Eva ANGLESSY **19/02/2026**

The Plantagenet “empire”, or

A medieval tale of love/hate relationship between England and France

Mural in Chapel of Saint Radegund in Chinon, France. The people depicted are traditionally thought to represent Eleanor of Aquitaine, Henry Plantagenet, and their children. Photo by Chinpat.[1]

Acknowledgement

For this handout, I am indebted to *The History of Britain and Ireland, From Early People to the Present Day*. Oxford University Press, 2006.

[1] Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chasse_royale,_fresque_de_la_chapelle_Sainte-Radegonde.JPG

The House of Plantagenet was the longest-ruling royal dynasty of England, from 1154 to 1485. The complicated political relationship existing between England and France under the rule of this dynasty, culminating in the Hundred Years' War, derives from the position of William the Conqueror, Duke of Normandy, the first sovereign ruler of England who also held fiefs on the Continent as a vassal of the French king.

When the English king Edward the Confessor died in January 1066, though he named Earl Harold as the next king, Duke William of Normandy claimed that Edward had earlier promised the throne to him. William thus invaded England and defeated Harold at the Battle of Hastings.

The events leading up to the Battle of Hastings and the Norman Conquest of England in 1066 are depicted in one of the wonders of the medieval world, the 70-metre-long Bayeux Tapestry. This monumental embroidery offers a vision of life in eleventh-century England both before and after the Conquest, from castles, warfare and ships to clothing, food and furniture. It is instantly recognisable, featuring in all school history books and copied by many artists.

A scene from the Bayeux Tapestry: Bishop Odo rallying Duke William's army during the Battle of Hastings in 1066 [2]

Likely commissioned by a Norman patron and made by English embroiderers, using manuscript drawings from Canterbury, the Tapestry is both a precious historical record and a remarkable work of art. Interestingly, following a historic agreement with France, the tapestry will be loaned to the British Museum, London, from September 2026 to July 2027.
(More details on https://www.britishmuseum.org/exhibitions/bayeux-tapestry)

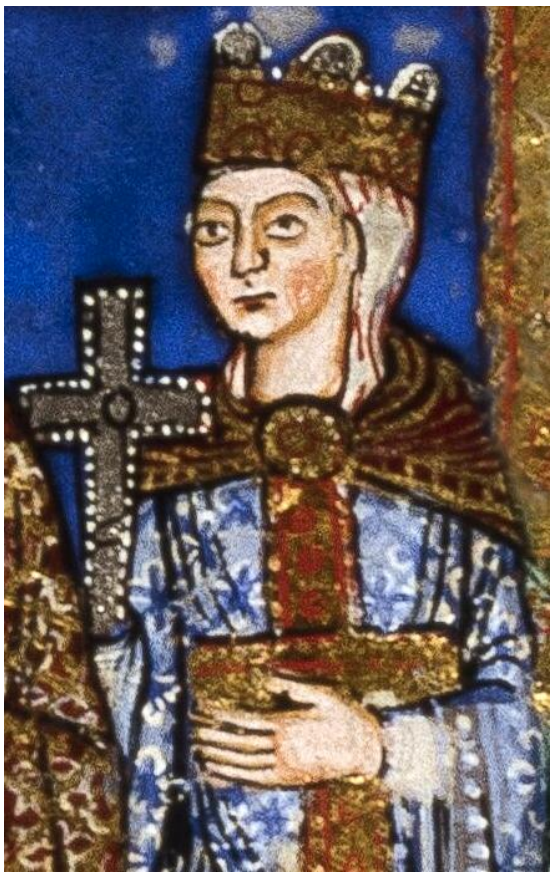
[2] Public Domain: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Odo_bayeux_tapestry.png

William I (1066-1087) thus seized the lands of Harold's supporters and gave them to his followers. To make sure of his conquest, he built castles, including the Tower of London, in all the main towns. His followers began to build motte and bailey and ringwork castles in large numbers to control their newly occupied territories in England.
Having conquered England, William ordered a detailed inventory of its wealth in 1086. The survey's main purpose was to record the annual value of every piece of landed property to its lord, and the resources in land, labour force, and livestock from which the value derived. All this information was written in Domesday Book, which has become an invaluable testimony of 11th-century England. For example, it shows that twenty years after the Norman Conquest, there were hardly any rich landowners of English birth left in England. It became a land ruled by Frenchmen, especially William's favourite Normans. For the next three centuries, everyone at the king's court in England spoke French, as well as in the law courts. Most of the people of England, though, continued to speak English. Many people became bi-lingual, and the influence of French in the English language is still felt today.

