

King Henry II of England



Born: 5 Mar 1133 Le Mans, FR
 Married: 18 May 1152 Eleanor of Aquitaine
 Died: 6 July 1189 ENG
 Parents: Geoffrey Plantagenet & Empress Matilda

Henry II of England (5 March 1133 – 6 July 1189) ruled as King of England (1154–1189), Count of Anjou, Duke of Normandy, Duke of Aquitaine, Duke of Gascony, Count of Nantes, Lord of Ireland and, at various times, controlled parts of Wales, Scotland and western France. Henry was also the first of the Plantagenet & Angevin dynasty. Early life

Henry was born at Le Mans on 5 March 1133, the first day of the traditional year.^[1] His father, Geoffrey Plantagenet, was Count of Anjou and Count of Maine. His mother, Empress Matilda, was a claimant to the English throne as William I's granddaughter. He spent his childhood with his parents in his father's land of Anjou. At the age of nine, Earl Robert of Gloucester took him to England where he received a year of education from Master Matthew at Bristol. He travelled again to England at the age of 16, to aid his mother's efforts in taking the English throne.

Marriage and children

On 18 May 1152, at Bordeaux Cathedral, Henry married Eleanor of Aquitaine. The future King was only 19 years old and the wedding was "without the pomp or ceremony that befitted their rank."^[2] This was partly due to the fact that only two months previously Eleanor had annulled her marriage to Louis VII of France. The strains of Henry's voracious empire building soured the relationship, as Eleanor disliked leaving her ancestral home. After she pushed her children into a rebellion against their father in 1173, Henry had her placed under house-arrest where she remained for fifteen years.^[3]

Henry and Eleanor had eight children, William, Henry, Richard, Geoffrey, John, Matilda, Eleanor, and Joan. William died in infancy, meaning their son Henry was crowned as joint regent when he came of age instead. However, because he was never King in his own right, he is known as "Henry the Young King", not Henry III. In theory, Henry would have inherited the throne from his father, Richard his mother's possessions, Geoffrey would have Brittany and John would be Lord of Ireland. However, fate would ultimately decide much differently.

It has been suggested that another son was born to the couple, Philip, by John Speed's 1611 book, History Of Great Britain. His sources no longer exist, but Philip would presumably have died in early infancy.^[4]

Henry also had illegitimate children. While they were not valid claimants, their Royal blood made them potential problems for Henry's legitimate successors.^[5] William de Longespee was one such child. He remained largely loyal and contented with the lands and wealth afforded to him as a bastard. Geoffrey, Bishop of Lincoln, Archbishop of York, on the other hand, was seen as a possible

thorn in the side of Richard I of England.^[6] Geoffrey had been the only son to attend Henry II on his deathbed, after even the King's favourite, John Lackland, deserted him ^[7] . Richard forced him into the clergy at York, thus ending his secular ambitions.^[8]

Appearance

Several sources record Henry's appearance. They all agree that he was very strong, energetic and surpassed his peers athletically.

" ...he was strongly built, with a large, leonine head, freckle fiery face and red hair cut short. His eyes were grey and we are told that his voice was harsh and cracked, possibly because of the amount of open-air exercise he took. He would walk or ride until his attendants and courtiers were worn out and his feet and legs were covered with blistered and sores...He would perform all athletic feats. John Harvey (Modern)

...the lord king has been red-haired so far, except that the coming of old age and grey hair has altered that colour somewhat. His height is medium, so that neither does he appear great among the small, nor yet does he seem small among the great... curved legs, a horseman's shins, broad chest, and a boxer's arms all announce him as a man strong, agile and bold... he never sits, unless riding a horse or eating... In a single day, if necessary, he can run through four or five day-marches and, thus foiling the plots of his enemies, frequently mocks their plots with surprise sudden arrivals... Always are in his hands bow, sword, spear and arrow, unless he be in council or in books.- Peter of Blois (Contemporary)

A man of reddish, freckled complexion, with a large, round head, grey eyes that glowed fiercely and grew bloodshot in anger, a fiery countenance and a harsh, cracked voice. His neck was poked forward slightly from his shoulders, his chest was broad and square, his arms strong and powerful. His body was stocky, with a pronounced tendency toward fatness, due to nature rather than self-indulgence - which he tempered with exercise. Gerald of Wales (Contemporary)

