

# William Marshal, 1st Earl of Pembroke

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**William Marshal, 1st Earl of Pembroke** (Welsh: *Iarll Iaf Penfro*) (1146 or 1147 – 14 May 1219), also called **William the Marshal** (Norman French: *Williame le Mareschal*), was an Anglo-Norman soldier and statesman.<sup>[1]</sup> He served five English kings – Henry II, his sons The "Young King" Henry, Richard I, and John, and John's son Henry III.

Knighthed in 1166, he spent his younger years as a knight errant and a successful tournament competitor; Stephen Langton eulogized him as the "best knight that ever lived."<sup>[2]</sup> In 1189, he received the title of Earl of Pembroke through marriage during the second creation of the Pembroke Earldom. In 1216, he was appointed protector for the nine-year-old Henry III, and regent of the kingdom.

Before him, his father's family held a hereditary title of Marshal to the king, which by his father's time had become recognized as a chief or master Marshaley, involving management over other Marshals and functionaries. William became known as 'the Marshal', although by his time much of the function was actually delegated to more specialized representatives (as happened with other functions in the King's household). Because he was an Earl, and also known as the Marshal, the term "Earl Marshal" was commonly used and this later became an established hereditary title in the English Peerage.<sup>[3]</sup>

## William Marshal

Earl of Pembroke



Tomb effigy of William Marshal in Temple Church, London

|                  |                                    |
|------------------|------------------------------------|
| <b>Spouse(s)</b> | Isabel de Clare                    |
| <b>Father</b>    | John Marshal                       |
| <b>Mother</b>    | Sybilla of Salisbury               |
| <b>Born</b>      | 1146 or 1147                       |
| <b>Died</b>      | 14 May 1219 (aged 72)<br>Caversham |
| <b>Buried</b>    | Temple Church, London              |

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## Early life

William's father, John Marshal, supported King Stephen when he took the throne in 1135, but in about 1139 he changed sides to back the Empress Matilda in the civil war of succession between her and Stephen which led to the collapse of England into "the Anarchy".<sup>[4]</sup>

When King Stephen besieged Newbury Castle in 1152, according to William's biographer, he used the young William as a hostage to ensure that John kept his promise to surrender the castle. John, however, used the time allotted to reinforce the castle and alert Matilda's forces. When Stephen ordered John to surrender immediately or William would be hanged, John replied that he should go ahead saying, "I still have the hammer and the anvil with which to forge still more and better sons!" Subsequently, there was a bluff made to launch William from a *pierrière*, a type of trebuchet towards the castle. Fortunately for the child, Stephen could not bring himself to harm young William.<sup>[5]</sup> William remained a crown hostage for many months, only being released following the peace that resulted from the terms agreed at Winchester on 6 November 1153 that ended the civil war.



Tomb effigy of William Marshal in Temple Church, London

## Knight-Errant

As a younger son of a minor nobleman, William had no lands or fortune to inherit, and had to make his own way in life. Around the age of twelve, when his father's career was faltering, he was sent to Normandy to be brought up in the household of William de Tancarville, a great magnate and cousin of young William's mother. Here he began his training as a knight. This would have included basic biblical stories and prayers written in Latin, as well as exposure to French romances, which conferred the basic precepts of chivalry to the budding knight.<sup>[6]</sup> In addition, while in Tancarville's household, it is likely that Marshal also learned important and lasting practical lessons concerning the politics of courtly life. According to his thirteenth-century biography, *L'Histoire de Guillaume le Marechal*, Marshal had a number of adversaries in court who machinated to his disadvantage—these individuals likely would have been threatened by the boy's close relationship with the magnate.<sup>[7]</sup> He was knighted in 1166 on campaign in Upper Normandy, then being invaded from Flanders. His first experience in battle came with mixed reviews. According to *L'Histoire*, everyone who witnessed the young knight in action agreed that he had acquitted himself well in combat. However, as medieval historian David Crouch explains, "War in the twelfth century was not fought wholly for honour. Profit was there to be made..."<sup>[8]</sup> On this front, Marshal was not so successful, as he was unable to parlay his combat victories into profit from either ransom or seized booty. As described in *L'Histoire*, the Earl of Essex, who was expecting the customary tribute from his valorous knight following battle, jokingly remarked: "Oh? But Marshal, what are you saying? You had forty or sixty of them — yet you refuse me so small a thing!"<sup>[9]</sup> In 1167 he was taken by William de Tancarville to his first tournament where he found his true *métier*. Quitting the Tancarville household he then served in the household of his mother's brother, Patrick, Earl of Salisbury. In 1168 his uncle was killed in an ambush by Guy de Lusignan. William was injured and captured in the same skirmish. It is known that William received a wound to his thigh and that someone in his captor's household took pity on the young knight. He received a loaf of bread in which were concealed several lengths of clean linen bandages with which he could dress his wounds. This act of kindness by an unknown person perhaps saved Marshal's life as infection setting into the wound could have killed him. After a period of time, he was ransomed by Eleanor of Aquitaine, who was apparently impressed by tales of his bravery.

