

DAN JONES is an acclaimed historian and award-winning journalist. His first book, *Summer of Blood: The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, drew wide critical acclaim, with the *Independent* praising his 'sound scholarship and sexy writing'. Dan is a columnist for the *London Evening Standard* and writes for *The Times*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Spectator* and *Literary Review*. He blogs about medieval history in popular culture at summerofblood.com, and on Twitter under the name @dgjones. Dan took a first in History from Pembroke College, Cambridge in 2002. He lives in London with his wife and two daughters.

From the reviews of *The Plantagenets*:

'This is great popular history ... *The Plantagenets* is proof that contemporary history can engage with the medieval world with style, wit and chutzpah'
Observer

'Action-packed narrative ... a great story filled with fighting, personality clashes, betrayal and bouts of the famous Plantagenet rage ... Jones is an impressively confident guide to this tumultuous scene ... *The Plantagenets* succeeds in bringing an extraordinary family to life'
Daily Telegraph

'Dan Jones tells the fascinating story with wit, verve and vivid insight. This is exhilarating history – a fresh and gloriously compelling portrait of a brilliant, brutal and bloody-minded dynasty'

HELEN CASTOR, author of *She-Wolves*

'Fascinating ... this is an exciting period and Jones describes it with verve ... Medieval history is enjoying its time in the sun again thanks to some excellent writing'
New Statesman

'[Jones] has a great knack for vividly setting scenes throughout the book ... it is traditional narrative history at its best, written with style and flow'
Spectator

‘Dan Jones’s sweeping narrative traces these developments both entertainingly and informatively ... [he] has produced an absorbing narrative that will help ensure that the Plantagenet story remains “stamped on the English imagination” for another generation’

Sunday Times

‘Will undoubtedly appeal to those who like the broad brush ... it puts all manner of legendary events into context ... Jones’s conclusion pulls the hectic centuries into a coherent whole’

Independent

‘Gripping storytelling and pin-sharp clarity ... *The Plantagenets* is a satisfying as well as an enjoyable read’

Literary Review

‘Bloody, brutal and brilliant’

GQ

ALSO BY DAN JONES

Summer of Blood: The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381

DAN JONES

The Plantagenets

The Kings Who Made England



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For JJ, VJ and IJ

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For a sensible man ought to consider that Fortune's favour is variable and her wheel is ever turning ... the Prince must take care, and always have imprinted on his mind the fact that although the merciful Creator ... is long-suffering and patient ... He is likewise severe in executing punishment and vengeance upon the stubborn and wilful, and usually begins to exact that punishment here on earth.

GERALD OF WALES,
THE CONQUEST OF IRELAND

CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	xi
List of Maps	xiii
List of Genealogical Tables	xxi
French Kings, 1060–1422	xxvi
Preface	xxvii

PART I – *Age of Shipwreck* (1120–1154)

The White Ship 3 – Hunt for an Heir 9 – The
Shipwreck 13 – Ambition 22 – A Scandalous Wife 26 –
Henry the Conqueror 32 – Peace Process 37

PART II – *Age of Empire* (1154–1204)

Births and Rebirth 45 – L’Espace Plantagenet 53 –
Unholy War 59 – Succession Planning 71 – The Eagle’s
Nest 82 – Henry Triumphant 93 – A World on Fire 100
– New Horizons 109 – Hero of the East 116 –
Treachery 124 – At the Emperor’s Pleasure 130 – Return
of the Lionheart 136 – Lackland Supreme 148 – John
Softsword 153 – Triumph and Catastrophe 158 –
Lackland Undone 166

PART III – *Age of Opposition* (1204–1263)

Salvaging the Wreck 173 – A Stay-at-Home King 179 –
A Cruel Master 187 – Beginning of the End 196 – To
Bouvines 203 – Magna Carta 209 – Securing the
Inheritance 219 – From Marshal to Magna Carta 224 –
Kingship at Last 230 – Marriage and Family 236 – Holy
Kingship 244 – The Road to War 248 – The Provisions
of Oxford 258

PART IV – *Age of Arthur* (1263–1307)

Lewes 271 – From Imprisonment to Evesham 276 – The
Leopard 282 – King at Last 290 – A New Arthur 297 –
The Final Stand 304 – The King's Castles 310 – The
Price of Conquest 314 – The Expulsion of the Jews 318
– The Great Cause 324 – War on All Fronts 330 – The
Conquest of Scotland 337 – Crisis Point 341 –
Relapse 349

PART V – *Age of Violence* (1307–1330)

The King and his Brother 357 – Coronation 362 –
Emergency 367 – The Ordinances 370 – Manhunt 374
– Summer of Promise 379 – Bannockburn 383 – New
Favourites 387 – Civil War 394 – The King's
Tyranny 402 – Mortimer, Isabella and Prince
Edward 407 – Endgame 412 – Abdication 417 – False
Dawn 422

PART VI – *Age of Glory* (1330–1360)

Royal Coup 435 – Glorious King of a Beggared
Kingdom 440 – New Earls, New Enemies 449 – The
Hundred Years War Begins 452 – Edward at Sea 457 –
The Crisis of 1341 463 – Dominance 469 – The Death
of a Princess 479 – Chivalry Reborn 485 – Decade of
Triumph 490

PART VII – *Age of Revolution* (1360–1399)

The Family Business 503 – Unravelling Fortunes 510 –
The Good Parliament 517 – New King, Old
Problems 526 – England in Uproar 532 – Return to
Crisis 540 – Treason and Trauma 549 – The Reinvention
of Kingship 556 – Richard Revenged 563 – Richard
Undone 571 – Richard Alone 583

Conclusion	589
Further Reading	603
Index	611

ILLUSTRATIONS

King Henry I mourning, from ‘Chronicle of England’

c.1307–27 by Peter of Langtoft. (© *The British Library Board, Royal 20 A. II, f.6v*)

Royal writ from Durham. (*Reproduced by permission of the Chapter of Durham Cathedral, 2.1.Reg.2*)

Henry II and Becket. (*akg-images/British Library. Ms. Cotton Claudius D.II, fol.73., 14th century*)

Geoffrey Plantagenet, enamelled copper from his tomb. (*The Art Archive/Musée de Tessé, Le Mans/Kharbine-Tapabor/Collection CL*)

Richard and Saladin from ‘The Luttrell Psalter’, 1320–40. (*The Art Archive/British Museum*)

The Capture of Acre from ‘Chroniques de France ou de St Denis’, c.1325–50. (*Scala, Florence/Heritage Images*)

Lower section of Magna Carta. (*The Print Collector/HIP/Topfoto*)

Death of Simon de Montfort from ‘Chronica Roffense’ by Matthew Parris, early 14th century. (*The British Library/HIP/Topfoto*)

Chateau Gaillard. (© *Eye Ubiquitous/Superstock*)

Edward I at court from Miscellaneous chronicles, c.1280–1300.