After William's death, his sons fought to seize the crown. Robert, the eldest, inherited Normandy, and William Rufus became King William II of England (1087-1100). When the latter died, Henry, the younger brother, became king of England (1100-1135). When Duke Robert of Normandy came back home after participating in a crusade, Henry I captured his brother in 1106 and conquered Normandy. He planned that his son, William, should succeed him in both England and Normandy but in 1120 the prince was drowned in the wreck of the *White Ship*.
Henry thus decided that Matilda, his daughter, would be queen after his death. Though a woman ruler was equally unprecedented for the kingdom of England and the duchy of Normandy, he made all the nobles swear they would recognise Matilda as their queen, but after Henry I's death, it was instead her cousin, Stephen of Blois (1135-1154), who was crowned king with the support of the English barons. Matilda and her second husband, Count Geoffrey Plantagenet of Anjou, decided to fight for her right to succeed (see their pictures next page).

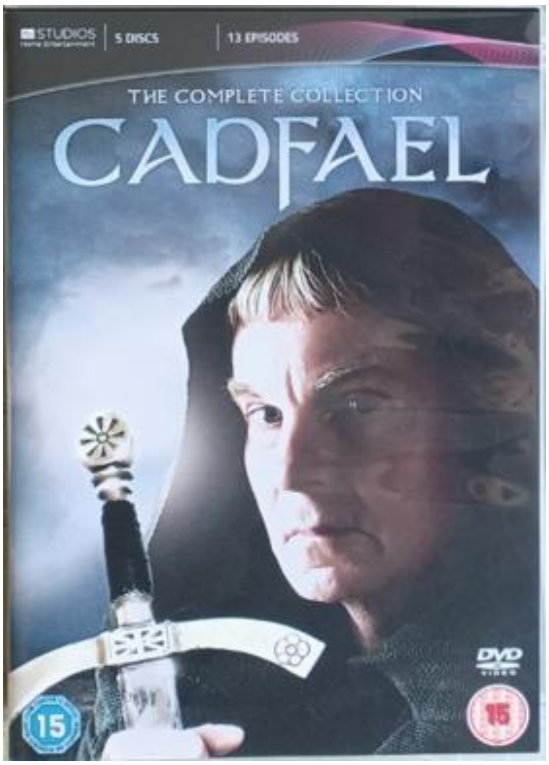
As the 18 years of civil war, known as the Anarchy (1135-1153), made the English people suffer for too long, the barons finally forced the rivals to reach a compromise: Stephen could keep the throne, but when he died, his own son would not be allowed to succeed. Matilda's eldest son, Henry Plantagenet, became **King Henry II of England** in 1154. He thus founded the **House of Plantagenet** which reigned from 1154 to 1485 in England and provided fourteen kings, six of whom belonged to the cadet houses of Lancaster and York. A very useful family tree can be consulted (though not downloaded) on the following website: https://www.britannica.com/topic/house-of-Plantagenet.
Matilda spent the remainder of her life in Normandy, exercising a steadying influence over Henry II's continental dominions.

Interestingly, this troubled period of English history captivated some 20th-century writers, who set their novels during the Anarchy. *The Cadfael Chronicles* is a series of historical murder mysteries written by the English author Edith Pargeter (1913–1995) under the name Ellis Peters. They were adapted for ITV and aired between 1994 and 1998, starring Derek Jacobi as the medieval detective and title character, Brother Cadfael. *The Pillars of the Earth* is a historical novel by Welsh author Ken Follett published in 1989, about the building of a cathedral in the fictional town of Kingsbridge, England. It was adapted as an eight-part miniseries for the television in 2010.

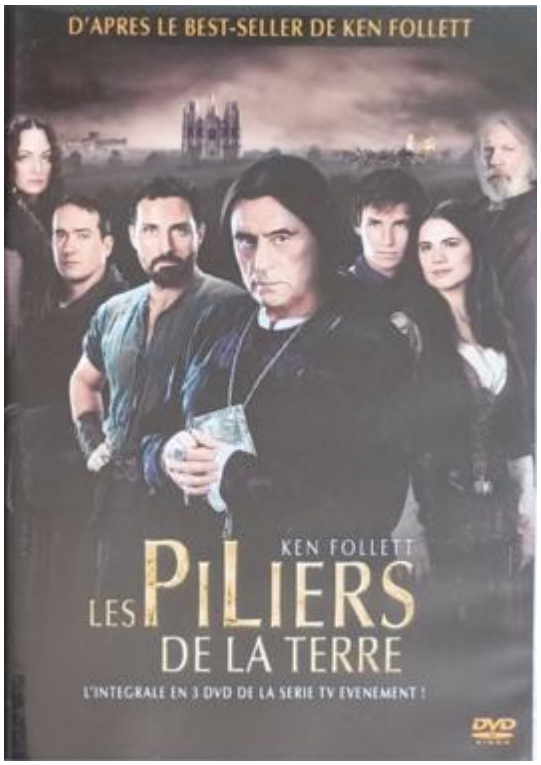


Matilda (1188), Public Domain [3]

