

This is a slightly altered extracted chapter and from my forthcoming book: *Goodrich Castle and the families of Godric Mapson, Monmouth, Clare, Marshall, Montchesney, Valence, Despenser and Talbot*.

When looking at the family history of the owning families of Goodrich castle it immediately struck me, once again, how odd the nickname 'Strongbow' is. This led to some intense research on the subject. Once more we seem to be left with the startling fact that so much of our history is in fact folklore and not serious, scientific study.

### **The Earls of Striguil and the False Nickname, Strongbow**

Much has been written of the nickname, Strongbow. This was allegedly given to Gilbert Clare (d.1149) and, rather surprisingly, also to his son, Richard (d.1176). The idea of such a 'famous' personage having a nickname which has influenced the mind set of historians for generations - and even drinks companies - being bunkum was at first difficult to accept, but once more we should let the evidence and not nostalgia speak for itself.

Wikipedia is most helpful in informing us that Richard Clare and his father Gilbert were:

'commonly known by his nickname Strongbow (Norman French: Arc-Fort)'

There is no citation for this unbacked assertion which has admittedly been around and also questioned for a long time<sup>\*1</sup>. If we look at the original sources written near to the lifetime of the two earls allegedly given this nickname, we find there is not a single contemporary mention of 'Strongbow'. If we look at several early works in a rough chronological order - as it is very difficult to be precise about when these chronicles were finally redacted - we find that writers alive in the earl's lifetime described Richard as:

Earl Richard of Striguil, the son of Earl Gilbert...<sup>\*2</sup>

Earl Richard of Striguil...<sup>\*3</sup>

Earl Richard of Striguil...<sup>\*4</sup>

Richard Striguil the son of Earl Gilbert<sup>\*5</sup>

Similarly, in various chronicles of the thirteenth century, he was described as:

The earl known as Richard...<sup>\*6</sup>

Earl Richard of Striguil...<sup>\*7</sup>

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<sup>\*1</sup> See *Complete Peerage of England, Scotland, Ireland, Great Britain and the United Kingdom* [13 vols., 1910-59] on Pembroke.

<sup>\*2</sup> *Obiit Richardus, comes de Streguel, filius comitis Gisleberti*, 'Chronica of Roberti de Torigneio' *Chronicles of the Reigns of Stephen, Henry II and Richard I* IV, ed. R. Howlett [1889], IV, 270.

<sup>\*3</sup> *Ricardus Comes de Striguil* Ralph de Diceto, *Opera Historica*, ed. W. Stubbs [2 vols., 1876], 590.

<sup>\*4</sup> *Ricardus comes de Stringuil*, Ralph de Diceto, *Opera Historica*, ed. W. Stubbs [2 vols., 1876] I, 54, and again as earl of *Strigwil*, *Idem*, 125, 161; II, 73.

<sup>\*5</sup> *Strigulensis Ricardus, Gillberti comitis filius*, Giraldus Cambrensis, *Opera*, eds. J.S. Brewer, J.F. Dimock and G.F. Warner [8 vols., 1861-91] V, 227.

<sup>\*6</sup> *Comitem scilicet Ricardum*, 'Historia Rerum Anglicarum', William of Newburgh, *Chronicles of the Reigns of Stephen, Henry II and Richard I*, ed. R. Howlett [1889] I, 167.

<sup>\*7</sup> *Ricardus comes de Strigul*, 'Annales Monasterii de Waverleia', *Annales Monastici*, ed. H.R. Luard [5 vols., 1864-9] II, 239. *Ricardus comes de Strigul*, 'Annales Prioratus de Dunstaplia', *Annales Monastici*, ed. H.R. Luard [5 vols., 1864-9] III, 22, and 'Annales de Margam', (continued...)

It is only nearly a hundred years after his death that a nickname or family name is alleged to have been used and this was in Scotland when the Clare's Marshall descendants were using the title earl of Pembroke, rather than Striguil as Earl Richard seems to have preferred.