Character

Like his grandfather, Henry I of England, Henry II had an outstanding knowledge of the law. A talented linguist and excellent Latin speaker, he would sit on councils in person whenever possible.^[9] His interest in the economy was reflected in his own frugal lifestyle. He dressed casually except when tradition dictated otherwise and ate a sparing diet.^[10]

He was modest and mixed with all classes easily. "He does not take upon himself to think high thoughts, his tongue never swells with elated language; he does not magnify himself as more than man."^[11] His generosity was well-known and he employed a Templar to distribute one tenth of all the food bought to the royal court amongst his poorest subjects.

Henry also had a good sense of humour and was never upset at being the butt of the joke. Once while he sat sulking and occupying himself with needlework, a courtier suggested that he looked like a tanner's daughter. The King rocked with laughter and even explained the joke to those who did not immediately grasp it.^[12]

"His memory was exceptional: he never failed to recognize a man he had once seen, nor to remember anything which might be of use. More deeply learned than any King of his time in the western world". ^[13]

Henry's claims by blood and marriage

Henry's father, Geoffrey Plantagenet, held rich lands as a vassal from Louis VII of France. Maine and Anjou were therefore Henry's by birthright, amongst other lands in Eastern France. ^[14] By maternal claim, Normandy was also to be his. However, the most valuable inheritance Henry

received from his mother was a claim to the English throne. Granddaughter of William I of England, Empress Matilda's line was most entitled to the crown, but because she was female her cousin became Stephen I of England. Henry's efforts to restore the royalty line to his own family line would create a dynasty spanning three centuries and thirteen Kings.

Henry's marriage to Eleanor of Aquitaine placed him firmly in the ascendancy ^[15]. His plentiful lands were added to his new wife's possessions, giving him control of Aquitaine and Gascony. The riches of the markets and vineyards in these regions, combined with Henry's already plentiful holdings, made Henry the most powerful vassal in France.

Taking the English Throne

Realising his royal ambitions was far from straightforward for Henry. His mother had been pushing her claim for the crown for several years to no avail, finally retiring in 1147 ^[16]. It was 1147 when Henry had accompanied Matilda on an invasion of England, his first and her last. It soon failed due to lack of preparation ^[17], but it made him determined that England was his mother's right, and so his own. He returned to England again between 1149 and 1150. On 22nd May 1149 he was knighted by King David I of Scotland, his great uncle, at Carlisle ^[18]. Early in January 1153, just months after his wedding, he crossed the Channel one more time. His fleet was 36 ships strong, transporting a force of 3,000 footmen and 140 horses ^[19]. Sources dispute whether he landed at Dorset or Hampshire, but it is known he entered a small village church. It was 6th January and the locals were observing the Festival of the Three Kings. The correlation between the festivities and Henry's arrival was not lost on them. "Ecce advenit dominator Dominus, et regnum in manu ejus", they exclaimed as the introit for their feast, "Behold the Lord the ruler cometh, and the Kingdom in his hand" ^[20].

Henry worked fast and within the year he had secured his right to succession via the Treaty of Wallingford with Stephen I of England. He was now, for all intents and purposes, in control of England ^[21]. When Stephen died in October 1154, it was only a matter of time until Henry's treaty would come to fruition, and the quest that began with his mother would be over. On 19th December 1154 he was crowned in Westminster Abbey, "By The Grace Of God, Henry II, King Of England"^[22]. Henry Plantagenet, vassal of Louis VII, was now more powerful than the French King himself.

Lordship over Ireland

Shortly after his coronation, Henry sent an embassy to the newly elected Pope Adrian IV. Led by Bishop Arnold of Lisieux, the group of clerics requested authorisation for Henry to invade Ireland. Most historians agree that this was the papal bull *Laudabiliter*. It is possible Henry acted under the influence of a "Canterbury plot"; where English ecclesiastics were set on dominating the Irish system as well ^[23]. However, Henry may have simply intended to secure Ireland as a lordship for his younger brother William.

