

Gerald de Barri

Gerald of Wales (c.1146 - c.1223)



Gerald of Wales, Giraldus Cambrensis, Gerald the Welshman, Gerallt Gymro. These are just a few of the names by which one of the most colourful and fascinating characters in medieval Welsh history is known.

It is remarkable to think that one man could pack so much into his life.

He was endlessly curious and even obsessive in recording, for posterity, the things he discovered or the things he believed. Amusingly so very often it did not matter whether these “Facts” were the truth or not because if they made for a good story then that was good enough for Gerald to write them down, so that others could read what he had written.

Thankfully seventeen (17) of his books are known to survive to this day. His most revealing work was his “Journey through Wales.” This was an account of his recruitment mission for the third Crusade.

The journey was made with Baldwin, the Archbishop of Canterbury in the year 1188. Gerald described his book as “A clear mirror (that).....portrays the country itself as well as the origins, customs and ways of its inhabitants.”

Gerald was born in 1146 at Manorbier in Pembrokeshire. He was three parts Norman and one part Welsh. His father, William de Barri was descended from Norman settlers who took their name from Barry Island. His mother was Angharad. She was the daughter of the Princess Nest. His grandmother Nest was the daughter of Rhys ap Tewdwr, King of Deheubarth.

Such was Nest’s beauty and such was her varied range of lovers that she was known as “Helen of Wales” in comparison with Helen of Troy from the tales of Ancient Greece.

Gerald’s father was a Norman adventurer and warlord called Gerald of Windsor. Most of Gerald of Wales’ ancestors were Norman Marcher Lords, whose families had overrun much of South Wales in the decades after the Battle of Hastings.

By the time Gerald was born this fiercely independent caste of Norman warriors occupied most of Eastern and Southern Wales and dominated the coastal areas from Chepstow to St. David’s.

Despite this conquest by foreign invaders and the occasional wars and border skirmishes with local Welsh rulers to the North and West of their lands, the Marcher Lords were not always on bad terms with their Welsh counterparts. When it suited both sides there was intermarriage between sons and daughters to cement peace agreements and secure mutually beneficial support against other potential threats. Gerald was the product of one of these deal-making marriages through his mother and grandmother.

Gerald was proud of his mixed heritage and this is a recurring theme in his books.

He was proud of his royal Welsh blood and even prouder of his Norman roots and wrote that he was lucky enough to: “Inherit courage from the Welsh and skill in warfare from the Normans.”

Gerald was unfortunately to find that this mixed Norman - Welsh blood was as much a curse as it was a blessing. It was often stated of him that he was too Norman to be truly Welsh and too Welsh to be truly Norman.

That said when English kings needed a diplomat capable of striking deals and negotiating with both Welsh princes and independently-minded Norman Marcher Lords of South Wales, Gerald was always in great demand. This was why he was selected to accompany Archbishop Baldwin on his journey through both the native Welsh and the Marcher lands of Wales in 1188.

However when it came to career advancement, such as when Gerald sought to become Bishop of St. David’s, this mixed parentage was a curse that would haunt him all his life.

His early life was not hindered by such worldly concerns. He enjoyed a happy childhood at the family castle in Manorbier, Pembrokeshire.



Manorbier Castle

In adult life he talked fondly of the area where he grew up and the orchards, the trees and sweet air that he breathed each day.

Gerald was the youngest of four brothers and as his father had both an heir and a spare and a third son too it was natural that Gerald, as the fourth son of a Marcher Lord, would pursue a career as a churchman.

There was very little chance that all three of his brothers would die before their father and given that Gerald’s uncle, David Fitz Gerald, was Bishop of St. David’s the family felt that a career in the Church would be an ideal opportunity for the youngest son to make his way in the world.

Gerald is said to have chosen this path when he was a young boy. He claimed that as children, his older brothers built sand castles on the beach near their home whilst he built churches and monasteries in the sand instead. His father jokingly nicknamed Gerald “My Bishop.”

Gerald’s education was at first entrusted to his uncle and key to this was learning Latin. This was the universal language of the Church and every learned Churchman in Christendom was literate in that ancient tongue. In fact during the early to central middle ages literacy meant literacy in Latin. It was the language of religion and of government.

Early Norman kings may not have been able to read and write it, but every priest worth his salt could. Gerald used the language to converse with clergy from Ireland to Rome and his

seventeen (17) surviving books were written in that academic language. It is thought by some that he was greatest writer in Latin that Wales has ever produced. This is what he would have said about himself for certain.

