

Mortimer History Society



Newsletter No.12 June 2013

PRESIDENTS: Carol & John Challis, Dr Paul Dryburgh, Dr Ian Mortimer CHAIRMAN: John Grove
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AUTUMN MHS STUDY DAY

12 OCTOBER

Study Day on Heraldry



Mascall Centre
Lower Galdeford
Ludlow SY8 1RZ
10.00 - 15.30
A practical introduction to heraldry with special reference to the Mortimers followed by a visit to St Laurence's Church which contains a wealth of heraldry including a 14th century Mortimer window.

Full details will be posted on the MHS website shortly and UK members without computers will receive information by post.

CHAIRMAN'S LETTER

Dear Friends,

Once again a big 'thank you' for everyone's contribution to our successful Spring Conference. This was our fourth such conference. Not only did we have a good attendance of some 80 people, but the level of the contributions was, as usual, exceptionally high. As you can see from the summaries, they were bristling with interest and inspiration.

In particular we greatly welcomed the launch by our deputy chairman, Paul Remfry, of his unique and totally new translation of the Wigmore Chronicle. In some ways it is a highly specialised contribution to our understanding of history, but it throws a fascinating light on the compilation of historical records, as well as leading us into a different perspective on the Mortimer family. Our congratulations to Paul for his great work!

You can see from this Newsletter, that the Society is going from strength to strength with a new website, several developing activities, and an active committee with new ideas. If you feel that you would like to make a more active contribution, do contact us, and please support our growing programme.

Finally our Congratulations to Dr. Ian Mortimer, on his BBC 2 series *The Time Traveller's Guide to Elizabethan England*. The first part was lucid and fascinating and well-received. We look forward to successive Friday nights!

John Grove

OTHER EVENTS

11-28 JUNE

Blanche Dress Display

Leominster Library
on the landing

13 JULY

WIGMORE VILLAGE through the ages

in aid of St James Church Fund
2pm Blanche display & talk
by D&T Group - in the Church
Tour of the castle, if dry
Contact Margot for
programme details



14-15 September

Re-enactment of
Battle of Mortimer Cross
Hampton Court Castle
Hope-under-Dinmore

WIGMORE THROUGH THE AGES

Saturday 13 July

Morning: Exhibitions in Wigmore Village Hall
2pm Display & talk in Wigmore Church
Blanche Mortimer & her Family
4pm Guided walk to Wigmore Castle if dry
More details on MHS website
or Margot 01432.860040



VISIT TO USK CASTLE IN APRIL

During one of the few fine sunny days in April, MHS members enjoyed a good tour of Usk Castle. John Grove described how this beautiful castle had provided a relatively comfortable medieval home rather than a fortification for hundreds of years, with a banqueting hall, a solarium and guest rooms in a range of buildings looking down over the central courtyard. The castle stands on the hill looking over Usk town, guarding the valleys northwards towards Monmouthshire and south and west into south and central Wales. John told us plenty of interesting tales of the people who have lived there, including the later Mortimer family members. We learnt much more about these Mortimers at the May Conference (*see page 4*).

REPORT OF MHS DRESS & TEXTILES GROUP

After the very successful launch of the Blanche Mortimer Dress Project at Much Marcle in March, the dress display appeared at Ross-on-Wye Visitors Centre in Ross Market Place for several weeks. Blanche's next appearances were at the May Conference at Earl Mortimer College in Leominster and the Local History Day at Hereford 6th Form College which was attended by 'history' people from all over the county from Ross in the south to Kington in the north. Blanche also spent a day at Ayrton Church during the Blossom Time at Putley, near Much Marcle (*unfortunately no blossom*). As people came back from a long walk around Marcle Ridge, and had a ploughman's lunch in the ancient barn, they visited the lovely little church Ayrton to see Blanche. The Dress & Textile Group are helping with arrangements for the *Wigmore Through the Ages* day on 13 July - *see front cover*. Through June the Blanche display is set up at Leominster Library until 28 June. Meanwhile, a booklet is being prepared with all the information we have collected during the project - on Blanche and her sisters, and on the relationships between Mortimer, Grandison and Montagu clans. Here is an excerpt from the booklet, concerning William de Montagu:



"The timing of Blanche Mortimer's and Sir Peter de Grandison's marriage in early 1330 appears to be crucial. That fateful year saw the beginning of the end of Roger Mortimer's reign of power. Three years before the Mortimer Wigmore wedding, in 1327, Sir Peter's sister Katherine de Grandison had married William de Montagu; thus Blanche's marriage meant that her father's enemy became her brother-in-law. William was a member of the royal household and King Edward's confidant. Over several generations the Montagus had been close compatriots, friends and supporters of Edwards I, II and III.