Unfortunately William died soon after the plan was hatched and Ireland was ignored. It was not until 1166 that it came to the surface again. In that year, Dermot MacMurrough, a minor Irish Prince, was driven from his land of Leinster by the High King of Ireland. Dermot followed Henry to Aquitaine, seeking an audience. He asked the English king to help him reassert control; Henry agreed and made footmen, knights and nobles available for the cause. The most prominent of these was a Welsh Norman, Richard de Clare, 2nd Earl of Pembroke, nicknamed "Strongbow". In exchange for his loyalty, Dermot offered Earl Richard his daughter Aoife (Eve) in marriage and made him heir to the kingdom.

The Normans quickly restored Dermot to his traditional holdings, but it quickly became apparent that Henry had not offered aid purely out of kindness. In 1171, Henry arrived from France, declaring himself Lord of Ireland. All of the Normans, along with many Irish princes, took oaths of homage to Henry, and he left after six months. He never returned, but he later named his young son, the future King John of England, Lord of Ireland.

Dermot's appeal for outside help had made Henry Ireland's Lord, starting 800 years of English interference on the island. The change was so profound that Dermot is still remembered as a traitor of the highest order. In 1172, at the Synod of Cashel, Roman Catholicism was proclaimed as the only permitted religious practice in Ireland. Henry's ruthless expansion was showing no boundaries.

Consolidation in Scotland

In 1174, a rebellion spearheaded by his own sons was not Henry's biggest problem. An invasion force from Scotland, led by their King, William the Lion, was advancing from the North. To make matters worse, a Flemish armada was sailing for England, just days from landing. It seemed likely that the King's rapid growth was to be checked ^[24].

He saw his predicament as a sign from God, that his treatment of Thomas Becket would be rewarded with defeat. He immediately did penance at Canterbury ^[25] for the Archbishop's fate and events took a turn for the better.

The hostile armada dispersed in the English Channel and headed back for the continent. Henry had avoided a foreign invasion, but Scottish rebels were still raiding in the North. Henry sent his troops to meet the Scots at Alnwick, where the English scored a devastating victory. William was captured in the chaos, removing the figurehead for rebellion, and within months all the problem fortresses had been torn down. Scotland was now completely dominated by Henry, another fief in his Angevin Empire, that now stretched from the Solway Firth almost to the Mediterranean and from the Somme to the Pyrenees. By the end of this crisis, and his sons' revolt, the King was "left stronger than ever before" ^[26].

Domestic policy Dominating nobles

During Stephen's reign, the barons in England had undermined Royal authority. Rebel castles were one problem, nobles avoiding military service was another. The new King immediately moved against the illegal fortresses that had sprung up during Stephen's reign, having them torn down.

To counter the problem of avoiding military service, Scutage became common. This tax, paid by Henry's barons instead of serving in his army, allowed the King to hire mercenaries. These hired troops were used to devastating effect by both Henry and his son Richard, and by 1159 the tax was central to the King's army and his authority over vassals.

Legal reform

Henry II's reign saw the establishment of Royal Magistrate courts. This allowed court officials to adjudicate on dispute with authority to the crown. This reduced the workload on Royal courts proper and allowed justice to be delivered with greater efficiency.

Henry also worked to make the legal system fairer. Trial by ordeal and Trial by combat were still common, even in the 12th century these methods were outdated. By the Assize of Clarendon, in 1166, Trial by Jury became the standard. Trial by Combat was still legal in England until 1819, but Henry's support of juries was a great contribution to the country's social history. The Assize of Northampton, in 1176, cemented the earlier agreements at Clarendon.

Religious policy Strengthening royal control over the Church

In the great tradition of Norman Kings, Henry II was keen to dominate the Church like the state. At Clarendon Palace on January 30 1164, the King set out sixteen constitutions, aimed at reducing clerical independence and interference from Rome. Secular courts, increasingly under the King's influence, would also have jurisdiction over clerical trials and disputes. Henry's authority guaranteed him majority support, but the newly appointed Archbishop of Canterbury refused to ratify the proposals.

Henry was characteristically stubborn and on October 8 1164, he called the Archbishop, Thomas Becket, before the Royal Council. However, Becket had fled to France and was under the protection of Henry's rival, Louis VII of France.