His educational progress was slow at first. He seems to have been distracted at home by his older brothers and their tales of war, knighthood and tournaments. His teachers resorted to insults and made him conjugate Latin verbs such as “Silly, sillier and silliest.” He soon changed his ways and applied himself to his studies and in one of his books modestly declared that he soon out performed all his contemporaries.

When he was about nine or ten years old, he was deemed old enough to leave home and was sent to further his education at the Benedictine Abbey of St Peter’s in Gloucester.



Cloister Garth, the Benedictine Abbey of St. Peter, Gloucester.

At Gloucester Gerald studied advanced Latin grammar, logic-the ability to argue a case clearly and rhetoric-the ability to argue a case persuasively. This was to be something of a speciality for Gerald.

By the time Gerald was about fifteen to sixteen years old it was clear that he was ready to move on to higher education and as there were no universities in the British Isles at that time, he was sent to the University of Paris.



The University of Paris, from a medieval manuscript.

It was the most famous educational institution in Europe during the 12th century. Courses here were long, challenging and expensive. Gerald was a student there for about 10 years during his first visit and was to return on a further two occasions.

He returned to Wales in around 1174 when he was in his twenties.

On his return, complete with a degree from Paris, Gerald embarked on a mission to reform the Church in Wales and remove many of the abuses that he felt the institution and its leaders was guilty of.

The Welsh Church in the mid twentieth century was lax, old-fashioned and in Gerald's eyes was corrupt. Priests kept "Wives" yet were supposed to be celibate. Even Gerald's uncle, the Bishop of St. David's was selling off Welsh Church lands to maintain his brood of illegitimate off-spring. These included at least one son and several daughters! Bishop David was also not above calling on the military support of his powerful Norman relatives when he had a dispute with other clergy within the Church.

However Gerald was more concerned with other matters such as collecting monies owed to the Church through unpaid tithes or Church taxes of ten percent. (10%)

Armed with a mandate from Canterbury, Gerald travelled around Pembrokeshire in all manner of foul weather to collect the monies he deemed owed to "Mother Church." The powerful Sheriff of Pembrokeshire refused to pay up and so Gerald excommunicated him on the spot. The sheriff then had to submit to a painful beating before Gerald lifted the excommunication ruling and accepted the monies owes by the brow beaten sheriff.

In 1175 Gerald turned his attention to Brecon. He learned that the Archdeacon was living in considerable comfort with a mistress. Gerald had the Archdeacon dismissed and using the influence of the Bishop of St. David's (Gerald's uncle and former tutor.) Gerald had the post given over to him.

This meant that Gerald received a house at Llanddew as his official residence and he was now free to enforce his moralising reforms on the local clergy of that part of Wales.



Remains of Llanddew Bishops Palace

Gerald became so unpopular with the Powys clergy that they besieged him in a church near Llandrindod Wells. Gerald sent a message to his cousin, a local Welsh ruler called Cadwallon ap Madog, who came to his aid. This saw Gerald's besiegers surrender and beg for mercy.

He would remain an archdeacon for the next twenty-eight (28) years. His career was to take him on a very different path.

On 3rd May 1176 Gerald's uncle, David Fitzgerald, Bishop of St. David's died. The bishopric that Gerald desired so much was now vacant.

All four Welsh archdeacons were put forward as possible candidates for King Henry II to consider and Richard, the Archbishop of Canterbury, supported Gerald's nomination. However King Henry II was well aware that Gerald wanted to use the post of Bishop of St. David's to push the case for the Church in Wales to become independent of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

This was less than six (6) years since the murder of Thomas Becket and Henry could not risk another confrontation with the English Church. King Henry II therefore nominated Peter de Leia, the Cluniac Prior of Much Wenlock (Shropshire).

Gerald was incensed by the king's decision. He collected his books and personal effects and returned to the University of Paris.

On his second visit to Paris Gerald studied church law and theology.

He soon began to lecture on the *Decretum Gratiani*, which was a series of Church or Canon Laws that had been compiled earlier on in the 12th century. (*This collection of six books became the basis of Roman Catholic Church Law from until 1918.*)

According to Gerald himself he claimed his lectures here were a great success. He stayed in Paris until 1179 and returned to England as he was essentially running out of money.

On his way back to Wales he dined with monks on Christ Church Canterbury and complained about both their table manners and their general gluttony.

He stopped his sister from divorcing her husband and found that his rival for Bishop of St. David's was now living in exile in England having fallen out with his fellow clergy in West Wales.

