

Cymdeithas Hanesyddol Tyddewi a Phebidiog St Davids and Dewisland Historical Society

William Marshal, the Greatest Knight in Christendom Gareth Mills

William Marshal (1146/47 - 1219) served five English kings. His father John Marshal held Newbury Castle for Empress Matilda when her adversary Stephen took 5 year old William hostage. He remained a crown hostage until the end of the civil war in 1153. Around the age of 12 he was sent to his mother's cousin, William de Tancarville, in Normandy to be trained as a knight. He then served with his mother's brother, Patrick, Earl of Salisbury until in 1168 when his uncle was killed in an ambush when escorting Henry II's queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine.



Henry II: William's ransom was subsequently paid by the queen and he remained a member of her household until 1170, when Henry appointed him his son's tutor-in-arms. In 1185 Marshal re-joined the court of King Henry II, as head of his army, and during the old king's last days he promised Marshal the hand and estates of Isabel de Clare (heiress to Pembroke Castle).

Henry's son - "Young King" Henry: Prince Henry and William travelled with Henry II before being given permission to travel to Europe (or exiled?) to participate in knightly tournaments, where both gained great prestige. In 1183 Prince Henry became sick and died but before his death asked Marshal to undertake a crusade to the Holy Land on his behalf.

Henry's son Richard I: After Henry II's death, Marshal was welcomed at court by King Richard I, and on his marriage to the daughter of Richard de Clare (Strongbow) he acquired large estates and claims in England, Wales, Normandy and Ireland, transforming him into one of the richest men in the kingdom. William made numerous improvements to Pembroke Castle – recreating it in stone, with one of the largest stone keeps in Britain (Llewelyn the Great is reputed to have accepted a bribe to leave the castle alone!) William was included in the council of regency, with Eleanor of Aquitaine, when Richard departed for the Third Crusade in 1190 and on his return he leads his army to France and William Marshal served in his wars in Normandy to hold the duchy against Philip II. Whilst on this campaign Richard was wounded by a poisoned crossbow bolt and died leaving no heir.

Henry's son John: William took the side of John and for his loyalty he was finally offered the title of Earl of Pembroke in 1201! William was heavily engaged with the defence of Normandy 1200 - 1203 but after John's disastrous performance they returned after their defeat in 1203, having lost the duchy. William was sent as an ambassador to negotiate a truce with King Philip II in 1204 ... when he took the opportunity to negotiate the continued possession of his own Norman lands! William alienated from court in 1206 but was taken back into favour and summoned to return to the English court in 1213. William remained loyal throughout the hostilities between John and his barons which culminated on 15 June 1215 at Runnymede with the sealing of Magna Carta, in which he is a signatory as one of the witnessing barons. It was William who took responsibility for the king's funeral and burial at Worcester Cathedral 1215.

John's son Henry III: William was appointed regent and effectively ruled for 18 months on behalf of the young king. During that time, he reasserted royal control of Scotland but failed to placate Llewelyn the Great in Wales and in spite of his age (around 68), when the other rebel barons supported Louis, William fought at the head of the young King's army, leading them to victory. Marshal's health finally failed him early in 1219 and fulfilling the vow he had made,



while on crusade, he was invested into the order of the Knights Templar ('divorcing' wife Isabel on his deathbed to do so!) He died on 14 May 1219 and was interred in pride of place in the Temple Church in London. King Henry later rebuilt a larger chancel, consecrated 1240, to be buried there himself but although one of his infant sons was buried here Henry was buried in Westminster Abbey. William's own son, William (who married Henry's sister) is buried alongside his father in the Temple Church and their effigies remain to this day.