

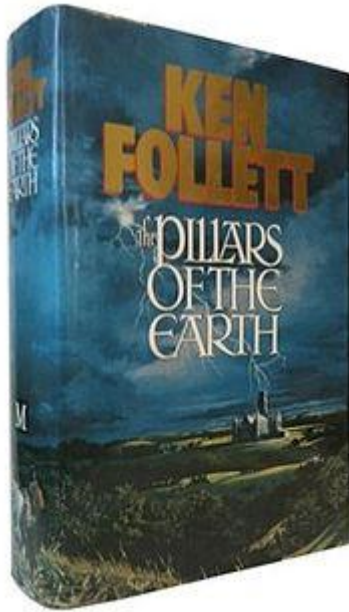
The Pillars of the Earth

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This article is about Ken Follett's novel. For the television miniseries adaptation, see [The Pillars of the Earth \(TV miniseries\)](#).

The Pillars of the Earth



1st edition

Author(s)	Ken Follett
Country	United Kingdom
Language	English
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Publisher	Macmillan
Publication date	1989
Media type	print
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Followed by	World Without End

The Pillars of the Earth is a [historical novel](#) by [Ken Follett](#) published in [1989](#) about the building of a [cathedral](#) in the fictional town of Kingsbridge, [England](#). It is set in the middle of the 12th century, primarily during [the Anarchy](#), between the time of the sinking of the [White Ship](#) and the murder of [Thomas Becket](#). The book traces the development of [Gothic architecture](#) out of the preceding [Romanesque architecture](#) and the fortunes of the Kingsbridge [priory](#) against the backdrop of actual historical events of the time.

Before this novel was published, Follett was known for writing in the [thriller](#) genre. *The Pillars of the Earth* became his best-selling work. The book was listed at no. 33 on the BBC's [Big Read](#), a 2003 survey with the goal of finding the "nation's best-loved book." The book was also selected for [Oprah's Book Club](#) in 2007. A sequel, entitled [World Without End](#), was released in October 2007.

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[\[edit\]](#) Plot

Set during the reign of King Stephen and [the Anarchy](#), the novel explores themes of intrigue and conspiracy using historical events to explore medieval architecture, civil war, secular/religious conflicts and shifting political loyalties.

[\[edit\]](#) Plot summary

Tom Builder, having lost a commission to build a home for Percy Hamleigh's son, roams southern England, seeking work. After losing his wife in childbirth and encountering the dark and empowered Ellen living in a forest cave with her son, Jack, Tom settles in Kingsbridge under the auspices of Prior Philip, who aspires to expand his priory by rebuilding a cathedral.

Seeking construction funds, Philip appeals to King Stephen and is given land and the right to take stone from the quarry. The quarry itself, however, is granted to Percy Hamleigh as part of the earldom of Shiring. Hamleigh's interests lie elsewhere, setting up one of the many conflicts within the narrative. In addition to currying favour with the king, Hamleigh has reason to topple Bartholomew, as his daughter, Aliena, rejected Hamleigh's son, William. William finds Aliena and her brother Richard living at the castle and in revenge, he rapes her and maims Richard. Homeless and destitute, Aliena and Richard travel to petition the king, and instead find their dying father in prison. Both swear an oath that Richard will regain the earldom. Aliena works to support Richard in becoming a knight for King Stephen, fighting in the civil war against Maud. William also fights for the king, but Richard gains his favour when he defends him at the [Battle of Lincoln](#).

Tom, meanwhile, has been building the cathedral, and living with his children, Alfred and Martha, his lover Ellen and her son Jack. Alfred despises and bullies Jack, and one fight reveals that Ellen and Tom are not married, bringing a charge of fornication. Outraged and hating the clergy, Ellen urinates on a sacred book and returns to the forest with Jack. Tom befriends Prior Philip and when Ellen returns, he persuades Philip to forgive her and allow them to marry. Now both masons, Jack and Alfred fight again. While the better mason and a skilled sculptor, Jack is expelled from the cathedral construction and is compelled to become a novice monk to stay in Kingsbridge.

Upon Sir Percy's death, William and Richard compete for the earldom but it has been bankrupted by the prosperity of Kingsbridge at Shiring's expense. Attempting to restore his fortunes, William burns down Kingsbridge and kills many people including Tom Builder. Aliena loses her fortune again, forcing her to agree to marry Alfred as he promised to support Richard in exchange. However, Jack and Aliena spend the night before her wedding together but Aliena marries Alfred regardless and Ellen curses the wedding, rendering Alfred impotent.

