amazing compilation, of a kind achieved by no later medieval king, was put together with great speed in a huge document of four hundred double-sided pages. At the same time the king summoned his tenants-in-chief and all other major landowners to a court held at Salisbury where they were made to swear an oath of allegiance to him. In these two great acts William reasserted his power over his new realm.

Domesday Book gives us a unique panorama of English society as it was at the end of William I's reign, twenty years after the Conquest. It paints a picture of a country where virtually the entire population was engaged in agriculture with little or no industry or commerce, and few towns. Apart from heathland, scrub and the royal forests (protected by law for the king's hunting and the source of deep resentment) all of the land was either under the plough or pasture. Arable farming centred on villages from which the peasants set out to work in the surrounding fields, which were divided into strips belonging either to the landlord or rented to the peasant in return for his labour. Sheep farming focused on scattered hamlets housing shepherds who tended the flocks. Life for nearly everyone rarely rose above subsistence level, a never-ending cycle of toil to produce corn for bread, barley for ale, sheep for wool, goats for milk and pigs for meat.

Within these small rural communities the classes

The Conquest led to a prodigious outburst of building. Nearly every cathedral and abbey church in England was rebuilt in a new style, the Romanesque, typified by grandeur of scale and making use of massively thick walls, huge columns and lofty vaults to achieve a new spaciousness. Durham Cathedral was begun in 1093 and completed in 1130. Today it is recognised as the supreme masterpiece of the style.





The chest in which the Domesday Book was kept from the early seventeenth century onwards. Lined and bound with iron it has the remains of three locks, the keys to which were held by three different officials, thus controlling access to it. Initially Domesday Book was kept at Winchester and later in the Palace of Westminster.

were divided forming what were the lower sections of the vast social pyramid which culminated in the king. There were firstly the freemen who owned their land but yet were expected to attend the lord's court, assist him at busy seasons of the year and pay him a levy. Next came the smallholders who made up two-fifths of the population paying rent for farms of up to thirty acres. Then there were the cottagers with up to three acres who worked, for example, as shepherds, blacksmiths or swineherds. Lastly there came the lowest of all, those who were slaves devoid of any land or rights. Together these four groups made up the subject native population, one which the Normans were steadily to grind down.

For the invaders, and for William I, the conquest of England was a remarkable achievement. It was to be an enduring one, for unlike the preceding centuries, no other invading force was to be successful until 1688 when another William crossed the Channel, this time from the Low Countries. For the native population it was a cruel and humiliating defeat which swept their civilisation away. The new aristocracy saw its first loyalty not to the land they had conquered but to Normandy. England was taxed and exploited in the interests of what was a smaller, poorer and far less cultured country. Henceforward too, for better or worse, English kings were also to be continental rulers and for four centuries the wealth of England was expended in wars aimed at acquiring, defending and sustaining a mainland empire whose final foothold was not to be lost until 1558.

The Tower of London was one of a vast network of castles built by William I to subject England. A temporary stronghold was erected soon after 1066 to be followed by the present massive structure of the White Tower completed by 1100. The rooms were stacked one on top of each other to increase security, with storage below and living quarters

above. By the close of the thirteenth century concentric rings of defence had been added. The Tower had the dual function during the Middle Ages of acting as a royal palace and a fortress to overawe London.