Thereafter he found he could make a good living out of winning tournaments, dangerous, often deadly, staged battles in which money and valuable prizes could be won by capturing and ransoming opponents, their horses and armour. His record is legendary: on his deathbed he recalled besting 500 knights during his tourneying career.<sup>[10]</sup>

## Royal favour

Upon his return during the course of 1185 William rejoined the court of King Henry II, and now served the father as a loyal captain through the many difficulties of his final years. The returns of royal favour were almost immediate. The king gave William the large royal estate of Cartmel in Cumbria, and the keeping of Heloise, the heiress of the northern barony of Lancaster. It may be that the king expected him to take the opportunity to marry her and become a northern baron, but William seems to have had grander ambitions for his marriage. In 1188 faced with an attempt by Philip II to seize the disputed region of Berry, Henry II summoned the Marshal to his side. The letter by which he did this survives, and makes some sarcastic comments about William's complaints that he had not been properly rewarded to date for his service to the king. Henry therefore promised him the marriage and lands of Dionisia, lady of Châteauroux in Berry. In the resulting campaign, the king fell out with his heir Richard, count of Poitou, who consequently allied with Philip II against his father. In 1189, while covering the flight of Henry II from Le Mans to Chinon, William unhorsed the undutiful Richard in a skirmish. William could have killed the prince but killed his horse instead, to make that point clear. He is said to have been the only man ever to unhorse Richard. Nonetheless after Henry's death, Marshal was welcomed at court by his former adversary, now King Richard I, who was wise to include a man whose legendary loyalty and military accomplishments were too useful to ignore, especially in a king who was intending to go on Crusade.<sup>[1]</sup>



13th-century depiction by Matthew Paris of the Earl of Pembroke's coat of arms<sup>[11]</sup>

During the old king's last days he had promised the Marshal the hand and estates of Isabel de Clare (c.1172–1220), but had not completed the arrangements. King Richard however, confirmed the offer and so in August 1189, at the age of 43, the Marshal married the 17-year-old daughter of Richard de Clare (Strongbow). Her father had been Earl of Pembroke, and Marshal acquired large estates and claims in England, Wales, Normandy and Ireland. Some estates however were excluded from the deal. Marshal did not obtain Pembroke and the title of earl, which his father-in-law had enjoyed, until 1199, as it had been taken into the king's hand in 1154. However, the marriage transformed the landless knight from a minor family into one of the richest men in the kingdom, a sign of his power and prestige at court. They had five sons and five daughters, and have numerous descendants.<sup>[1]</sup> William made numerous improvements to his wife's lands, including extensive additions to Pembroke Castle and Chepstow Castle.<sup>[12]</sup>

William was included in the council of regency which the King appointed on his departure for the Third Crusade in 1190. He took the side of John, the king's brother, when the latter expelled the justiciar, William Longchamp, from the kingdom, but he soon discovered that the interests of John were different from those of Richard. Hence in 1193 he joined with the loyalists in making war upon him. In spring 1194, during the course of the hostilities in England and before King Richard's return, William Marshal's elder brother John Marshal (who was serving as seneschal) was killed while defending Marlborough for the king's brother John. Richard allowed Marshal to succeed his brother in the hereditary marshalship, and his paternal honour of Hamstead Marshall. The Marshal served the king in his wars in Normandy against Philip II. On Richard's death-bed the king designated Marshal as custodian of Rouen and of the royal treasure during the interregnum.<sup>[1]</sup>

## King John and Magna Carta

William supported King John when he became king in 1199, arguing against those who maintained the claims of Arthur of Brittany, the teenage son of John's elder brother Geoffrey Plantagenet. William was heavily engaged with the defence of Normandy against the growing pressure of the Capetian armies between 1200 and 1203. He sailed with King John when he abandoned the duchy in December 1203. He and the king had a falling out in the

aftermath of the loss of the duchy, when he was sent with the earl of Leicester as ambassadors to negotiate a truce with King Philip II of France in 1204. The Marshal took the opportunity to negotiate the continued possession of his Norman lands.