Geoffrey of Anjou (1151), Public Domain [4]



DVD cover of Cadfael (own photo)

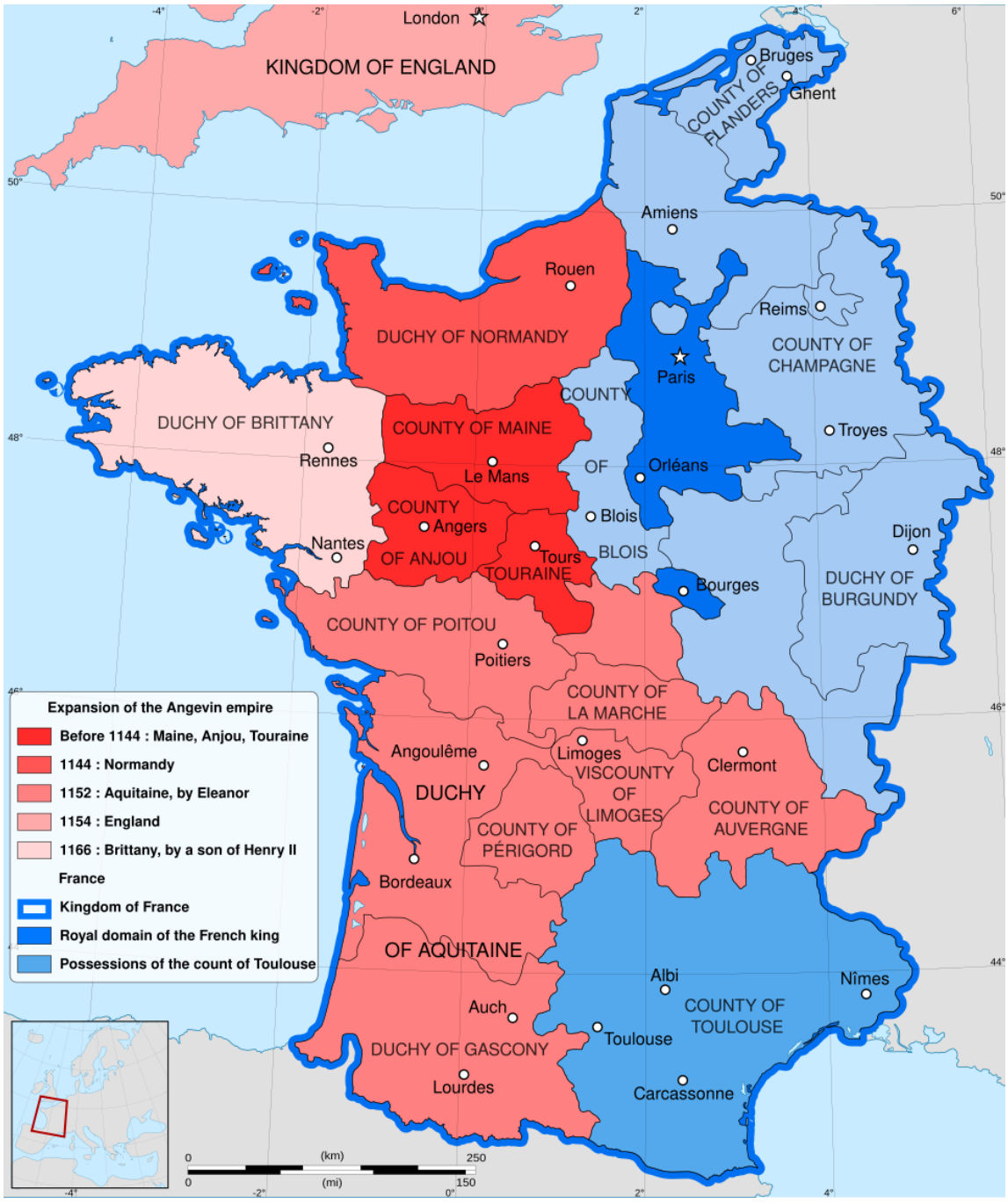


DVD cover of *The Pillars of the Earth* (own photo)

[3] Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Empress_Matilda#/media/File:Empress_Matilda.png

[4] Source : https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Empress_Matilda#/media/File:Geoffrey_of_Anjou_Monument.jpg

In France, the natural alarm caused to the Capetian kings by their overmighty vassals, the dukes of Normandy, who were also kings of England, was greatly increased in the 1150s. Henry Plantagenet, already duke of Normandy (1150) and count of Anjou (1151), became duke of Aquitaine in 1152 when he married Eleanor of Aquitaine, recently divorced from Louis VII of France, before he finally accessed the throne of England in 1154. Not only did he rule England, but he also controlled more of France than the king of France! The Plantagenet "empire" spread from Scotland to the Pyrenees. But Henry wanted more: he conquered Brittany and gave it to his third son, Geoffrey, and in 1171, he invaded Ireland and gave his youngest son, John, the title 'lord of Ireland'.



