

# Shrewton

## William Longspee

### A link to the Norman Kings and the Crusades

Close to the font in St. Mary's church, carved into the 13<sup>th</sup> century column, is the effigy of a Norman knight; and carved in the opposite face is an effigy of his lady. If you visit Salisbury Cathedral, look in the south arcade of the nave, up by the front rows of seats and you will see a wonderful work of art; a full length effigy of a knight in chain armour. Compare the features of our knight and you will then have confirmed the identity of our church's founder as William Longspee (Longsword) and his wife Ela.



Lady Ela was born in Amesbury in 1187; inherited the title (from her father) of Countess of Salisbury at the age of 9 yrs. Ela and the Earldom of Salisbury were given in marriage by Richard the Lionheart to his \_ brother William Longespee in 1198. After William's death in 1226 she she founded Laycock Abbey in 1232, took the veil in 1238, became abbess in 1239, resigned in 1257 through ill health, died and was buried at Lacock in 1261.

By her, William had 4 sons and four daughters ... and so she leaves a memorial to their life together, cast into the foundation of our church, and does not marry again.

Have you ever wondered why our church is named after St. Mary and its theme is the vine? Let me tell you the story of William Longespee.

The year is 1225 William had sailed for Gascony on Palm Sunday to fight the armies of Louis VII. The expedition was successful; Gascony secured against Louis, and in the autumn William sailed for England. The ship met rough weather, was driven by a tempest, and all his goods lost overboard. At the height of the danger William and the seamen saw a great light and a lovely maiden standing, as it seemed, at the mast head. He knew her to be the Blessed Virgin come to save them, for "from the day of his knighthood he had ever provided a light to burn at the Virgin's altar". The ship was driven onto the isle of Ré and, after adventure and more divine intervention; William finally arrived in Cornwall after a voyage of nealy three months.



*An 1873 illustration of the English attack*

These were turbulent times; times of mystery and legend; times of intrigue and the forming of nations. William stood by King John (his half-brother) at the signing of the Magna Carta on 1215. He fought in the crusades. He was with John as William of Scotland did homage in 1201. In 1202 he helped make a treaty with the Kings of Navarre. 1204 he escorted Llewellyn of Wales to John of Worcester. In 1214, as Marshall of the King of England, he commanded combined forces which recovered Flanders for the Count.

In 1213 he commanded a fleet of 500 ships which destroyed the invasion plans of Philip of France, capturing 300 French ships fully laden and burning 100 more in Damme harbour.

William died in mysterious circumstances on the 7<sup>th</sup> March 1226 at the age of 57. He and Ela had laid, in 1220 the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> foundation stones of Salisbury Cathedral and he was the first person buried there. The story is told as a

miraculous proof of his salvation that though there was a storm of wind and rain while his body was being taken from Sarum Castle to the unfinished cathedral, the lights of the procession were not extinguished.

But I hear you say “what about the mystery?....” well when William landed from France after his 3 month voyage he found that Herbert of Burge had tried to obtain the hand of Ela for his nephew. He was pretty angry and went to see King Henry III at Marlborough about it. Henry made peace between them; he dined with Herbert and on his return to Salisbury, fell sick, summoned the bishop (Richard Le Poore) to him, received the sacrament, and died ...”

... and so to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when a rat found in William's tomb was dissected and was found to have died from arsenic poisoning ...

**Source:** Shewton St. Mary, text by Bill Charlton.