

# King John I of England



**Born: 24 Dec 1166 Oxford, ENG**

**Married: 24 Aug 1200 Isabella de Trailleffer**

**Died: 19 Oct 1216 Newark Castle, ENG**

**Parents: King Henry II of England & Eleanor of Aquitaine**

**John** (24 December 1166 – 19 October 1216<sup>[1]</sup>) reigned as King of England from 6 April 1199, until his death. He succeeded to the throne as the younger brother of King Richard I (known in later times as "Richard the Lionheart"). John acquired the nicknames of "Lackland" (French: *Sans Terre*) for his lack of an inheritance as the youngest son and for his loss of territory to France, and of "Soft-sword" for his alleged military ineptitude.<sup>[2]</sup> He was a Plantagenet or Angevin king.

Apart from entering popular legend as the enemy of Robin Hood, he is also known for when he acquiesced to the nobility and signed Magna Carta, a document limiting his power which is popularly thought as an early first step in the evolution of modern democracy.

## Birth

Born at Beaumont Palace, Oxford, John was the fifth son and last of eight children born to Henry II of England and Eleanor of Aquitaine. He was almost certainly born in 1166 instead of 1167, as is sometimes claimed.<sup>[3]</sup>

He was a younger maternal half-brother of Marie de Champagne and Alix of France, his mother's children by her first marriage to Louis VII of France, which was later annulled. He was a younger brother of William, Count of Poitiers; Henry the Young King; Matilda, Duchess of Saxony; Richard I of England; Geoffrey II, Duke of Brittany; Leonora, Queen of Castile; and Joan, Queen of Sicily

## Early life

While John was his father's favourite son, as the youngest he could expect no inheritance. His family life was tumultuous, as his older brothers all became involved in rebellions against Henry. Eleanor was imprisoned by Henry in 1173, when John was a small boy.

As a child, John was betrothed to Alys (pronounced 'Alice'), daughter and heiress of Humbert III of Savoy. It was hoped that by this marriage the Angevin dynasty would extend its influence beyond the Alps, because John was promised the inheritance of Savoy, the Piemonte, Maurienne, and the other possessions of Count Humbert. King Henry promised his young son castles in Normandy which had been previously promised to his brother Geoffrey, which was for some time a bone of contention between King Henry and his son Geoffrey. Alice made the trip over the Alps and joined Henry's court, but she died before being married.

Gerald of Wales relates that King Henry had a curious painting in a chamber of Winchester Castle, depicting an eagle being attacked by three of its chicks, while a fourth chick crouched, waiting for its chance to strike. When asked the meaning of this picture, King Henry said:

The four young ones of the eagle are my four sons, who will not cease persecuting me even unto death. And the youngest, whom I now embrace with such tender affection, will someday afflict me more grievously and perilously than all the others.

Before his accession, John had already acquired a reputation for treachery, having conspired sometimes with and sometimes against his elder brothers, Henry, Richard and Geoffrey. In 1184, John and Richard both claimed that they were the rightful heir to Aquitaine, one of many unfriendly encounters between the two. In 1185, John became the ruler of Ireland, whose people grew to despise him, causing John to leave after only eight months.

#### Richard's absence

During Richard's absence on the Third Crusade from 1190 to 1194, John attempted to overthrow William Longchamp, the Bishop of Ely and Richard's designated justiciar. This was one of the events that inspired later writers to cast John as the villain in their reworking of the legend of Robin Hood.

John was more popular than Longchamp in London, and in October 1191 the leading citizens of the city opened the gates to him while Longchamp was confined in the tower. John promised the city the right to govern itself as a commune in return for recognition as Richard's heir presumptive.<sup>[4]</sup> While returning from the Crusade, Richard was captured by Leopold V, Duke of Austria, and imprisoned by Henry VI, Holy Roman Emperor. John is said to have sent a letter to Henry asking him to keep Richard away from England for as long as possible, but Richard's supporters paid a ransom for his release because they thought that John would make a terrible king. On his return to England in 1194, Richard forgave John and named him as his heir.

#### Dispute with Arthur

When Richard died, John did not gain immediate universal recognition as king. Some regarded his young nephew, Arthur of Brittany, the son of John's late brother Geoffrey, as the rightful heir. Arthur fought his uncle for the throne, with the support of King Philip II of France. The conflict between Arthur and King John had fatal consequences. By the May 1200 Treaty of Le Goulet, Philip recognised John over Arthur, and the two came to terms regarding John's vassalage for Normandy and the Angevin territories. However, the peace was ephemeral.

