

HENRY III

by Christine Bowering

Reproduced from her article in the Steward of

Henry III (1207–1272), whose head can be seen in the Quire, was the eldest son of King John and Isabella of Angoulême. He was a devout and intelligent king who reigned for 56 years (1216-1272) and was thus on the throne at the time the Quire was rebuilt. We know that Henry visited Southwell in 1258 but don't know the purpose of the visit. The timing may, however, have coincided with the building of Westminster Abbey (see below).

Henry assumed his throne when he was only 9 years old during the middle of the First Barons' war, when half the kingdom was in the hands of rebel barons who were seeking to make Prince Louis of France King of England. It was 3 years before a ceremony at Westminster Abbey formally established Henry as King. Henry's supporters won over the rebels by re-issuing the Magna Carta which by 1225 became the law of the land. For the next 30 years Henry was preoccupied with trying to keep and increase his power overseas. These attempts were largely unsuccessful with his policies being seen as reckless in England, contributing to the 2nd Barons' Rebellion. In 1263 he was put under strict control by the establishment of a baronial council led by Simon de Montfort, his brother-in-law, who took him and his eldest son, Edward, prisoner in 1264 at the battle of Lewes. However, Edward escaped from captivity the following year to defeat de Montfort at the Battle of Evesham and freed his father.

Henry had married Eleanor of Provence when he was 32 but she only 12 years of age. They reputedly had a happy marriage with five children and, unusually for the time, he was not known to have had any mistresses! Like his father before him and subsequently his son and heir, Edward, his wife was French and French was the language that he and the court would have used. It was not until Henry IV that the English language came into more common usage.

Henry attempted to launch gold currency during his reign and ordered the striking of a penny in pure gold at the value of 20 silver pennies in 1257. The enthroned king was on the front of the coin, the first time that an image of the king had appeared on an English coin since Anglo-Saxon times. The coin failed, however, possibly because it was undervalued against silver.

Henry expressed a lifelong interest in building, with much of what constitutes the Tower of London today being a result of his work. He would probably have considered that gothic Westminster Abbey was his life's greatest achievement. Everything above ground at the abbey today is the building which Henry began in 1245. The tomb of Edward the Confessor, a hero of Henry's, who had erected the previous Westminster Abbey in 1042,

was moved to a new position of honour in 1269. Henry died in his palace at Westminster on the evening of 16 November 1272 leaving his son Edward as his successor. He was buried in the Abbey four days later.