*Richardus comes de Penbroc, filius Giliberti comitis Stranboue...*

Earl Richard of Pembroke, the son of Earl Gilbert of Striguil...

*Ricardus comes cognomine Strangboge*

Earl Richard known as Striguil...<sup>\*8</sup>

The Melrose chronicler obviously had trouble with Striguil, spelling it either *Stranboue*, *Strangboge* or even *Stranbohe* according to various transcripts. However his intention is clear, to make sure that the reader understands that the earls were both lords of Striguil and Pembroke. This is where the confusion seems to have arisen, with later writers seeming to make Striguil, as spelt above, into the erroneous Strongbow. This seems a strong statement to make on the little facts, but let us think about the word - strongbow. Would a medieval chronicler use such an English word when he wrote Latin? Further, would a Norman lord, even if he had lived all of his life in England, have used an English nickname? The language of the nobility was French and if we look at *Stranboue* from that angle we have the far more likely 'foreign leggings' if we replace the b with an h as appears commonly in probably only slightly later spellings. Personally I don't see an Anglo-Norman warlord taking too kindly to being called Fancy-pants and the idea that this cognomen would not have been used in his lifetime, but then be remembered a hundred years after his death, does rather stretch credulity beyond its breaking point. If we stick to Latin we are left with the following possible words from *Stranboue* and its variations:

Stag/ium an upper storey or platform

Stragul/a - a strail or bed-cover, strip or panelled cloth.

Strangum, a stray or foreigner, often a Breton, ie. the Lestranges

Bov/a, vault

Bowg/a, bag

Hos/a - a small cask

Hos/arius - an officer of the royal buttery

Hos/e - hose or leggings.

Again the thought that any of these combinations could have formed a nickname for a powerful Anglo-Norman nobleman falls very flat. It is also telling that such nicknames are not that common and are never English - viz, William Rufus (d.1100), Lupus and Le Gros (d.1101), Robert Curthose (d.1134), Henry Curtmantle (d.1189), Fulk 'le Brun' Fitz Warin (d.1198?), Richard Coeur de Lion (d.1199), Jean Sans Terre (d.1216). Finally of course, there is William Gasteviande Marshall (d.1219), the post mortem son-in-law of Earl Richard of Striguil. Again all the nicknames are French and not English. The lack of any English nicknames is readily apparent.

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<sup>\*7</sup> (...continued)

1066-1232', *Annales Monastici*, ed. H.R. Luard [5 vols., 1864-9] I, 16.

<sup>\*8</sup> *Chronica de Mailros* [Edinburgh, 1835], 82, 88. The name was spelt *Stranbohe* in *The Church Historians of England*, IV, pt 1 [London, 1856], 132.

The idea of the nickname Strongbow, despite the Scottish false start, seems to have grown up in South Wales where the earls of Striguil obviously spent much of their time. In the Welsh annals there are several references to Richard in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. In the copies of the *Annales Cambriae*, probably kept at Whitland and Strata Florida abbeys, we have the standard ‘Earl Richard of Striguil (*Striguil/Strugul*)’. The Strata Florida Latin chronicle was copied in the final form which has come down to us at Neath abbey at some point between 1300 and 1304. Around the same time another short Latin chronicle was copied there. This is now known after the manuscript it was kept in, the Domesday Exchequer annals<sup>\*9</sup>. This source from the beginning of the fourteenth century seems uncertain of his name and therefore calls him:

Richard known as Striguil earl of Striguil  
*Ricardus cognomento Stranghose Comes Strugulliae.*

It would appear from this that the compiler didn’t know that *Strugulliae* was the same as *Stranghose*. This *Stranghose* itself is very close to the variant spellings used at Melrose. However the 1300-04 Neath chronicler’s confusion has led to those coming later assuming that *Stranghose* meant strongbow rather than ‘foreign leggings’ or indeed Striguil, which is the much more likely translation.

