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William of Newburgh  
*History of English Affairs*



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*History of English Affairs of*  
**WILLIAM OF NEWBURGH**

(1136-1198)



**Contents**

*The Translation*

The History of English Affairs (1198)

*The Latin Text*

Historia rerum Anglicarum (Books I and II)

*The Biography*

William of Newburgh (1900) by Kate Norgate

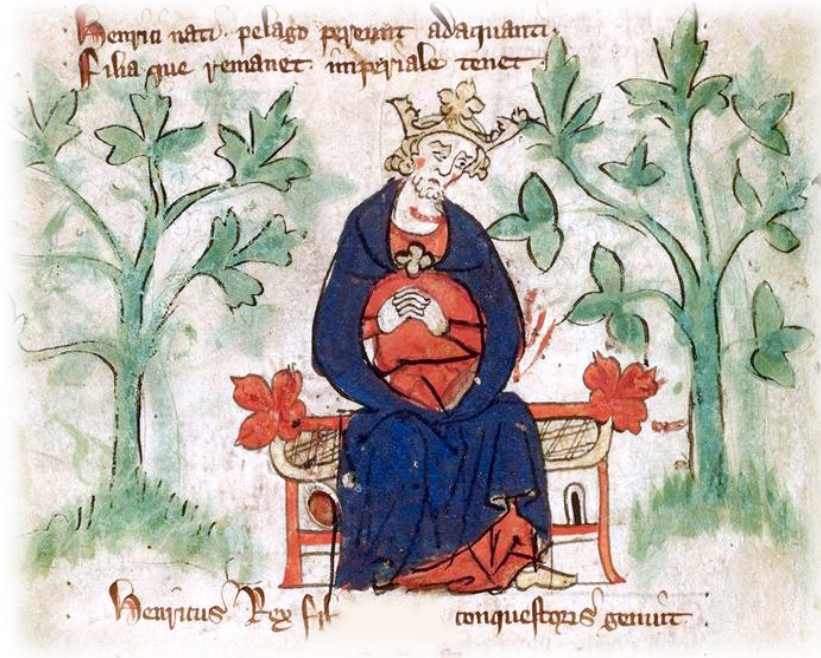
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**WILLIAM OF NEWBURGH**



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*The History of English Affairs by William of Newburgh*



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ISBN: 978 1 80170 267 6

Delphi Classics

is an imprint of

Delphi Publishing Ltd

Hastings, East Sussex

United Kingdom

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## The Translation



*Old Bridlington, Yorkshire, c. 1820 — William of Newburgh's birthplace*



*Bridlington, East Riding of Yorkshire, today*

## The History of English Affairs (1198)



*Translated by Joseph Stevenson, 1861*

William of Newburgh (1136-1198) was a historian and Augustinian canon of Anglo-Saxon descent from Bridlington, East Riding of Yorkshire. We know little of his life. He was the author of one of the most valuable historical works on eleventh and twelfth century England. He entered the Augustinian priory of Newburgh as a boy to study theology and history; he apparently remained there for the rest of his life, gaining information from an assortment of travellers and neighbouring abbeys.

Written in Latin at the request of Ernald, abbot of Rievaulx, William's *Historia rerum Anglicarum* (History of English Affairs) covers the period from the Norman Conquest of 1066 to 1198. His erudition included knowledge of the classical writers Virgil, Horace, Cicero and Livy; the early church historians Eusebius, Gregory, and Augustine; and the English chroniclers Bede, Henry of Huntingdon, Simeon of Durham and Anselm of Canterbury.

The nineteenth century historian Edward Augustus Freeman expressed the opinion that William was "the father of historical criticism." For example, William was critical of King John, whom he describes as "nature's enemy" and in general his discussion of English kings is "loyal but critical and cool", with little show of political subserviency. William based his work on what he deemed reliable sources, unlike Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, of which he was highly critical, stating "only a person ignorant of ancient history would have any doubt about how shamelessly and impudently he lies in almost everything." He criticised Geoffrey for writing a history that conflicted with the accounts found in the writings of Bede and the church.

*Historia rerum Anglicarum* is primarily a compilation of other English chronicles, except for William's original treatment of the period from 1154 to 1173. His dependence on oral tradition and legend resulted in some vagueness and error, though the work is still highly regarded both as a source of English domestic history, at that time overshadowed by news of the Crusades, and for its unusually acute commentary and critical analysis of cause and effect in the anarchic reign of King Stephen (1135-54). It is composed in an engaging style and still readable to this day, containing fascinating stories and glimpses of twelfth century life in medieval England. William is a major source for stories of medieval revenants, animated corpses that returned from their graves, with close parallels to vampire beliefs and he remains the only source for the bishop-pirate Wimund.



*Scene from the Bayeux Tapestry depicting ships grounding and horses landing in England — William's history opens with the 1066 Conquest of England by the Normans.*



*King John presenting a church by Matthew Paris in 'Historia Anglorum', c. 1259*

## CONTENTS

### *BOOK I.*

THE PREFATORY EPISTLE  
THE PREFACE TO THE ENSUING HISTORY  
CHAPTER 1  
CHAPTER 2  
CHAPTER 3  
CHAPTER 4  
CHAPTER 5  
CHAPTER 6  
CHAPTER 7  
CHAPTER 8  
CHAPTER 9  
CHAPTER 10  
CHAPTER 11  
CHAPTER 12  
CHAPTER 13  
CHAPTER 14  
CHAPTER 15  
CHAPTER 16  
CHAPTER 17  
CHAPTER 18  
CHAPTER 19  
CHAPTER 20  
CHAPTER 21  
CHAPTER 22  
CHAPTER 23  
CHAPTER 24  
CHAPTER 25  
CHAPTER 26  
CHAPTER 27  
CHAPTER 28  
CHAPTER 29  
CHAPTER 30  
CHAPTER 31  
CHAPTER 32