The war upset the barons of Poitou enough for them to seek redress from the King of France, who was King John's feudal overlord with respect to certain territories on the Continent. In 1202, John was summoned to the French court to answer the charges one of which was his marriage to Isobel of Angouleme who was already engaged to Guy de Lusignan. John was called to Phillip's court after the Lusignans pleaded for his help. John refused, and, under feudal law, because of his failure of service to his lord, the French King claimed the lands and territories ruled by King John as Count of Poitou, declaring all John's French territories except Gascony in the southwest forfeit. The French promptly invaded Normandy; King Philip II invested Arthur with all those fiefs King John once held (except for Normandy) and betrothed him to his daughter Marie.

Needing to supply a war across the English Channel, in 1203 John ordered all shipyards (including inland places such as Gloucester) in England to provide at least one ship, with places such as the newly-built Portsmouth being responsible for several. He made Portsmouth the new home of the navy. (The Anglo-Saxon kings, such as Edward the Confessor, had royal harbours constructed on the south coast at Sandwich, and most importantly, Hastings.) By the end of 1204, he had 45 large galleys available to him, and from then on an average of four new ones every year. He also created an Admiralty of four admirals, responsible for various parts of the new navy. During John's reign, major improvements were made in ship design, including the addition of sails and removable forecastles. He also created the first big transport ships, called buisses. John is sometimes credited with the founding of the modern Royal Navy. What is known about this navy comes from the Pipe Rolls, since these achievements are ignored by the chroniclers and early historians.

In the hope of avoiding trouble in England and Wales while he was away fighting to recover his French lands, in 1205, John formed an alliance by marrying off his illegitimate daughter, Joan, to the Welsh prince Llywelyn the Great.

As part of the war, Arthur attempted to kidnap his own grandmother, Eleanor of Aquitaine, at Mirebeau, but was defeated and captured by John's forces. Arthur was imprisoned first at Falaise and then at Rouen. No one is certain what happened to Arthur after that. According to the Margam Annals, on 3 April 1203:

After King John had captured Arthur and kept him alive in prison for some time in the castle of Rouen... when [John] was drunk he slew [Arthur] with his own hand and tying a heavy stone to the body cast it into the Seine.

However, Hubert de Burgh, the officer commanding the Rouen fortress, claimed to have delivered Arthur around Easter 1203 to agents of the King sent to castrate him and that Arthur had died of shock. Hubert later retracted his statement and claimed Arthur still lived, but no one saw Arthur alive again, and the supposition that he was murdered caused Brittany, and later Normandy, to rebel against King John.

Besides Arthur, John also captured his niece, Eleanor, Fair Maid of Brittany. Eleanor remained a prisoner the rest of her life (which ended in 1241); through deeds such as these, John acquired a reputation for ruthlessness.

#### Dealings with Bordeaux

In 1203, John exempted the citizens and merchants of Bordeaux from the Grande Coutume, which was the principal tax on their exports. In exchange, the regions of Bordeaux, Bayonne and Dax pledged support against the French Crown. The unblocked ports gave Gascon merchants open access to the English wine market for the first time. The following year, John granted the same exemptions to La Rochelle and Poitou.<sup>[5]</sup>

#### Dispute with the Pope

Pope Innocent III and King John had a disagreement about who would become Archbishop of Canterbury which lasted from 1205 until 1213.

When Archbishop of Canterbury Hubert Walter died on 13 July 1205, John became involved in a dispute with Pope Innocent III. The Canterbury Cathedral chapter claimed the sole right to elect Hubert's successor and favoured Reginald, a candidate out of their midst. However, both the English bishops and the king had an interest in the choice of successor to this powerful office. The king wanted John de Gray, one of his own men, so he could influence the church more.<sup>[6]</sup> When their dispute could not be settled, the Chapter secretly elected one of their members as Archbishop. A second election imposed by John resulted in another nominee. When they both appeared in Rome, Innocent disavowed both elections, and his candidate, Stephen Langton, was elected over the objections of John's observers. John was supported in his position by the English barons and many of the English bishops and refused to accept Langton.