English map of the growth of the Plantagenet Empire, from 1144 to 1166, by Reigen (2014) [5]

[5] CC BY-SA 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=37306574

Eleanor of Aquitaine (c. 1122-1204), the most powerful woman in 12th-century Europe.

The daughter and heiress of the duke of Aquitaine and count of Poitiers, she inherited one of the largest domains in France—larger than those held by the French king—in 1137 and married the heir to the French throne, who soon after became Louis VII.

Eleanor held the title of queen of France for the next fifteen years. Beautiful and capricious, she exerted considerable influence over Louis, who adored her. From 1147 to 1149 Eleanor accompanied Louis on the Second Crusade to protect the fragile Latin kingdom of Jerusalem from Turkish assault. Eleanor's conduct during this expedition aroused Louis's jealousy and marked the beginning of their estrangement. After their return to France, their marriage was annulled in March 1152.

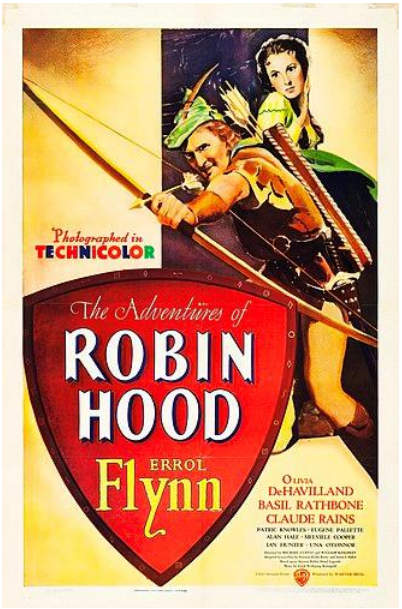
According to feudal customs, Eleanor then regained possession of Aquitaine, and two months later she married Henry Plantagenet, count of Anjou and duke of Normandy. When he became king of England, as Henry II, in 1154, England, Normandy, and the west of France were thus united under his rule. Eleanor had only two daughters by Louis VII, but to her new husband she bore five sons (including Richard the Lionheart and John, surnamed Lackland until 1199, when he inherited the crown of England) and three daughters. During her childbearing years, she participated actively in the administration of the realm and even more actively in the management of her own domains.

Recumbents of Eleanor of Aquitaine and Henry II in the abbey church of the Royal Abbey of Fontevraud
Photo by ElanorGamgee (2007) [6]

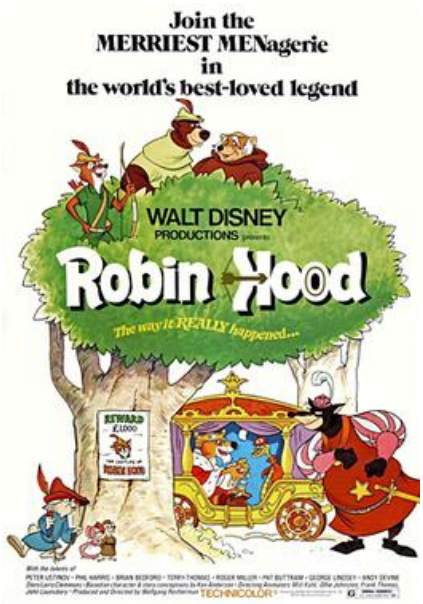
[6] See https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fichier:Gisant_alienor_d_aquitaine_et_henri2.jpg

Under her patronage, the court of Poitiers, then frequented by the most famous troubadours of the time, became a centre of poetry and a model of courtly life and manners. Two dominant poetic movements coexisted at this time: the courtly love tradition, conveyed in the romantic songs of the troubadours, and the historical matière de Bretagne, or "legends of Brittany," which originated in Celtic traditions and in the *Historia regum Britanniae* (*History of the Kings of Britain)* written by the chronicler Geoffrey of Monmouth sometime between 1135 and 1138.[7] His chronicles were essentially fantasy, although some of the events narrated bear some resemblance to the actual ones. A striking example of the mixing of French and English cultures under the patronage of Eleanor and Henry II may be found in King Arthur's legend, which started in the twelve and thirteen centuries: a Norman poet called Wace wrote *Roman de Brut*, a fiction drawing his inspiration from Monmouth's work and moving Arthur closer to the world of courtly romance. Wace's work had a great impact on Chrétien de Troyes, the French poet whose literary output included five Arthurian romances, written between 1170 and 1191 in octosyllabic lines of rhymed verse.

