

The Norman Conquest

There was still one other invasion which was to play a major part in the shaping of the English language, that of the **Normans**. We generally date the Norman-French period in English history from the invasion by **WILLIAM THE CONQUEROR** in 1066, but Norman influence had appeared before then. The Saxon King **ETHELRED THE UNREADY** (reigned 978-1016) had married a Norman princess, and his son **EDWARD THE CONFESSOR** (1042-1066), who reigned after him, had been brought up in **France**, with the result that a number of French words had come into the language before **William the Conqueror** became King of England.

The Normans were descended from the same fierce warrior race of the ‘**Norsemen**’ as had harried England a century before the coming of the conqueror. In 912 **ROLLO THE ROVER** was given **Normandy** by the French King **CHARLES THE SIMPLE**. With amazing vigour the Normans became one of the most highly organized states in the world. They adopted French as their language, embraced Christianity and became renowned for their learning. Their military prowess and their organizing ability. After defeating the English King, **HAROLD**, at **Hastings** in 1066, William the Conqueror began to organize England on the Norman pattern. Many Frenchmen came to England bringing the rich learning and developed civilization of Normandy, and putting England into the full stream of European culture and thought. The Normans ruled with a hard hand, and the defeated **Saxons** suffered oppression and indignities. For the next three centuries all the kings of England spoke French ; all the power in court and castle and Church was in the hands of the Normans, and the Normans organized from above the lives and activities of the common people. The language they spoke was French and they never dreamed of doing their organizing in any

language except French or Latin. For about three hundred years two languages were spoken side by side in England. The ‘official’ language was French ; English was spoken only by the ‘common’ people.

The language of Saxon times was being changed, but it was in no danger of dying out ; and the changes were all to the good.

Ultimately Norman and Saxon united to form one nation, but it had taken more than three centuries. The turning point was perhaps marked in 1362 when for the first time **EDWARD III** opened **Parliament** in English. At the same time the **Statute of pleading** enacted that proceedings in law courts should be in English because ‘French’ has become much unknown in this realm.

When finally English emerged as the language of England, it had been greatly modified by the vicissitudes through which it had gone. The gradual dropping of inflectional endings and the general gramatical simplification which, we noticed, had begun in the time of the **Danes**, had gone on and had been greatly accelerated by the collision with French and by the fact that English had for three centuries been almost entirely a spoken language, no longer restrained and kept from change by literary models.

Since Norman times no other invader has come to England to impose an alien tongue on the country. But the stream of words has never ceased to flow in