(*akg-images/British Library, Ms. Cotton Vitellius A. XIII, fol.6 v*)

ILLUSTRATIONS

Conwy Castle. (© *Buddy Mays/Alamy*)

Tomb effigy detail showing face of Edward II. (© *Angelo Hornak/Corbis*)

Isabella of France, Queen Consort of England, from 'Chroniques' by Jean Froissart 1337–1400. (*Mary Evans Picture Library*)

'The Wilton Diptych', c.1395–99. (© *The National Gallery, London/Scala, Florence*)

The Battle of Sluys from 'Chroniques' by Jean Froissart, 1337–1400. (*White Images/Scala, Florence*)

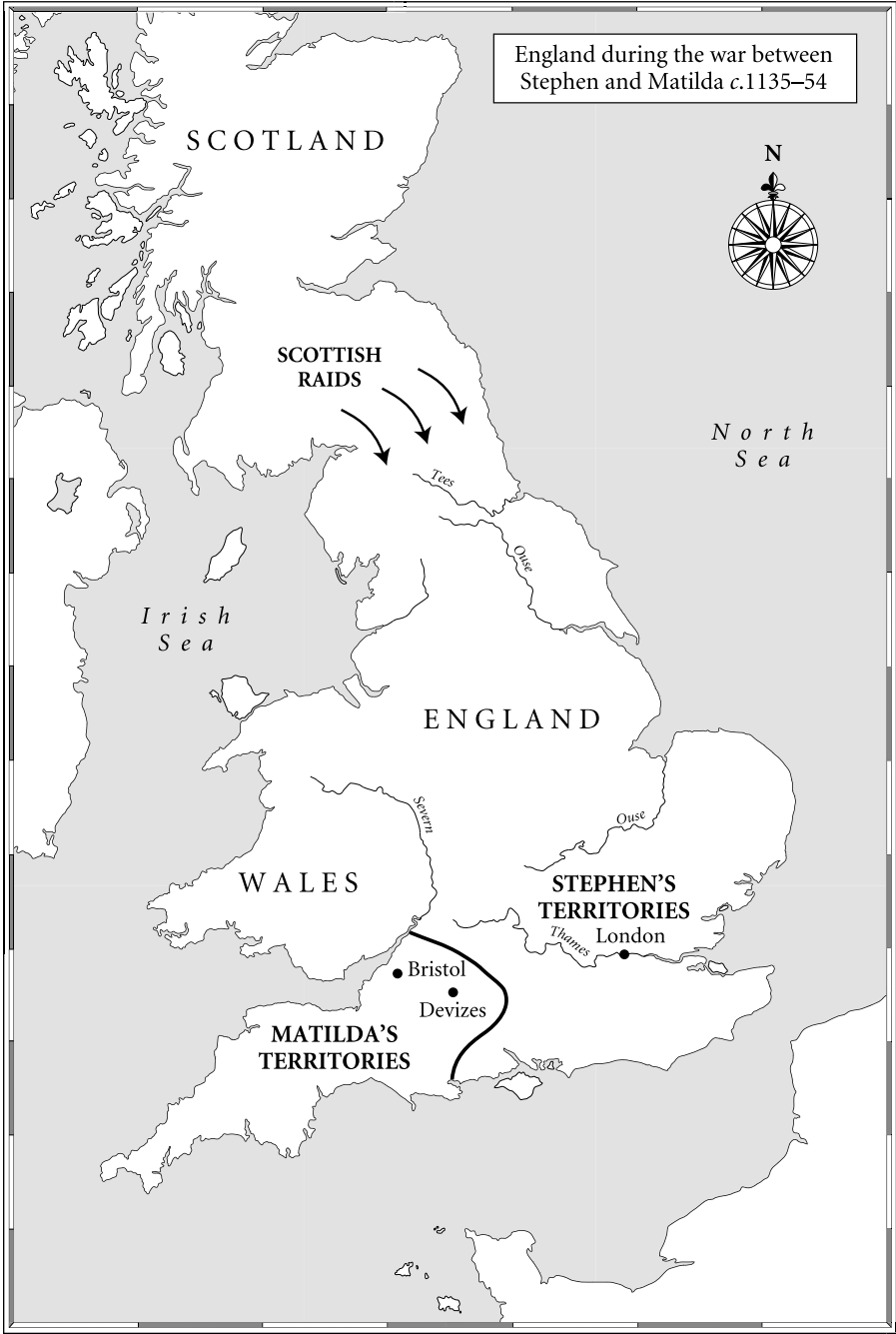
Edward III in Garter robes from William Bruges's Garter Book, c.1440–50. (© *The British Library Board, Stowe 594, f.7v*)

Henry of Grosmont from William Bruges's Garter Book, c.1440–50. (© *The British Library Board, Stowe 594 f.8*)

John of Gaunt, portrait attributed to Lucas Cornelisz. (*Private Collection/The Bridgeman Art Library*)

MAPS

England during the war between Stephen and Matilda, c.1135–54	xiv
The Plantagenet Empire at its peak, c.1187	xv
The Plantagenet Empire after John's reign, c.1216	xvi
The Welsh castles of Edward I	xvii
Plantagenet battles in Scotland	xviii
France under Edward III, 1360	xix