The revolt of her sons against her husband in 1173 put Eleanor's cultural activities to a brutal end. She gave her sons considerable military support, but when the revolt failed, Eleanor was captured and her semi-imprisonment in England ended only with the death of Henry II in 1189. When Richard accessed the throne as Richard I (1189-99), Eleanor played a greater political role than ever before, becoming administrator of the realm during his Crusade to the Holy Land, and, after his capture by the duke of Austria on Richard's return from the east, she collected his ransom and went in person to escort him to England. During Richard's absence, she succeeded in keeping his kingdom intact and in thwarting the intrigues of his brother John Lackland and Philip II Augustus, king of France, against him. In his ten-year reign, Richard spent more time in France and the Crusades than in England. He was the only son to be buried near his parents in Fontevraud Abbey.



1938 film poster [8]



1973 Disney animation film [9]

1991 *Robin Hood* film Poster [10]

[7] Source: https://www.britannica.com/biography/Eleanor-of-Aquitaine
[8] Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=86849427
[9] Fair use, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?curid=20750297
[10] Fair use, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?curid=2327520

This short period in English history has also fed the imagination of many poets, writers and film directors, from the many versions of Robin Hood's legend and Shakespeare's play *King John* to *The Lion in Winter*.
The earliest surviving text of a Robin Hood ballad is the 15th-century "Robin Hood and the Monk". It contains many of the elements still associated with the legend, from the Nottingham setting to the bitter enmity between Robin and the local sheriff.[11] Among the most prominent films in the 20th century, we find the 1938 film *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, (portraying Robin as a hero on a national scale, leading the oppressed Saxons in revolt against their Norman overlords while Richard the Lionheart fought in the Crusades), the 1973 animated Disney film *Robin Hood*, and the 1991 movie *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (see pictures above).
The Lion in Winter is a 1968 British historical drama centred on Henry II of England and his attempt to establish a line of succession during a family gathering at Christmas 1183.

Theatrical release poster of *The Lion in Winter*, 1968 [12]


Effigy of Richard I of England in the church of Fontevraud Abbey, photo by Adam Bishop [13]

In 1199 Richard died without leaving an heir to the throne, and John was crowned king (1199-1216). Eleanor, nearly 80 years old, tried to ensure peace between the Plantagenets of England and the Capetian kings of France, while defending Anjou and Aquitaine against her grandson Arthur of Brittany. She died in 1204 at the monastery at Fontevraud, Anjou, where she had retired. Her contribution to England extended beyond her own lifetime; after the loss of Normandy (1204), it was her own ancestral lands, Aquitaine, and not the old Norman territories, that remained loyal to England until the Battle of Castillon in 1453 won by the French army.

As a king, John (1199-1216) turned out to be a failure: he lost Normandy and Anjou (see map next page), and when he died in 1216, the country was divided by civil war. John's eldest son Henry was only nine, so several barons formed a council to govern from 1216 to 1232, until Henry III was old enough to rule for himself. Though a much kinder man than his father, as a king he was forgetful and inefficient. Most of his schemes went wrong and the barons became increasingly impatient with him. Edward, the heir to the throne, defeated the rebellion for his father, then left to go on crusade. He was returning when, in 1272, he heard of Henry III's death. As he made his way back, the new king Edward I (1272-1307) visited his lands in France, reaching England only two years later.

[11] Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robin_Hood
[12] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Lion_in_Winter_(1968_film)
[13] Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_I_of_England#/media/File:Church_of_Fontevraud_Abbey_Richard_I_effigy.jpg

