

Cheshire 1066 William the Conqueror

There always has been a concern about the importance of Cheshire during this period, as it was really a military buffer zone for protection from the people of Wales.

The whole of England was drastically changed after the battle of Hastings in 1066. William was prepared to capture the whole of the land for himself, taking it from the present landowners, he wanted complete control over what was grown, bought or sold. Most estates were confiscated and the owners became workers. William had to back down from this original idea as there was a great rebellion against his acts. He allowed some aristocrats to keep their land if they acknowledged his authority. Having to rethink his plans for England he ordered a Census. (which we know as the Domesday Book) This was to find out how much taxes he could (fairly in his mind) raise from the land and its people.

The Domesday Book only records men of importance and land, there are no records of women and children, and even the manual workers.

This can be seen as the records do not show the salt workers, who were numerous in Middlewich, Northwich, Nantwich or Wheelock. We can never be sure how many people lived in this area.

William was not popular, and many areas of the country revolted against those who came to collect the taxes.

Many men of Cheshire defied the King to the bitter end, the full force of William's wrath was felt in the winter of 1069/70. William had to restore order to this area if he was to rule the whole country. He went first to Northumbria in 1067, there he laid waste the whole district. They set fire to all they could and destroyed all the livelihood of the population. Now he marched southwest over the Pennines to Cheshire (Mercia and Powys as it was then). Cheshire suffered almost as much as Northumbria.

1070 saw the security of Chester in the hands of Gherbod, the advocate of St. Bertin he only lasted a year. William summoned his nephew from Normandy, Hugh son of Viscount Richard of Avranches and made him Earl of Chester, in 1071. He was the first in a long line of William's relatives to be there until 1237.

So this was the buffer zone William needed to make his attack on Wales.

He reorganized the land boundaries making Cheshire what it is today, apart from a few minor changes. The total land area was 1,000 square miles of lowland countryside, this land was very poor and undeveloped apart from the salt towns. It was then divided into 10 areas called "hundreds", called after the nearest town. All but 6 of the original 130 landowners remained in Cheshire, but most of the land was forest, woods, or marshes, it was very difficult to clear and so remained for military purposes.

The "Feudal system" of Edward the Confessor was nothing compared with that of the Norman use. Even though they kept a similar feudal system it was founded on each man in the chain being a great responsibility to each other. This resulted in better crops, and great changes in this countryside.