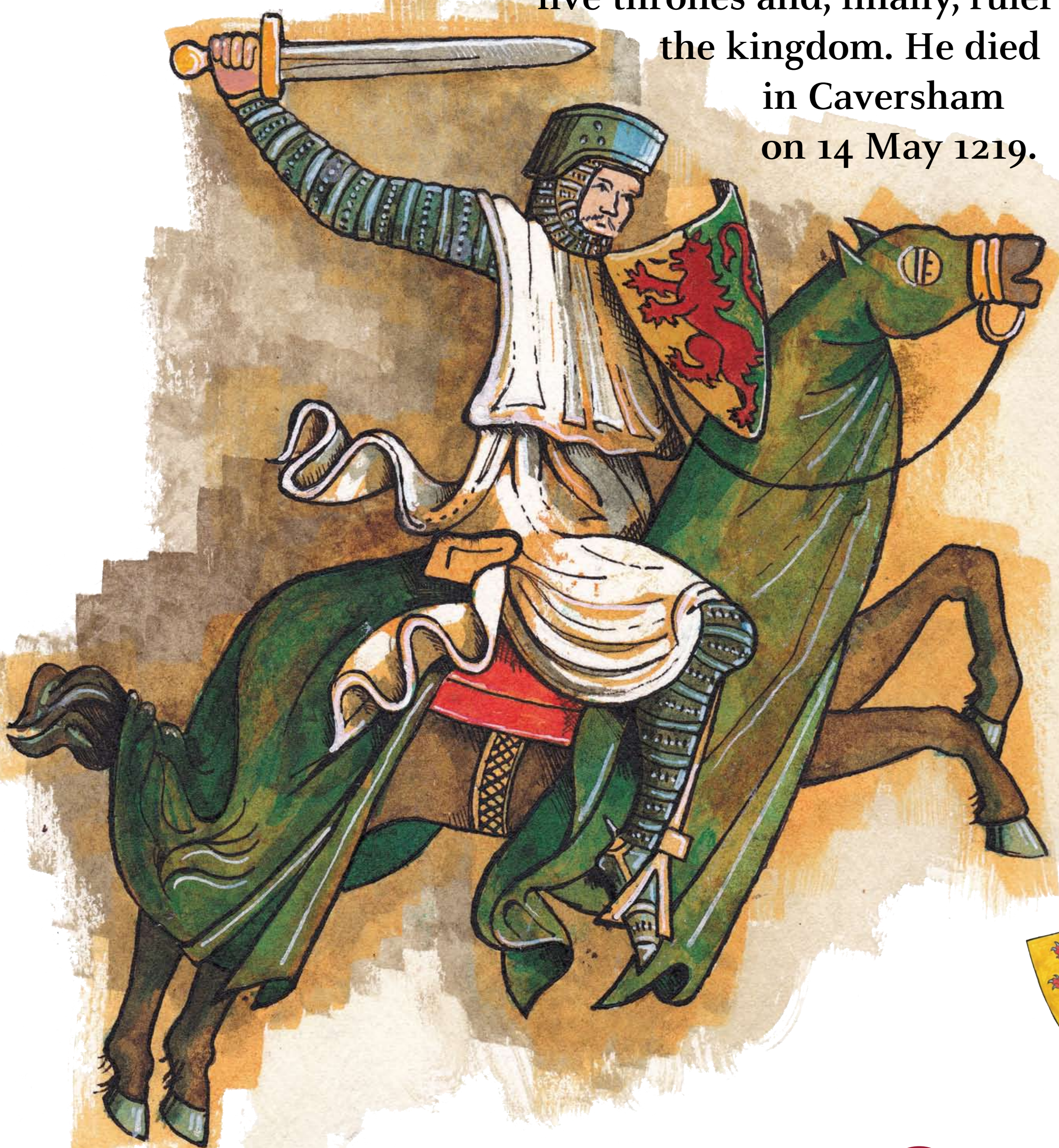


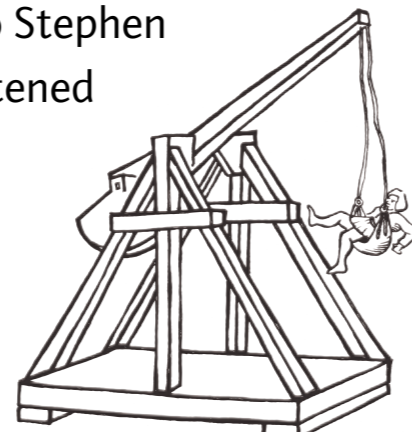
WILLIAM MARSHAL 'THE GREATEST KNIGHT WHO EVER LIVED'

rose from being a younger son with no lands to become the Earl of Pembroke, the power behind five thrones and, finally, ruler of the kingdom. He died in Caversham on 14 May 1219.



