INTRODUCTION

The two dates that are most commonly associated with the Middle Ages in the British Isles are 1066 and 1485. William the Conqueror’s victory at Hastings in 1066 brought the Normans to the throne of England. Richard III’s defeat by Henry Tudor at the battle of Bosworth in 1485 is popularly seen to mark the close of the Middle Ages. There are dangers in endowing either of these dates, particularly 1485, with too much significance, but both are in a way appropriate. They both relate to England and they each centre on changes in ruling dynasties. Although there are no reliable figures—the first national census was not until 1801—medieval England contained more people and was wealthier than Ireland, Scotland or Wales. It was also the most united of the constituent parts of the British Isles and the one that featured most in European politics. The politics of England centred on the ruler, on his views and entourage. The character of his reign depended on the personality of the monarch and this was of great importance for the stability of the country, for the personal relationship between the monarch and the great nobles (aristocrats) was crucial to political order. It is therefore possible to write a history of medieval England that centres on the rulers and is merely an account of their reigns in chronological order. Such an approach captures much of the reality of the high politics of the period, but it would also omit much that was of consequence to the development of medieval England. Two crucial aspects that would be omitted are social history and the regional dimension. Both must therefore be addressed in addition to the high political history of the period. In order to capture the variety of developments, particular attention will be devoted to two
areas: prosperous East Anglia in lowland eastern England, particularly the counties of Norfolk, Suffolk and Lincolnshire, and Wales, a part of Celtic Britain under pressure from England and Anglo-Norman practices. Examples will not be restricted to these two areas, but stress on them will serve to highlight the diversity of Britain and the danger of concentrating on any one train of change.

Information on England at the outset is provided by the Domesday Book (1086), a land survey ordered by William the Conqueror so that he could ascertain his own resources and those of his tenants. Its contents provide a guide to the extent to which English landowners had been replaced by Normans. Both as a result of the 1066 campaign and as a consequence of the suppression of subsequent rebellions, there had been a social revolution at the level of the elite. This had had far less effect at the level of the bulk of the population. Their life continued to be dominated by the pressures of agricultural life and the rhythms of a harsh demographic regime. Domesday revealed the extent to which the detailed nature of local environments influenced settlement patterns and economic activities. Thus, the silts and peat fens in the south-east of Lincolnshire were little settled: the marshland attracted few bar salt makers. In Norfolk, the fertile, well-drained river valleys were far more heavily populated than the high, dry interfluves; and readily worked lighter soils were easier to plough than poorly drained heavy soils.

Under the Normans the crucial economic unit was the manor, the possession of a lord consisting of a demesne (home farm) directly under the lord and the rest of the estate from which the lord was entitled to day labour, rent and the profits of justice. Food-rents and labour services had existed under the Anglo-Saxons. The Normans brought heavier tenurial burdens as a consequence of their social system of feudalism under which manors were granted to vassals in return for military service. Peasants became subject to closer control and some free men had their status and rights lessened by the new lords. The Norman conquest thus changed more than simply the world of high politics.

NORMANISATION

Unlike the Danish seizure of the throne by Cnut, that by William was followed by a social revolution. William, who claimed to be the