

## King Henry 1 1068 – 1135 : “Beauclerc”

*The youngest and most able of William the Conqueror's and Matilda's sons, Henry was the only Norman King of England to be born in the country. He strengthened the crown's executive powers and modernised royal administration.*

Tradition holds that Henry was born in Selby in 1068 or 1069, the fourth son of William the Conqueror. As a fourth son, it was never expected that he would reign, so he was trained in "book learning". This academic background enabled him to be a very capable ruler.

### Coming to power

When elder brother William Rufus died whilst on a hunting expedition in the New Forest in August 1100, some say it was an accident, others that it was the assassination of an unloved leader. Whatever the reason, Henry hastened to Winchester, where he was crowned king before his elder brother, and rightful heir Robert could return from abroad. Military power lay with the barons, several of whom maintained support for Robert, making Henry's succession precarious. He quickly bought support by reconciliation with the church, a return to the laws of earlier in the 11<sup>th</sup> century and making wide-ranging concessions in his "Charter of Liberties". Four key clauses were

- 1. I shall remit all debts and pleas which were owing to my brother, except those which were lawfully made through an inheritance*
- 2. I impose a strict peace on the land, and command it be maintained.*
- 3 I restore the law of King Edward (the Confessor) and the amendments which my father introduced upon the advice of his barons.*
- 4 Anything taken from me after the death of my father shall be returned immediately, without fine. If it is not returned, a heavy fine shall be enforced.*



In November 1100, he married Edith, sister of the king of Scotland, to secure his northern border and to link Norman and Saxon blood lines.

Robert invaded England in 1101, but Henry, now with the support of church and the barons, agreed a peaceful settlement. Robert gave up his claim to England in return for Henry's territories in Normandy and a large annuity. However, five years later, the situation had deteriorated. Henry invaded Normandy, routed Robert's army at Tinchebrai, capturing Robert and held him prisoner for the rest of his life.

## Henry as monarch

As Henry was often away from England he used his educational experience to set up an efficient bureaucracy . A system of recording financial transactions was set up, the origin of the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Many royal judges began to tour the shires to reinforce local administration and inquire into revenues.

It could be argued that Henry's men toured the country enforcing extremely strict tenancy laws and so were the "greatest terror of every neighbourhood." Alternatively, one could say Henry was a strong king, enforcing obedience to the law and removing financial corruption.

Whatever one's views, Norman laws required a strong king and Henry was certainly that. The Anglo Saxon Chronicle stated "*No man durst misdo against another in his time. He made peace for man and beast. Whoso bare his burden of gold and silver, no man durst say aught but good*". In short, this was a time when honest men could do business safely - but punishments could be harsh. For instance, in 1125 Henry had several 'moneyers' (bankers) castrated as they had supplied coin of less than the required quality.

Henry is sometimes referred to as "Beauclerc" or the "Lion of Justice" due to his establishment of such strict law enforcement.

Abroad, his possessions in Normandy were challenged by Robert's son, William Clito, but by 1120 the barons had submitted, Henry's only legitimate son William had been married to the daughter of the powerful Count of Anjou and Louis VI of France had agreed to peace after defeat in battle



### Tragedy of the White Ship

From this pinnacle of success, tragedy struck in November 1120, with the sinking of the 'White Ship' off Barfleur in the Channel. Henry and his retinue were returning to England after summer in his French lands, and whilst the king had boarded an older vessel, his son William Adelin (marking Edith and Henry's reunion of Norman and Saxon, "Aethling" being a Saxon term for 'prince') along with many relations and nobles decided to use the newer boat, the "White Ship" captained by Thomas FitzStephen, the son of one of William the Conqueror's admirals.

The "White Ship" was newer and faster than Henry's vessel, and FitzStephen was encouraged to overtake the King on the night journey across the Channel.

Contemporary image of the sinking of the White Ship (British Library via Wikipedia)

Unfortunately, too much drinking went on before the ship left and too many were allowed on board. "Drunken driving" piloted the ship onto rocks at the mouth of the harbour and the ship sank. Only two survivors are recorded, neither being Henry's son William Adelin. Chroniclers tell that he got into a small boat and could have escaped but turned back to try to rescue his half-sister, Matilda. His boat was swamped by others trying to save themselves, and all perished.

It is said that Henry never smiled again after the disaster of the White Ship, and much of the rest of his reign was devoted to attempting to find a male successor. Despite fathering many bastards, Henry's only legitimate heir was his daughter Matilda. Although a woman had never before been Queen of England, Henry persuaded his barons to regard her as his heir, and in 1128, Matilda was married to the Count of Anjou, Geoffrey Plantagenet in an attempt to further strengthen her claims.

### **Death and succession**

In later life, Henry's way of life coarsened and he became known for his gluttony. This was literally to be the death of him. In December 1135, after hunting at Lyons sur Fôret near Rouen, despite doctor's orders he feasted on the eel-like fish, the lamprey and was poisoned by ptomaine that the fish contain.

On Henry's death, there was a succession crisis as the barons reneged on their promises to Matilda, leading to 18 years of Civil War or 'Anarchy' between Henry's nephew Stephen and Matilda. This was a time of such violence that it was said that during these years "Christ and his saints were asleep".

Henry was buried at Reading Abbey, but his grave is now lost, and he is one of very few Kings of England who does not have a marked resting place.

It seems ironic that the legacy of the king who brought order to the country should be years of anarchy, but, ultimately, in the person of his grandson Henry II, order was restored and the Plantagenet dynasty begun.

## Taking it further

Wikipedia searches for "Henry 1" and the "White Ship" produce good and detailed articles. However images purporting to be of Henry I are often of other regal Henrys.

A blue plaque marking Henry's supposed birthplace is on the railings of Selby Abbey, outside the North Porch.

A google search for 'Henry 1 Anglo Saxon Chronicle' leads to websites



The roundel of Henry 1 on the Selby Riverside Walk

with text from the Chronicle (e.g. [www.britannia.com/history/docs/1124-27.html](http://www.britannia.com/history/docs/1124-27.html) or <http://historymedren.about.com/library/text/bltxtaschron1111.htm>) detailing the events of Henry's reign in detail - including his treatment of the moneyers.

Other web references are:

[www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic\\_figures/henry\\_i\\_king.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/henry_i_king.shtml)

[www.timeref.com/hpr159.htm](http://www.timeref.com/hpr159.htm)

[www.berkshirehistory.com/bios/henry1.html](http://www.berkshirehistory.com/bios/henry1.html)

Two key text books are

Judith A. Green : 'Henry I: King of England and Duke of Normandy'. A copy is in Selby library.

C. Warren Hollister : 'Henry I'

A succinct and easily digestible account of Henry's qualities as a monarch and his relations to Norman and Plantagenet rulers can be found in David Hilliam's 'Kings, Queens, Bones & Bastards'

Selby Civic Society produced a small pamphlet to mark the unveiling on St. George's Day 2009 of a blue plaque marking Henry's birthplace. This pamphlet has a full version of the "Charter of Liberties". It is available in the reference section of Selby Library or via the Civic Society

Dante Gabriel Rossetti wrote the "Ballad of the White Ship" about the great maritime disaster.