

WILLIAM MARSHALL

EARL OF PEMBROKE

1147 – 1219

THE GREATEST KNIGHT

A supremely accomplished knight, his pivotal contribution to English history and the rule of law it is hugely surprising that he is so little known or venerated. As my story will recount he surely ranks with the truly great and noble heroes of England and is deserving of far more recognition.

William Marshall was born in the village of Hampstead Marshall in Berkshire, where the remains of the family castle can still be seen. He was the second son of John Fitzgilbert; A minor Baron who sided with the Empress Maud against her cousin King Stephen during the 30-year war, known as the Anarchy, over the disputed succession following the death of Henry 1.

His early life was, to say the least; traumatic and very nearly resulted in his death at the hand of King Stephen who had laid siege to his father's castle at Newbury. Fitzgilbert, on being informed of the attack raced to the castle and negotiated a truce and, as was the custom of the time, offered William as a hostage.

Using the time gained Fitzgilbert reinforced the defences and then repudiated the truce. King Stephen was incensed by his treachery and promptly threatened to hang the boy William and had a scaffold built in front of the castle walls.

This war of nerves continued with William being regularly paraded around the scaffold with a noose around his neck and culminated with William being placed on a trebuchet (a giant catapult used in siege warfare) and aimed at the castle walls – William was only 9 years old at the time!).

His father continued in his refusal to surrender famously stating that "*He had both the anvil and the hammers to forge more and better sons*".

The siege was eventually successful but King Stephen had been greatly impressed by the boy William's stoicism and general demeanour. He mercifully

made him a ward of court and following the treaty at Winchester which led to the restoration of peace, returned William to his family.

It was the custom of the time for second sons to enter the priesthood but at the age of 12 William was sent to Normandy to join the household of his Mother's kinsman the Duke of Tancaville, hereditary Chamberlain of Normandy, to acquire skill at arms, learn the business of war and, ultimately, to join the ranks of Europe's new military elite by becoming a knight.

William spent his teenage years learning the arts of martial horsemanship, hand-to-hand combat and the ability to fight in medieval armour. By the age of twenty he was a fully trained warrior, a superb horseman, 6 feet tall and immensely strong. He became adept in the use of sword, mace and lance and a master of mounted combat. Attributes that were to have a significant impact on his later career as a Free Lance (a term still used today) In accordance with the customs of the times he was dubbed a Knight by the Duke of Tancaville and went on his first military expedition as part of the army sent to resist an attempt by their eastern neighbours to occupy northern Normandy. He apparently acquitted himself well, fighting in the vanguard with great bravery but was subsequently mocked for failing to profit from the encounter. A lesson in medieval warfare he never forgot!

Soon afterwards he left the employ of the Duke of Tancaville and joined the household of his Mother's brother, Patrick, Earl of Salisbury. In 1168 his uncle Patrick was killed in an ambush by Guy de Lusignan (an infamous Knight Templar who was heavily defeated by Saladin at the Battle of Hattin) and William was injured and taken captive in the same skirmish.

This proved to be a turning point in his career as the target of the ambush who had escaped as a result of William's valiant rear-guard action was none other than Eleanor of Aquitaine, the wife of Henry II and arguably the most famous queen of the Middle Ages. She was impressed by his bravery, paid his ransom and invited him to join the court of her husband and their son, also Henry, known as 'the Young king', having been already crowned by his Father, King Henry II, to ensure an undisputed succession.

William was made the Head of his Household and taught Henry 'the Young King' the chivalric rules of knighthood and was so highly regarded that it was William who subsequently knighted him.

He had though, made enemies at court and they, allegedly, spread the rumour that he had been sleeping with Elizabeth the Young King's wife. Despite his denials and demanding trial by combat he was dismissed from court and found himself an outcast and unemployed.

Despite this and playing to his strengths he went on to make a handsome living from tournaments. These were not the largely theatrical and showy events depicted in films or re-enactments seen today but wide-ranging, dangerous and often deadly free-for-all contests. William's favourite tactic was to seize the reins of the opposing rider's horse and lead him off the field of combat. Thereby capturing him for ransom together with his horse and his armour. On many occasions William would release his prisoner against their word that they would honour their promise of payment. It is reputed that during his tournament career he bested some 500 knights and in so doing made a fortune.

As a result of his prowess William was in great demand and was offered employment, amongst others, by the Count of Flanders and the Duke of Burgundy. In those days being an accomplished knight was something like being a star footballer today – wealthy nobles wanted to hire you for their households to bring prestige and fame to them.

William however declined such employment and remained independent until 1183 when the 'young King Henry', who once again was quarrelling with his Father, asked him to re-join his Court. William sought and surprisingly, was given the permission of Henry II to do so. The conjecture being that perhaps Henry II hoped that William would use his influence to stop his son's revolt. However, in 1183 Henry 'the young King' died of an unspecified illness, leaving a grief-stricken Father - and William without a patron.

