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Forthcoming MHS Events

[BOOKING IS OPEN FOR THESE TWO EVENTS - SEE FULL DETAILS ON SUBSEQUENT PAGES](#)

Saturday 6th October 2018 - *MHS Autumn Symposium*

An informal and inexpensive day of talks on a variety of subjects

10.00 - 16.15 in Ludlow Methodist Church - *for full details and booking see below*

Saturday 10th November 2018 - *Castles in the Welsh Marches: Trouble and Strife in the Middle Ages*

10.00 - 13.00 in Grange Court, Leominster - *for full details and booking see below*

[OTHER DATES FOR YOUR DIARY](#)

Saturday 10th February 2019 - *The Wigmore Chronicle and other Manuscripts*

10.00 - 13.00 in College Hall, Hereford Cathedral

Saturday 10th March 2019 - *The Medieval Castle and Borough of Richard's Castle*

10.00 AGM - open to all; 11.00 Talk by MHS Secretary, Philip Hume followed by a tour of the castle
- in Richard's Castle Village Hall

Saturday 18th May 2019 - Spring Conference

The Mortimers to 1330: from Wigmore to ruler of England

in Leominster Priory

Saturday 29th June 2019 - Joint Conference with the Richard III Society

The Mortimer Inheritance: Key to the Yorkist Crown

In Ludlow Assembly Rooms and St Laurence's Church

AUTUMN SYMPOSIUM

SATURDAY 6TH OCTOBER 2018
LUDLOW METHODIST CHURCH 10AM TO 4.15PM

Richard III's skull
© Leicester University



MORTIMER
History Society

Programme

- 09.15 Reception and Refreshments
- 10.00 Welcome and Introduction
- 10.05 **Fishing in Troubled Waters: Scottish Intrigue & Interference in Wales, 1315 - 1327**
Ethan Gould - Prizewinner in the MHS 2017 Essay Competition
- 10.55 **Bastardy & Dynasty: Thomas Mortimer & the Survival of the Earls of March in the Late 14th Century** **Sara Hanna-Black** - Trustee of the Mortimer History Society
- 11.25 Refreshments
- 11.50 **Elizabeth Mortimer in Fact & Fiction**
Anne O'Brien - The Sunday Times Bestselling Author
- 12.40 **The Traitors Arms - Decoding a Medieval Mystery**
Posy Hill - Writer & Historian
- 1.10 Lunch Break
- 2.35 **The Mortimer Retinue for War, 1277-1422: A Traditional Marcher Affinity in Changing Times?** **Dr. David Simpkin** - Author of 'The English Aristocracy at War'
- 3.25 **Discovering How Richard III Died: Modern Forensic Analysis of a 500 Year Old King**
Professor Sarah Hainsworth - Pro-Vice Chancellor of Aston University
- 4.15 End of Symposium

Symposium Fee: Members £13.00 Non-Members £16

For Full Details and Booking Arrangements - [Click Here](#)



CASTLES IN THE WELSH MARCHES & WALES: TROUBLE AND STRIFE IN THE MIDDLE AGES

GRANGE COURT, LEOMINSTER

Saturday 10th November – 10.00am to 1.00pm

Members £9.00 Non-Members £13.00

10.00am **After Hen Domen: Earth and Timber Castles in Mid Wales & the Central Marches**
[Will Davies, CADW](#)

It is well documented that the Welsh Marches contain arguably the greatest concentration of medieval castles in Europe, the majority of which were of earth and timber. Over 25 years on from the conclusion of the pioneering Hen Domen excavations, this talk will set out our current state of knowledge of these timber castles in the region with their great variety in form, scale, location, function and origin and our approaches to their survey, research and conservation. [Will Davies](#), is CADW's inspector of ancient monuments in East Wales and has an overriding interest in medieval castles.

10.45am **Anglo-Norman Stone Castles in the Central Marches**
[Bill Zajac, CADW](#)

This talk will survey the evidence provided by historical sources, archaeology and the surviving monuments themselves for an understanding of the role of masonry castles in the central Marches in the period between the arrival of the Normans and the end of the thirteenth century. [Bill Zajac](#) joined CADW publications in 2001 and in 2016 was part of the team that steered the Historic Environment (Wales) Act 2016 through the Welsh National Assembly.