Despondent, Jack goes to [France](#) and hones his skills as a sculptor and mason, unaware that Aliena is pregnant. In Kingsbridge, Alfred persuades Philip to replace the wooden roof with a stone vault. The building collapses during a service, killing many people but revealing that Aliena has given birth to a red-headed son, causing Alfred to disown her as he is not the father. Jack cleans up the mess after Aliena brings him home but Philip forbids the union until her marriage is annulled: an act requiring Waleran Bigod's approval. This is not forthcoming since Bigod and the Hamleighs are allies, intending to ruin Philip and Aliena.

Meanwhile, Richard has joined the forces of Maud's son, Henry, [Count of Anjou](#). When Henry invades, Stephen agrees to a deal whereby Henry succeeds Stephen and all properties revert to those who owned them prior to Stephen's reign. Frustrated that the earldom will not go to Richard until Stephen's death, Aliena takes action and persuades William's wife, Elizabeth, to hand the castle over to them. This forces William to return to the village of Hamleigh.

After many years, Kingsbridge cathedral is completed, thanks to inventive problem-solving by Jack. Conflict continues as Waleran accuses Prior Philip of unchastity and fornication by claiming the monk, Jonathan, is Philip's son. Ellen swears that Jonathan is Tom Builder's son but Waleran accuses her of perjury so she exposes his complicity in a conspiracy to sink the [White Ship](#) carrying [William Adelin](#), heir of [King Henry I](#). Ruined by this, Bigod lives out his days as a humble monk.

Meanwhile, William Hamleigh has led a wastrel's life and ultimately is involved with the plot to assassinate [Thomas Becket](#), the [Archbishop of Canterbury](#). Convicted of this sacrilege, William is hanged. The Pope forces King Henry's public repentance and symbolic subjugation of the crown to the church.

[\[edit\]](#) Background

In the 1999 Preface to *The Pillars of the Earth* Follett informs readers that: "When I was a boy, all my family belonged to a Puritan religious group called the [Plymouth Brethren](#). For us

a church was a bare room with rows of chairs around a central table... So I grew up pretty much ignorant of Europe's wealth of gorgeous church architecture."

When Follett embarked on the task of writing *The Pillars of the Earth* he notes that he

...read a couple of books on architecture and developed an interest in cathedrals. Before too long, it occurred to me to channel this enthusiasm into a novel. I knew it had to be a long book. It took at least thirty years to build a cathedral and most took longer because they would run out of money, or be attacked or invaded. So the story covers the entire lives of the main characters. My publishers were a little nervous about such a very unlikely subject but, paradoxically, it is my most popular book. It's also the book I'm most proud of. It recreates, quite vividly, the entire life of the village and the people who live there. You feel you know the place and the people as intimately as if you yourself were living there in the Middle Ages.^[1]

The Preface names some sources:

1. *An Outline of European Architecture*, by Nicholas Pevsner.
2. *The Cathedral Builders*, by Jean Gimpel.
3. *The Medieval Machine*, by Jean Gimpel.

The novel's Kingsbridge is fictional and not [Kingsbridge, Devon](#), or any other British town of the name. Its location is that of [Marlborough, Wiltshire](#); Follett chose it as [Winchester, Gloucester](#), and [Salisbury](#) can be reached within a few days on horseback. Kingsbridge Cathedral is based on the cathedrals of [Wells](#) and [Salisbury](#).^[2]