In the fourteenth century, or even later, the confusion is taken up again and placed in its final form when we have:

Earl Richard son of Gilbert Strongbow [earl of Shropshire].<sup>\*10</sup>

Little needs to be said of the value of such a late source in decoding twelfth century history. At least two hundred years after Richard’s death this transmogrification of Striguil into Strongbow was finally fully achieved in its current form in the Red Book of Hergest. Here, in the period 1375 to 1425, we finally reach:

Richard earl of Striguil the son of Gilbert Bow Strong  
*Rickert iarll Strifug vap Gilbert Bwa Kadarnn.*<sup>\*11</sup>

What work the compiler was using for his composition is unknown, but it could have been the *Annales Cambriae* or any form of the Brut mentioned above. However, the writer has gone one stage further and translated the word he has obviously Anglicised, *Stranboue*, into Strongbow and then converted it into Welsh. Was this a valid translation or a simple unlucky guess? The versions of the names listed above show the latter.

A similar unlucky guess was made by William Camden (d.1623). He added against the first reference to Earl Richard in the works of Giraldus Cambrensis, *dictus Strongbow, fortis arcus*. The words of the Victorian editor sum this comment up well.

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<sup>\*9</sup>Remfry, P.M., *Annales Cambriae...*, 93, 94.

<sup>\*10</sup>*Brut y Tywysogyon or The Chronicle of the Princes. Peniarth Ms. 20 version*, ed. and trans. T. Jones [Cardiff, 1952], 65. *Richard vap Gilbert Stragbow* [iarll Amhwydic], *Brenhinedd y Saeson or The Kings of the Saxons*, ed. and trans. T. Jones [Cardiff, 1971], 170. This version was written sometime between 1332 and 1461

<sup>\*11</sup>*Brut y Tywysogyon or The Chronicle of the Princes. Red Book of Hergest version*, ed. and trans. T. Jones [Cardiff, 1955], 150.

This is in no MS. that I have seen. It is not in Hooker's translation. Is this name given him by any at all contemporary writer? I much doubt it.\*<sup>12</sup>

Considering that this was known some 150 years ago it is most sad that this fallacy is still pushed today with such regularity.

Despite the overwhelming evidence that Earl Richard was never known as Strongbow, the final word should again go to contemporaries of the original Earl Richard. In the Song of Dermot and the Earl, Richard is never more than *Quens Ricard*\*<sup>13</sup>. Although the song is a copy it appears to date to within fifty years of Richard's death and as such would have been likely to have mentioned such a nickname if the earl had been given one. Of course it does not. Similarly, when we look at the earls' charters there is nothing to suggest that Strongbow was a name of theirs. Indeed in one charter Earl Gilbert (1100-49) merely declares himself, Earl Gilbert of Pembroke, the son of Gilbert\*<sup>14</sup>. Similarly there is no trace of any nickname on the seals of either Gilbert or Richard. In 1136 a contemporary English chronicler living in Normandy called him simply, Gilbert Clare\*<sup>15</sup>. This is hardly surprising as he did not become earl of Pembroke until his uncle Walter died on 10 March 1138, eventually leaving his lands in Gwent, which included Striguil, to Gilbert. Even so, Gilbert seems far more often to have used the designation Pembroke, *Comes Gilebertus de Penbroc*\*<sup>16</sup> rather than Striguil or Chepstow as it became to be known in the fourteenth century. This can be seen in various charters of the earl.

Earl Gilbert's son seems to have mainly used his Gwent title, appearing as earl of *Strigoil* in the five years before his death in 1176. However there is a transcription of a charter of 22 March 1223, where Earl William Marshall of Pembroke confirmed various grants to Tintern abbey for his own soul as well as those of Walter, his son Richard, his son Gilbert Striguil, my grandfather... (*Walteri filii Ricardi filii Gilberti Strongbowe avi mei...*)\*<sup>17</sup>. Quite obviously as this stands it is corrupted or at best mistranscribed, as Walter was the uncle of Gilbert Striguil, who was father to Earl Richard (d.1176), the grandfather of Earl William (d.1231). In a later part of the charter the relationship is more logically put:

Gilbert and Richard Striguil (*Gilberti et Ricardi Strongbowe* )  
...the gift of the said Gilbert Striguil and Richard my grandfather... from Striguil up to  
Nantxlinat...  
*De donis dicti Gilberti Strongbowe et Ricardi avi mei.... versus Strugull usque*  
*Nantxlinat...*

It is immediately noticeable how different these two spellings are in quick succession, *Strongbowe* and *Strugull*. With the noticed errors it is unfortunate that there is not a readily available up to date transcription of the text, as it might clear up whether Strongbow was

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\*<sup>12</sup> Giraldus Cambrensis, *Opera*, eds. J.S. Brewer, J.F. Dimock and G.F. Warner [8 vols., 1861-91] V, 227, note 4.

\*<sup>13</sup> *Song of Dermot and the Earl, The*, ed. Orpen, GH. [Llanerch, 1994], line 327.

\*<sup>14</sup> *Gilbertus filius G. comes de Penbroc, Monasticon Anglicanum*, ed. W. Dugdale, Revised edition by J. Caley, H. Ellis, and B. Bandinel [6 vols., 1817-30] III, 473.

\*<sup>15</sup> Ordericus Vitalis, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, ed. Le Provost, A [Paris, 5 vols, 1838-55] V, 63.

\*<sup>16</sup> *Reading Abbey Cartularies* [Camden, London, 1986] I, 209. Similarly in the contemporary account of the wars of King Stephen, he only appears as Earl Gilbert, 'Gesta Stephani', *Chronicles of the Reigns of Stephen, Henry II and Richard I* III, ed. R. Howlett [1889], 126-7.

\*<sup>17</sup> *Monasticon Anglicanum*, ed. W. Dugdale, Revised edition by J. Caley, H. Ellis, and B. Bandinel [6 vols., 1817-30] V, 267. Only calendered in *Calendar of Charter Rolls 1226-1516* [6 vols., 1903-27] 1300-26, 89. Another copy was in the library at Arundel. The original apparently no longer exists.

actually written thus and not as some form of *Strigboue*. However, even this could not clear up the question, as apparently only fourteenth century copies of the charter exist. In 1086 the vill and castle were known as *Estrighoiet*<sup>\*18</sup>. This is supposed to derive from *ystraigl*, a form of Welsh for a turn or detour, presumably in the river. Nevertheless, as has been noted with the derivations of other names, the truth is often more complex.

According to Giraldus Cambrensis, who had a personal grudge against King Henry II, Earl Richard of Striguil was discriminated against by his king. In Giraldus' own words:

However he was a man in the present circumstances illustrious by blood and nobility, and clearly the first born of the lineage of Clare; certainly a man til now having a greater name than status, more of appetite than of talent, more of succession than of possession. Therefore he came to King Henry II of the English, resolutely beseeching and requesting that either his rightful hereditary lands should be granted to him, restored at least by means of justice, or that he himself should be given liberty to bring about his own destiny and fortune in foreign regions.<sup>\*19</sup>

This has been taken in some quarters to mean that the earl was held from his patrimony of Pembroke, viz Wikipedia:

Richard was the son of Gilbert de Clare, 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Pembroke and Isabel de Beaumont. Richard's father died in about 1148, when he was about 18 years old, and Richard inherited the title Earl of Pembroke. It is probable that this title was not recognized at Henry II's coronation in 1154. As the son of the first Earl, he succeeded to his father's estates in 1148, but was deprived of the title by King Henry II of England in 1154 for siding with King Stephen of England against Henry's mother, the Empress Matilda. Richard was in fact, called by his contemporaries Earl Striguil, for his marcher lordship of Striguil where he had a fortress at a place now called Chepstow, in Monmouthshire on the River Wye. He saw an opportunity to reverse his bad fortune in 1168 when he met Diarmait Mac Murchada, the deposed King of Leinster.