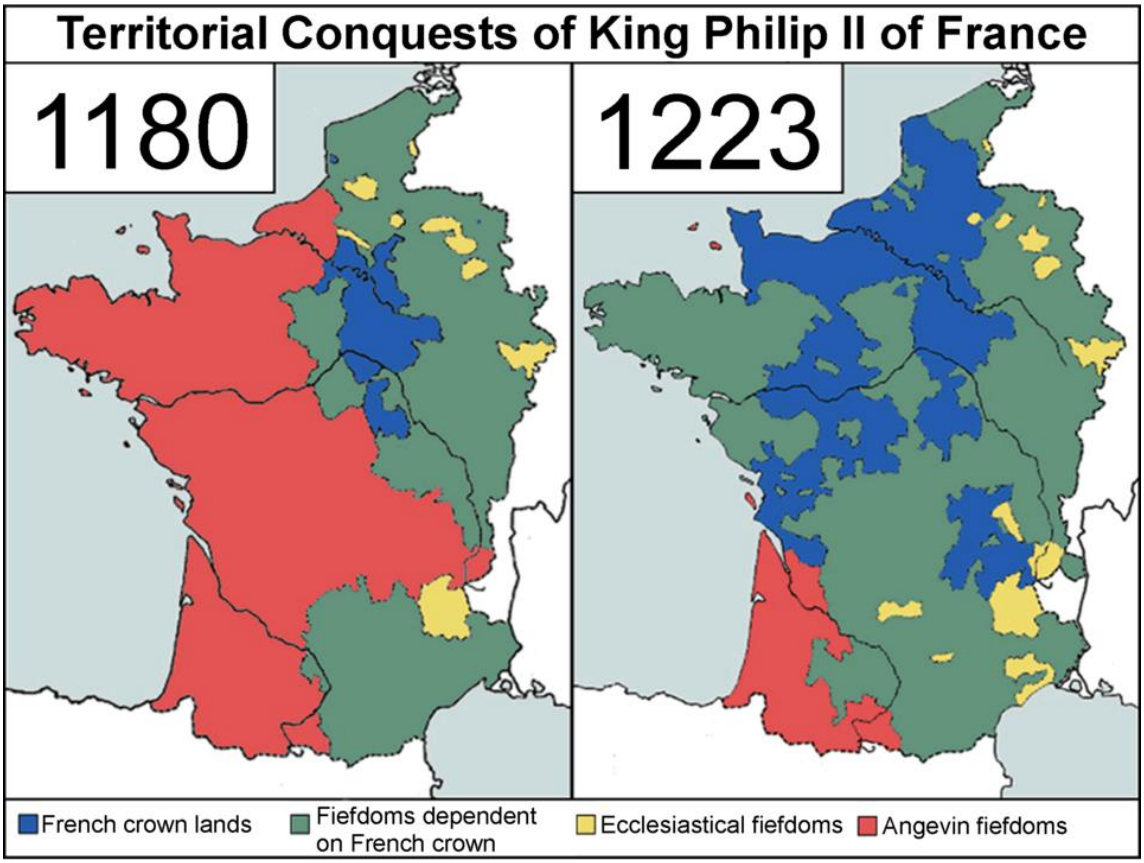


Image from WikimediaCommons [14]

In the 1290s, Edward I was fighting a defensive war to prevent the king of France from conquering Aquitaine. He had conquered Wales the decade before and was also building massive castle there. He sent English settlers to live in Wales and ordered that English laws should be obeyed. From that day forward, Wales was governed from Westminster. Interestingly, in 1301, Edward I made his 17-year-old son Edward Prince of Wales. The ceremony was intended to set a seal on the English conquest. Ever since it has been the custom for the eldest son of the English monarch to be created Prince of Wales.

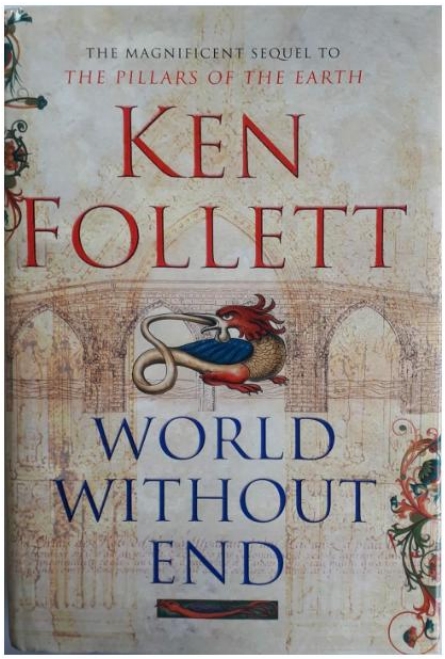
At the same time, Edward I was trying to conquer Scotland too. When the Scots turned to Edward I's enemy, the king of France, and made a treaty with him which marked the beginning of the 'Auld Alliance' (a long-standing friendship which was to continue between France and Scotland the following centuries), Edward's response was to invade. The War of Scottish Independence began. Edward's cruelty turned the Scots into patriots. When Edward I died, his weak son, Edward II (1307-1327) and his army were defeated by the Scots led by Bruce, who was finally recognized as a king of Scotland by an English government in 1328.

Politics in England became more savage than it had been in the previous two hundred years. Between 1327 and 1485, four Plantagenet kings were violently deposed and murdered by members of their own family. It is the bloodiest episode in the entire history of the English monarchy. Not only did the Hundred years War with France start in the 1330s, but it was then followed by a brutal civil war in England, during which the Plantagenets turn in on themselves.