Born during 'The Anarchy'

in about **1147** at Hamstead Marshall, William grew up in the West Country. His father John Marshal, a minor noble, backed Henry I's daughter Matilda as she fought her cousin Stephen for the throne. When King Stephen laid siege to the fortified outpost that John Marshal had built near Newbury, William, aged five, was sent to Stephen as a hostage to buy time. Stephen threatened to hang the boy or catapult him into the fortress from a siege engine unless his father surrendered. But John is said to have replied: 'I still have the anvils and hammers to forge even finer sons!'



As a younger son



William had to make his own way in life. In his teens he was sent to a relative in Normandy, where he trained to be a knight. His physical strength and size, skilled horsemanship and military prowess won him considerable wealth and acclaim in tournaments across France and beyond. He had the good fortune to come to the notice of Eleanor of Aquitaine, the wife of Henry II, and joined the royal household.

In 1170, William was appointed tutor-in-arms to The Young Henry, the eldest son and heir of Henry II.

The future king died before he could go on Crusade and William promised to go to the Holy Land in his place. When William returned in c. 1185, he joined the court of Henry II. In the conflict between Henry and his sons, William remained loyal to the King and fought against Richard the Lionheart, the unrivalled warrior and master of the art of war who would later become Richard I.

An inestimable prize



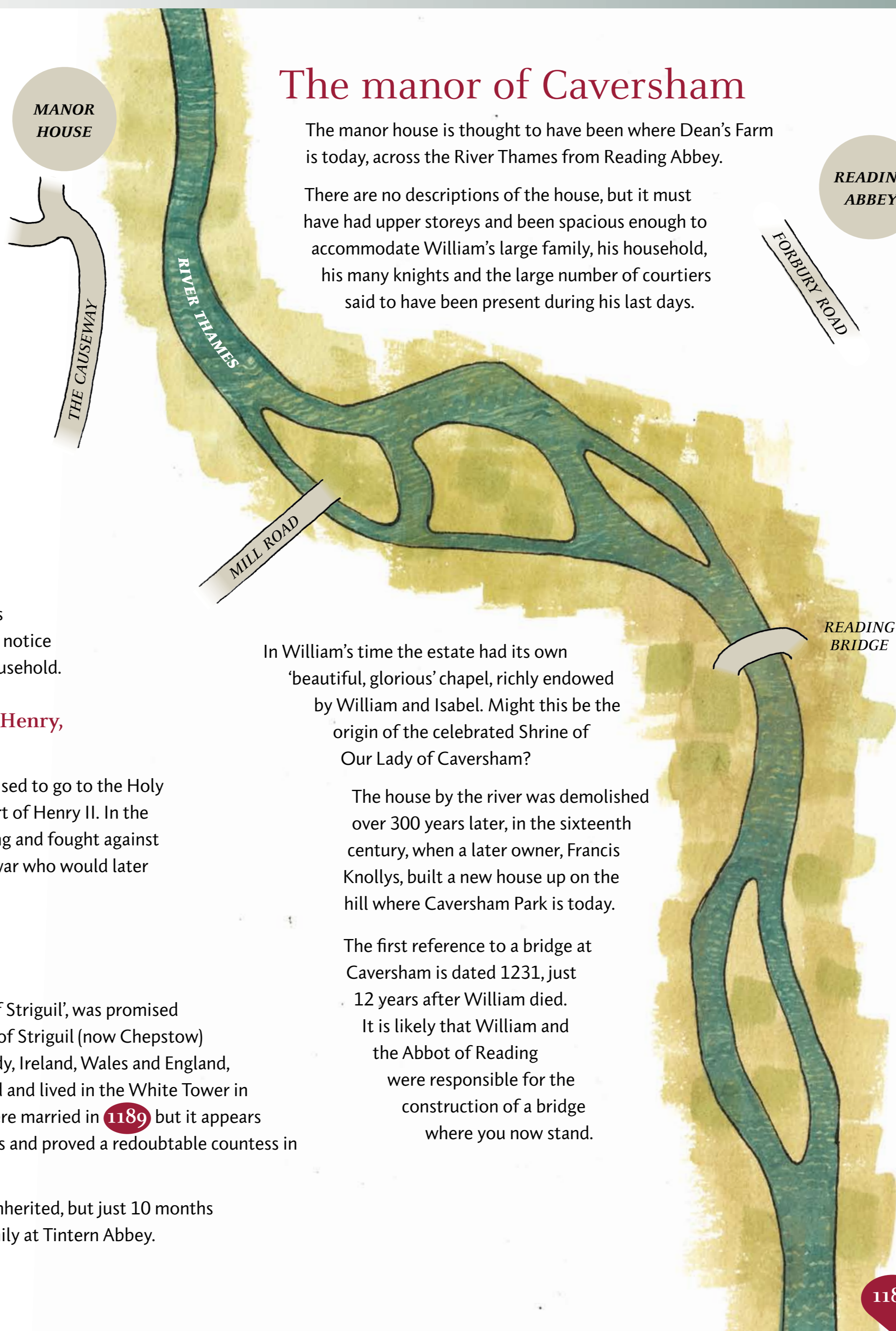
for a future husband, Isabel de Clare, the 'good and beautiful damsel of Striguil', was promised to William by Henry II. Isabel was the daughter of Richard Strongbow of Striguil (now Chepstow) and Aoife of Leinster in Ireland. She inherited lands in Normandy, Ireland, Wales and England, including the manor of Caversham. She was made a crown ward and lived in the White Tower in London. William was over 40 and Isabel about 18 when they were married in **1189** but it appears to have been a happy union. She bore five sons and five daughters and proved a redoubtable countess in her own right.