[\[edit\]](#) Major characters

- **Jack Jackson** (known also as **Jack Builder**): Son of Jack Shareburg (Jacques Cherbourg) and Ellen; a clever young architect and skilled stonemason trained by his stepfather Tom Builder, he has spent his life loving Aliena and dreaming of building a cathedral. He learns mathematics in Spain and the techniques of [Gothic architecture](#) in France, then builds a new Kingsbridge Cathedral, the first Gothic cathedral in England. He has a love for poetry and a knack for storytelling inherited from his father. His lifelong curiosity about his father is finally satisfied at the end through revelations from Ellen, Remigius and Waleran.
- **Tom Builder**: A penniless builder and architect whose lifelong dream is to build a cathedral; stepfather to Jack. Loyal and diligent, he has a love for building and family, though he is blind to Alfred's cruelty. Noted for his unusually tall stature, he is later killed by William Hamleigh in a raid that burnt down Kingsbridge.
- **Ellen**: Daughter of a knight. She was unusual in knowing English, French and Latin, and in being literate. The lover of Jack Shareburg and the mother of Jack Jackson, she lives in the woods and is considered by some to be a witch after she cursed the men responsible for her lover's execution; it is thought that eventually her curse destroys Percy Hamleigh and his odious son William, Prior James and Waleran Bigod. She later becomes the wife of Tom Builder. She later curses the marriage of Aliena and Alfred: the curse is thought to have effectively destroyed Alfred.
- **Prior Philip**: A resourceful and dedicated [monk](#), whose dream is to see Kingsbridge rise to greatness. He becomes the benevolent ruler of Kingsbridge — allocating

resources, organizing commerce, resolving disputes and meting out justice, essentially without armed force. His moral strictness frustrates several sympathetic characters, but is completely devoid of malice. In the novel finale he became Bishop of Kingsbridge.

- **William Hamleigh:** The son of a minor lord, with a sadistic streak and an obsession with Aliena — who, by refusing to marry him, had blocked his rise from the country [landed gentry](#) to the [nobility](#). He temporarily gains the [earldom](#) of Shiring but eventually loses it to Richard, the son of the former earl, Bartholomew. Through the machinations of Waleran Bigod, William later becomes Sheriff of Shiring and attempts to regain the earldom by attempting to arrest Richard for murder, after Richard killed Alfred for attempting to rape Aliena, but fails. He later participates in the murder of Thomas Beckett, Archbishop of Canterbury, but is witnessed by Philip and is eventually hanged for his crime. He lives for power and revenge, but fears [Hell](#), which often gives both his adversaries and his allies an advantage over him. In the end his ambitions destroy him.
- **Aliena:** Daughter to the Earl of Shiring, the intended bride of William Hamleigh. She refuses to marry him and is raped because of it, after her father loses the earldom; later she becomes the lover/wife of Jack. She is very beautiful. Makes an ill-considered vow to her dying father that she would help her brother regain the earldom, then becomes a wealthy wool merchant to support her brother's knightly ambitions. Unwisely marries Alfred and, after a long struggle, is finally reunited with Jack.
- **Richard (Richard of Kingsbridge):** Aliena's younger brother, a knight who as a young boy witnesses his sister's rape by William Hamleigh. Becomes a skilled soldier and leader, although he is completely dependent on Aliena for money. Organizes the town's defenses before William's attempted second raid on Kingsbridge. Becomes the Earl of Shiring but is obliged to join a [Crusade](#) after killing Alfred. Settles in the Holy Land leaving Aliena to run the Earldom. Upon Richard's death in an earthquake, Aliena's son, Tommy, becomes Earl.
- **Alfred Builder:** Tom's son, a dimwitted and often cruel mason who later marries Aliena. As a youth he repeatedly beats Jack; as a man he marries Aliena for spite, to keep Jack from having her, and is consistently impotent with her. Without strengthening the supporting walls, he builds a stone vault on Kingsbridge Cathedral, which collapses, killing dozens, the day it is dedicated. He is eventually killed by Richard when he tries to rape Aliena.
- **Agnes:** First wife of Tom Builder and mother to Martha and Alfred. The daughter of a priest and his housekeeper, she is literate, and values cleanliness and security. Despite her disapproval of Tom's dream of building a cathedral, she never regrets marrying him. She dies of blood loss, starving and freezing in the woods, while giving birth to Jonathan.
- **Martha:** Daughter of Tom, sister to Alfred, stepsister to Jack. Timid and mild-mannered, often bullied by Alfred. She is in love with Jack, but realizing he will never return her feelings, she dedicates her life to serving him and his wife and children, remaining unmarried. In the sequel [World Without End](#), however, several of the main characters (including Edmund Wooler, Caris, Petranella, Prior Anthony, and Prior Godwyn) are descendants of Martha, so the character must have had some kind of relationship resulting in children, though not described in the novel.^[3]
- **Bishop Waleran Bigod:** An ambitious, devious, and corrupt cleric, who constantly schemes his way into more power. He uses Philip to become Bishop of Kingsbridge in return for using his powers as archdeacon to nominate Philip as Prior. Waleran later

attempts to use the burning of Kingsbridge Cathedral as an excuse to gain Shiring after Earl Bartholomew's downfall in order to fund the building of his castle under the pretext that the earldom will be used to rebuild the cathedral. He attempts to manipulate Philip into helping him and nearly succeeds in doing so, but is outwitted by Philip when he realizes his deception, thus leading to a lasting feud between the two. He allies himself with the Hamleighs and often plots with William to bring about Philip's and Aliena's downfall. He eventually outwits himself when he accuses Philip of fornication and being Jonathan's father, but Ellen exposes his perjury (in which he had falsely condemned Jack Shareburg for theft) and ends his career.