[14] https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Territorial_Conquests_of_Philip_II_of_France.png

King Edward II's reign was a disaster: he managed events at home so badly that civil war broke out in 1321. By 1326 Edward had become so unpopular that his wife, Queen Isabella (a daughter to the king of France), and her lover, Roger Mortimer, raised an army against him and captured him. He was forced to abdicate in favour of his son, Edward III (1327-1377). As the new king was only 14 years old, the real rulers were his mother and her lover., who had the ex-king murdered in 1327 in Berkeley Castle (see Appendix). Three years later, Edward III had Mortimer hanged and sent his mother into retirement. Edward and his eldest son, 'The Black Prince' turned out to be two of England's most admired leaders, and their success in their wars against France made them extremely popular. These wars went on for so long that historians have called them the Hundred Years War.

This troubled period inspired Ken Follet to write the sequel of *The Pillars of the Earth* in 2007: the novel *World Without End* takes place in the fictional town of Kingsbridge, in 1327. Its plot incorporates two major historical events, the start of the Hundred Years' War and the Black Death. A television miniseries based on the novel aired worldwide in 2012.



2007 cover of Ken Follet's novel (Public Domain)

DVD cover of the TV adaptation (own photo)

In 1330, war broke out when the French attacked Aquitaine again and Edward III claimed that he was the true king of France through his mother's bloodline. In Paris, however, Philip of Valois was recognized as Philip VI. France was bigger and richer than England, so Edward would have to fight hard if he wanted to become its ruler. But the Frenchs's over-confidence led them to make disastrous mistakes at the Battle of Crecy in 1346 (see illustration next page) and the Battle of Poitiers in 1356. The English also captured Calais, which they were to hold for two hundred years.

Edward III's military victories made him the most famous king in Europe, and one of the richest. He spent a fortune on Windsor Castle. His son, the Black Prince, died before him, thus at the king's death in 1377, he was succeeded by his nine-year old grandson, Richard II (1377-1399).

Illustration of the Battle of Crecy in Jean Froissart's *Chronicles*, 15th century. Wikimedia Commons.

The life of Richard II and his Plantagenet successors, up to Richard III, were first dramatized in the 1590s by William Shakespeare in his *Histories*, which have been adapted many times for the cinema and the television.

It is not our purpose here to describe in detail the political struggles during Richard II's life, nor how one of his opponents, Bolingbroke, seized the crown in 1399 for the House of Lancaster by trickery and force. Though he had no real right, he claimed to be king and was proclaimed Henry IV (1399-1413). Surrounded by enemies, he wore them all down and was able to pass the throne to his eldest son, Henry V (1413-1422) when he died.

15th-century stained glass, Museum of Aquitaine, Bordeaux (own photo)

The above picture shows the arms adopted by Henry IV from 1405 and kept by the Tudor dynasty until 1603. The three golden lions/leopards of the English crown, representing England, Normandy and Aquitaine, are quartered with the arms of France, representing the English claim to the French throne since Edward III was evicted from the Capetian succession.

The Battle of Agincourt, 1415 [15]

[15] Public Domain: Manuscript Illumination, BnF https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/b/be/Schlacht_von_Azincourt.jpg/1280px-Schlacht_von_Azincourt.jpg

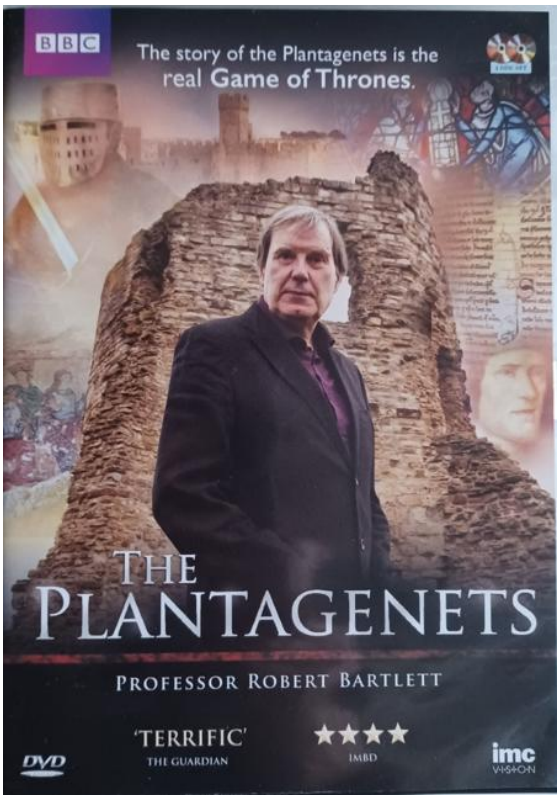
In France, as King Charles VI was suffering from fits of insanity, it meant that the French had no strong ruler. As soon as he became king, Henry V seized this opportunity and prepared to invade France. On 15 October 1415, St Crispin's Day, Henry and a small English army won a staggering victory over the French at the Battle of Agincourt (see illustration above), turning him into a hero. For the next five years he was triumphant in France, forcing Normandy to surrender in 1417. After he married Katherine de Valois, Charles VI's daughter, in 1420, Henry forced the French king to disinherit his son, the Dauphin, and to recognize him as his heir. But the soldier king died of dysentery in September 1422 and never became king of France.