As we have seen this, and indeed most of the potted history pushed by Wikipedia, may be 'popular', but historically it is simply not true. What seems more likely is that Earl Richard was asking the king for permission to retake the lost Clare lands in Ceredigion in the late 1160s after these had been overrun by Rhys ap Gruffydd (d.1197). No such permission was forthcoming and Earl Richard seems to have taken Henry's reply as permission to seek compensation in foreign parts, ie. Ireland. Once again we can see how the ironic and often vindictive words of Giraldus have been taken out of context and warped to form a distorted view of history.

If Giraldus has unintentionally done history a disservice by his treatment of Henry II, he certainly did us a service when he wrote a description of Earl Richard. Such verbal portraits are rare indeed in this period. The piece was probably written between 1188 and

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<sup>\*18</sup> Domesday Book, fo.162.

<sup>\*19</sup> *Erat autem vir hic vir sanguine conspicuus, et Clarensum clara de stirpe progenitus; vir quidem plus nominis hactenus habens quam ominis, plus genii quam ingenii, plus successionis quam possessionis. Veniens igitur ad Anglorum regem Henricum secundum, obnixè supplicat et efflagitat, ut vel terras ipsum jure hereditario contingentes eidem saltem mediante justitia restitueret, vel in exteris regionibus se fati et fortunae committendi licentiam daret.* Giraldus Cambrensis, *Opera*, eds. J.S. Brewer, J.F. Dimock and G.F. Warner [8 vols., 1861-91] V, 247.

1191 about a man who had been dead for some fifteen years. However Giraldu is quite likely to have met the earl, Giraldu having been born in Dyfed when Earl Gilbert, the father of Richard, was earl of the district. As far as can be ascertained Giraldu was born around 1146 and died in 1223. Earl Richard was born in 1130 and died in 1176 when Giraldu was thirty. If this is correct, Richard himself was only some fifteen years older than Giraldu and there is every chance that they should have met, either at court or in South Wales. As earl of Pembroke Richard should have been well known to Giraldu's family who lived at Manorbier, a five fee honour within the earldom of Pembroke. Therefore we can have some degree of confidence when repeating Giraldu's portrait of the earl, that this is a description of a real man.

Truly this was the measure of the earl. A ginger man, with freckles, eyes bluish grey, a feminine appearance, a poor voice, a short neck, through the rest entirely uncivilized/wild, lofty of body. A man courteous and gentle. What he was not able to achieve by business, he would settle by charming words. Dressed as a civilian and unarmed, he was prepared to obey when ordered, outside war he was considered more a soldier than a leader, in war truly more a leader than a soldier. All of his men were allowed to speak freely in debate, nothing at any time by himself or by his arms [alone] did he undertake, or perform with impetuosity. In battle he took up position, he remained fixed so that his men could recover and take refuge at his battle standard. And in which battle he was by condition steadfast and immovable, neither by the surging fortune of the enemies, nor by following any fickleness would he roam about.<sup>\*20</sup>