The Archbishop of Canterbury was forced to hand administrative control of St. David's over to Gerald but eventually Peter de Leia patched things up with the local West Wales clergy and Gerald's career took yet another turn.

In 1184 he was appointed Court Chaplain to King Henry II (1154-1189) and spent over a year moving around with the royal court. King Henry II was arguably the most hardworking and energetic of the medieval English kings and regularly rode twenty (20) miles or so a day because his Angevin Empire stretched from the Scottish border to France's border with Spain.

In 1185 Gerald joined Prince John (later King John 1199-1216) on a mission to Ireland. Gerald went as chaplain and adviser to Prince John as Gerald's Norman relatives held land there following a series of invasions earlier in the 12th century.

He remained in Ireland until 1186 and wrote his first two books "The Topography of Ireland." and "The Conquest of Ireland." Prince John offered Gerald two positions as bishop for Wexford and Leighlin but he declined both of them. John offered him the two posts combined as one, again Gerald declined the offer.

In 1187 King Henry II and his eldest son Richard promised to take the Cross and campaign against the new Muslim leader, Saladin. He was Sultan of Egypt and Syria and was the greatest threat that the crusaders had ever faced. Saladin captured Jerusalem in October 1187 after destroying the Christian army at the Battle of Hattin in July that year.

These events led to the visit to Wales by Baldwin, the new Archbishop of Canterbury. He was seeking Welsh and Norman recruits for the third Crusade which would eventually be led by King Richard I (1189-1199) or Richard the Lionheart as he became known.

Baldwin was accompanied by Gerald on this journey around Wales. It started in early March and lasted until Easter. Gerald described the events in his book "The Journey through Wales" and soon after Gerald wrote his "The Description of Wales." (*These books are still available in translation from Latin today. They are a key reason why Gerald is taught in many schools in Wales especially to secondary school Year 7 pupils as part of their studies of Medieval Wales.*)

Amongst the first to take the cross was Gerald himself and Peter de Leia, Bishop of St. David's. It was a highly successful preaching tour and some 3,000 men pledged to go on

crusade by taking the Cross.

When it came down to leaving Wales to join Richard's army, far fewer Welshmen actually proved to be pious or brave.

Gerald did join the third Crusade but was sent back to England in 1189 on the death of King Henry II. The new king, Richard I, felt that Gerald would be more use to him back home rather than on a military mission to the Holy Land.

Archbishop Baldwin did make the full journey but fell ill and died at the siege of Acre in 1190.

Back in Wales Gerald was offered the post of Bishop of Bangor and then that of Llandaff but declined both. Peter de Leia was in declining health and died in 1198 so Gerald again set his heart on the Bishopric of St. David's. The battle for this post would last more than five years from July 1198 to November 1203. This meant it crossed over the reign of King Richard I and his brother, King John (1199-1216).

In 1202, Gerald was accused of stirring up the Welsh to rebellion and was put on trial but the trial came to nothing due to the absence of the principal judges. After this long struggle, leading clergy of St. David's deserted Gerald and he was obliged to leave Wales and he fled to Rome.

Lord Rhys the most powerful prince in Wales and Gerald's cousin had died in 1198 but Gerald was still related to too many powerful men in Wales, both Welsh and Norman, for any English king to consider allowing Gerald to become the Bishop of West Wales.

In 1203 Geoffrey of Henlaw was appointed to the See of St. David's despite the strenuous exertions of Gerald. When travelling back to France, he was briefly imprisoned.

He afterwards reconciled with King John but there was a price to pay for this. Gerald was forced to vow never again to support the primacy of the Bishop of St. David's over Archbishop of Canterbury ever again. The expenses of his unsuccessful campaign were paid by the crown.

Gerald always maintained that it was the fear of his appointment would have on the national politics in Wales that had prevented him securing the post he wanted most of all. He famously complained in a letter to Pope Innocent III. "Because I am a Welshman am I to be debarred from all preferment in Wales? On the same reasoning so would an Englishman in England, a Frenchman in France and Italian in Italy. But I am sprung from the Princes of Wales and the Barons of the Marches and when I see injustice in either race I hate it."

After Geoffrey de Henlaw was chosen as the new Bishop of St David's, Gerald wrote at length about his struggles in his "The Events of His Own Life." Unfortunately not all of his book has survived to this day though the unsuccessful campaign to gain the one post he had desired all his adult life is also covered in his other works that do survive (*e.g. the Rights and Privileges of the Church of St. David's.*)

Gerald had been offered posts in Ireland twice and in Wales a total of four times. He declined them all. For him it was St. David's or nothing and here was where the problem with him lay. It was always to be St. David's or nothing.