Before commencing negotiations with King Philip, William had been generously permitted to do homage to the King of France by King John so he might keep his possessions in Normandy; land which must have been of sentimental value due to the time spent there in his youth and adolescence. However, once official negotiations began, Philip demanded that such homage be paid exclusively to him, which King John had not consented to.<sup>[13]</sup> When William paid homage to King Philip, John took offence and there was a major row at court which led to cool relations between the two men. This became outright hostility in 1207 when John began to move against several major Irish magnates, including William. Though he left for Leinster in 1207 William was recalled and humiliated at court in the autumn of 1208, while John's justiciar in Ireland Meilyr fitz Henry invaded his lands, burning the town of New Ross.



A 13th-century depiction of the Second Battle of Lincoln, which occurred at Lincoln Castle on 20 May 1217; the illustration shows the death of Thomas du Perche, the Comte de la Perche

Meilyr's defeat by Countess Isabel led to her husband's return to Leinster. He was once again in conflict with King John in his war with the Braose and Lacy families in 1210, but managed to survive. He stayed in Ireland until 1213, during which time he had Carlow Castle erected<sup>[14]</sup> and restructured his honour of Leinster. Taken back into favour in 1212, he was summoned in 1213 to return to the English court. Despite their differences, 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. William was one of the few English earls to remain loyal to the king through the First Barons' War. It was William whom King John trusted on his deathbed to make sure John's nine-year-old son Henry would get the throne. It was William who took responsibility for the king's funeral and burial at Worcester Cathedral.<sup>[1]</sup>

On 11 November 1216 at Gloucester, upon the death of King John, William Marshal was named by the king's council (the chief barons who had remained loyal to King John in the First Barons' War) to serve as protector of the nine-year-old King Henry III, and regent of the kingdom. In spite of his advanced age (around 70) he prosecuted the war against Prince Louis and the rebel barons with remarkable energy. In the battle of Lincoln he charged and fought at the head of the young King's army, leading them to victory. He was preparing to besiege Louis in London when the war was terminated by the naval victory of Hubert de Burgh in the straits of Dover.<sup>[1]</sup>

William was criticised for the generosity of the terms he accorded to Louis and the rebels in September 1217; but his desire for an expeditious settlement was dictated by sound statesmanship. Self-restraint and compromise were the keynote of Marshal's policy, hoping to secure peace and stability for his young liege. Both before and after the peace of 1217 he reissued Magna Carta, in which he is a signatory as one of the witnessing barons.

## Death and legacy

Marshal's health finally failed him early in 1219. In March 1219 he realised that he was dying, so he summoned his eldest son, also William, and his household knights, and left the Tower of London for his estate at Caversham in Berkshire, near Reading, where he called a meeting of the barons, Henry III, the Papal legate Pandulf Verraccio, the royal justiciar (Hubert de Burgh), and Peter des Roches (Bishop of Winchester and the young King's guardian). William rejected the Bishop's claim to the regency and entrusted the regency to the care of the papal legate; he apparently did not trust the Bishop or any of the other magnates that he had gathered to this meeting. Fulfilling the

vow he had made while on crusade, he was invested into the order of the Knights Templar on his deathbed. He died on 14 May 1219 at Caversham, and was buried in the Temple Church in London, where his tomb can still be seen.<sup>[1]</sup>

