

Redlynch & District Local History Society

The Mysterious Death of William Rufus by Andy Skinner of Southampton Museums

Zoom Presentation on Tuesday 2nd March 2021

Andy Skinner of Southampton Museums gave us an on-line talk on The Mysterious Death of William Rufus (William II) 1057-1100. William 1st and his family were Norsemen in origin and are described as violent and not particularly cultured. William Rufus is described as being well set, very strong, yellow hair, a florid complexion (which maybe the source of his name Rufus), different coloured eyes, loutish, uncouth and fond of bad language. He never married and was not particularly godly. This latter aspect may have affected the records which were mostly written by clerics.



William 1st had 4 sons, Richard who was killed circa 1075 in a hunting accident, Robert who inherited his father's title Duke of Normandy, William Rufus who inherited England, and lastly Henry Beauclerc (good writer). All the brothers vied for power and land between themselves; in 1088 Robert aided a rebellion in England which William Rufus suppressed. However shortly afterwards Robert went upon the 1st Crusade financially aided by William Rufus for which he became caretaker of Normandy in Robert's absence. William Rufus fell out with the Church such that when the Archbishop of Canterbury died in 1089, William Rufus did not appoint a successor for four years, keeping the church revenue in that period.

William Rufus died in 1100 on the 2nd August; in the lead up to this the Crusade had ended and Robert was returning, if Henry were to seize power this would be the time to move. However both the 12thC accounts emphasise the death was an accident. In one version Walter Tyrell shoots an arrow at a running deer, the arrow is deflected off the stag's back and hits William Rufus who has moved off station, in the breast; the other version states the arrow deflects on a bough hitting Rufus and emphasises the low sun and the King being dazzled. The assembled royal party rapidly departed to secure their lands so that charcoal burners, in particular Purkiss, were left to carry the body to Winchester where it was interred. Walter Tyrell decided an immediate visit to Normandy was prudent and stayed there marrying into the influential Clare family; he became Walter de Poix with an important position and appears to have had no blame attached to him. Henry rushed to Winchester to seize the treasury and thence to Westminster and was crowned on 5th August only 3 days after the death; and when Robert landed in England, Henry intercepted him near Alton and convinced him that he should remain King of England. Subsequent to this Henry captured Robert in battle in Normandy and kept him imprisoned for 28 years.

So, whether an accident or murder, the astute Henry, with the help of the Church who were unsympathetic to William Rufus, carried the succession. Lastly where did this happen? Word of mouth provides the current memorial site at Canterton although John Leland in 15thC states it was at Thorougham, mentioned in the Domesday Book but since lost on time.