11.30 Questions

11.40 Refreshments

12.10 **Castles of the Welsh Princes: An Overview**
[Dr. John Kenyon](#)

Sometimes ignored by those studying castles in Britain, this presentation will provide an overview of the range of castles in north and south Wales that were built by largely independent Welsh princes and lords, ending with that built by the first Welshman to enter the English peerage. [Dr. Kenyon](#) is a Research Fellow at the National Museum of Wales and an Associate at Cardiff University. He has written extensively on both Welsh and English castles.

12.55 Questions.

1.00pm Finish



For full details and booking information - [click here](#)

We celebrate our tenth anniversary in 2019

In May 2009, John Grove gave a stirring talk about the Mortimers to a packed audience at Much Marcle Memorial Hall and proposed the formation of a new society. The idea was greeted with enthusiasm and on 24th October the first AGM was held in Wigmore, together with a guided tour of the castle and an inaugural dinner. Nine years on, we have a global membership of over 300; a full programme of events with over 100 people attending our conferences; the annual MHS Essay Prize; the hard-copy MHS Journal containing academic articles; the quarterly *Mortimer Matters* containing news and popular articles; the publication of *On the Trail of the Mortimers* and the MHS Schools Programme in many of the primary schools in 'Mortimer Country'. It's an impressive achievement by any standard.

Although the Society also embraces the history of the Welsh Marches and medieval life in general, we will be celebrating our 10th anniversary next year by returning to our roots; so 2019 will be mostly about the Mortimers. Here is a list of the Mortimer-themed events being planned:

- February **The Wigmore Chronicle and other documents** - in Hereford
- May **The Mortimers to 1330** - our Spring Conference in Leominster
- June **The Mortimer Inheritance: key to the Yorkist Crown**
- a joint conference with the Richard III Society in Ludlow
- September **Visit to Wigmore Castle and Wigmore Abbey**
- November **The Mortimers and Ireland** - in Church Stretton



Prof. David Carpenter
on Magna Carta

Four other Mortimer-related initiatives are planned for 2019

- Produce a poster showing the family tree of the Mortimers of Wigmore
- Create an online Mortimer bibliography
- Start a major project to translate and publish the various Wigmore Chronicles that describe the early history of the Mortimers
- Collate and publish the articles on Mortimer history currently being serialised in *Mortimer Matters* to provide a simple introduction to the key members of the family

Finally we are working on a development that will be of interest to all our members who live a long way from the Welsh Marches. During 2019 we'll be experimenting with **podcasts** so an increasing number of our talks will be available on our website.

It should prove a very busy and stimulating year.

Would you like to be able to read Medieval Documents?

Have a look at this free online Latin course at www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/latin

New Members

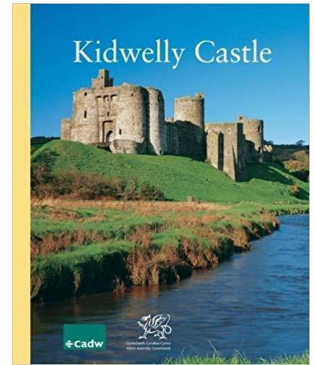
We welcome the following new members to the Society

John Bacon	Dorset UK	Angela Iliff	Bristol UK
Susan Benyon-Tinker	Devon UK	Hilary Jones	Herefordshire UK
Simi Bignall	Somerset UK	Ashley Mantle	Worcestershire UK
Yvonne Clark	Lancashire UK	Margaret Melhuish	Somerset UK
Jean Edwards	Worcestershire UK	Evan Mortimer	North Yorkshire UK
Matthew Edwards	Leicestershire UK	Jackie Smith	Kent UK
Margaret Halstead	Conwy, Wales UK	Colin Sowden	Monmouthshire, Wales UK

MHS Writers - Dr John R Kenyon

Head librarian at the National Museum of Wales until his retirement in 2013, John Kenyon is passionate about medieval castles and has written extensively about them. As well as numerous academic papers, John wrote the CADW guides to Kidwelly and Raglan castles and the English Heritage Red Guides to Middleham and Helmsley. His major works include *Medieval Fortifications* and *The Medieval Castles of Wales*.

John remains at the centre of research in the UK as representative for Wales on the Castles Studies Group. We are delighted that he will be speaking on *Castles of the Welsh Princes* at our Study Morning in Leominster in November



MHS Study Visit to Cefnlllys Castles and Abbey Cwm Hir - 22 July 2018

A group of members and non-members enjoyed the sunshine as they explored the dramatic site of Cefnlllys Castle and the romantic ruins of Abbey Cwm Hir. The castle and the abbey are two important Mortimer sites near to Llandrindod Wells in what became Radnorshire.



