

The Domesday Cows

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Illustrated by
Davide Ortù



ISZI LAWRENCE

BLOOMSBURY EDUCATION

LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY EDUCATION
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
Bloomsbury Publishing Ireland Limited
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, D02 AY28, Ireland

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First published in Great Britain in 2026 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: PB: 978-1-80199-606-8; eBook: 978-1-80199-608-2

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Typeset by Lumina Datamatics Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.



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To Freya

*Did you know that in 1066 there were no wild
rabbits in England?*

Nora hated Normans. They were like the elves believed to roam in the forest. They looked like normal people, but there was something wrong with them. From their stupid language to their stupid haircuts. They weren't just different, they were evil. She didn't want anything to do with them. Which was a shame really because she was currently on the back of a donkey looking up at the rear end of a Norman's horse.

The large bottom moved in front of her. Each cheek swaying side to side in a slow deliberate rhythm. The man on top had his hood up and he bobbed stupidly along with his steed's movements. Still, looking at this large bottom was better than looking at the man's face. Or listening to him.

Somewhere beneath her contempt, Nora felt a pang of guilt. This particular Norman was a bishop and although he hung around with possibly the most creepy man in all of England, he himself had been nothing but polite. Kind, in fact. Nora dismissed the thought that he was anything other than terrible from her mind.

The Normans were dangerous. All of them. They had conquered England before Nora had been born and spent the next few years stopping rebellions and laying waste to entire villages. It was thanks to the Normans that Nora didn't have any grandparents. It was thanks to them that her father had lost his prestigious title of Thane. They were beasts. And yet at the same time, everyone admired them. They were rich and powerful. They had fancy clothes, cool armour and horses. Everyone wanted to be them. That was why Nora had a Norman name. It was why she had to learn French.

Still, Nora mused while looking at the horse's backside, she couldn't blame the Normans for the fact that she was being made to ride to Chester.

Nor really could she blame the infamous Welsh King Gruffudd who was locked up inside the castle and who Nora was planning to rescue. No, she was in this mess because her plan had gone wrong. Very wrong.

This morning, all she had wanted to do was hide some cows. Not a simple task, obviously. Cows are quite large, and there were thirty of them. You couldn't force them under a table or squeeze them behind a tapestry. Not all of them do what you tell them to, either. One such cow, called Mildrith, refused to be hidden and was now travelling with them to Chester.

She was quite far back in the procession of beasts and people. Nora's family's servant, Caron, was herding her, being one of the few people Mildrith didn't bite. Nora would rather be travelling with Caron than with her older sister Githa, who was riding gracefully on a donkey alongside her. Githa was sixteen and too much of a goody-two-shoes for Nora's liking. Nora's parents were further ahead in the group, riding close to the bishop and the high ranked Normans.

Nora felt anxious. Everyone was getting along for now. But the Normans had no idea that Nora was up to no good. She needed to get to Chester and stop the cascading events that could soon result in her sister being humiliated, her village being punished and her family fortune (the cows) being lost forever.

What started this whole situation was Nora's mother. Perhaps if Nora hadn't spoken up, she wouldn't have provoked her mother into doing something very silly.



ONE

Ash Wednesday

Forty-four days earlier, it was the start of Lent and the monks of the village had organised the usual Ash Wednesday mass. Nora, wearing her best mustard coloured dress and red cloak, already had a smudge of ash on her forehead. She waited while the monks walked up and down the line of villagers reminding everyone that they were going to die. They did this in Latin, which hardly anyone spoke, so it wasn't as upsetting as it sounds. What *was* upsetting was the

shuddering of the wooden church building, and the bits of thatch roof and dust that rained down on the monks and villagers alike. Imminent death suddenly seemed a real possibility as one of the wooden beams moved to a new position with a snap. It didn't fall, but the gasps and swearing from the churchgoers weren't very holy. The nervous-looking monks moved everyone outside to finish the service. It was a grey, cold day and they continued to mark people's foreheads with ash and told them to repent and believe in the Gospel.