The King continued doggedly in his pursuit of control over his clerics, to the point where his religious policy became detrimental to his subjects. By 1170, the Pope was considering excommunicating all of Britain. Only Henry's agreement that Becket could return to England without penalty prevented this fate.

Murder of Thomas Becket

"Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?", or words to that effect, are ones that sparked the darkest event in Henry's religious wranglings. Bitter at Becket, his old friend, constantly thwarting his clerical constitutions, the King shouted in anger but most likely not with intent. However, four of Henry's knights, Reginald Fitzurse, Hugh de Moreville, William de Tracy, and Richard le Breton overheard their King's cries and decided to act.

On December 29th 1170, they entered Canterbury Cathedral, finding Becket near the stairs to the crypt. They beat down the Archbishop, killing him with several blows. Whatever the rights and wrongs, it certainly tainted Henry's later reign. For the remaining 20 years of his rule, he would personally regret the death of a man who "in happier times...had been a friend" ^[27].

Just three years later, Becket had been canonized and was revered as a martyr against secular interference in God's church. Plantagenet historian John Harvey believes "The martyrdom of Thomas Becket was a martyrdom which he had repeatedly gone out of his way to seek...one cannot but feel sympathy towards Henry" ^[28]. Wherever the true intent and blame lies, it was yet another failure in Henry's religious policy, an arena which he seemed to lack adequate subtlety.

The Angevin Curse Civil war and rebellion " It is the common fate of sons to be misunderstood by their fathers, and of fathers to be unloved of their sons, but it has been the particular bane of the English throne. ^[29] "

The "Angevin Curse" is infamous amongst the Plantagenet rulers. Trying to divide numerous lands amongst numerous ambitious children resulted in many problems for Henry. The King's plan for an orderly transfer of power relied on Young Henry ruling and his younger brothers doing homage to him for land. However, Richard refused to be subordinate to his brother, because they had the same mother and father, and the same Royal blood in their veins ^[30].

In 1173, Young Henry and Richard moved against their father and his succession plans, trying to secure the lands they were promised. The King's changing and revising of his inheritance nurtured jealousy in his offspring, resulting in the aggression ^[31]. While both Young Henry and Richard were relatively strong in France, they still lacked the manpower and experience to trouble their father unduly. The King crushed this first rebellion and was fair in his punishment, Richard for example, lost half of the revenue allowed to him as Count of Poitou^[32].

In 1182, the Plantagenet children's aggression turned inward. Young Henry, Richard and their brother Geoffrey all began fighting each other for their father's possessions on the continent. The aggression was exacerbated by French rebels and the French King, Philip Augustus ^[33]. This was the most serious threat to come from within the family yet, and the King faced the monastic tragedy of civil war. However, on 11th June 1183, Henry the Young King died. The uprising, which had been built around the Prince, quickly collapsed and the remaining brothers returned to the their individual lands ^[34]. Henry quickly occupied the rebel region of Angouleme to keep the peace ^[35].

The final battle between Henry's Princes came in 1184. Geoffrey of Brittany and John of Ireland, the youngest brothers, had been promised Aquitaine, which belonged to elder brother Richard^[36]. Geoffrey and John invaded, but Richard had been controlling an army for almost 10 years and was

an accomplished military commander. Richard expelled his fickle brothers and they would never again face each other in combat, largely because Geoffrey died two years later, leaving only Richard and John.

Death and succession

The final thorn in Henry's side would be an alliance between his eldest son, Richard, and his greatest rival, Philip Augustus. John had become Henry's favourite son and Richard had begun to fear he was being written out of the King's inheritance^[37]. In summer 1189, Richard and Philip invaded Henry's heartland of power, Anjou. The unlikely allies took northwest Touraine, attacked Le Mans and overran Maine and Tours. Defeated, Henry II met his opponents and agreed to all their demands, including paying homage to Philip for all his French possessions.

