

The sons of William the Conqueror

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William had three sons: Robert, William and Henry. Only the last two were to rule Britain. William (called "Rufus" because of his red hair) ruled from 1087 to 1100, Henry (called Henry I) from 1100 to 1135. Robert was given Normandy of which his father, the great conqueror, had been the duke. Here we are going to tell more about William and Henry.

William Rufus

William Rufus was a strong ruler. He continued the centralised government of his father, enforced justice among the people and strengthened England's ties to Normandy. But the style of his leadership left much to be desired. He was a corrupt, aggressive and blasphemous king. He confiscated wealth and property from the Church and never kept his promises of reform and just government. Besides he had a dangerous weakness: a great desire to be admired. This desire led him to be most generous to the men in his court who best managed to express their adoration. This "generosity" of the king was well known and drew lots of ambitious, self-seeking young men, many of them foreigners, to seek fame and fortune at his court. The people didn't like that. And they liked it even less when they saw that not only was the king generous towards these flatterers, he also placed them *above* the law – the law that was so heavily, often brutally, enforced upon the rest of the people.

William knew that he wasn't very popular with the people. Therefore he was also afraid most of his time, anxious that somebody should succeed in assassinating him. He really couldn't trust anybody. And one day when he was out in the forest hunting, he was killed with an arrow through his chest. Who did it? We are still not sure. The most probable answer was that Walter Tirel did it, one of the king's courtiers. Walter Tirel was a French nobleman who was the king's favourite, but who had quarreled with the king the night before. Tirel was alone with the king that afternoon. But Tirel adamantly claimed his innocence. Could it perhaps have been an accident? Or could it have been a plot arranged by somebody else? By his brother Henry, for instance, who was remarkably quick to take advantage of his brother's death. Already the next day he was chosen king...

Henry I

Henry shared much of the greed and ruthlessness of his brother William. But in the day-to-day affairs he was generally more wise than his older brother.

Henry got his will by *negotiating*, by *persuasion* and by *diplomacy* – not by killing everyone he didn't like the look of. Nevertheless he had the same problem as his brother: Henry was constantly in fear of plots and treason and felt that he couldn't trust even his closest servants.

Unlike William, Henry survived, perhaps because he was all in all a more gentle ruler than his brother. No one tried to, or ever succeeded in, killing him. But Henry had another problem, just as disturbing: his lawfully wedded wife bore him only one son. This legitimate son was called William after Henry's father, the great Conqueror. Unfortunately the handsome young William drowned when his *White ship* hit an underwater rock and sank in 1120, just a few hundred yards off the coast of Normandy. Then there was no legitimate male heir to the throne. Henry's other legitimate child, Matilda who at the time was married to the German emperor Henry V, was the next in line. (Of course, many of the 20 other children Henry had with different mistresses, were boys, but none of them could be accepted heirs to the throne, instead all these children were derogatory named "bastards".)

When Matilda's husband died in 1125, she hurried back to England. Henry persuaded his barons to swear an oath to support her. But when Henry died in 1135, they had forgotten about their oath. Instead they were eager to support Stephen, Henry's nephew from Normandy. So Stephen became the new king of England and in his 19 years on the throne the country was thrown out in a terrible civil war that was only ended when Matilda's son, Henry II, became king in 1154.

Questions

1. What good things did William Rufus do as a ruler?

2. What were his negative sides?

3. How did William die?

4. Who was suspected for the murder?

5. What were Henry's main political strategies?

6. How many legitimate sons had Henry?

7. How many children had Henry all in all?

8. Why didn't Matilda become queen after Henry's death?

Answers

- 1. What good things did William Rufus do as a ruler?**
He continued the centralised government of his father, enforced justice among the people and strengthened England's ties to Normandy.
- 2. What were his negative sides?**
He was corrupt, aggressive and blasphemous. Also he had a particular weakness: he desired to be admired by his courtiers.
- 3. How did William die?**
He was hit by an arrow while he was out hunting in the forest.
- 4. Who was suspected for the murder?**
Walter Tirel. But who actually killed William Rufus we do not know. This is one of the great mysteries in English history.
- 5. What were Henry's main political strategies?**
He tried to be a successful politician by negotiations, persuasions and diplomacy.
- 6. How many legitimate sons had Henry?**
One: William.
- 7. How many children had Henry all in all?**
22: two legitimate children (William and Matilda) and 20 illegitimate children with different mistresses. Several of these illegitimate children were onboard the White ship with William as it went down in November 1120. They all died.
- 8. Why didn't Matilda become queen after Henry's death?**
Because the barons and noblemen who had promised to support her, went back on their promise as soon as Henry died. Then they supported Stephen instead, Henry's nephew from Normandy.