King William I (1027-87), reigned 1066-87
King of England and Duke of Normandy, known as ‘The Conqueror’

On 14 October 1066 William became the first Norman king of England after defeating the Anglo-Saxon army at the Battle of Hastings. King Harold II of England was killed in the battle and William was crowned king at Westminster Abbey the following Christmas Day. Great social, political and cultural change followed in England as a result of the conquest.

William had put forward a claim to the throne in January 1066, on the death of King Edward the Confessor, on the grounds that Edward - a distant cousin whom the Normans had supported against the Danes - had promised him the throne in 1051. However, on his deathbed Edward had reportedly named Harold Godwineson, Earl of Wessex, as his heir.


William I’s appearance

It is not known exactly what William looked like. Portraits of him made during his lifetime include images on coins, seals and illuminated manuscripts (see Fig. 2). The Bayeux Tapestry, an embroidery made in the eleventh century to record the events of the Norman conquest, also includes representations of the king. These depictions are less concerned with revealing a likeness of William I than of symbolizing kingship in general.

It is known, however, that William was a relatively tall man. A thigh bone found in his tomb in Caen, Normandy, when it was opened in 1961, indicates that he may have been around 5 feet, 9 inches tall. Medieval descriptions of the king in chronicles and histories, such as that by the twelfth-century historian William of Malmesbury, generally concur that William was a physically strong, thick-set man who grew rather fat in his later years.
William the Conqueror through Tudor eyes

In the sixteenth century William was celebrated as a great warrior and a strong leader. A general interest in the history of the nation and in royal genealogy led to a demand for portraits of early kings and queens and other historical figures. Portrait sets appeared in print as well as in painting and imaginary images of William and the other Norman kings were sometimes included. The portrait at Montacute (Fig. 1) is one of only a handful of surviving paintings of William I from this period.

The three engravings shown here (Fig. 3) represent the three principle portrait types of William that circulated in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The first is from André Thevet’s *Les Vrais Pourtraits Et Vies Des Hommes Illustres* (1584), the second from Henry Holland’s *Baziliologia* (or Book of Kings) (1618) and the third from William Martyn’s *The Historie and Lives of the Kings of England* (1628). All three are fictional portraits but each shows William in armour, celebrating his military success.

The portrait at Montacute

The portrait of William currently on display at Montacute House (Fig. 1) is from the ‘Hornby Castle’ set of kings and queens, now in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery. Painted in the late 1590s or early 1600s the set was previously owned by the Duke of Leeds and hung at Hornby Castle, his Yorkshire seat. Portrait sets of this kind became popular in England in the second half of the sixteenth century and were often displayed in the ‘long galleries’ of the country homes of the nobility and gentry.

The portraits of the early monarchs in the set, including this depiction of William, appear to be derived from a series of woodcut prints published in 1597 in *A Book Containing the True Portraiture of the Kings of England* by an author known as ‘T.T.’ (probably the antiquarian Thomas Talbot). This facial type was later appropriated by Henry Holland in the aforementioned *Baziliologia* (or Book of Kings) of 1618 (Fig. 3 middle engraving).