Weak, ill, and deserted by all but an illegitimate son, Geoffrey, Archbishop of York, Henry died at Chinon on 6th July 1189. His legitimate children, chroniclers record him saying, were "the real bastards."^[38] His eldest remaining son, and conquerer, was crowned Richard I of England on 1st September 1189



Tomb of King Henry and Eleanor
Fontevraud Abbey. France

HENRY II

1154-1189



THE COAT OF ARMS OF HENRY II
When Henry became King, he adopted a coat of arms bearing three lions.

HENRY PLANTAGENET was 21 when he became King in 1154. His succession made him lord of an empire which stretched from the Scottish borders down to the Pyrenees, and he was equipped with all the intellectual and physical qualities to rule it well. He began by destroying the castles built by rebellious barons during Stephen's reign, and then set about regulating the power of the Church. He also introduced numerous legal reforms, laying the foundation for the common law, and despite the fact that the latter years of his reign were plagued by family revolts, his substantial empire was intact when he died in 1189.

HENRY II

- ◆ **Born** Le Mans, Anjou, 5 Mar 1133, first son of Geoffrey Plantagenet and Matilda.
- ◆ **Married** Eleanor of Aquitaine, Bordeaux Cathedral, 18 May 1152, 8 children.
- ◆ **Acceded** 19 Dec 1154.
- ◆ **Crowned** Westminster Abbey, 19 Dec 1154.
- ◆ **Died** Chinon Castle, France, 6 July 1189, aged 56.

THOMAS A BECKET

In 1162 Henry appointed Thomas à Becket Archbishop of Canterbury, to reform the abuses of the Church. Becket quarrelled with the King in 1164 and again in 1170. In exasperation, Henry cried out: "Will not someone rid me of this turbulent priest?" Four of Henry's knights took him literally and murdered Becket in his cathedral.



THE MURDER OF BECKET

The illustrated manuscript above depicts the murder of Thomas à Becket by four of Henry's knights in Canterbury Cathedral in 1170.

ROYAL SEAL

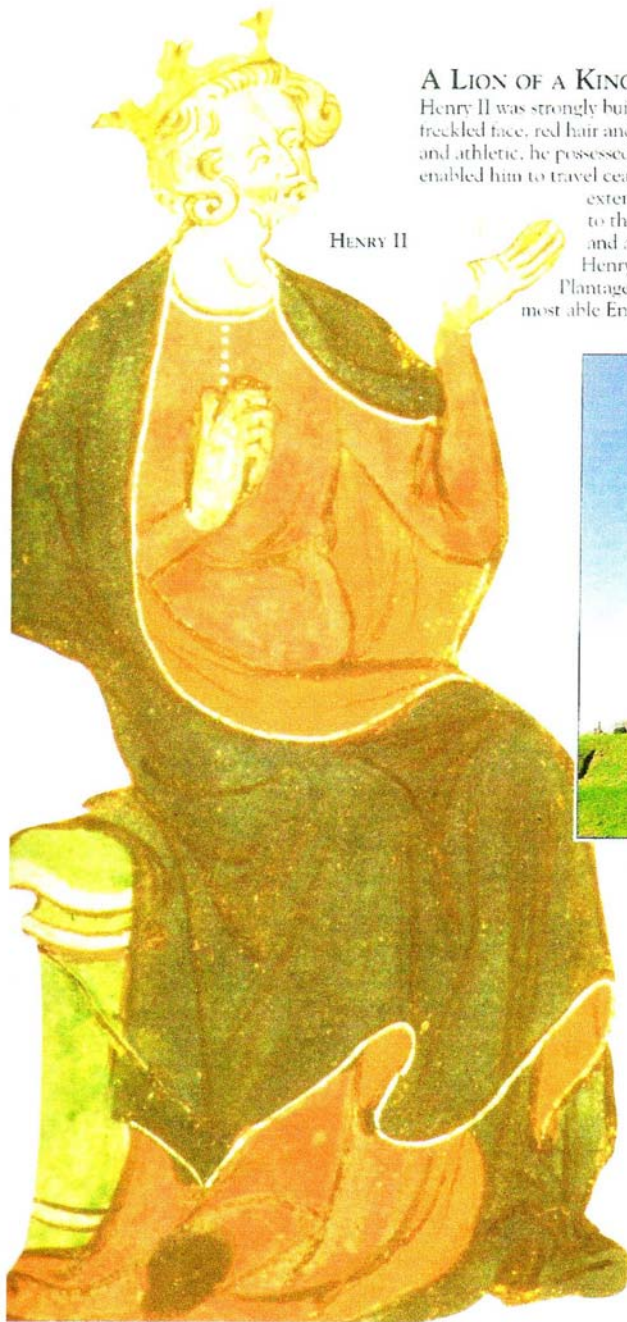
The royal seal of Henry II shows the King on horseback.



