

CASTLES IN THE ETHER – finding the site of Newbury Castle

A PLACE BEYOND COURAGE, out in paperback this week, is based on the story of John FitzGilbert Marshal, father of the great William Marshal, Earl of Pembroke and Regent of England. Without John there would have been no William. Aside from John's contribution of fifty per cent of William's DNA, those all important formative years were of John's moulding in the paternal role. The imprinting of behaviour patterns, morals and social mores came from the family household.

Having said that, one has to add that John was also responsible for his son's almost death in 1154 when he carried brinkmanship to extremes at the siege of Newbury Castle. The royalist forces attacked the stronghold during the struggle for the rule of England between King Stephen and his cousin the Empress Matilda. Finding himself beleaguered, John asked permission to request the Empress's consent to yield the castle. Stephen agreed to give him time, but demanded hostages as security, including John's son William, then a child of about five years old.

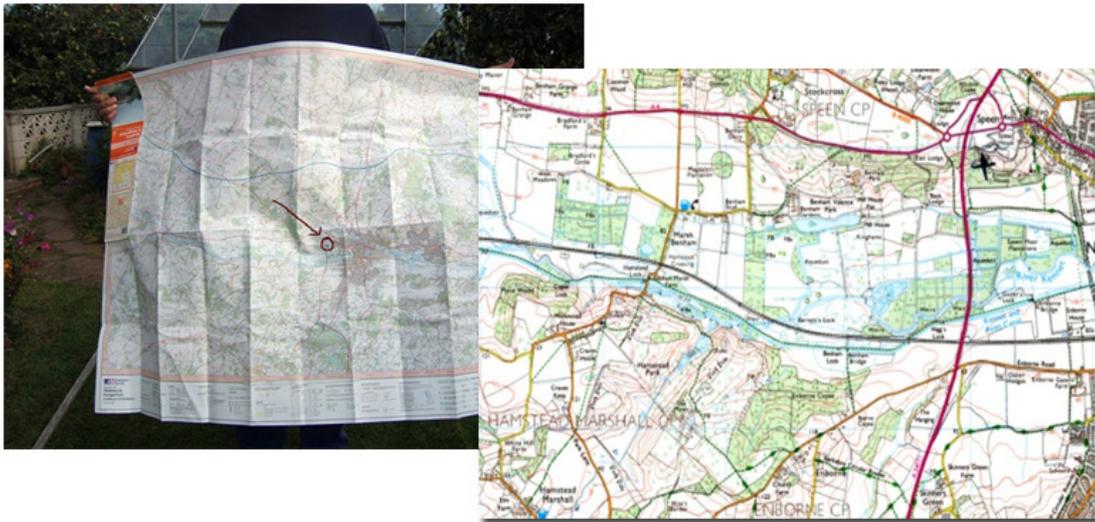
John handed over the boy and used the time, not to seek consent, but to stuff the threatened keep to the rafters with men and supplies. When the time came to relinquish the castle, John refused and told the king where he could go. Stephen then said he would hang little William, to which John apparently replied that Stephen must do as he saw fit because he (John) had the anvils and hammers to get better sons. *Mais il dist ke ne li chaleit de l'enfant, quer encore aveit les enclumes e les marteals dunt forgereit de plus beals.* William was threatened with all sorts of dire ends, including the gallows, being hurled from a trebuchet and squashed against the castle walls. His father remained implacable and it was Stephen who yielded and backed down, taking young William into his household where he stayed for the next 2 years.

Stephen died, the Empress's son Henry II came to the throne and the wounds of the devastating civil war began to grow scars. The adulterine castles thrown up during the conflict were torn down by Henry's order. There is no mention of Newbury but historians speculate that it was one of these temporary fortifications. Suffice to say no remains have ever been found. Newbury itself has yielded no evidence. There's a traditional site called 'the Castle' but it is thought to refer to the ruins of a cloth factory.