### *BOOK II.*

CHAPTER 1  
CHAPTER 2  
CHAPTER 3  
CHAPTER 4  
CHAPTER 5  
CHAPTER 6  
CHAPTER 7  
CHAPTER 8  
CHAPTER 9

CHAPTER 10  
CHAPTER 11  
CHAPTER 12  
CHAPTER 13  
CHAPTER 14  
CHAPTER 15  
CHAPTER 16  
CHAPTER 17  
CHAPTER 18  
CHAPTER 19  
CHAPTER 20  
CHAPTER 21  
CHAPTER 22  
CHAPTER 23  
CHAPTER 24  
CHAPTER 25  
CHAPTER 26  
CHAPTER 27  
CHAPTER 28  
CHAPTER 29  
CHAPTER 30  
CHAPTER 31  
CHAPTER 32  
CHAPTER 33  
CHAPTER 34  
CHAPTER 35  
CHAPTER 36  
CHAPTER 37  
CHAPTER 38

*BOOK III.*

CHAPTER 1  
CHAPTER 2  
CHAPTER 3  
CHAPTER 4  
CHAPTER 5  
CHAPTER 6  
CHAPTER 7  
CHAPTER 8  
CHAPTER 9  
CHAPTER 10  
CHAPTER 11  
CHAPTER 12  
CHAPTER 13  
CHAPTER 14  
CHAPTER 15  
CHAPTER 16  
CHAPTER 17  
CHAPTER 18  
CHAPTER 19

CHAPTER 20  
CHAPTER 21  
CHAPTER 22  
CHAPTER 23  
CHAPTER 24  
CHAPTER 25  
CHAPTER 26  
CHAPTER 27  
CHAPTER 28

*BOOK IV.*

CHAPTER 1  
CHAPTER 2  
CHAPTER 3  
CHAPTER 4  
CHAPTER 5  
CHAPTER 6  
CHAPTER 7  
CHAPTER 8  
CHAPTER 9  
CHAPTER 10  
CHAPTER 11  
CHAPTER 12  
CHAPTER 13  
CHAPTER 14  
CHAPTER 15  
CHAPTER 16  
CHAPTER 17  
CHAPTER 18  
CHAPTER 19  
CHAPTER 20  
CHAPTER 21  
CHAPTER 22  
CHAPTER 23  
CHAPTER 24  
CHAPTER 25  
CHAPTER 26  
CHAPTER 27  
CHAPTER 28  
CHAPTER 29  
CHAPTER 30  
CHAPTER 31  
CHAPTER 32  
CHAPTER 33  
CHAPTER 34  
CHAPTER 35  
CHAPTER 36  
CHAPTER 37  
CHAPTER 38  
CHAPTER 39

CHAPTER 40  
CHAPTER 41  
CHAPTER 42

*BOOK V.*

CHAPTER 1  
CHAPTER 2  
CHAPTER 3  
CHAPTER 4  
CHAPTER 5  
CHAPTER 6  
CHAPTER 7  
CHAPTER 8  
CHAPTER 9  
CHAPTER 10  
CHAPTER 11  
CHAPTER 12  
CHAPTER 13  
CHAPTER 14  
CHAPTER 15  
CHAPTER 16  
CHAPTER 17  
CHAPTER 18  
CHAPTER 19  
CHAPTER 20  
CHAPTER 21  
CHAPTER 22  
CHAPTER 23  
CHAPTER 24  
CHAPTER 25  
CHAPTER 26  
CHAPTER 27  
CHAPTER 28  
CHAPTER 29  
CHAPTER 30  
CHAPTER 31  
CHAPTER 32  
CHAPTER 33  
CHAPTER 34



*Miniature from Matthew Paris's 'Historia Anglorum', depicting Stephen (c. 1096-1154), often referred to as Stephen of Blois, who was King of England from 1135 till his death in 1154.*



*Near contemporary illustration of the Battle of Lincoln — a key event of the Anarchy described by William*

# BOOK I.



## THE PREFATORY EPISTLE

*A prefatory and apologetic Epistle to the ensuing work, addressed to the abbot of Rievaulx, by William, canon of Newburgh.*



[1] TO HIS reverend father and lord, Ernald, abbot of Rievaulx, William, the least of the servants of Christ, prayeth, that when the Prince of Shepherds shall appear, there may be given to him an unfading crown of glory.

[2] I have received the letters of your holiness, wherein you deign to assign to me the care and labor of writing (for the knowledge and instruction of posterity) a history of the memorable events which have so abundantly occurred in our own times; although there be so many of your own venerable fraternity better qualified to accomplish such a work, and that more elegantly; but this, I perceive, arises from your kind desire to spare, in this respect, the members of your own society, who are so fully occupied in the duties of monastic service, as well as to prevent the leisure hours kindly granted to my infirmity from being unemployed. Indeed, I am so devotedly bound by your kind regard to me, that, even were your commands more difficult, I should not venture to gainsay them; but since your cautious discrimination does not impose upon me any research into profound matters or mystical exposition, but merely to expatiate, for a time, on historic narrative, as it were for mental recreation only (so easy is the work), I have, consequently, no sufficient ground of refusal remaining. Wherefore, by the assistance of God and our Lord, in whose bands both of us and our words are, and relying on the prayers of yourself and your holy brotherhood, who have condescended to unite their repeated entreaties to the command of your holiness, I will attempt the labor you recommend; premising, however, some few necessary matters before I commence my history.

HERE ENDS THE EPISTLE.

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