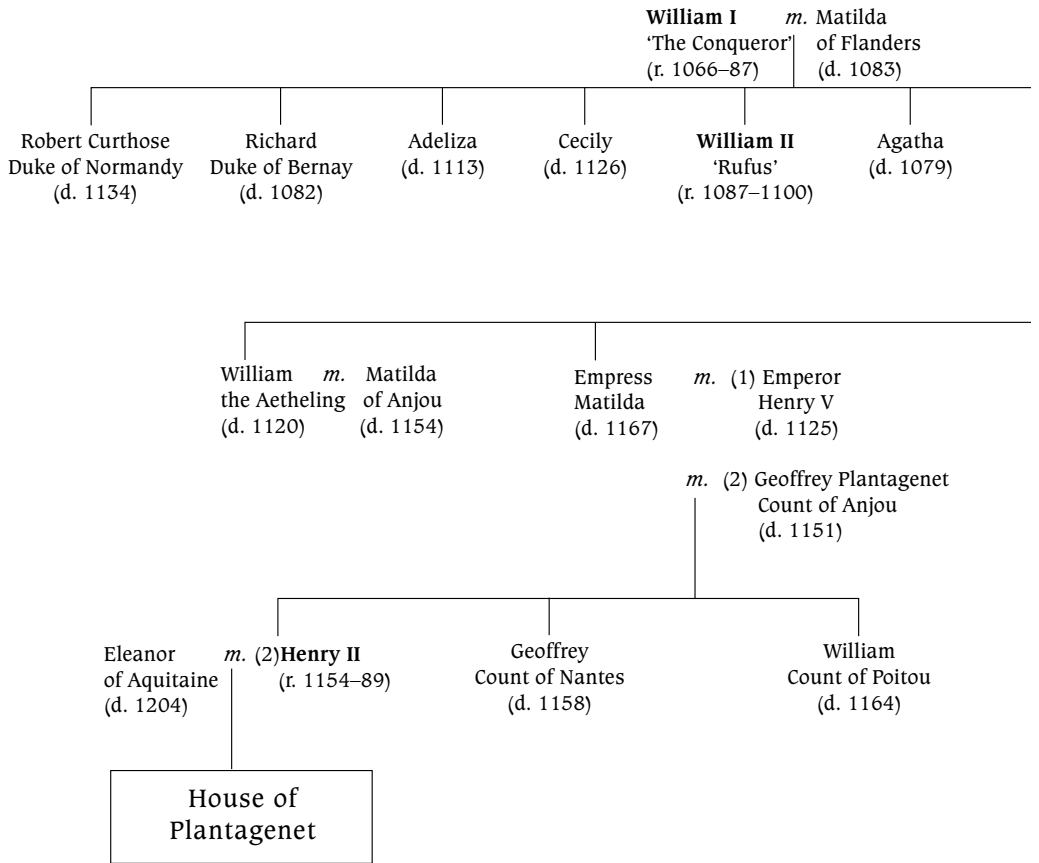




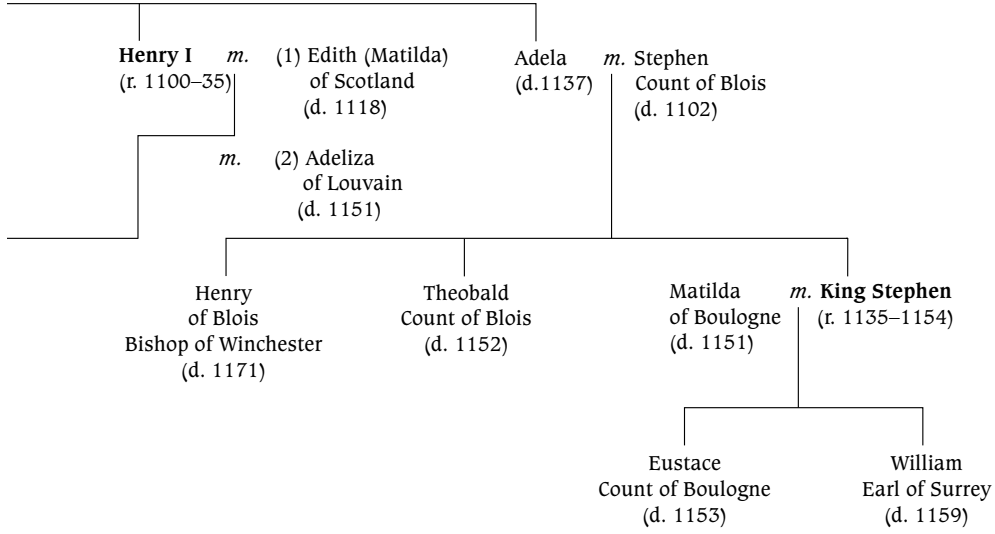


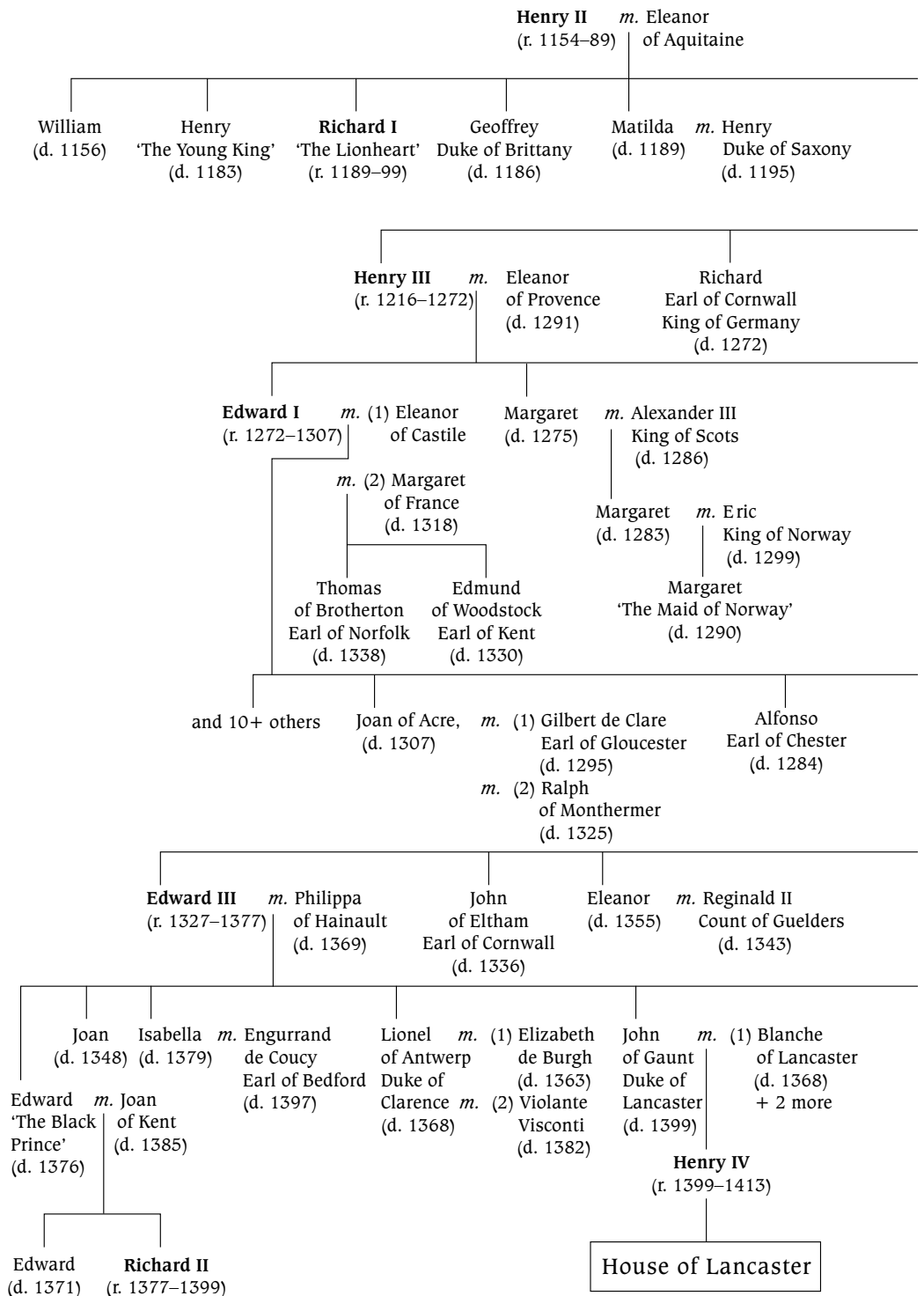
GENEALOGICAL TABLES

The Normans	xxii
The Plantagenets	xxiv

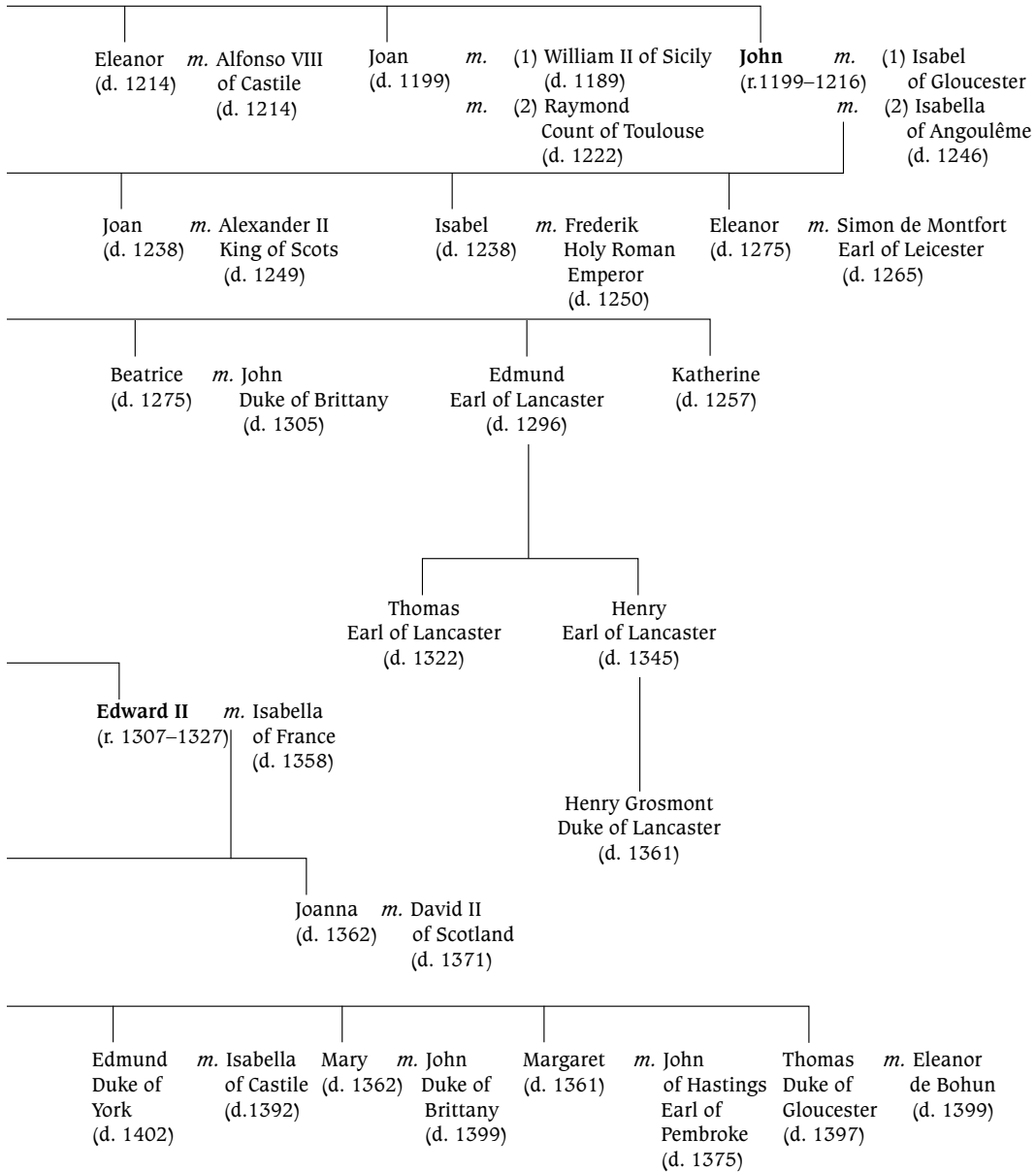


The Normans





The Plantagenets



FRENCH KINGS, 1060–1422

HOUSE OF CAPET

Philip I	1060–1108
Louis VI	1108–1137
Louis VII	1137–1180
Philip II	1180–1223
Louis VIII	1223–1226
Louis IX	1226–1270
Philip III	1270–1285
Philip IV	1285–1314
Louis X	1314–1316
John I	15–20 November 1316
Philip V	1316–1322
Charles IV	1322–1328