Nora understood a bit of Latin thanks to Caron, the family servant. It had been left up to Caron to deal with the cause of the wobbling church. She was struggling to move one of the cows who was using the corner of the church to scratch herself. It was Mildrith, of course. Nora didn't know who had named this particular cow after her mother, but they had nailed her personality. The cow lowered her large head and leant her shoulder against the church's timber supports, causing the building to shake like an overladen handcart

on a rutted track. She huffed in pleasure. Her breath steamed in the cold air, disappearing as it travelled up Caron's brown tatty cloak and reappearing above her head. It made Caron look like a boiling pot.

'Come on Mildrith, you silly cow!' Caron said, loud enough for Nora's mother, Mildryth, to hear.

Mildryth (the human) gave Caron a sour look and then spoke to her daughters softly. 'Where is your father?'

'The woods, I think,' Githa whispered back.

'It is bad enough when the Bishop no longer comes from Chester to visit us, but when the village Thane doesn't turn up for mass it makes us look bad,' Mildryth said, tucking a stray lock of blond hair back under Githa's wimple.

'Dad's not Thane anymore,' Nora said.

Githa nudged her and gave her a look telling her to be quiet. It was too late.

'Oh yes, I'm well aware of that!' Mildryth fumed. 'When I was younger we'd have members of Earl Edwin's court here at the start of Lent and

we'd all go to Chester for Easter and eat the fine food and celebrate. Now, look at us.'

A different cow wandered closer to the group and had a nibble at Mildryth's scarlet cloak.

'No you don't!' Mildryth snapped.

'Shhh,' Githa said, smiling at the monks who looked over at them disapprovingly.

Mildryth lowered her voice, but her bitterness was evident. She released each word like an arrow from a longbow. 'Not a single soul here from Chester. No invite to Easter either. We are a noble family. Cedric even fought alongside the Normans against the Welsh only a few years ago. Does that mean nothing?'

'Don't worry about it, Mum,' Githa said.

'Well I do,' Mildryth said sharply. 'Your father captured that nasty Welsh King Gruffudd and handed him over to the Earl. Do we get any recognition?'

'Think about it from the Wolf's point of view,' Nora said. She didn't like to call the Norman Earl, Hugh, by his title. He was always the Wolf. 'He is friends with King William. He must have

hundreds of holdings. Here and abroad. Even if we had rights to all the farmland in this village and the next, we'd still be poor in his eyes.'

'For the Lord's sake! Nora, this is supposed to be a sacred mass! It isn't the time to go on about ranks and property value. Have some respect!' Mildryth snapped.

The monks looked disapprovingly at the group.

'Do you think they're done? Come on, I'm freezing,' Mildryth said.

The monks and villagers watched as Nora, Caron and Githa followed Mildryth out of the cemetery and up the hill towards the great hall. The cattle stayed by the church, sniffing the villagers to see if anyone had any snacks for them.

Nora followed the hem of Githa's green cloak up the muddy path. She blocked out her mother's voice as Mildryth barked instructions to Caron about preparing dinner that evening.

Githa dropped back to speak with her sister.

'You need to learn to hold your tongue,' Githa whispered.

Nora held the tip of her tongue with her fingers.

‘You’re not funny!’ Githa nodded at the figure of their mother, in her scarlet hood, striding ahead. ‘Please stop being childish. Mum’s not in a good way.’

‘She’s never in a good way,’ Nora said wearily.

‘You were winding her up,’ Githa whispered.

‘I was telling the truth,’ Nora said defensively.

‘I aspire for the speaking in the French like the Norman nobbles, thanking you please!’ Mildryth shouted back in broken French to them.

Nora smirked. Mildryth meant Norman nobles, not nobbles.

‘Of course, mother,’ Githa replied in English before carrying on their conversation in French. Githa wasn’t very good at French, but she was better than Mildryth. *‘Be um... nice... to Mum. She would expect a different... um... life. But the Normans... they re-erected.’*

‘You mean took over,’ Nora corrected her in the same language.