William was now to take part in something no medieval story would be complete without, a crusade. Not a major one but his own in honour of the late Henry 'the Young King' which was approved and paid for by Henry II.

Little is known of this episode in William's life save that he arrived in the Levant just before the Battle of Hattin in 1187. A major turning point in Outremer history and it is not known if William took part in the battle but during the two years he was there he forged a close and enduring relationship with the Knights Templar.

On his return to England Henry II accepted him back into his Household. Promoting him rapidly through the ranks and making him one of his most important advisors and promised him something that would change William's life forever. Marriage to Isabel de Clair, a wealthy 18-year old heiress who owned a vast amount of land in Wales and Ireland and to match his new wealth he was appointed the Earl of Pembroke. This made him one of the richest and most powerful men in the western world. Despite their age gap, William was forty when they were betrothed, the match turned into a classical love story, that would remain strong right up until their deaths and, as a by-product, produced nine children,.

Towards the end of Henry's reign the King's two surviving sons Richard and John staged yet another rebellion. William was called upon to fight for the King and was defending his retreat when he was charged at by Richard, the heir to the throne. At the very last moment William lowered his lance killing Richard's horse and took the King to safety. Less than a month later Henry II died of a perforated ulcer and Richard the Lionheart was crowned King.

The first meeting of Richard and William shortly after was to say the least tense. Richard accused him of trying to kill him whereupon William is reported as saying that if that had been his intention then he would have done so but had deliberately aimed at the horse and his sole aim was to protect the then King as his honour required him so to do.

By all accounts Richard was deeply impressed by William's loyalty and mindful of his prowess and military reputation took him into his inner circle. Richard, known as the Templar King but also, with good reason, as the 'Absent King' relied on William to safeguard his realm while he was away fighting in the Holy Land. Richard was subsequently killed whilst on campaign in France and his brother John, known as 'Lackland' succeeded him as King.

John swiftly alienated the Barons with punitive taxes and land seizures, sparking a civil war. William had meanwhile left England to manage his estates in Ireland but loyal as ever returned at the King's request to mediate with the rebellious Barons. Culminating in a truce and the drawing up of the Magna Carta - the Great Charter. When John refused to implement the reforms contained in the Charter

the rebellion flared up again with the rebels enlisting the help of Prince Louis of France. When John died his nine-year old son Henry III succeeded him but his future was far from secure as the country was mainly in the hands of the rebels and the French. His life hanging from a thread, Henry sought William's protection. This request placed William, his family and his estates in great danger. The rebels were very much in the ascendency and if they captured the King, would show no mercy least of all to William.

He none-the-less offered the young King his total loyalty and in due course became Regent of England. Aided by his reputation for fairness and honourable dealings he rapidly won the support of many neutral and rebellious barons. The end of the uprising coming at Lincoln in 1217 when William, at the age of 70, led the King's army to victory. This victory coupled with a resounding defeat of the French Fleet by Hubert de Burgh in the straits of Dover secured a lasting peace.

Shortly thereafter he re-released the Magna Carta which bears his signature as Regent.

William's health finally failed him early in 1219. In March that year he realised he was dying so summoned his eldest son, also called William, and his Household Knights and left the Tower of London for his estates in Caversham near Reading in Berkshire. On his arrival he summoned the Barons, Henry III, the Papal Legate Pandalf Verracio, Hubert de Burgh (Royal Justicar) and the King's Guardian, Peter des Roches, Bishop of Winchester to a Grand Council in order to determine how best to protect the peace and the King.

Rejecting the Bishop of Winchester's bid to become Regent, he apparently neither trusted him or any of the other magnates present, he entrusted the Regency to the care of the Papal Legate.

Then, fulfilling a vow he had made whilst on crusade, he summoned his Templar friend Aimery de Saint-Maire and was privately invested into the Order of the Knights Templar on his deathbed. He died on 14th May 1219 at Caversham and was buried with full Templar honours in the Temple Church in London where his tomb can still be seen.

At William Marshall's funeral the eulogy was delivered by Stephen Langton Archbishop of Canterbury and he described him as the greatest knight that ever

lived. Even his arch enemy Phillip II of France described him as an honourable knight and a model of chivalry.

Based on historical evidence and the testimony of his contemporaries there is absolutely no doubt that this country owes William Marshall a very great debt. As, if it had not been for him, we would be living in a very different world to the one we know today.

Possibly, God Forbid! Even being a province of France.

A full-sized statue of William stands guard in the House of Commons and I can't help but wish that his virtues of good governance, fair play, honesty and loyalty could be absorbed by its present inhabitants. That really would be a fitting tribute to the Greatest Knight – a Templar knight at the end!