Aerial view of Cefnlllys, clearly showing both castle sites

The group assembled by Shaky Bridge at the bottom of the steep escarpment that rises up to the ridge where Cefnlllys castles are sited. Philip Hume gave a brief introduction to the history of the castles and the role that they played in the 200-year long conflict between the Mortimers and the native Welsh Princes for control of the district of Maelienydd. Mike Beazley talked about the role and life of the military garrison in the castle and demonstrated the use of the crossbow. Jason O'Keefe spoke about the use of the longbow and Terry Cousins informed the group about the medieval borough that developed around the church by the river.

Following the talks, it was time to ascend to the castles. After a pleasant stroll across the bridge and through a field the group began to appreciate the defensive benefits of the site as they began to toil up the steep slopes to the ridge at the top. The effort was rewarded - in addition to being able to walk around the earthworks of the two castles at either end of the ridge, the sunny day allowed fantastic views across Radnorshire. A steep scramble down was rewarded by the lunch break, during which members were able to have a go at shooting the crossbow and investigate the various items of equipment that Mike and Jason had brought to show people.

After lunch, the group drove to the ruins of Abbey Cwm Hir, where Philip again provided a brief introduction to the history of the Abbey and its connection to the Mortimers. Although there are now only a few ruined walls, when it was first built in the early 13th century it had the third longest nave in the whole of England and Wales, surpassed only by Durham and Winchester Cathedrals. The group then explored the tranquil site.



On the site of the southern castle at Cefnlllys

Several participants asked if Philip could write up his talks on the history of the castle and the abbey. Unfortunately there isn't space in this edition but an article will be included in the next one.

Ewyas Lacy and the Mortimers

by Martin Cook. The village of Longtown in the hundred of Ewyas Lacy lies in a remote corner of south-west Herefordshire, north of Abergavenny, between the Golden Valley and the Black Mountains of Wales. Martin is the Membership Secretary of the Longtown and District Historical Society and was one of the managers of the lottery-funded Longtown Castles Project.

Roger de Mortimer, later 1st Earl of March, acquired much of his wealth and property through his marriage in 1301 to Joan de Geneville, the granddaughter of Maud de Lacy. This included Ludlow Castle, extensive properties in Ireland and a moiety or half share of the honour of Ewyas Lacy. The Longtown Castles Project, a programme of archaeology and historical research, has established a new evidence-based history for Ewyas Lacy and overturned much of what has been assumed by earlier researchers.

Excavation has shown that the castle at Longtown had early origins. It began as a Roman auxillary fort, part of the line of forts set up to control the border with the Silures and the Ordovices, two unconquered tribes occupying what is now Wales. In 1055, Gruffydd ap Llywelyn led a united Welsh force into Hereford, looted the cathedral and burned the city. Earl Harold Godwinson, who later became King Harold, raised an English army and chased Gruffydd back into Welsh territory. Harold's army camped at Longtown's Roman fort and prepared for a Welsh attack by deepening the ditch and raising the ramparts. This explains why Longtown has a square embankment in the shape of a Roman fort but with a height more typical of a Saxon *burh* or fortified township.



*Aerial view showing the outline of the Roman fort
the round medieval tower is top right*

After 1066, William the Conqueror's most able military commander, William FitzOsbern, was appointed Earl of Hereford. He and Walter de Lacy were tasked with "defending the frontier against the Welsh, who were breathing defiance". To ensure that Hereford wouldn't burn again, William FitzOsbern began building a chain of castles from Chepstow to Wigmore, controlling the routes out of Wales. Walter de Lacy added to this line of defence with his own castles. North of Hereford, the de Lacy castles of Weobley and Ludlow flanked Wigmore, which was held by Ralph de Mortimer after FitzOsbern's son revolted in 1075. South-west of Hereford, in Ewyas Lacy, Walter built a motte and bailey at Walterstone – Walter's Town – and began to build a second one at Ponthendre as a counter to the fortification at Longtown, which was now occupied by the Welsh. Ponthendre and Longtown being only half a mile apart, this no doubt led to conflict. As a result, Walter and his followers took over the Longtown rampart and used it as the basis for a new motte and bailey. Although the earthworks at Ponthendre were nearing completion, they were now redundant and the recent excavations showed that the site was never completed or occupied.