Nora rolled her eyes. She was fed up hearing about the good old days, back before the year 1066, when they had an English king. That king,

King Edward the Confessor, had died. A new king (Harold Godwinson) was crowned and that same year the Norwegian king (Harald Hardrada) challenged him for the throne. Harold had defeated Harald but then William of Normandy had sailed over from France and attacked. Harold was killed and William took the throne. Unfairly, as Nora's family thought. They had joined in the uprisings against William's Norman invaders but the Normans had been ruthless. They cut people down, soldiers and peasants alike. Those who were left were starved as the Normans burnt the harvests. That was the year that Githa was born. The year Nora's grandparents had died. The year everything had gone wrong.

'I hate speaking French. I only do it because Mum is too stupid to understand us,' Nora explained.

'She's not stupid,' Githa said in French. *'You are going to... to want a husband who is speaking French or you'll be poor. And he... wants a wife... who speaks French too.'*

'I don't like pretending that we're Normans,' Nora said firmly.

‘You need to get better at your accents!’
Mildryth said in English. ‘You sound like churls.
Don’t you think Caron?’

Caron, who was holding her mistress’s cloak out of the mud, cleared her throat.

‘Perhaps,’ she said. She did nothing to disguise her own Welsh accent. Her cold blue eyes flicked to Nora.

‘You’re stressing the vowels too much,’
Mildryth said to the girls.

‘Well, you’re stressing me!’ Nora snapped back. Caron snorted.

It delighted Nora to make Caron laugh.

Nora avoided Mildryth’s angry look and glanced out through the gap left by the missing wooden stakes in the palisade wall. The dark forest in the distance moved in the wind. Elves, wolves and Welshmen were said to roam in that forest, although they were only rarely heard howling.

Nora knew that the Welsh were bloodthirsty warriors but her father was braver than all of them. He often went into the forest alone, unafraid of

bumping into gangs of roaming Welsh bandits or mischievous elves.

Unlike the elves, Nora had actually seen the Welsh soldiers. When she was about seven, the Normans had attacked the northern territories of Wales and paid Nora's father to help them.

The village had been used as a military base by the Normans, who had kept the Welsh soldiers as prisoners and walked them back to Chester. Welsh soldiers weren't that different from English ones, although they hadn't been able to understand Nora when she had offered them water. The village had been very different then. The great hall had been packed with strangers. The Normans had eaten through the winter stores, they'd sang songs in foreign languages and had arrived back from fighting with revolting injuries. Most of the injured had died, still clutching their protective saint's pendants that had proved useless in the face of Welsh steel.

Some of the amulets had been left behind after the bodies had been taken back to Chester for burial. Nora had collected them, she still wore

a couple around her neck. She knew they didn't work, but she liked the look of them and no one else had wanted them.

'Nora!'

Nora felt something tug at her hood.

'You're off with the elves,' Mildryth said, glaring at her.

Nora was confused. 'Sorry?'

'I swear sometimes my real daughter was swapped for a babe of wood,' Mildryth snarled.

'You think I'm an elf?' Nora raised her voice.

'You are strange enough to be one,' Mildryth said. 'An embarrassment.'

'You're the one who embarrassed us at the mass,' Nora quipped back. 'Maybe that's why Dad is in the forest... he's trying to persuade the elves to swap you too.'

Caron tried to control a smirk again.

Githa looked shocked. 'Don't make jokes like that!'

'There! Proof you aren't real.' Mildryth raised her voice. 'Maidens do not have shouting matches with their mothers in the open air!'

‘I’m not the one shouting,’ Nora pointed out.

‘You’re the rudest child under heaven. You’re going to be impossible to find a husband for!’ Mildryth snapped.

‘I am not!’ Nora said.

‘Why bother learning French?’ Mildryth waved her hands in frustration. ‘Forget a Norman nobleman, you’ll be lucky if we can convince a shaved pig in a hat.’

Nora was about to snap back when Caron leaned in and murmured. ‘Don’t be a brat. Honour your father and mother.’