John expelled the Chapter in July 1207, to which the Pope reacted by imposing the interdict on the kingdom. John immediately retaliated by seizure of church property for failure to provide feudal service. The Pope, realizing that too long a period without church services could lead to loss of faith, gave permission for some churches to hold Mass behind closed doors in 1209. In 1212, they allowed last rites to the dying. While the interdict was a burden to many, it did not result in rebellion against John.

In November 1209 John was excommunicated, and in February 1213, Innocent threatened stronger measures unless John submitted. The papal terms for submission were accepted in the presence of the papal legate Pandulph in May 1213 (according to Matthew Paris, at the Templar Church at Dover);<sup>[7]</sup> in addition, John offered to surrender the Kingdom of England to God and the Saints Peter and Paul for a feudal service of 1,000 marks annually, 700 for England and 300 for

Ireland.<sup>[8]</sup> With this submission, formalised in the Bulla Aurea (Golden Bull), John gained the valuable support of his papal overlord in his new dispute with the English barons.

Dispute with the barons  
John signing Magna Carta

Having successfully put down the Welsh Uprising of 1211 and settling his dispute with the papacy, John turned his attentions back to his overseas interests. The European wars culminated in defeat at the Battle of Bouvines (1214), which forced the king to accept an unfavourable peace with France.

This finally turned the barons against him (some had already rebelled against him after he was excommunicated), and he met their leaders at Runnymede, near London on 15 June 1215 to seal the Great Charter, called in Latin *Magna Carta*. Because he had signed under duress, however, John received approval from his overlord the Pope to break his word as soon as hostilities had ceased, provoking the First Barons' War and an invited French invasion by Prince Louis of France (whom the majority of the English barons had invited to replace John on the throne). John travelled around the country to oppose the rebel forces, including a personal two month siege of the rebel-held Rochester Castle.

Death  
John's tomb effigy

Retreating from the French invasion, John took a safe route around the marshy area of the Wash to avoid the rebel held area of East Anglia. His slow baggage train (including the Crown Jewels), however, took a direct route across it and was lost to the unexpected incoming tide. This dealt John a terrible blow, which affected his health and state of mind. Succumbing to dysentery and moving from place to place, he stayed one night at Sleaford Castle before dying on 18 October (or possibly 19 October) 1216, at Newark Castle (then in Lincolnshire, now on Nottinghamshire's border with that county). Numerous, possibly fictitious, accounts circulated soon after his death that he had been killed by poisoned ale, poisoned plums or a "surfeit of peaches".

He was buried in Worcester Cathedral in the city of Worcester.

His nine-year-old son succeeded him and became King Henry III of England (1216–72), and although Louis continued to claim the English throne, the barons switched their allegiance to the new king, forcing Louis to give up his claim and sign the Treaty of Lambeth in 1217.

Legacy  
King John's tomb

King John's reign has been traditionally characterised as one of the most disastrous in English history: it began with defeats—he lost Normandy to Philip Augustus of France in his first five years on the throne—and ended with England torn by civil war and himself on the verge of being forced out of power. In 1213, he made England a papal fief to resolve a conflict with the Roman Catholic Church, and his rebellious barons forced him to sign Magna Carta in 1215, the act for which he is best remembered.

As far as the administration of his kingdom went, John functioned as an efficient ruler, but he lost approval of the English barons by taxing them in ways that were outside those traditionally allowed by feudal overlords. The tax known as scutage, payment made instead of providing knights (as required by feudal law), became particularly unpopular. John was a very fair-minded and well informed king, however, often acting as a judge in the Royal Courts, and his justice was much sought after. Also, John's employment of an able Chancellor and certain clerks resulted in the first proper set of records—the Pipe Rolls.

Medieval historian C. Warren Hollister called John an "enigmatic figure":

...talented in some respects, good at administrative detail, but suspicious, unscrupulous, and mistrusted. He was compared in a recent scholarly article, perhaps unfairly, with Richard Nixon. His crisis-prone career was sabotaged repeatedly by the halfheartedness with which his vassals supported him—and the energy with which some of them opposed him.