- **Jonathan:** Infant son of Tom and Agnes Builder but raised by Prior Philip and the Kingsbridge monks when Tom abandons him on Agnes's grave. Grows up to be even taller than Tom. Eventually succeeds Philip as Prior of Kingsbridge.
- **Lord Percy Hamleigh, Earl of Shiring:** Power-driven and greedy father of William. After disposing of the traitor Earl Bartholomew, Percy is given the earldom by King Stephen. He is an ineffective ruler who is largely influenced by his wife, Regan. He dislikes sharing the Shiring stone-quarry with Kingsbridge Priory and impedes the building of the cathedral. He dies of a seizure, leaving a weakened and indebted earldom. He was one of the three perjurers who had had Jack Shareburg hanged.
- **Lady Regan Hamleigh, Countess of Shiring:** William Hamleigh's mother. She is physically hideous, having been burned in the deliberate firing of the White Ship, but is smart and manipulative and effectively has control over her husband and son. She influences many of the decisions made by William and is the one person he truly loves. She instills in him a fear of Hell and dies of a heart attack at about the age of 60. William has a church built in her memory.

[\[edit\]](#) Minor characters

- **Jack Shareburg (Jacques Cherbourg):** a [jongleur](#) who is the only survivor of the wreck of the [White Ship](#), later lover of Ellen and father of Jack Jackson; hanged in the Prologue.
- **Francis of Gwynedd:** Philip's brother, orphaned with him in Wales and raised by monks; chooses to become a secular diocesan priest rather than a monk affiliated with a religious order. Becomes the secretary of Robert of Gloucester, later of Empress Maud, then of Henry II. More worldly than Philip, he saves his brother when he is taken prisoner after a battle; he gives him valuable political insight and inside information.
- **Tommy (later called Thomas):** son of Jack and Aliena. With no talent for building but a talent for administration and command, he becomes the Earl of Shiring and orders William's hanging for his involvement in the assassination of the Archbishop of Canterbury.
- **Sally:** daughter of Jack and Aliena. She takes after Jack and becomes an artisan working on the Kingsbridge Cathedral, designing and making the stained-glass windows.
- **Raschid Alharoun:** Jack's friend in Toledo, a Christian Arab merchant, who introduces Jack to many scholars, scientists, and mathematicians (who are engaged in translating [Euclid](#) from [Arabic](#) into [Latin](#)). Jack comes close to marrying Raschid's daughter, but he decides he'd rather build a cathedral in Kingsbridge than rich merchants' houses in Toledo; he resumes his travels and is found by Aliena.

- **Walter:** William Hamleigh's groom/squire. Accompanies him through much of the novel, joining in many of his crimes, and assists in the memorable attack on Aliena and Richard.
- **Johnny Eightpence:** A dimwitted yet resourceful monk who nurses baby Jonathan by dipping a twisted rag in goats' milk. This act prompts Philip to take Johnny with him to Kingsbridge to assist in young Jonathan's upbringing.
- **Remigius:** The former Sub-Prior of Kingsbridge under the old Prior James. He attempts to secure the position of Prior, but Philip's appearance and election foils Remigius's ambitions. He then serves as Philip's Sub-Prior, but also becomes an ally to Waleran Bigod. After leaving the Abbey, then subsequently falling from Waleran's favour, he is forced to beg until being invited back by Philip, to live out his days as a lowly monk. His testimony at Philip's trial helps to clear Philip, as he had heard the last confession of Prior James (Philip's predecessor) regarding Jack Shareburg's framing for theft.
- **Cuthbert Whitehead:** Kingsbridge Priory's cellarer. An early ally of Philip after his arrival in Kingsbridge.
- **Milius Bursar:** Kingsbridge Priory's former kitchener and later bursar, responsible for the accounts of the Priory, he is also an early ally of Philip's and aids him in becoming Prior and running the priory.
- **Elisabeth:** An innocent young fourteen year old girl who was betrothed to William Hamleigh to become the Countess Hamleigh. On her wedding night she was beaten by William and went on to despise him. She worked with Aliena on the plot to overthrow William by distracting his Men at Arms while William was away at Earls castle allowing Richard's army to ride through the gates and claim his Earldom.
- **Bartholomew, Earl of Shiring:** The Earl of Shiring and the father of Aliena and Richard. He earns the enmity of the Hamleighs after he supports his daughter's decision to spurn their son, William. This, as well as his support for Maud, leads to Lord Percy leading an assault on Earls castle in order to bring Bartholomew to justice and to ,hopefully, gain the earldom for himself. He surrenders, on the condition that no harm came to his daughter and the servants, and is imprisoned because of his treason. Aliena and Richard eventually find him, but is ill and near-death. He makes Richard take a vow to reclaim Shiring, his birthright, and makes Aliena vow to assist Richard in his vow. He orders them to leave, and dies months later.