Nora closed her eyes. For Nora, honouring your parents was the hardest of all God’s commandments. She’d never made herself an idol to worship. She did her best to never lie. She’d never wanted a donkey, besides they already had two in the stables. She did, however, struggle to obey her mother. It seemed that God had placed Mildryth on this earth purely as a test for Nora’s soul.

‘I’m sorry, you’re right,’ Nora said gruffly.

‘What was that?’ Mildryth snapped.

‘I said I’m sorry...,’ Nora began.

‘Not that bit,’ Mildryth interrupted.

Nora sighed. ‘You’re right.’

‘Indeed, I am,’ Mildryth said smugly.



Two

The Deer

Three weeks had passed and Nora, Caron, Githa and Mildryth were busy making yarn by the large central fire in the great hall. Mildryth was talking loudly about her days as a maiden and everyone else was focussed on their work.

Making wool into thread was an ongoing chore and although it was time consuming, it was a habit. Nora thought it would feel alien to sit and talk without the combed wool fibres wrapped around her wrist, as she dropped the spindle and pinched the wool to control the twist.

They dyed the yarn in summer, a process that Mildryth forbade Nora to take part in as it was considered part of tanning, lowly work. Nora particularly liked the blue which they made by crushing woad leaves in a bucket of men's wee. Servants would take turns, standing in the bucket, treading the wool into the dye. Caron would show off her blue feet in the summer, walking barefoot whenever she could. It made Nora irrationally jealous.

There was a scream.

'Did you hear that?' Caron asked.

'Servants shouldn't interrupt,' Mildryth snapped. 'As I was saying, when I was a maiden, I impressed Earl Edwin with my modesty...'

There was yelling in the distance. Mildrith the cow, who had also taken shelter from the drizzle in the great hall, turned her large head towards the door. This movement upset Mildryth the human who had been using her as a back rest. Nora and Caron jumped up.

'Sit down!' Mildryth ordered.

‘Didn’t you hear that?’ Nora said, standing up and dropping her yarn onto the thresh on the floor.

‘Nora!’ Mildryth said crossly.

‘I heard it too,’ Caron said, her hand automatically reaching for the knife that hung from her belt.

Githa picked up Nora’s spindle and started to pick the dirt off it as Nora hurried towards the large doors.

‘Get back here this instant!’ Mildryth said, as Nora ran out into the rain. Realising that Nora wasn’t listening, she sighed and nodded at Caron who took it as permission to follow her.

Nora ran towards the shouting. It came from the base of the tall wooden watchtower at the south end of the village.

It was clear by the targets and arrows Nora could see that the men had been practicing shooting and had been interrupted. Cedric, Nora’s father, was still holding his longbow and pointing his arrow to the ground while his men stood just behind him in a V formation. Each was wild-eyed with

their axes and maces drawn. The invader they were prepared to fight was silhouetted in the gap in the palisade. Caron reached out and grabbed Nora's arm before she ran too far ahead.

'Do not shoot it!' Cedric shouted to the man at the top of the tower. His voice was panicked.

Just then, the creature in the gap in the palisade stepped forward and the men all shuffled backwards.

It wasn't a dragon. Or a wolf. Or even a bear.

'But it's only a deer?' Nora whispered to Caron.

Nora hadn't seen a wild deer this close before. She wasn't allowed in the forest and had only seen them from a distance. She knew in the old days people would eat them. They had plenty of dagger hilts, hooks and utensils carved from their antlers. However, no one hunted them anymore because they were protected under Norman law.

The deer stepped closer and Cedric lurched away as though it was on fire.

'Shoo!' Eadric, a boy training to be one of her father's guards, shouted at it as he came down from the tower.

‘Be quiet!’ Cedric ordered. ‘No one startle or touch it.’

Nora looked at the soft, velveted antlers and whispered to Caron. ‘Will it attack?’

Caron looked confused and stepped forward. Cedric looked over at her and shook his head slowly, his eyes wide and stern.