HOUSE OF VALOIS

Philip VI	1328–1350
John II	1350–1364
Charles V	1364–1380
Charles VI	1380–1422

PREFACE

Who were the Plantagenets? The name was not used by any of the characters in this book to describe themselves, with the exception of one: Geoffrey, count of Anjou, a handsome, belligerent, red-headed young man born in 1113, who wore a sprig of yellow broom blossom in his hat and decorated his shield with lions. It was from the Latin name (*planta genista*) of the broom that the name Plantagenet derived, while lions passant guardant would become the heraldic symbol of English kingship, carried before vast armies who took to the field everywhere from the chilly Lowlands of Scotland to the dusty plains of the Middle East. There is some irony here: Geoffrey never visited England, took scant direct interest in the affairs of the realm and died in 1151, three years before his eldest son inherited the English Crown.

Nevertheless, Plantagenet is a powerful name. The kings who descended from Geoffrey ruled England for more than two centuries, beginning with Henry II, who inherited the Crown in 1154, and ending with Richard II, who was relieved of it by his cousin Henry Bolingbroke in 1399. They were the longest-reigning English royal dynasty, and during their times were founded some of the most basic elements of what we today know as England. The realm's borders were established. Her relationships with her neighbours – principally Scotland, Wales, France and Ireland, but also the Low Countries, the papacy and the Iberian states that would eventually become Spain – were established. Principles of law and institutions of government that have endured to this day were created in their essential forms

PREFACE

– some deliberately, others either by accident or under duress. A rich mythology of national history and legend was concocted, and the cults of two national saints – Edward the Confessor and St George – were established. The English tongue rose from an uncultured, rather coarse local dialect to become the language of parliamentary debate and poetic composition. Great castles, palaces, cathedrals and monuments were raised, many of which still stand as testament to the genius of the men who conceived them, built them, and defended them against attack. Heroes were born, died and became legends; so too were villains whose names still echo through the pages of history. (Some of those villains wore the crown.) Several of the most famous and dramatic battles in European history were fought, at Bouvines and Bannockburn, Sluys and Winchelsea, Crécy and Poitiers. Military tactics were revolutionized between a Norman age in which warfare was the art of siegecraft, and the dawn of the fifteenth century, during which pitched battles were commonplace and the English – with their brave men-at-arms and deadly mounted archers – were the scourge of Europe. Likewise, by the end of the Plantagenet years the English had begun to explore art of war on the open seas. Naval tactics lagged some way behind tactics in the field, but by the middle of the fourteenth century something resembling an English navy could be deployed to protect the coasts and attack enemy shipping. It is undeniable that during the Plantagenet years many acts of savagery, butchery, cruelty and stupidity were committed, but by 1399, where this book ends, the chilly island realm which had been conquered by William, the bastard of Normandy, in 1066 had been transformed into one of the most sophisticated and important kingdoms in Christendom. At its heart lay the power and prestige of the royal family.

That is the process described in this book; but this is also a book written to entertain. It is a narrative history, and it tells some of the great stories of England which took place between the sinking of the *White Ship* in 1120 and the solemn deposition of Richard II in 1399. They include the great civil war between Stephen and Matilda; the murder of Thomas Becket by Henry II's knights; the Great War of

PREFACE

1173–4; Richard I's wars against Saladin on the Third Crusade; the Barons' War against King John and the agreement of Magna Carta; Henry III's hapless attempts to deal with the barons of a later age including his brother-in-law and nemesis Simon de Montfort; Edward I's campaigns in Wales and Scotland; Edward II's peculiar romance with Piers Gaveston and his dismal abdication in 1327; Edward III's provocation of the Hundred Years War, in which he fought alongside his son the Black Prince and captured the king of France, and the subsequent institution of the Order of the Garter to celebrate England's new martial supremacy; the fierce mortality inflicted on Europe by the Black Death; Richard II's heroism against Wat Tyler's rebels during the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, which was followed by Richard's tyranny and his final fall, deposed by Bolingbroke. These stories are exciting in their own right; they are also part of an English historical canon that still, even in the cultural chaos of the twenty-first century, defines England as a nation and as a people. The Plantagenet kings did not just invent England as a political, administrative and military entity. They also helped to invent the *idea* of England – an idea that has as much importance today as it ever has before.

This is a long book, and it could have been longer still. For ease of reading I have divided the text into seven sections. Part I, 'Age of Shipwreck', illustrates the dismal state to which England had sunk by the end of its period of Norman rule, which began under William the Conqueror and continued during the reigns of two of his sons, William Rufus and Henry I. After the death of the latter, a vicious and paralysing civil war engulfed England and Normandy. It was fought between rival claimants, the Conqueror's grandson King Stephen and his granddaughter the Empress Matilda, and it took nearly two decades to resolve it in favour of the latter. During that time England was effectively partitioned between two courts and two competing governments, leaving public authority splintered and the countryside a smouldering ruin, infested with mercenaries. Only with the accession of Matilda's son – her eldest child by Geoffrey Plantagenet, a dishevelled, quick-tempered but brilliant boy known as Henry FitzEmpress – was the realm reunited and restored to good

governance. Henry FitzEmpress became Henry II, and through a combination of some good fortune, immense personal energy and a great deal of military capability and hard-headed purpose, Henry set about establishing himself, and by association the English Crown, as the master of a patchwork of territories reaching from the borders of Scotland to the foothills of the Pyrenees.

The story of Henry II's rule over his vast dominions, and their gradual, if unintended coherence into a form of empire is the subject of Part II, 'Age of Empire'. It charts Henry's astonishing conquests, his catastrophic dispute with his one-time best friend Archbishop Thomas Becket and the king's struggles with his feckless children and extraordinary wife Eleanor of Aquitaine, which some contemporaries believed were divine punishment for Becket's death. 'Age of Empire' also explores Henry's revolutionary reforms of English law, justice and bureaucracy – reforms that gave England legal processes and principles of government that endured for centuries.

