

Max Keen: King John - The worst King in English History?

There were cheers as frequent and popular Guest Speaker, Max Keen, entered the room, dressed as Sir William Marshall, a key figure during the reign of King John. Sir William is buried in the Temple Church, London.



Max Keen dressed in the colours of Sir William Marshall and wearing authentic chainmail and carrying an authentic helmet.

Max began his presentation by explaining about the armour and weapons he was carrying and their significance. He gave the group some grisly details, which they appeared to 'enjoy'.

King John (born 1167, reigned 1199 - 1216) is buried in Worcester Cathedral, at his own request, and his tomb may be seen whenever the Cathedral is open. His effigy, on the tomb, is the first contemporary effigy of a monarch. Max gave us a detailed description of John's physical appearance, as well as citing his interests, skills and character.

King John's effigy in Worcester Cathedral

with St Wulstan and

St Oswald flanking him.



As the fourth son of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine, he was known as John Lackland, alluding to his lack of property and lands. His brothers were: Henry, Geoffrey and Richard (The Lionheart). He was his father's favourite son, but even to him he showed treachery.

King John did not have a lot of good characteristics - he was known even in his own lifetime as treacherous, cruel and unwise. He was implicit in the savage murder of his nephew Arthur, aged 13, the son of Geoffrey. He also ordered the cruel death by starvation of the wife and young son of a nobleman he considered an enemy. He was also a notorious womaniser. As Max explained: 'He was the Architect of his own destruction'. His only redeeming attributes appear

to be that he was the first English-speaking monarch (until then the language of the Court was French), and that he was cultured and literate.

Max continued by giving detailed information of complicated histories of 'to-ing and fro-ing' of lands and alliances including with France and the Pope. Ultimately, King John lost most of the lands that his father had owned in Europe, by unwise actions and impulsive behaviour. As a result of his folly, the Barons met him at Runnymede (1215), a meeting mediated by Stephen Langton, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and documented to limit the power of the monarch by the Magna Carta.

King John's Tomb in
Worcester Cathedral.



Another local link with King John, as well as Worcester was Stourton Lodge, his hunting lodge for the Forest of Kinfares (now Kinver).

King John died at Newark Castle aged 49. His will is the earliest surviving royal will in existence. The Crown went to his son Henry III, aged 9 years old and William Marshall was his Regent.

Max concluded by citing many reasons for John's failure as a monarch:

- The murder of his young nephew Arthur.
- The total loss of his English lands in France.
- The starvation of a mother and son.
- The starvation of 22 Knights at Corfe Castle.
- The submission of his kingdom as a Papal fief.
- Blatant adultery.
- Cowardly retreat from direct combat.
- Over-taxation driving barons to open rebellion.
- The loss of London and 1 / 3 of the country to French rule.

Max's thorough presentation, which he spent eight months researching, used humour and personal anecdotes, as well as maps, contemporary pictures, paintings, effigies, photographs and cartoons. He also produced his favourite prop and 'source' - a Ladybird book.

In summing up Max was thanked for a 'stimulating presentation and entertaining us in his own inimitable style'.

Heidy Hague