Matters were further complicated by his openly stated views. He showed in his writings that he was a supporter of Thomas Becket who as we all know was in conflict with King Henry II and who came to that untimely end in Canterbury Cathedral in 1170.

Added to this Gerald had constantly and consistently argued for years that Wales should have an independent Church not under the authority of Canterbury. He said it should be under the Bishop of St. David's control as it had been long before the Norman invasion of 1066. This was something no English medieval king would risk, let alone allow.

By 1203 Gerald was almost sixty (60) and failing to get St. David's for the second time was too much for him. He resigned as Archdeacon of Brecon where he had not spent much time since 1176.

He devoted the rest of his life to his books and lived in Lincoln Cathedral in the years before his death.



Lincoln Cathedral

He lived with relatives in Ireland from 1204 to 1206 and he went to Rome on pilgrimage in 1207.

In 1214 Geoffrey, Bishop of St. David's died but Gerald did not seek the post again. He lived for another eight years and probably died in Hereford Cathedral aged seventy-seven (77) or at least that is what most historians believe today.

Gerald described himself as very tall and strikingly good looking. He was filled with a sense of his own self-importance and would strongly argue his case in person or by letter, in public or in private.

He was prepared to travel to Rome to seek the support of the Pope for his claim to the see of St. David's and he was not afraid to speak his mind to three medieval English kings that he knew personally or had worked for. He failed to achieve his life's dream and ambition and he had his many failings and faults.

However and in "History" there is always a however...Gerald achieved something few others have achieved.

Gerald secured his place in history. He is studied by school children in Wales to this day and by academic historians of the middle ages. He has his statues in Cardiff City Hall and in St. David's Cathedral.

In 1988 there were celebrations across Wales to commemorate his journey through Wales eight hundred years earlier. There was an exhibition about him at the National Museum in Cardiff. That year a cartoon was made by Siriol Productions (*The creators of Super Ted*) and the 'Gerald of Wales' cartoon which is narrated by Max Boyce can be seen on Youtube.com. This is where Gerald's final victory lies. People know about and his life. If he could sit with us today and see how much is known about him almost 800 years after his death, he would almost certainly be even more full of himself than ever...if that were at all possible!



The Commemorative Order of St. Thomas of Acon which had long been established in London had many members living in Wales. It was agreed in 2003 that a Chapel of this Commemorative Order should be established in Wales.

The first Chapel of the Order in Wales was to be formed in Penarth in the Vale of Glamorgan in South Wales. *The adjoining town to Barry. (Barri)*

It was agreed by the founders of the Chapel that Gerald de Barri having an ancestry in the Vale of Glamorgan, who had taken up the Cross in the third crusade where the Order of St. Thomas of Acon was formed, his fascinating character, together with all of his association with Wales; was truly appropriate and a very fine name to be given to the first Chapel of the Commemorative Order to be consecrated in Wales on the 31st January 2004.

The surviving works of Gerald of Wales

- *Topographia Hibernica* ("Topography of Ireland", 1187)¹
- *Expugnatio Hibernica* ("Conquest of Ireland", 1189)
- *Itinerarium Cambriae* ("Journey through Wales", 1191)
- *Liber de Principis instructione* c. 1193
- *Descriptio Cambriae* ("Description of Wales", 1194)
- *De instructione principis* ("Education of a prince")
- *De rebus a se gestis* ("Autobiography")
- *De iure et statu Menevensis ecclesiae* ("Rights and privileges of the Church of St. David's")
- *Gemma ecclesiastica* ("Jewel of the church")
- *Speculum ecclesiae* ("Mirror of the church")
- *Symbolum electorum*
- *Invectiones*
- *Retractationes*
- *Speculum duorum*
- *Life of St. Hugh of Lincoln*
- *Life of Geoffrey, Archbishop of York*
- *Life of St. Ethelbert*
- *Life of St. Remigius*
- *Life of St. David*

A bibliography for these notes includes

- 1: '*Gerald of Wales- The Journey through Wales/The Description of Wales.*' Published by Penguin Classics in 1987
- 2: '*Gerald and His Journey of 1188*' by Charles Kingsley. Published by Cadw Welsh Historical Monuments in 1988
- 3: '*Gerald and His World*' by Robert M. Morris. Published by the University of Wales Press in 1987