Presumably William de Montagu did not attend the Wigmore wedding as he was in Rome trying to get the Pope to support the king against Roger Mortimer. By October 1330, Roger was holding a meeting of nobles at Nottingham Castle, and accusing Montagu of treachery. Montagu and his men broke into the castle, Roger killed one of William's men before being arrested. In November, Roger was brought before the nobles of the realm at Westminster, found guilty of treason and hanged at Tyburn. It is clear that Montagu came out of 1330 the winner, and remained one of the young King Edward's most important advisers. William was rewarded with the earldom of Salisbury in 1337, was allowed to buy the wardship of Roger Mortimer's grandson Roger for 1000 marks, and for four or five years served his king loyally in battle - captured and ransomed by the French. In 1344 he was wounded at a tournament at Windsor, and died at Bisham Manor in Berkshire, buried at Bisham Priory which he had founded in 1337."

Visit of the Heraldry group to Martley , near Worcester and Ribbesford, Bewdley



Five of us spent an enjoyable time investigating a Mortimer effigy in Martley church, believed to be a direct descendant of Roger of Chirk, Sir Hugh Mortimer who died in 1460 at the battle of Wakefield while fighting for the Yorkist cause. The alabaster effigy is minus its hands, but has the head resting on a knight's helm and the feet resting on a lion. Around his neck is a chain indicating Sir Hugh's Yorkist sympathies.

After a good meal at a pub we travelled to the Church at Ribbesford. Today it is isolated, but was once the mother church of Bewdley and a Manor belonging to the Mortimers probably dating from the early 12th century. In this interesting building we found a stone coffin lid (?) leaning against the west wall bearing Mortimer arms. Just who it was made for and when, is lost to us now.

- Anne Blandford

REPORT OF THE MHS SPRING CONFERENCE 11 May 2013 CHANGING SOCIETY IN THE TIME OF RICHARD II



Dr Benjamin Thompson - descendant of the Mortimers - gave a skilful lecture illustrated by quotations from contemporary literature - Chaucer, Leyland's *Piers Plowman*, Gower sermons, rebel poems and parliamentary petitions - to describe English feudal social structure. Chaucer described the three *ideal* estates - the labouring classes, the knights and clerics. Sermons explained how the pyramid was based on labourers - these are *the feet*, working and providing for the upper classes; the knights are *the hands* protecting and providing military security, and the clerics are *the eyes* - to see and lead the Way. This view of feudal society was supposed to be inter-dependent, like the strings of a harp - the upper classes protecting and praying for the plebs who worked for and provided for the rest.

Using further quotations from the above sources, Ben Thompson showed that medieval society was made up of many more than these three tiers. There was a growing 'middle' class consisting of craftsmen and artisans; others like Chaucer's *Frankelyn* who was a country gentleman, not a knight but a local JP and MP; sergeants at law and mayors also had local power, and in the towns there was a growing class of professional men such as merchants, scholars, doctors, lawyers; and another group who were household servants. As well as these male groups, there were women, for example, Chaucer's *Wife of Bath*, and *the Prioress* - women in their own right, as well as commercially active wives of artisans and merchants; and also companions and servants to nobility. The *ideal* three-tier social structure broke up seriously after the Black Death of 1348-9, with the loss of a third of the labouring class. By the end of the 14th century the web of power and obligations that held feudal society together, loosened; serfdom could no longer go unchallenged. The poor, and others, demanded more food, wages, power and freedom to leave the land to which they were tied to find a better living elsewhere.

Here were the seeds of the Peasants Revolt of 1381 - not only amongst the *revolting* labouring class, but amongst the emerging middle classes - a mixture of the *poor commons* as they called themselves. The revolutionaries included members of the emerging middle classes, and even a sprinkling of the upper class - such as local gentry and administrators. They argued against the oppression of the feudal lords, serfdom and the tenure system; they argued that *for the mill of society to work right - might and right must go together*.