Henry and Katherine had only one child, Henry VI (1422-1461; 1470-1471). He was just nine months old when he succeeded his father as king of England in September 1422, and one month later, when Charles VI died, he became king of France as well. In December 1431 he was crowned in the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris. However, in central and southern France, people recognized another king, Charles VII, the 'disinherited son' of the previous French king. Among his many supporters was Joan of Arc, a peasant girl who, believing that she was acting under divine guidance, led the French army in 1429 to momentous victory at Orléans. In May 1430, though, Joan was captured by Burgundian troops (Burgundy was then England's ally). After an unsuccessful escape, she was handed to the English in November, put on trial and convicted of heresy. On 30 May 1431 she was burnt to the stake in Rouen.

Henry VI showed no interest in war. He never re-visited his French kingdom. In 1445 he married a French princess, Margaret of Anjou, and tried to make peace with her uncle, Charles VII. Instead, as the English still controlled much of France, Charles decided to re-conquer Normandy and Aquitaine through lightning campaigns in 1449 and 1450. The sudden loss of all their territories in France, especially Aquitaine which had belonged to the kings of England for three centuries, shocked everyone in England. Only the Pale of Calais remained an English dominion, until it was unexpectedly retaken by the French following a siege in 1558, during the reign of Mary I of England ("Bloody Mary"), Henry VIII's elder daughter.

Although the 'War of the Roses' (the red rose of Lancaster and the white rose of York) is another fascinating period of England's history, it was a civil war, a fiery fight for the right to govern between the two hostile cadet houses of the Plantagenets: on one side was the House of Lancaster and the court party led by Henry VI's wife, Margaret of Anjou; on the other were the friends of Richard, Duke of York, who blamed the court party for the humiliating losses in France. The wars that lasted more than thirty years had a devastating impact on England's nobility. They ended with the victory of Henry Tudor over Richard III, the last of the Plantagenet kings, in 1485 at the Battle of Bosworth. King Henry VII then founded a new royal dynasty, the Tudors, whose splendours would mirror the English Renaissance during the next century… but this is another story!

If this summary about the Plantagenets has interested you, I would recommend the following BBC programme in three parts, in which Professor Robert Bartlett tells the extraordinary story of England's most dysfunctional, yet longest-ruling, royal dynasty:



DVD cover of *The Plantagenets* (own photo)

APPENDIX

Berkeley Castle is one of the March Castles, built by the Normans during the 12th century to play both military and political roles, including keeping out the Welsh.

Berkeley Castle, photo by Andrew Hackney [16]

The 12th century stone keep is the earliest remaining part of the castle, its sturdy walls being built around the whole of the motte (mound) on which the original castle was located, to give it extra strength. The keep was completed with defence in mind, for it includes trip steps to catch out the unwary intruder, as well as a guard room.

The keep was constructed by Robert Fitzharding (c. 1095–1170), ancestor of the later Berkeley family, who was a wealthy Anglo-Saxon merchant from Bristol. He was granted Berkeley by King Henry II after the period known as The Anarchy, since the original de Berkeley family had not been supporters of the Plantagenets and had subsequently lost their lands.
Fitzharding is notable in that he represents possibly the only example of an Anglo-Saxon noble who achieved a level of authority comparable to that of the incoming Norman aristocracy. The castle was extended by his son and also by Thomas de Berkeley in the 14th century.

In 1327, Berkeley Castle became the scene of one of the most infamous murders in British history. King Edward II was imprisoned in a cell by his former Queen Isabella and Roger Mortimer and violently put to death shortly afterwards.

[16] CC BY-SA 2.0: https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=114402964

The dungeon and holding cell thought to be the scene of the murder are part of the keep. The official story was that Edward had died after an accident, and his embalmed body was kept on display in the castle for a month.

Other monarchs, such as Elizabeth I, visited under happier circumstances. Elizabeth is said to have played bowls on her visit! The visible breach in the castle wall was made during the English Civil War in the 17th century. The castle was held at various times by both Royalists and Parliamentarians, and the damage done by Parliamentarian forces remains to this day.

Source: https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryMagazine/DestinationsUK/Berkeley-Castle/