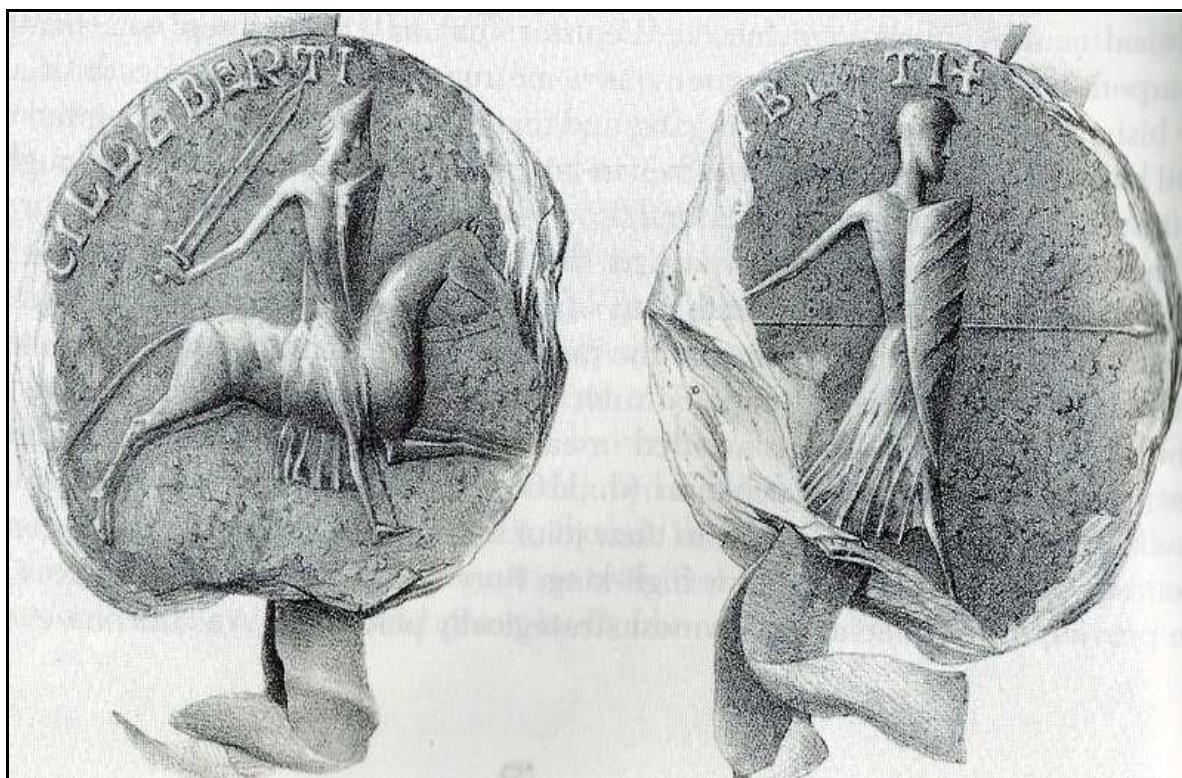
Richard was probably only the fourth man to be lord of Goodrich after the Norman Conquest. We are therefore lucky to have such a passable description of a man who most definitely owned Goodrich castle. To finish, it is almost amusing to quote the Wikipedia version of this description:

He is vividly described by Giraldu Cambrensis as a tall and fair man, of pleasing appearance, modest in his bearing, delicate in features, of a low voice, but sage in council and the idol of his soldiers.

The reader can be left to judge whether the actual words of Giraldu are sufficient to draw the Wikipedia description ascribed to Giraldu and compare the cleric's opinion with the seal of Earl Richard which described how the man felt he should have been portrayed (Fig.1).

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<sup>\*20</sup> *Descriptio Comitis. Comiti vero modus hic erat. Vir subrufus, lentiginosus, oculis glaucis, facie feminea, voce exili, collo contracto, per cetera fere cuncta, corpore procero. Vir liberalis et lenis. Quod re non poterat, verborum suavitate componebat. Togatus et inermis, parere paratior quam imperare, extra bellum plus militis quam ducis, in bello vero plus ducis quam militis habens. Omnia suorum audens consilio, nihil unquam ex se vel armis aggrediens, vel animositate praesumens. In praelio positus, fixum suis recuperationis et refugii signum manebat. In utraque belli fortuna stabilis et constans, nec casibus adversis desperatione fluctuans, nec secundis ulla levitate discurrens.* Giraldu Cambrensis, *Opera*, eds. J.S. Brewer, J.F. Dimock and G.F. Warner [8 vols., 1861-91] V, 272.



**Figure 1**, The seal of Richard Clare (d.1176) from a nineteenth century sketch anonymously copied in *The Oxford Illustrated History of Ireland* [1996], 56. The only remaining text states *Gilberti* - of Gilbert. The original text would probably have run, *Sigillum Comes Ricardus filius Gilleberti* - the seal of Earl Richard Fitz Gilbert.

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