After William's death Isabel retained the rights to the lands she had inherited, but just 10 months later became gravely ill and died. She was buried with the de Clare family at Tintern Abbey.

The manor of Caversham

The manor house is thought to have been where Dean's Farm is today, across the River Thames from Reading Abbey.

There are no descriptions of the house, but it must have had upper storeys and been spacious enough to accommodate William's large family, his household, his many knights and the large number of courtiers said to have been present during his last days.



In William's time the estate had its own 'beautiful, glorious' chapel, richly endowed by William and Isabel. Might this be the origin of the celebrated Shrine of Our Lady of Caversham?

The house by the river was demolished over 300 years later, in the sixteenth century, when a later owner, Francis Knollys, built a new house up on the hill where Caversham Park is today.

The first reference to a bridge at Caversham is dated 1231, just 12 years after William died. It is likely that William and the Abbot of Reading were responsible for the construction of a bridge where you now stand.

William and Richard I

had fought on opposite sides in the conflict between Henry II and his sons. In one armed encounter, William killed Richard's horse from under him but spared his life. But after Richard succeeded his father in 1189, they fought side by side in Normandy. While Richard spent much of his reign away on crusade, William was a member of the ruling council in England.

William had a troubled and tempestuous relationship with King John and spent long periods in his estates in Ireland; but he was a leading adviser at John's side at Runnymede in **1215** when John was forced to set his seal to Magna Carta in an attempt to resolve disputes with the barons.

Aged almost 70

William faced a major dilemma when King John died suddenly in 1216, leaving his nine-year-old son Henry as his heir. The agreement sealed in 1215 at Runnymede was null and void before the year was out. The rebel barons offered the English crown to Prince Louis of France. The royal coffers were spent, and the collapse of the English royal dynasty seemed inevitable. Should William risk his own position to take charge of young Henry and assert his right to the throne?

Nobody else had the same experience and reputation, and William agreed to become 'guardian of the realm'. He issued a revised version of Magna Carta, showing Henry's willingness to rule justly.

But a clear-cut military victory was needed. A skilled commander and strategist, William led his forces into battle at Lincoln in **1217**, winning a stunning victory. In the succeeding negotiations, William was generous to his opponents and a treaty was sealed at Kingston which included a new version of Magna Carta.

William thus ensured the survival of Magna Carta and, until his death in 1219, served as Regent to the boy king.