Winston Churchill summarised the legacy of John's reign: "When the long tally is added, it will be seen that the British nation and the English-speaking world owe far more to the vices of John than to the labours of virtuous sovereigns".<sup>[9]</sup>

In 2006, he was selected by the BBC History Magazine as the 13th century's worst Briton.<sup>[10]</sup>

Marriage and issue

In 1189, John was married to Isabel of Gloucester, daughter and heiress of William Fitz Robert, 2nd Earl of Gloucester (she is given several alternative names by history, including Avisia, Hawise, Joan, and Eleanor). They had no children, and John had their marriage annulled on the grounds of consanguinity, some time before or shortly after his accession to the throne, which took place on 6 April 1199, and she was never acknowledged as queen. (She then married Geoffrey de Mandeville as her second husband and Hubert de Burgh as her third).

John remarried, on 24 August 1200, Isabella of Angoulême, who was twenty years his junior. She was the daughter of Aymer Taillefer, Count of Angouleme. John had kidnapped her from her fiancé, Hugh X of Lusignan.

Isabella bore five children:

- Henry III (1207-1272), King of England.
- Richard (1209-1272), 1st Earl of Cornwall.
- Joan (1210-1238), Queen Consort of Alexander II of Scotland.
- Isabella (1214-1241), Consort of Frederick II, Holy Roman Emperor.
- Eleanor (1215-1275), who married William Marshal, 2nd Earl of Pembroke, and later married Simon de Montfort, 6th Earl of Leicester.

John is given a great taste for lechery by the chroniclers of his age, and even allowing some embellishment, he did have many illegitimate children. Matthew Paris accuses him of being envious of many of his barons and kinsfolk, and seducing their more attractive daughters and sisters. Roger of Wendover describes an incident that occurred when John became enamoured of Margaret, the wife of Eustace de Vesci and an illegitimate daughter of King William I of Scotland. Eustace substituted a prostitute in her place when the king came to Margaret's bed in the dark of night; the next morning, when John boasted to Vesci of how good his wife was in bed, Vesci confessed and fled.

John had the following illegitimate children:

- Joan, Lady of Wales, the wife of Prince Llywelyn Fawr of Wales, (by a woman named Clemence)
- Richard Fitz Roy, (by his cousin, Adela, daughter of his uncle Hamelin de Warenne)
- Oliver FitzRoy, (by a mistress named Hawise) who accompanied the papal legate Pelayo to Damietta in 1218, and never returned.

By an unknown mistress (or mistresses) John fathered:

- Geoffrey FitzRoy, who went on expedition to Poitou in 1205 and died there.
- John FitzRoy, a clerk in 1201.
- Henry FitzRoy, who died in 1245.
- Osbert Gifford, who was given lands in Oxfordshire, Norfolk, Suffolk, and Sussex, and is last seen alive in 1216.

# JOHN

1199–1216



THE COAT OF ARMS  
OF JOHN

THE YOUNGEST SON OF HENRY II, John inherited from his brother Richard the throne of England, as well as the Plantagenet dominions in France, which he lost to the French by 1204. John's failure to recapture these territories, his dispute with Rome over the Pope's choice of a new Archbishop of Canterbury, and a high level of taxation had the English nobility up in arms against him. In 1215 they forced the King to agree to the Magna Carta, guaranteeing their rights in relation to those of the crown. This led to civil war, which only ended with John's death in 1216. Yet despite these disasters, it is now known that John was a much better king than history has usually portrayed him.

## JOHN

- ◆ **Born** Beaumont Palace, Oxford, 24 Dec 1166, fourth son of Henry II and Eleanor.
- ◆ **Married** Isabella of Gloucester, 29 Aug 1189, no children; Isabella of Angoulême, 24 Aug 1200, 5 children
- ◆ **Acceded** 27 May 1199.
- ◆ **Crowned** Westminster Abbey, 27 May 1199.
- ◆ **Died** Newark Castle, Lincolnshire, 18/19 Oct 1216, aged 49.