Nora didn’t understand why her father looked so terrified. Caron did as he indicated and stepped back. The deer looked curiously at the movement and sniffed the air. It seemed to be having a very relaxed morning, and turned its attention to the ten men cowering from it.

The deer stepped forwards towards the men, who backed up in response.

‘Please go?’ Cedric whispered to the deer. ‘Back out the way you came.’

More villagers gathered around the stable, watching the deer approach the cowering soldiers from a safe distance. Eadric pushed his way to the front, looking just as confused as Nora. He loomed over their heads, touching the sparse dark hairs on his top lip as if he were styling a moustache.

The deer looked at them all curiously.

‘No one make any noise,’ Cedric said quietly.

‘What was that?’ someone called from the back of the crowd.

The deer looked up.

‘Shhh!’ everyone said.

The deer froze for a second as everyone held their breath.

‘I don’t understand what’s going on,’ Nora whispered to Caron.

‘All the deer belong to the king,’ Caron whispered back. ‘You can’t poach from the forest. Remember what they did to Gyrth?’

Nora shook her head. The deer continued to approach and the men softly retreated. They were slowly being pushed back up the palisade embankment.

‘Gyrth got caught hunting by the Wolf’s men,’ Caron whispered.

‘That’s right,’ Eadric held up his index and middle finger on his right hand. ‘They cut these off.’

Caron nodded. ‘In a way it was a blessing that the fever from the wound killed him. He wouldn’t have been able to fire a bow or fight.’

‘Couldn’t hold a quill either, but he never learnt to write, so, that weren’t too bad...’ Eadric added. ‘Though the Normans fined his family, and they all died too.’

‘But if we just yell at it, surely it will go back out the way it came,’ Nora insisted.

‘Startled deer aren’t the wisest creatures, so it could just as easily run into something and hurt itself,’ Caron said.

‘Please shoo!’ Cedric pleaded softly.

As the deer stepped closer to the men. Nora had a horrible thought pop into her mind.

‘Where are the dogs?’ Nora whispered.

‘I don’t know,’ Eadric said. He called over to his brother who was further back in the crowd. ‘Ordric? Where are the dogs?’

‘What? You want the dogs?’ Ordric called back.

‘No!’ Eadric hissed.

Ordric whistled loudly.

‘The dogs are sure to kill it!’ Nora exclaimed.

Cedric had been backed up the bank of the palisade by the deer. The deer sniffed the arrow tip. It was more tame than Nora’s mother’s cattle.

‘No, no, no!’ Nora shouted as five large dogs (Nosewise, Sturdy, Lump, Sloote, and Letego) ran up the path towards them. She took off the top of her wimple and waved it. ‘Over here, over here!’

The crowd turned to see the dogs, giving them a clear path to the deer. They spotted the deer and stopped for a moment, cocking their heads in confusion.

‘No! Bad dogs!’ yelled Cedric. ‘Stop!’

On seeing the dogs, the deer suddenly remembered it was made of flesh and bone. Instinct took over... in the most idiotic way possible. Just as Cedric feared, it was startled. Instead of fleeing the way it had come, back through the palisade, down the steep hillside and into the woods, it ran further into the village. That’s when it suddenly realised that people,

once they were all moving out of the way of bloodthirsty dogs, were probably quite scary too. To avoid the crowd, it jumped on a mounting block. Once it had done this, there was only one place it could go: onto the thatched roof of the stables.

It made the jump to the delight of the crowd and the despair of Cedric.

‘I said not to startle it!’ he yelled.

‘At least the dogs didn’t get it,’ Caron said, grabbing hold of Nosewise’s collar. ‘The Wolf would do hideous things to them.’

Nora looked horrified.

‘Now what do we do?’ Cedric spat, walking around the stable looking at the deer, who peered down at him. ‘We can’t keep it; it belongs to the king.’

‘It’s bound to come down,’ Eadric said.

Only the deer didn’t come down. It was still on the stable roof the next morning, happily eating the thatch.