## Descendants of William Marshal and Isabel de Clare

1. William Marshal, 2nd Earl of Pembroke (1190–6 April 1231), married (1) Alice de Béthune, daughter of Earl of Albemarle; (2) 23 April 1224 Eleanor Plantagenet, daughter of King John of England. They had no children.
2. Richard Marshal, 3rd Earl of Pembroke (1191–16 April 1234), married Gervase le Dinant. He died in captivity. They had no children.
3. Maud Marshal (1194–27 March 1248), married (1) Hugh Bigod, 3rd Earl of Norfolk, they had four children; (2) William de Warenne, 5th Earl of Surrey, they had two children; (3) Walter de Dunstanville.
4. Gilbert Marshal, 4th Earl of Pembroke (1197–27 June 1241), married (1) Marjorie of Scotland, youngest daughter of King William I of Scotland; by an unknown mistress he had one illegitimate daughter:
  1. Isabel Marshal, married to Rhys ap Maeldon Fychan.
5. Walter Marshal, 5th Earl of Pembroke (c. 1199 – November 1245), married Margaret de Quincy, Countess of Lincoln, granddaughter of Hugh de Kevelioc, 3rd Earl of Chester. No children.
6. Isabel Marshal (9 October 1200 – 17 January 1240), married (1) Gilbert de Clare, 5th Earl of Hertford, whose daughter Isabel de Clare married Robert Bruce, 5th Lord of Annandale, the grandfather of Robert the Bruce; (2) Richard Plantagenet, Earl of Cornwall
7. Sibyl Marshal (c. 1201–27 April 1245), married William de Ferrers, 5th Earl of Derby—they had seven daughters.
  1. Agnes Ferrers (died 11 May 1290), married William de Vesci.
  2. Isabel Ferrers (died before 26 November 1260)
  3. Maud Ferrers (died 12 March 1298), married (1) Simon de Kyme, and (2) William de Vivonia (de Forz), and (3) Amaury IX of Rochechouart.
  4. Sibyl Ferrers, married Sir Francis or Franco de Bohun.
  5. Joan Ferrers (died 1267)
  6. Agatha Ferrers (died May 1306), married Hugh Mortimer, of Chelmarsh.
  7. Eleanor Ferrers (died 16 October 1274), married to:
8. Eva Marshal (1203–1246), married William de Braose, Lord of Abergavenny
  1. Isabella de Braose (b.1222), married Prince Dafydd ap Llywelyn. She died childless.
  2. Maud de Braose (1224–1301), in 1247, she married Roger Mortimer, 1st Baron Mortimer and they had descendants.
  3. Eva de Braose (1227 – 28 July 1255), married Sir William de Cantelou and had descendants.
  4. Eleanor de Braose (c.1228–1251). On an unknown date after August 1241, she married Sir Humphrey de Bohun and had descendants.
9. Anselm Marshal, 6th Earl of Pembroke (c. 1208–22 December 1245), married Maud de Bohun, daughter of Humphrey de Bohun, 2nd Earl of Hereford. They had no children.
10. Joan Marshal (1210–1234), married Warin de Munchensi (d. 1255), Lord of Swanscombe
  1. Joan de Munchensi (1230–20 September 1307) married William of Valence, the fourth son of King John's widow, Isabella of Angoulême, and her second husband, Hugh X of Lusignan, Count of La Marche. Valence was half-brother to Henry III and Edward I's uncle.



William Marshal was interred in Temple Church, London

## The fate of the Marshal family

During the civil wars in Ireland, William had taken two manors that the Bishop of Ferns claimed but could not get back. Some years after William's death, that bishop is said<sup>[15]</sup> to have laid a curse on the family that William's sons would have no children, and the great Marshal estates would be scattered. Each of William's sons did become earl of Pembroke and marshal of England, and each died without legitimate issue. William's vast holdings were then divided among the husbands of his five daughters. The title of "Marshal" went to the husband of the oldest daughter, Hugh Bigod, 3rd Earl of Norfolk, and later passed to the Mowbray dukes of Norfolk and then to the Howard dukes of Norfolk, becoming "Earl Marshal" along the way. The title of "Earl of Pembroke" passed to William of Valence, the husband of Joan Marshal's daughter, Joan de Munchensi; he became the first of the de Valence line of earls of Pembroke.

Through his daughter Isabel, William is ancestor to both the Bruce and Stewart kings of Scots. Through his granddaughter Maud de Braose, William is ancestor to the last Plantagenet kings, Edward IV through Richard III, and all English monarchs from Henry VIII and afterward.