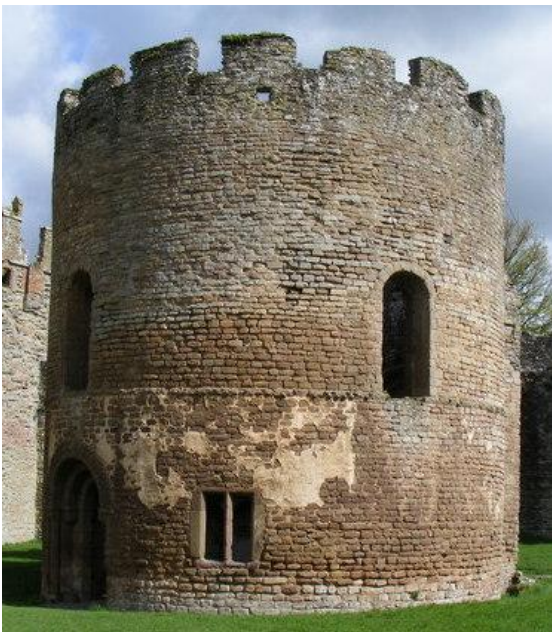
From the new castle at Longtown Walter de Lacy and his son, Roger, were able to control the whole of the upper Monnow Valley and extend their territory further into Wales. After William the Conqueror's death, Roger de Lacy, Ralph Mortimer and other barons supported the succession of Robert, duke of Normandy over his brother William Rufus. Their rebellion was unsuccessful but William Rufus needed their support on the border so allowed them to retain their properties. However, after a second conspiracy in 1096, Roger de Lacy was exiled to

Normandy and his estates were confiscated. During the civil war known as the Anarchy, Roger's son Gilbert fought to regain his father's property and eventually recovered his inheritance around 1148.

Soon afterwards, the wooden tower at Longtown was replaced with the fine drum-shaped stone keep that can be seen today. It has often been assumed that this was built in the early 13th century. However, the keep contains an arch of decorated stones, identified as the work of the School of Herefordshire Romanesque Sculpture, which was active during the second quarter of the 12th century. Although previously thought to have been re-used from an earlier building, these stones are now regarded as being part of the original build at Longtown and are an important piece of dating evidence.



Additional circumstantial evidence for a mid 12th century date for the Longtown keep is provided by the Templar chapel at Ludlow Castle. Gilbert de Lacy, Walter's grandson, became a Knight Templar and joined the Crusades around 1158. Before leaving for Palestine, he built the chapel at Ludlow in the form of a round keep, complete with crenellations and bearing a remarkable resemblance to the keep at Longtown.



The chapel at Ludlow castle



The keep at Longtown castle

Radiocarbon dates from the excavations at Longtown showed considerable activity during the 1150s and on this evidence it seems certain that Gilbert was responsible for rebuilding the Longtown keep in stone, making it one of the earliest round keeps in Britain.

Gilbert's son, Hugh de Lacy played a major part in the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland. He was awarded the Lordship of Meath, centred on the castle at Trim, and exercised vice-regal powers. The last de Lacy of Ewyas was called Walter like the first member of the dynasty. King Richard the Lionheart saw him as a threat and confiscated his lands, only returning them on payment of a huge fine. Although Walter later became Sheriff of Herefordshire, his finances never recovered. He died in 1241, blind and seriously in debt. His son was already dead, so the de Lacy estates were divided between Walter's two granddaughters, Margery and Maud. After the division of Ewyas Lacy, Longtown lost its importance as a regional centre and in 1328 it was recorded that the castle was in ruins.

Longtown Castle was part of the moiety held by Margery, so didn't come into Roger Mortimer's possession when he married Joan, Maud's granddaughter. This was to cause problems for his grandson, Roger Mortimer, the second Earl of March. In 1359, there was a breakout from Roger's prison in Ewyas Lacy and many felons escaped. Roger transferred John de Boa, who was charged with assenting to the escape, out of Ewyas to his castle at Radnor to await trial. Transferring a prisoner from one lordship to another was considered to be illegal and a contempt to the king, but Roger was pardoned when he petitioned that he held no castle in the land and lordship of Ewyas Lacy in which to hold prisoners.

Introducing the Mortimers 6: Roger Mortimer, 1st Earl of March (executed 1330)

by Hugh Wood. The story of the Mortimers spans the whole of the later medieval period from the 11th to the 15th centuries. With 15 generations of Mortimers it is difficult to get one's head around which Roger, Edmund, Hugh or Ralph we are talking about and how they relate to each other. In successive editions of Mortimer Matters we are publishing a simple introduction to the Mortimers of Wigmore in short chunks, to help new members build a picture of this colourful and important family.

