

Norman Shrewsbury 1066 – 1154

Between 1066 and 1154 England was ruled by the Norman kings. Prior to this in 1050, Richard Fitz Scrob was a Norman knight granted lands by the Saxon King Edward the Confessor and he built Richard's Castle near Ludlow. It is believed that the origins of the name "Shropshire" is the old English "Scrobbesbyrigsein", perhaps taking its name from Richard Fitzscrob. However, the Normans found it difficult to pronounce so they softened it to "Salopescira". Salop is the abbreviation of this.

In 1066 the Norman invasion commenced when William the Conqueror defeated the Saxon King Harold of Godwinsson.



His victory spelt the end of almost of every Anglo Saxon earl's influence, power or holdings. William had raised his army with promises of a share in the spoils of war and ,once victorious, he divided the country up and gave large tracts of land to his most loyal supporters. Around 200 Norman barons replaced almost 4,000 Anglo Saxon nobles.

Immediately after the Conquest, William placed Shropshire under the control of the Anglo Saxon Earl Edwin of Mercia who had accepted William as a monarch. However, events in the next few years made the situation in Shropshire increasingly volatile.

Shropshire was important to William because of its border with Wales. He was keen to prevent attacks by the unconquered Welsh and eradicate the risk of an alliance between the Welsh princes and disgruntled and displaced Anglo Saxons.

In 1069, an Anglo Saxon thegn* of Herefordshire, Edric the Wild, known as Eric the Wild, attacked Shrewsbury with the assistance of Welsh warriors and insurgents from Chester. The rebellion was easily put down by Norman forces but the perpetrators were never caught and William, furious at the insurrection and irate that the rebels could not be caught, vented his fury by razing Shrewsbury to the ground.

In 1071, Earl Edwin of Thercia was killed by conspirators from his own clan. After this, William felt that Shropshire needed strong and loyal leadership and he installed Roger de Montgomery as Earl of Shrewsbury.



He was allocated seven eighths of the land in Shropshire and the rest divided between eight others including the Bishops of Chester and Hereford.

Roger de Montgomery was one of William's most loyal and trusted aides as well as a friend and he entrusted Roger to look after affairs while he invaded England. Given Roger's esteemed status, William's decision to grant him control of Shropshire, highlights the strategic importance of the area.

Roger's first task was to pacify the unruly areas, theoretically under English rule, but in reality a dangerous no man's land. William was keen for the Norman influence to penetrate deeper into Wales.

Shrewsbury would be a strategic base from which to launch these invasions. Roger set about building large numbers of Norman castles and Shropshire quickly became the most heavily fortified area in Norman England. Although surviving evidence is scarce, it is thought that Roger de Montgomery built as 70 castles in Shropshire. The Norman garrison established in Shrewsbury quickly became the launch pad for attacks into Wales and by 1073 Roger had secured a large tract of Wales stretching as far as Cardigan.

Roger constructed Shrewsbury Castle to provide a secure base from which to mount military operations. In the surrounding area he granted many of his manors to his retainers but whilst Shropshire was extensively fortified the immediate land around Shrewsbury was kept clear of castles to ensure the town was dominant.

Meanwhile, William the Conqueror had the Domesday Book compiled. It was the manuscript record of "Great Survey" of much of England and part of Wales and was completed in 1086. Its main purpose was to determine what taxes had been owed during the reign of King Edward the Confessor, which allowed William to reassert the rights of the

Crown to assess where power lay after a wholesale redistribution of land following the Norman Conquest.



Shrewsbury Castle was built in the north-eastern corner of the Saxon burh straddling the rampart and was undoubtedly a massive intrusion on the existing town. The Domesday Book recorded that 50 houses were made uninhabitable to provide clear views. Given that there were only 300 houses in the town, this led to complaints from the population that it was unfair to demand the same amount of tax as during the previous reign.

The castle itself was an earth and timber motte and bailey fortress*. The motte was built over the Saxon town rampart and directly overlooked the River Severn. The mound was topped with a wooden palisade and tower. Extending to the north-west was an inner bailey which enclosed an area of one acre and hosted the Great Hall and associated ancillary buildings. Projecting south and west of the motte was a large outer bailey which was built over the line of the Saxon town hall. Unusually this outer bailey also straddled the main north/south road into town forcing traffic to enter or leave the town through the castle precincts. The chapel of St Nicholas was located within the outer bailey.

In 1083 Roger de Montgomery pledged to build an abbey in Shrewsbury.



The site is symbolic of the subjugation of the Anglo-Saxon ruling class, rather than choosing an unoccupied area, Roger decided to place it on the home of Siward, a wealthy and influential Anglo-Saxon thegn*. His house incorporated its own watermill, church and burial ground was positioned on the busiest road into town.

Building work on the Abbey began under the supervision of two monks from the Abbey of Seez* and was in progress when the Domesday Book was compiled in 1086. The

following year regular monastic life began under Fulchred of Seez, the first Abbot.

In 1087 William the Conqueror died while leading a campaign in Northern France and his lands were divided. Normandy went to his eldest son, Robert Curthose and his second son, William Rufus-William II received England.

In 1094 Roger de Montgomery died, having taken monastic vows shortly before, and was buried between 2 alters of his new Abbey church.

This suburb, now Abbey Foregate, became the Abbey's own borough, under the jurisdiction of the Abbot and quite independent of the town.

After his death, Roger's English estates and his title of Earl of Shrewsbury passed to his son, Hugh. However, he died in 1098 and was followed by his elder brother, Robert of Belleme who had previously inherited his father's Normandy estates.

Accordingly when William II was killed in 1100, Robert sought the re-unification of England and Normandy. Henry I took the English throne but Robert opposed him and instead supported the claim of Robert Curthose, Duke of Normandy. The latter invaded but his campaign failed enabling Henry to secure the throne and take revenge on those who had supported his rival. Robert of Belleme's estate including Arundel, Tickhill and Shrewsbury, were besieged forcing him to surrender. He was allowed to go into exile but his estates, including Shrewsbury were forfeited to the Crown.

Henry I died in 1135 without leaving a male heir and the country slipped into civil war over the succession. Shrewsbury Castle was initially held for Stephen of Blois who had assumed the role of king following Henry's death. However, in 1138 Shrewsbury Castle was seized by William Fitzalon on behalf of the other claimant, Matilda. Royal forces rushed to the Castle and besieged it forcing its surrender. Around 100 defenders were hanged from the battlements after its capture.

Many of the buildings with which the Normans used to subjugate and rule England in 1066 have lasted more than 900 years. Shropshire's own Norman legacy, in the form of the Abbey and a number of castles, testifies to its role as a military stronghold and religious centre. In later years Shrewsbury Abbey became one of England's most sacred pilgrim sites, second only to Canterbury. It is suggested that some Anglo-Saxon settlements grew and became regional capitals thanks to the Norman invaders.

Meaning of words

- **Thegn** – one who serves. Commonly used to describe either an aristocratic retainer or a king or nobleman in Anglo-Saxon England.
- **Motte and Bailey** – a motte and bailey castle is a fortification with a wooden or stone keep (tower) situated on a raised earthwork called a motte, accompanied by an enclosed courtyard or bailey. This is surrounded by a protective ditch or palisade which is a wall made from wooden stakes.
- **Seez** – a place in Eastern France in the Rhone-Alpes region.
- **Burh** – old English fortification or fortified settlement.