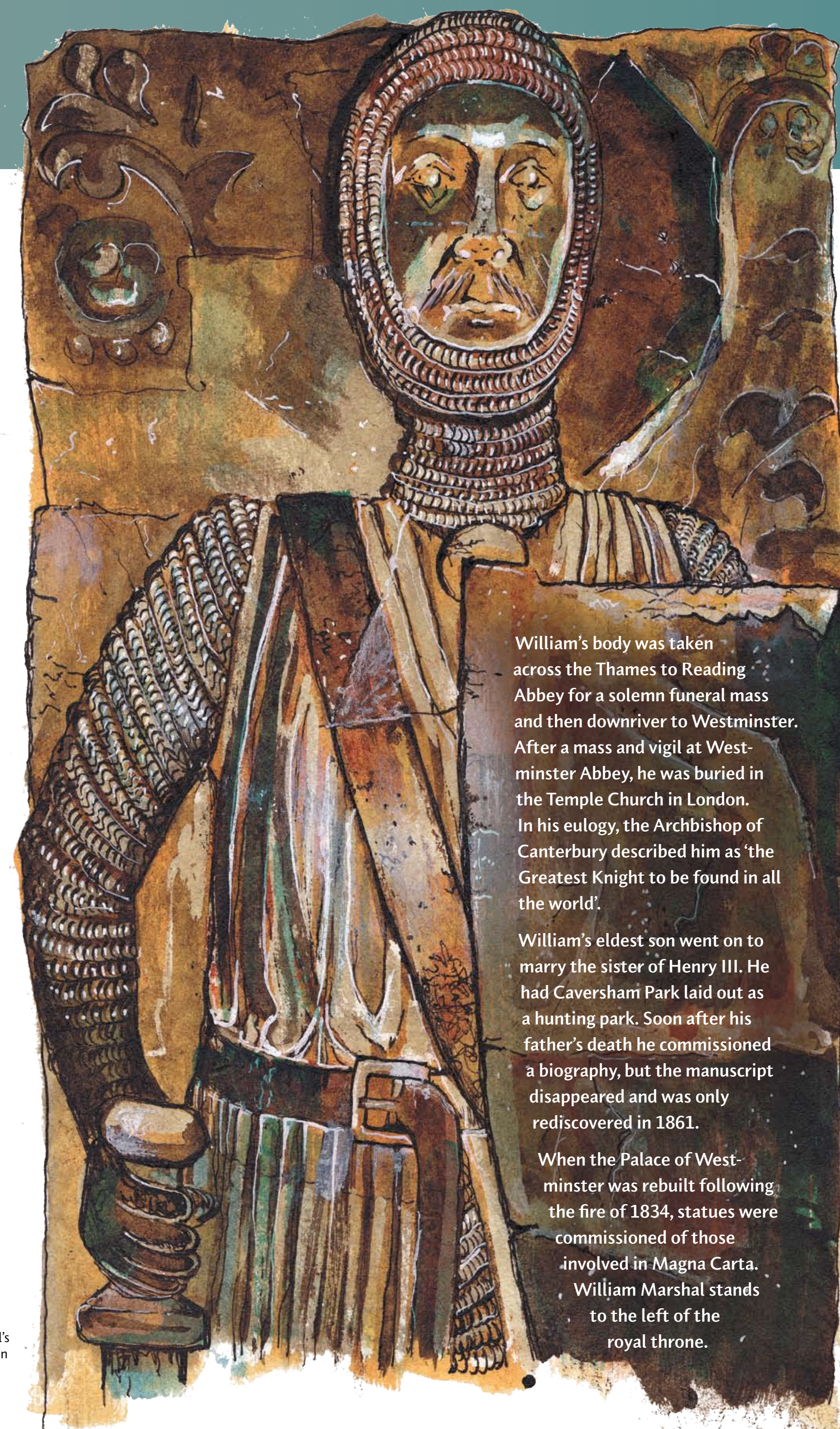
Magna Carta 1217. The seal on the right is the diminutive seal of a household knight which William appears to have retained throughout his life.

William fell seriously ill

in January 1219. Preferring to die 'at home', he and Isabel travelled up the Thames to their manor house at Caversham, arriving there on 20 March. It was from here that he continued to run the affairs of state in the last few weeks of his life, while the young King Henry III and his court took up residence at Reading Abbey across the Thames.

Fearing that the factious barons would try to seize power after his death, William entrusted the young King to Pandulf, the Pope's representative in England. Then, after settling his own affairs, he was inducted into the Order of the Knights Templar, an order of crusading monks founded to protect fellow pilgrims to the Holy Land. He died peacefully on 14 May **1219**.

Artwork based on William Marshal's effigy in the Temple Church, London



William's body was taken across the Thames to Reading Abbey for a solemn funeral mass and then downriver to Westminster. After a mass and vigil at Westminster Abbey, he was buried in the Temple Church in London. In his eulogy, the Archbishop of Canterbury described him as 'the Greatest Knight to be found in all the world'.

William's eldest son went on to marry the sister of Henry III. He had Caversham Park laid out as a hunting park. Soon after his father's death he commissioned a biography, but the manuscript disappeared and was only rediscovered in 1861.

When the Palace of Westminster was rebuilt following the fire of 1834, statues were commissioned of those involved in Magna Carta. William Marshal stands to the left of the royal throne.

Henry I
1100-1135

1121
Reading Abbey founded

Stephen
1135-1154

Henry II
1154-1189

Richard I
1189-1199

John
1199-1216

Henry III
1216-1272

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Commissioned by Caversham and District Residents Association (CADRA) in 2019
Researched and written by Helen Lambert and Vickie Abel, with thanks to Dr Thomas Asbridge



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