In her talk Juliet Barker explained in detail how the rebellion involved not only agricultural workers but also small-holders, bailiffs, constables and artisans. Nor was the 1381 uprising solely a rebellion against the 14 year old Richard II, but was particularly directed against the ruling Councillors - Richard's regency, and the oppressive feudal system. When the rebels reached London, the King set out from the Tower of London to meet them at Mile End and the next day at Smithfield. He appears to have given in to the rebels' demands - an end to serf and fiefdom. Juliet Barker argued that Richard did not just give in to the rebels to gain time to rally opposition. To a certain extent, he wanted to make changes to the system which oppressed his people. But when Parliament gathered a few days later, the Council pressured the young king to revoke any freedoms he had given the rebels. Once again the powerful landowners restored the status quo. How different English history would have been if the 'peasants' had achieved their radical demands. As we learnt at the May Conference in 2012, the power struggle started in 1215 with the Magna Carta - continued throughout the following centuries. By 1381 other classes were joining in the fight for the balance of power - the rights to wealth, land-holding, and personal liberty.

- Margot Miller



WHO WERE THE MORTIMERS?

Lecture by Dr Ian Mortimer at the MHS May Conference in Leominster on 'The Golden Age of the Mortimers in the time of Richard II'

In his talk about the later members of the Mortimer clan, Ian Mortimer tried to pin down more than the 'who did what, when and where' of the Mortimers. He realised that we know nothing about their characters; were they wise or simpletons? how did they decide to do what they did? Edmund Mortimer was known as *The Good* - but beyond this, we know nothing more. Ian Mortimer argued that, despite the early death of so many of the sons and heirs, they did achieve much in the following ways: through working for good government in keeping the King to account; in loyal and efficient service to the King, especially in Ireland; supporting the church through piety and service.

The reasons why we have so little concrete knowledge of the Mortimer characters are not hard to find. The Mortimers of Wigmore tended to die young: for 52 out of a total of 90 years the head of the family was under age, their estates being managed and 'farmed' by others, under royal guardianship. During the 22 years of Richard II's reign there was an adult Earl of March for only nine of them. If we add in the fact that the Mortimers were frequently on royal service in Ireland, there was an adult Earl of March in England for only five years over this period. Little is known of the Countesses either, nor of the younger sons of the family.

Dr Mortimer pointed out, however, that the term 'Mortimers' means much more than the earls of March. Once one adds in the wider family, their tenants and a variety of associates the numbers grow to a sizeable affinity of people loyal to, and dependent on, the Mortimers. Ian showed that, despite all the problems caused by the earls' minorities, the Mortimer affinity seems to have enjoyed a golden age and he gave five examples to support this:

- The Mortimers were identified with good government: the presiding officer during the Good Parliament of 1376 was a steward of the 3rd Earl of March and corrupt officials were placed in Mortimer hands for safe keeping;
- they were great supporters of the crown, serving in France, Scotland and Ireland, with the seven-year-old 4th Earl being made Lieutenant of Ireland;
- they maintained the Mortimer inheritance;
- they were devout: the 3rd earl had a reputation for spirituality and carried out major works at Wigmore Abbey.
- Finally there was their potential royal status, there being no firm law of succession at that time.



MHS visit to Wigmore Abbey October 2012

Just Published: The Wigmore Chronicle 1066 to 1377, a translation of manuscripts in the John Rylands Library, Manchester and Trinity College, Dublin

by Paul Martin Remfry 2013, £30 + p&p, available through PayPal from MHS website or www.castles99.ukprint.com
Ian Mortimer writes in the Foreword: "I find myself asking the question: were the Mortimers of Wigmore lucky? On the

one hand they were obviously very fortunate, being rich, privileged and powerful. However on the other hand, several died violent deaths and the great majority of family members born after 1260 died young - only one later son of the family reached the grand old age of forty.....



Abbot's House, Wigmore Abbey

In one respect, however, the Mortimers of Wigmore were very fortunate. No fewer than 4 extant chronicles were written at Wigmore that reflect their deeds and their position in the world - and these are in addition to the significant 15th century work of Adam Usk. Not many other medieval families are so well covered ... In the *Chronicles* you have what mattered to these men of God and their secular patrons... Their thoughts on what happened in those far-off days, which is some respects were so fleeting, have proved more enduring than the stone walls of the warriors' castles - and the abbey scriptorium where they set their scratchy pens to parchment."

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