Despite the feats and achievements of his astonishing reign, Henry II is one of the lesser-known Plantagenet kings. Not so his third son Richard I, 'the Lionheart' who inherited the Plantagenet empire in 1189, during the white heat of Europe's most enthusiastic crusading years. Richard – who spent a surprisingly small amount of time in England given the heroic status he achieved there within decades of his death – devoted his life to defending and expanding the horizons of Plantagenet power. This led him to conquests as far afield as Sicily, Cyprus and the kingdom of Jerusalem during the Third Crusade, before he returned, via an expensive imprisonment in Germany, to fight for his inheritance against the French king Philip II 'Augustus'. 'Age of Empire' ends in 1204 when Richard's brother, King John, suffered a humiliating defeat to Philip, lost the duchy of Normandy and disgraced his family's military legacy in a reign that would influence relations between England and France for almost 150 years.

The repercussions of John's military failure are explored in Part III, 'Age of Opposition'. After the loss of Normandy, the kings of England were forced to live permanently in England: a state of affairs that brought John rapidly into conflict with his barons, churchmen and

PREFACE

Celtic neighbours. 'Age of Opposition' begins during the dark days of John's reign, during which military successes against Wales, Scotland and Ireland were clouded by the unusual cruelty of a defective king. John's use and misuse of the sophisticated system of government bequeathed him by his father, Henry II, provoked one of the greatest constitutional crises in English history. In 1215 England collapsed into a long civil war, at the heart of which lay a question: how could a realm discipline a tyrannical king? It was a question that a failed peace treaty known as Magna Carta sought unsuccessfully to answer. But Magna Carta expressed some important principles of English government, and the great charter subsequently became a rallying cry to opponents of the Crown during the reign of John's son Henry III and the early career of his grandson Edward I. It was Magna Carta to which all opponents of the Crown would turn at moments of crisis for the rest of the thirteenth century. Chief among these opponents was a man called Simon de Montfort. Henry III and Edward's wars with de Montfort eventually brought the 'Age of Opposition' to a close.

Part IV begins in 1260, towards the end of the long period of intermittent civil war between Plantagenet kings and their barons. The royal hero of this time was Edward I, a tall and relentless king who was said to be so fierce that he once literally scared a man to death. Under Edward's belligerent leadership, the English were finally induced to cease fighting one another and turn their attentions on their neighbours: Scotland and Wales. Edward I's brutal attempts to become the master not only of England but the whole of Britain are the subject of 'Age of Arthur'. The popularity of Arthurian tales and relic-hunting increased as a new mythology of English kingship was explored. Edward cast himself as the inheritor of Arthur (originally a legendary Welsh king) who sought to reunite the British Isles and usher in a great new age of royal rule. Despite flurries of outrage from his barons, who began to organize political opposition through the nascent political body known as parliament, Edward very nearly succeeded in his goals, and his influence over England's relations with Scotland and Wales has never entirely waned.

PREFACE

Edward I was undoubtedly one of the great, if not one of the more personally endearing Plantagenets. His son, Edward II, was the worst of them on every score. In Part V, 'Age of Violence', this book examines the desperate tale of a king who failed completely to comprehend any of the basic obligations of kingship, and whose reign dissolved into a ghastly farce of failure in foreign policy, complete isolation of the political community and murderous civil war. Edward's disastrous relationships with his favourites Piers Gaveston and Hugh Despenser the Younger wreaked havoc on English politics, as did the brutish behaviour of Edward's cousin Thomas, earl of Lancaster, who waged uncompromising war on the king until the earl was executed in 1322. Through Lancaster's belligerence and Edward's inadequacy, kingship was debased, degraded and finally attacked by the king's own subjects; the pages of English history between 1307 and 1330 become stained with blood. Part V aims to explain how this came to be so – and how the 'Age of Violence' was eventually brought to an end.

The greatest of all the Plantagenet kings was Edward III. Edward inherited the throne as a teenage puppet king under his mother and her lover Roger Mortimer, who were responsible for the removal of Edward II. He soon shook off their influence, and the next three, triumphant decades of his reign are described in Part VI, 'Age of Glory'. In these years, the Plantagenets expanded in every sense. Under the accomplished generalship of Edward, his son the Black Prince and his cousin Henry Grosmont, England pulverized France, and Scotland (as well as other enemies, including Castile), in the opening phases of the Hundred Years War. Victories on land at Halidon Hill (1333), Crécy (1346), Calais (1347), Poitiers (1356) and Najera (1367) established the English war machine – built around the power of the deadly longbow – as Europe's fiercest. Success at sea at Sluys (1340) and Winchelsea (1350) also gave the Plantagenets confidence in the uncertain arena of warfare on water. Besides restoring the military power of the English kings, Edward and his sons deliberately encouraged a national mythology that interwove Arthurian legend, a new cult of St George and a revival of the code of knightly chivalry in the Order of the Garter. They created a culture that bonded England's aristocracy

PREFACE

together in the common purpose of war. By 1360, Plantagenet kingship had reached its apotheosis. Political harmony at home was matched by dominance abroad. A new period of greatness beckoned.

Then, just as suddenly as it had arrived, English pre-eminence dissolved. Part VII charts just how rapidly fortune's wheel – a favourite medieval metaphor for the vicissitudes of life – could turn. After 1360 Edward's reign began to decay, and by the accession of his grandson Richard II in 1377 a crisis of rule had begun to emerge. Richard inherited many very serious problems. The Black Death, which ravaged Europe's population in wave after wave of pestilence from the middle of the fourteenth century, had turned England's economic order upside down. Divisions among the old king's sons led to fractured foreign policy, while France, revived under Charles V and Charles VI, began to push the English back once more towards the Channel. But if Richard was dealt a bad hand, he played it diabolically. Plantagenet kingship and the royal court imported trappings of magnificence; the first great medieval English writers – Geoffrey Chaucer, John Gower and William Langland – set to work. But Richard was a suspicious, greedy, violent and spiteful king, who alienated some of the greatest men in his kingdom. By 1399, the realm had tired of him and he was deposed by his cousin, Henry Bolingbroke.