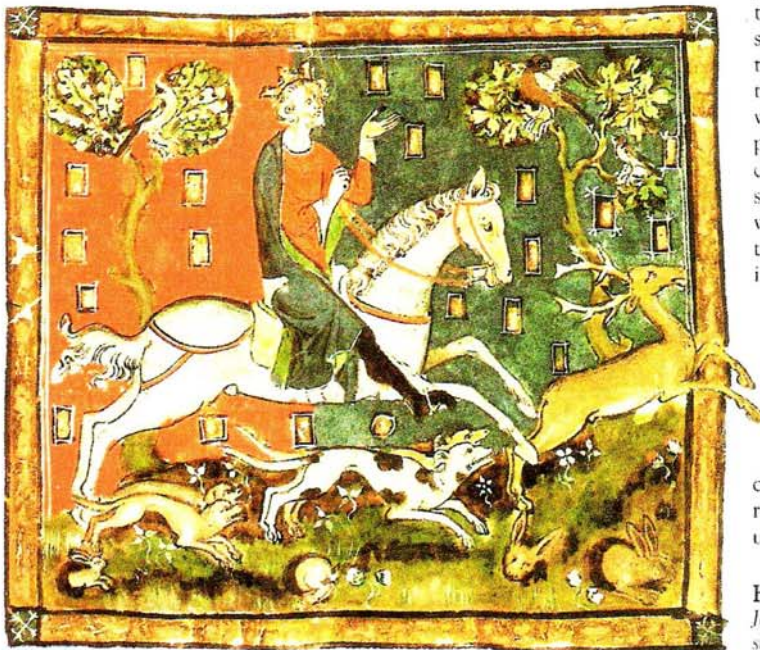


### OLD LONDON BRIDGE

Completed during the reign of John. London Bridge (above) remained standing until its demolition 600 years later.

### BRIDGE OVER THE THAMES

There has been a bridge across the Thames on or around the site of the present London Bridge since Roman times. The construction of the first stone bridge was begun by Henry II in the 1170s, but progress was slow until the French engineer, Isambert of Saintes, was employed by John to complete the project. The bridge, which included a drawbridge, a double row of houses and some 140 shops, all resting on 19 arches, was finally opened in 1206. It remained the only stone bridge across the Thames in London until 1750.



### LOVE OF LEISURE

Despite a reputation for hard work, John always found time for leisure. Chief among his recreations was hunting, but he also enjoyed his comforts and is said to have particularly relished taking a bath – an extremely uncommon practice at that time.

### HUNTING

John's favourite pastime was hunting, as shown in this 14th-century illustration.

## JOHN • 1199–1216

## JOHN

King John is shown in this contemporary manuscript illustration in one of his many castles.



## JOHN

Despite his problems with France and the English barons, recent historical research suggests that John was an energetic administrator, a good general, an astute diplomat, and a hard-working and keenly intelligent ruler with a strong sense of justice. In that respect he was one of the ablest of the Plantagenet monarchs. However, a chronicler writing only a decade after his death said that while he was a great prince, he was hardly a happy one.

EVENTS OF THE REIGN  
1199 – 1216

- ◆ 1199 John accedes to the throne on the death of Richard.
- ◆ 1204 England loses almost all its possessions in France.
- ◆ 1206 John refuses to accept Stephen Langton as Archbishop of Canterbury.
- ◆ 1208 Pope Innocent III issues an Interdict against England, banning all church services except baptisms and funerals.
- ◆ 1209 Pope Innocent III excommunicates John for his confiscation of ecclesiastical property.
- ◆ 1212 Innocent III declares that John is no longer the rightful King of England.
- ◆ 1213 John submits to the Pope's demands.
- ◆ 1214 Philip Augustus of France defeats the English army at the Battle of Bouvines.
- ◆ 1214 The English barons gather at Bury St Edmunds to discuss the demands they wish to make on the King.
- ◆ 1215 John meets the barons at Runnymede, near Windsor, and finally agrees to their demands and seals Magna Carta.



## ROCHESTER CASTLE

Throughout his reign John spent huge sums of money on the construction and maintenance of castles. He was also experienced in conducting siegeworks, capturing Rochester Castle (above) in 1216 by undermining the east corner of the tower.

- ◆ 1215 The Pope decrees that John need not adhere to Magna Carta and civil war breaks out.
- ◆ 1216 The barons seek French aid in their fight against John; Prince Louis of France captures the Tower of London.
- ◆ 1216 John loses his war chest of cash and jewels in the Wash.
- ◆ 1216 John dies at Newark and is buried in Worcester Cathedral.

Information from the book, “Kings & Queens of England & Scotland” by Plantagenet Somerset Fry



King John I tomb at Worcester Cathedral



Worcester Cathedral



The altar