In this series of brief articles about the Mortimers of Wigmore, we now come to the most powerful and colourful member of this illustrious family. Soldier and major landholder in England, Wales and Ireland, he served as a loyal supporter and lieutenant of king Edward II until circumstances led him into rebellion, surrender and a sentence of life imprisonment. Escaping from the Tower he fled to France where he forged a close alliance with Edward's discontented queen, Isabella. Together they accomplished the downfall of the king and Roger became the effective ruler of England for almost 4 years, during the minority of the new king Edward III. Unfortunately power went to his head and, overreaching himself, he was executed for treason at the age of 43.

Roger inherited the lordship of Wigmore in 1304 at the age of 17. Three years earlier, he had been married to Joan de Geneville, the 15-year-old granddaughter and heiress of Geoffrey de Geneville. Geoffrey was one of the 'Savoyard' Frenchman who came to England in the train of Henry III's queen, Eleanor of Provence. He proved to be both talented and loyal and the king greatly enriched him by arranging for him to marry the heiress Maud de Lacy. So, by his marriage to Joan de Geneville, Roger Mortimer gained extensive estates in Ireland and the Welsh Marches, including Trim in County Meath and the great castle at Ludlow, just 8 miles from his ancestral home at Wigmore.



Pembridge Church today



The great castle at Trim in Co. Meath

The Mortimers already held lands in Ireland through the marriage of Roger's grandfather to the heiress Maud de Braose. By his marriage Roger became one of the principal lords in Ireland and much of his early career was concerned with Irish affairs. As far as we know, he was the first lord of Wigmore to actually set foot in Ireland, which he visited first in 1308.

Roger was very close to his uncle, the warlike Roger Mortimer of Chirk, and in 1314 both of them were with Edward II on the Scottish campaign which resulted in the ignoble defeat at Bannockburn. Roger was captured but released by the Scottish king, Robert the Bruce, who tasked him with returning king Edward's privy seal and royal shield to him.

Edward II's humiliation at Bannockburn had been unexpected and traumatic for the English. Buoyed by his great victory, Robert the Bruce saw an opportunity to increase his authority in the region and put further pressure on the English king. English rule in Ireland was widely resented by the native Irish and Robert chose this moment of low English morale to offer the Irish a new deal, in alliance with Scotland. He sent over an army led by his brother Edward Bruce. Roger Mortimer rushed back to Ireland to defend his lands but was defeated at the battle of Kells in 1315. Though Dublin and a handful of castles, including Trim, held out against Edward Bruce, he was crowned King of Ireland on May 1st 1316.

Having returned to England following the battle of Kells, Roger distinguished himself as a soldier, both in helping to put down the rebellion of Llewelyn Bren in Wales and in the successful siege of Bristol. Recognising both his loyalty and his effectiveness as a military commander, Edward II appointed Roger to the post of King's Lieutenant in Ireland, tasked with re-establishing English rule. After careful planning and many tiresome delays, he eventually landed in Ireland with a large army on 7th April 1317. An able commander and administrator, Roger was very successful, Edward Bruce being defeated and killed in October 1318 shortly after Roger had returned home.



Roger was involved in raising Llywelyn Bren's siege of Caerphilly Castle

All was not well in England. Over many years Edward II had given undue power at court to various 'favourites'. This inevitably led to conflict with the senior earls and barons of the land. By 1318, Piers Gaveston had already come and gone, captured and summarily executed in 1312. However, the removal of Gaveston hadn't solved the problem and by 1317 he had been replaced by new favourites including the wily and avaricious Despensers, father and son. Relations between Edward II and the earl of Lancaster were at an all-time low and Roger Mortimer had been called back from Ireland to help negotiate on behalf of the king. As part of the team that negotiated a peaceful settlement with Lancaster, Roger was chosen to be one of just four barons on the permanent royal council. In March 1319, he was sent back to Ireland, this time as Justiciar, to establish a stable peace and the rule of law. He was notably successful in this and, when he returned to England the following year, he won great praise from the Dublin authorities.



Hugh Despenser the Younger

By 1320 Roger Mortimer had come a very long way in a fairly short time. Now very rich, he had demonstrated his ability as a strong and effective leader and negotiator and his loyal service ensured that he was trusted by the king. The future must have looked very bright indeed for Roger, but there was one fly in the ointment that was going to turn his world upside-down and that fly was Hugh Despenser the Younger.