That is where this book ends. It would be perfectly possible, in theory, to have carried on. Direct descendants of Edward III continued to rule England until 1485, when Henry Tudor took the throne from Richard III at Bosworth. Indeed, the name 'Plantagenet' first came into royal use during the Wars of the Roses, when in 1460 the Parliament Rolls record 'Richard Plantagenet, commonly called Duc of York' claiming to be king of England. Thereafter, Edward IV and Richard III awarded the surname to some of their illegitimate children – a nod to royalty outside the official family tree, whose use denoted a connection to an ancient and legendary royal bloodline stretching back to time almost out of mind.

I have defined England's Plantagenet years as being between the dates 1254 and 1400 for three reasons.

PREFACE

First, this was the only period of the English Middle Ages in which the Crown passed with general certainty from one generation to the next without any serious succession disputes or wars of dynastic legitimacy. With the exceptions of Arthur of Brittany and Prince Louis of France, who made hopeful but ultimately fruitless claims at the beginning and end of King John's torrid reign, there were no rival claimants to the English Crown during the Plantagenet years. The same cannot be said either for the Norman period that ended with King Stephen's reign, or the century following Richard II's deposition, when the Plantagenet dynasty split into its two cadet branches of Lancaster and York.

Second, I have chosen to write about the period 1254–1399 simply because it seems to me that this is one of the most exciting, compelling periods in the Middle Ages, during which some of the greatest episodes in our nation's history took place. And third, I have limited this story to these years for reasons of practicality. This is a long book, and could be many times longer. Dearly though I would love to take the story of the Plantagenets through to the grisly death of the dynasty under Henry Tudor, it would simply not be possible in a volume light enough to read in bed. A second part will one day complete the story.

This book has been a pleasure to write. I hope it is a pleasure to read, too. A number of people have helped me write it. Nothing would have been possible without my peerless agent Georgina Capel. I also want to thank Dr Helen Castor for her extraordinary generosity, wisdom and encouragement as we discussed almost every aspect of the book. Ben Wilson and Dr Sam Willis helped with naval matters. Richard Partington offered useful advice about Edward III. Walter Donohue, Paul Wilson and Toby Wiseman gave invaluable comments on the manuscript at different stages. Any errors are mine, of course. My editor at Harper Press, Arabella Pike, has been as patient as ever and piercing with her observations and notes on the text. Her team, including Kerry Enzor, Sophie Ezra, Steve Cox and Caroline Hotblack, have also been very helpful and tolerant. The staff at the British Library, London Library, National Archives, London Metropolitan Archives and Guildhall Library have been exceptionally kind, as have

PREFACE

the keepers, guides and staff at the innumerable castles, cathedrals and battlefields I have visited in the course of researching this journey through three centuries of European history.

Above all, however, I should like to thank Jo, Violet and Ivy Jones, who have put up with my incessant scribbling, and to whom it is only reasonable that this book is dedicated.

Dan Jones
Battersea, London
January 2012

PART I

Age of Shipwreck

(1120–1154)

It was as if Christ and his saints were asleep

– *THE ANGLO-SAXON CHRONICLE*

The White Ship

The prince was drunk. So too were the crew and passengers of the ship he had borrowed. On 25 November 1120, nearly two hundred young and beautiful members of England and Normandy's elite families were enjoying themselves aboard a magnificent white-painted longship. She had been loaned by a wealthy shipowner for a crossing from Normandy to England, and now bobbed gently to the hum of laughter in a crowded harbour at Barfleur. A 70-mile voyage lay ahead across the choppy late-autumn waters of the Channel, but with the ship moored at the edge of the busy port town, barrels of wine were rolled aboard and all were invited to indulge.

The prince was William the Aetheling. He was the only legitimate son of Henry I, king of England and duke of Normandy, and Matilda of Scotland, the literate, capable queen descended from the Cerdic line of Wessex kings who had ruled England before the Norman Conquest. His first name, William, was in honour of his grandfather, William the Conqueror. His sobriquet, 'Aetheling', was a traditional Anglo-Saxon title for the heir to the throne. William was a privileged, sociable young man, who exuded a sense of his dual royalty and conformed to the time-honoured stereotype of the adored, spoiled, eldest son. One Norman chronicler observed William 'dressed in silken garments stitched with gold, surrounded by a crowd of household attendants and guards, and gleaming in an almost heavenly glory'; a youth who was pandered to on all sides with 'excessive reverence', and was therefore prone to fits of 'immoderate arrogance'.

William was surrounded by a large group of other noble youths. They included his half-brother and half-sister Richard of Lincoln and Matilda, countess of Perche, both bastard children from a brood of twenty-four fathered by the remarkably virile King Henry; William's cousin Stephen of Blois, who was also a grandson of William the Conqueror; Richard, the 26-year-old earl of Chester, and his wife Maud; Geoffrey Ridel, an English judge; the prince's tutor Othver; and numerous other cousins, friends and royal officials. Together they made up a golden generation of the Anglo-Norman nobility. It was only right that they travelled in style.

The owner of the *White Ship* was Thomas Fitzstephen. His grandfather, Airard, had contributed a longship to the Conqueror's invasion fleet and Fitzstephen judged that carrying future kings to England was therefore in his blood. He had petitioned the king for the honour of carrying the royal party safely back from Barfleur to the south coast of England. Henry had honoured him with the passage of the prince's party, but with duty came a warning: 'I entrust to you my sons William and Richard, whom I love as my own life.'

William was a precious charge indeed. He was seventeen years old and already a rich and successful young man. He had been married in 1119 to Matilda, daughter of Fulk V, count of Anjou and future king of Jerusalem. It was a union designed to overturn generations of animosity between the Normans and Angevins (as the natives of Anjou were known). Following the wedding, William had accompanied King Henry around Normandy for a year, learning the art of kingship as Henry thrashed out what the chronicler William of Malmesbury described as 'a brilliant and carefully concerted peace' with Louis VI 'The Fat', the sly, porcine king of France. It was intended as an education in the highest arts of kingship, and it had been deemed effective. William had lately been described as *rex designatus* – king designate – in official documents, marking his graduation towards the position as co-king alongside his father.