[\[edit\]](#) Adaptations

[\[edit\]](#) Board games

There have been three separate [board games](#) based on *The Pillars of the Earth*.

A [German-style board game](#) by [Michael Rieneck](#) and [Stefan Stadler](#) was published in 2006^[4] by [Kosmos](#) and released at the [Spiel](#) game fair as *Die Säulen der Erde* . The game sold out long before the fair ended. It has been awarded the 2007 [Deutscher Spiele Preis](#), the Spanish "Game of the Year 2007"^[5] and the Norwegian "Best Family Game of 2007"^[6] and the [GAMES Magazine Game of the Year 2007](#).^[6] An [expansion pack](#) was published in 2007 and English-language versions of both the base game and the expansion have been published by [Mayfair Games](#).

A 2 player game was published by Kosmos in Germany and reprinted in the US as Pillars of the Earth: Builder's Duel.

A different, [trivia](#) game attributed to [E. Follett](#) was first published in 2008 by British publisher [Sophisticated Games](#).

[\[edit\]](#) Television adaptation

Main article: [The Pillars of the Earth \(TV miniseries\)](#)

A German-Canadian co-production spearheaded by Munich-based Tandem Communications and Montreal-based [Muse Entertainment](#) in association with [Ridley Scott](#)'s Scott Free Films signed up actors to bring this historical novel to television.^[7] It premiered on July 23, 2010, in Canada on [The Movie Network/Movie Central](#) and in the United States on [Starz](#). Its UK premiere began in October 2010 at 9pm on [Channel 4](#).

[\[edit\]](#) See also

- [The Cathedral](#) by Joris-Karl Huysmans
- [Anno 1404](#)

[\[edit\]](#) References

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- ↑ ["Pillars of the Earth and World Without End character tree"](#). ken-follett.com.
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- ↑ Castro, Jesús Torres (2007-12-24). ["JESS: Los Pilaes de la Tierra - JdA 2007"](#). *Boardgame News*. Retrieved 2007-12-24.
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- ↑ Guider, Elizabeth; Roxborough, Scott (June 8, 2009). ["Three sign on for 'Pillars of the Earth'"](#). The Hollywood Reporter. Archived from [the original](#) on June 11, 2009.

[\[edit\]](#) External links

- [The Pillars of the Earth](#) on Ken Follett's website
- [The Pillars of the Earth series official website](#)
- [IMDb listing for Mini-series](#)
- [Tandem Communications' Pillars pages](#)

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[Works](#) by **[Ken Follett](#)**

Thrillers

- [*Eye of the Needle*](#) (1978)
- [*Triple*](#) (1979)
- [*The Key to Rebecca*](#) (1980)
- [*The Man from St. Petersburg*](#) (1982)
- [*Lie Down with Lions*](#) (1986)
- [*Night Over Water*](#) (1991)
- [*A Dangerous Fortune*](#) (1993)
- [*The Third Twin*](#) (1996)
- [*The Hammer of Eden*](#) (1998)
- [*Code to Zero*](#) (2000)
- [*Jackdaws*](#) (2001)
- [*Hornet Flight*](#) (2002)
- [*Whiteout*](#) (2004)

Historical novels

- [*On Wings of Eagles*](#) (1983)
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