CANTERBURY CATHEDRAL
The extent of Canterbury Cathedral while Becket was Archbishop can be gauged from these contemporary plans.

LEGAL REFORMS

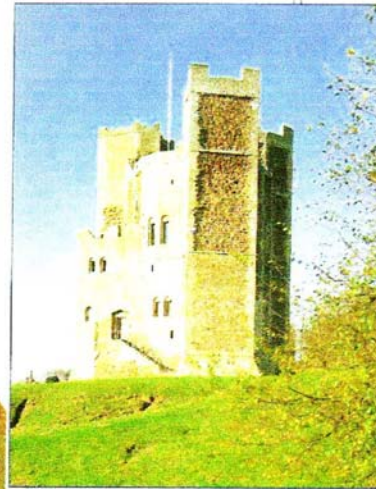
In 1164 Henry set out various Church reforms in the Constitutions of Clarendon. Notable proposals were that the clergy or others associated with the Church, if charged with a criminal offence, should be tried in the civil courts, and that no appeal should be made to Rome without the King's consent. Despite fierce opposition from the Church, the proposals were adopted. At the Assize of Clarendon in 1166, the right to trial by jury was established.



HENRY II

A LION OF A KING

Henry II was strongly built, with a leonine head, freckled face, red hair and a cracked voice. Tough and athletic, he possessed immense energy, which enabled him to travel ceaselessly about his extensive domains. Generous to the poor, a pillar of justice and an intellectual giant, Henry was the greatest of the Plantagenets and arguably the most able English king since Alfred.



ORFORD CASTLE

Built between 1166-73, only the unique 21-sided great tower of Orford Castle in Suffolk remains standing today.

IN STONE

To strengthen his position in England, Henry destroyed the warring barons' wood and earth castles, and replaced them with stone castles of his own. He also extended and repaired many existing structures.

EVENTS OF THE REIGN 1154 – 1189

- ◆ 1154 Henry II accedes to the throne upon the death of his second cousin, Stephen.
- ◆ 1155 Henry appoints Thomas à Becket Chancellor of England.
- ◆ 1155 Pope Adrian IV issues the papal bull *Lanctabiliter*, which gives Henry authority to invade Ireland and bring its Church under the control of Rome.
- ◆ 1162 Henry appoints Thomas à Becket Archbishop of Canterbury in the hope that he will help introduce church reforms.
- ◆ 1164 Henry introduces the Constitutions of Clarendon, which place limitations on the Church's jurisdiction over crimes committed by the clergy. This leads to a violent quarrel between Henry and Thomas à Becket and the latter goes into exile in France.
- ◆ 1166 The Assize of Clarendon establishes trial by jury for the first time.
- ◆ 1166 Dermot McMurrugh, King of Leinster in Ireland, appeals to Henry to help him oppose a confederation of other Irish kings. In response, Henry sends a force led by Richard de Clare, Earl of Pembroke, thereby beginning the English settlement of Ireland.
- ◆ 1168 English scholars expelled from Paris and settle in Oxford, where they found a university.
- ◆ 1170 Henry and Becket are reconciled, but the two of them quarrel again. Becket is killed at the high altar in Canterbury Cathedral on 29 December.
- ◆ 1171 Henry invades Ireland and receives homage from the King of Leinster and the other Irish kings. Henry is accepted as Lord of Ireland.
- ◆ 1171 At the Council of Cashel, Henry makes the Irish clergy submit to the authority of Rome.
- ◆ 1173 Becket is canonized.
- ◆ 1173-4 Henry's sons, Henry, Richard and Geoffrey, lead a rebellion against him.
- ◆ 1189 Henry dies at Chinon Castle in Anjou.