The highest point of William's young life had come just weeks before the *White Ship* prepared to sail, when he had knelt before the corpulent Louis to do homage as the new duke of Normandy. This

semi-sacred ceremony acknowledged the fact that Henry had turned over the dukedom to his son. It recognized William as one of Europe's leading political figures, and marked, in a sense, the end of his journey to manhood.

A new wife, a new duchy, and the unstoppable ascent to kingship before him: these were good reasons to celebrate – which was precisely what the Aetheling was doing. As the thin November afternoon gave way to a clear, chilly night, the *White Ship* stayed moored in Barfleur and the wine flowed freely.

The *White Ship* was a large vessel – apparently capable of carrying several hundred passengers, along with a crew of fifty and a cargo of treasure. This must have been a considerable vessel, and the Norman historian Orderic Vitalis called it 'excellently fitted out and ready for royal service'. It was long and deep, raised and decorated with ornate carvings at prow and stern, and driven by a large central mast and square sail, with oarholes along both sides. The rudder, or 'steer-board', was on the right-hand side of the vessel rather than in the centre, so the onus on the captain was to be well aware of local maritime geography: steering was blind to the port side.

A fair wind was blowing up from the south, and it promised a rapid crossing to England. The crew and passengers on William's ship bade the king's vessel farewell some time in the evening. They were expected to follow shortly behind, but the drinking on board the *White Ship* was entertaining enough to keep them anchored long past dark. When priests arrived to bless the vessel with holy water before its departure, they were waved away with jeers and spirited laughter.

As the party ran on, a certain amount of bragging began. The *White Ship* and her crew contained little luggage, and was equipped with fifty oarsmen. The inebriated captain boasted that his ship, with square sail billowing and oars pulling hard, was so fast that even with the disadvantage of having conceded a head start to King Henry's ship, they could still be in England before the king.

A few on board started to worry that sailing at high speed with a well-lubricated crew was not the safest way to travel to England, and

it was with the excuse of a stomach upset that the Aetheling's cousin Stephen of Blois excused himself from the party. He left the *White Ship* to find another vessel to take him home. A couple of others joined him, dismayed at the wild and headstrong behaviour of the royal party and crew. But despite the queasy defectors, the drunken sailors eventually saw their way to preparing the ship for departure. Around midnight on a clear night lit by a new moon, the *White Ship* weighed anchor and set off for England. 'She [flew] swifter than the winged arrow, sweeping the rippling surface of the deep,' wrote William of Malmesbury. But she did not fly far enough. In fact, the *White Ship* did not even make it out of Barfleur harbour.

Whether it was the effects of the celebrations on board, a simple navigational error, or the wrath of the Almighty at seeing his holy water declined, within minutes of leaving shore the *White Ship* crashed into a sharp rocky outcrop, now known as Quillebeuf, which stands, and is still visible today, at the mouth of the harbour. The collision punched a fatal hole in the wooden prow of the ship. The impact threw splintered timber into the sea. Freezing water began to pour in.

The immediate priority of all on board was to save William. As the crew attempted to bail water out of the *White Ship*, a lifeboat was put over the side. The Aetheling clambered aboard, together with a few companions and oarsmen to return him to the safety of Barfleur.

It must have been a terrifying scene: the roars of a drunken crew thrashing to bail out the stricken vessel combining with the screams of passengers hurled into the water by the violence of the impact. The fine clothes of many of the noble men and women who fell into the ocean would have grown unmanageably heavy when soaked with seawater, making it impossible to swim for safety or even to tread water. The waves would have echoed with the cries of the drowning.

As his tiny boat turned for harbour, William picked out among the panicked voices the screams of his elder half-sister Matilda. She was crying for her life – certain to drown in the cold and the blackness. The thought of it was more than the Aetheling could bear. He commanded the men on his skiff to turn back and rescue her.

THE WHITE SHIP

It was a fatal decision. The countess was not drowning alone. As the lifeboat approached her, it was spotted by other passengers who were floundering in the icy waters. There was a mass scramble to clamber to safety aboard; the result was that the skiff, too, capsized and sank. Matilda was not saved, and neither now was William the Aetheling, duke of Normandy and king-designate of England. He disappeared beneath the waves. As the chronicler Henry of Huntingdon put it: ‘instead of wearing a crown of gold, his head was broken open by the rocks of the sea.’

Only one man survived the wreck of the *White Ship*. He was a butcher from Rouen, who had boarded the ship at Barfleur to collect payment for debts and was carried off to sea by the revellers. When the ship went down, he wrapped himself in ram-skins for warmth, and clung to wrecked timber during the night. He staggered, drenched, back to shore in the morning to tell his story. Later on, the few bodies that were ever recovered began to wash up with the tide.

The news was slow to reach England. King Henry’s ship, captained by sober men and sailed with care and attention, reached his kingdom unscathed, and the king and his household busied themselves preparing for the Christmas celebrations. When the awful word of the catastrophe in Barfleur reached the court, it was greeted with dumbstruck horror. Henry was kept in ignorance at first. Magnates and officials alike were terrified at the thought of telling the king that three of his children, including his beloved heir, were what William of Malmesbury called ‘food for the monsters of the deep’.

Eventually a small boy was sent to Henry to deliver the news, throwing himself before the king’s feet and weeping as he recounted the tragic news. According to Orderic Vitalis, Henry I ‘fell to the ground, overcome with anguish’. It was said that he never smiled again.

The wreck of the *White Ship* wiped out in one evening a whole swathe of the Anglo-Norman elite’s younger generation. The death of the Aetheling – and the fortuitous survival of his cousin, Stephen of Blois – would come to throw the whole of western European politics into disarray for three decades.

The sinking of the *White Ship* was not just a personal tragedy for Henry I. It was a political catastrophe for the Norman dynasty. In the words of Henry of Huntingdon, William's 'certain hope of reigning in the future was greater than his father's actual possession of the kingdom'. Through William the Aetheling's marriage, Normandy had been brought to peace with Anjou. Through his homage to Louis VI, the whole Anglo-Norman realm was at peace with France. All of Henry's plans and efforts to secure his lands and legacy had rested on the survival of his son.

Without him, everything was in vain.