There are some mounds in the grounds of North Lodge at Hamstead Marshal which stands upon the land where once John Marshal had a substantial manor, probably fortified. Again, historians have suggested that these mounds were the remnants of protective motts made during the twelfth century civil war to protect the manor. Having visited these mounds and walked the grounds, my own feeling is that that this suggestion is a non starter. Stephen could easily have defeated John had he made a stand at Hamstead, and one of things John wasn't, was a fool when it came to building castles. He was known as a cunning builder. He was a thinker, a planner. A cool and calculating soldier. His nearest secure base of operations that we know about was at Marlborough. But the writer of the Histoire says that his castle was at Newbury. So where might it have been?

At an Akashic Record session on the third of July 2007, I asked Akashic consultant Alison King if she could tune into John Marshal and ask him where the castle at Newbury had been. I had come to this session armed with Ordnance Survey map 158 and as I struggled to open it out (the thing was as big as I was!), Alison urgently

asked me to move because John had come through to her and was keen to guide her index finger to the point where the castle was on the map. Alison had her eyes closed. I managed to get the map laid out on the floor and she leaned over and put her finger decisively on a particular spot. 'Here,' she said. I hastily took a biro and marked a cross under her fingertip as best I could. Alison said that her finger was guided with the firm decision she has always been aware of in John's character. A few days ago I got my husband to stand in the garden with this same map spread out. I've used the paint programme to draw a ring around the original cross made by Alison in July of 2007. You can get an idea of the size of the map. I've also cropped it down to a close up.



When I looked at the map and checked it out on Google Map coordinates, I thought that it looked interesting. It was on the outskirts of Newbury and close to Hamstead Marshal, but my eye was untrained. I had corresponded briefly with a reader who lives in the area who has an archaeology qualification. She had once e-mailed me wondering where the missing castle might be. I sent her a scan of the map with the 'X' marks the spot that John Marshal had shown us. The reader - S. was very interested to see it because she said that it was strategically a very important site being the highest point on a ridge overlooking two rivers, the Lambourn to the north and the Kennet to the south. The Roman road - Ermine street coming from Cirencester to Speen, must have been very close by. Today the land forms part of the grounds of a private home called Speen House. Alison and I were excited and delighted at this news. Initially though, we didn't take it further than that and just noted that it was circumstantial corroboration.

S. invited us to Wiltshire this year as she lives more or less where John Marshal, William Marshal and many of their kin and descendants used to call home. We were thrilled at the invitation and arranged to travel down there in early August and spend some time in 'Marshal' country. On day one, we went to Old Sarum. Our road there took us down the Newbury Bypass and past the lower end of the site John Marshal had told us was the site of his castle. As we were driving, Alison said she had John coming through saying, 'You are coming to visit me tomorrow.' We thought at the time that it was a reference to our forthcoming meeting with S, however that wasn't the entire story.

When we did meet S. the next day, she showed us a close up of a different picture of the area on the map I had sent her, showing clearly that there were ramparts on the spot at Speen. The county archaeologist had confirmed this. No one knows their dateline, but it is suspected there was Roman occupation here. So why not medieval? Fortifications and ramparts are regularly adapted and reused down the centuries. John Marshal was renowned as a cunning builder of castles and Speen would have been tailor made for his skills, especially if he was throwing up defences in a hurry and this place was '*a strategically important site.*'

Another circumstantial point that backs up the Speen site theory is the detail that William Marshal granted himself a market at Speen in 1218, thus confirming strong Marshal interests in the place. This we didn't find out until shortly before our visit to S.

S. managed to secure us permission to go and look at the ramparts at Speen House, which we did. This was a personal invitation and I didn't feel it was appropriate to take photographs. However, while we were there, Alison's psychic antennae went haywire and she had John Marshal coming through powerfully and strongly, greeting us and saying that this was the place. Although I sometimes do share snippets of Akashic material with readers, what came through and what was said, was personal and not appropriate for the public domain, but as far as confirmation that this was the place is concerned – we were left in absolutely no doubt.. Whether evidence would show up on a dig I don't know, because the fortifications would not have stood for very long and the site is now someone's back garden and thick with rhododendron bushes. Even so, I am convinced that Speen is the site of John's castle at Newbury. It fits better than anything else that has yet come to light, and when the builder himself has crossed the divide to personally show you.....