## William Marshal in fiction


- William is the central figure in the Anglo-Norman History of William Marshal. *History of William Marshal*, ed. A.J. Holden, S. Gregory & D. Crouch, 3 vols., ANTS Occasional Publications 4–6 (London: Anglo-Norman Text Society, 2002–6)
- William appears (named only as the Earl of Pembroke) in William Shakespeare's historical play *King John*.
- William Marshal is a central character in the traditional English ballad "Queen Eleanor's Confession" (Child 156), in which he is (fictitiously) revealed to have seduced Eleanor of Aquitaine while escorting her to England.
- Four generations of the Marshal family, from Isabel de Clare's parents through William fitzWilliam's fictitious bastard son, are the subjects of a series of four historical romances by Mary Pershall. *Dawn of the White Rose* (1985) is the one about William Marshal and Isabel de Clare.
- William Marshal appears in four of the books authored by Jean Plaidy on the Plantagenet Kings: *The Revolt of the Eaglets* (where he fights for Henry II), *The Heart of the Lion* (his relation with Richard Coeur de Lion), *The Black Prince* (his relation with King John Lackland) and *The War of the Queens* (in his role as regent of Henry III). His daughter Isabella also appears in the next book of the Saga, (*The Queen came from Provence*), as Richard of Cornwall's first wife
- William Marshal also appears as a supporting character in Thomas B. Costain's out of print novel *Below the Salt*, and Sharon Kay Penman's novels *Time and Chance* and *Devil's Brood*, as well as a minor appearance in Penman's *When Christ and His Saints Slept*, illustrating the story about young William's time as King Stephen's hostage and John Marshal's defiance.
- William Marshal makes appearance in James Blish's historical novel, *Doctor Mirabilis*. He appears at the Convocation at Westminster, and in absentia on his temporary break with Henry III. Blish himself acknowledges the historicity of Marshall, and further notes that in the company of Sir Miles Bonecor that they appear "... as martial spear carriers in this account..." Ultimately, William is merely a figure present in the plot as opposed to a significant mover of events within this particular novel.
- William Marshal is the main character of the novel *A Pride of Kings* by Juliet Dymoke, published by the New English Library in 1978.
- William Marshal is a significant secondary character in the novel *The Witch Hunter* by Bernard Knight, in the author's John Crowner medieval mystery series, published in 2004.
- A new novel about William Marshal, *The Greatest Knight* by Elizabeth Chadwick, based on primary sources and the main secondary source biographies of professors Painter, Duby and Crouch was published by Time Warner Books on 3 November 2005. A sequel, *The Scarlet Lion* followed in 2006. As one of the prominent historical figures of the period, Marshal also appears as a minor character in several of her other novels set around the same time.
- In film, Marshal makes a minor appearance in 1968's *The Lion in Winter*, portrayed by Nigel Stock. Clive Wood portrays Marshal in the 2003 remake.

- The author of *The Lion in Winter*, James Goldman, also used William Marshal as a supporting character in his novel about King John *Myself As Witness* (1979).
- Another novel about William and his wife is *Champion* (in German "Der Ritter der Könige) from Christian Balling of the year 1988.
- William Marshal is a major character in the novels *The Devil is Loose* and its sequel, *Wolf at the Door* by Graham Shelby. The books are about Richard Lionheart and King John, and are historical fictions about the events after the death of Henry II and the fall of the Angevin Empire.
- William Marshal also has 2 appearances in the historical romance novels "The Falcon and the Flower" and "The Dragon and the Jewel" by author Virginia Henley.
- He is a major character in Mike Walker's BBC Radio 4 series of plays *Plantagenet* and is played by Stephen Hogan.
- William Marshal is a major character in Sir Ridley Scott's Robin Hood epic who tries to convince King John to agree to the Magna Carta. He is played by William Hurt.
- In another Robin Hood movie, *Bandit of Sherwood Forest* (1946), as the regent William of Pembroke, played by Henry Daniell, an entirely fictitious characterisation as a scheming villain who kidnaps young Henry III and revokes the Magna Carta.
- William Marshal is also a key character in Christopher Morley's new play *The King's Disposition*.
- Peter Robert's radio play *Holy Fool* is about William Marshal (played by William Chubb) narrated by his squire (played by Michael Williams).
- A character named "Marshal" (played by James Purefoy), based loosely on the historical William Marshal, is the central character in the 2011 film *Ironclad*.
- An alternate history of William Marshal is in Martin Archer's multi-book saga "The Archers" - the young William is revealed as a young archer who evolves into William the Marshal and places his grandson on the throne.
- William Marshal is also the main inspiration for Heath Ledger's character, William Thatcher, in the movie *A Knight's Tale*.

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## External links

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