Despenser was cunning, ambitious and utterly ruthless. Having skilfully managed to secure a pre-eminent place at court as the king's favourite, he exploited every opportunity for personal advancement at the expense of others and he

particularly singled out Roger Mortimer. Roger was clearly a rival, but there was a deeper reason for Despenser's hatred. At the battle of Evesham back in 1265, Roger's grandfather had slain Hugh Despenser's grandfather and this had not been forgiven. Despenser vowed to destroy Mortimer - and he almost succeeded.

As the younger Despenser's influence grew he became more and more autocratic and high-handed. The turning point arrived when, with the acquiescence of the king, he began to acquire lands in south Wales that actually belonged to other people. In this situation, all the Marcher lords felt threatened, but they were in a very difficult position. Basically loyal by nature, any move against Despenser would effectively be an act of rebellion against the king. Between a rock and a hard place they reluctantly moved into active opposition. When Roger finally joined the other barons he was quickly stripped of his title as Justiciar of Ireland. His uncle, Roger of Chirk, also joined the rebels after 50 years of loyal service to the crown.

In May 1321 Roger led a large army to attack Despenser lands in south Wales, where they wreaked havoc. He then moved to London. Faced with overwhelming opposition, the king was eventually persuaded that he had no option but to exile the Despensers. It looked as if Roger had won his personal battle with Hugh Despenser the Younger. But, although the rebels had achieved their primary objective, they were now in a very difficult position and things quickly turned against them. The king greatly resented having to banish the Despensers and could not forgive the humiliation he had suffered. He was determined to revenge himself on the Marcher lords and mustered an army. With the the Despensers now out of the country, his loyal subjects no longer had any reason to refuse his demand. Roger and his uncle saw much of their support evaporate and on 22nd January 1322, they submitted to the king at Shrewsbury. Despite the two Rogers being assured that they would be pardoned, they were placed in chains and sent to the Tower.



Westminster Hall - scene of Roger's trial in 1322

Having captured the Mortimers, Edward felt confident enough to recall the two Despensers. He now set about dealing with the rest of the rebels, led by the Earl of Lancaster, and the two forces clashed at Boroughbridge in March. The rebels were defeated and the Earl of Lancaster summarily executed. Edward's anger and vindictiveness knew no bounds and he set about hunting down and executing all those who had opposed him. In July, Roger and his uncle were tried in Westminster Hall and sentenced to death for treason. The Wheel of Fortune had turned once more: Hugh Despenser was up again and Roger was down and (almost) out. Edward II then made a

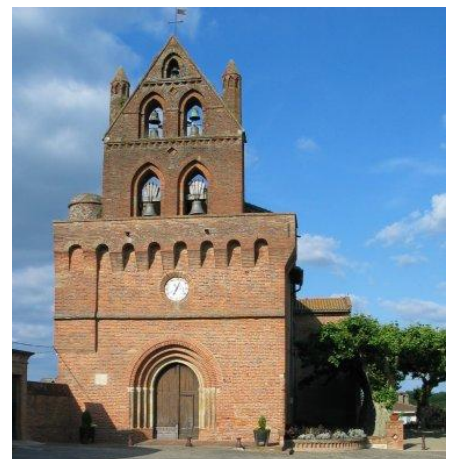
mistake that was to have dire consequences for him later: he commuted the sentences of the Mortimers to imprisonment for life.

Basking in the warmth of the king's affection and trust, Hugh Despenser was now unassailable; the king seems to have automatically approved everything he asked. His ambition knew no bounds and he set about increasing his wealth and influence further by fair means or foul. There was soon once again widespread dissatisfaction in the country but, aware of the dire fate of Lancaster, Roger Mortimer and the other rebels, opposition was necessarily sporadic and disaffection more muted.

Though incarcerated in the Tower, there is evidence that Roger still had significant support in the country and was seen as a potential saviour from the rule of Despenser. Things came to a head when, realising the potential danger, Despenser urged the king to execute Roger. Aware of the urgency of the situation, detailed plans were made by supporters to free him from the Tower. Queen Isabella certainly feared Despenser and hated what he was doing to her husband and to the country. She was ready to throw in her lot with Mortimer and was probably made aware of his impending escape. On 1st August 1323 the plans

were put into execution. First it was necessary to get most of the guards drunk and then, with inside help, he was spirited from his cell, up and over the high walls of the castle and into a waiting boat. The escape had been well-planned and he was out of the country within a couple of days.

Roger made his way to Paris. This was an astute move as there was already tension between Charles IV of France and Edward II over Gascony and Roger was welcomed as an ally. Edward had so far failed to do homage to the French king for lands he held in Gascony and was failing in his duty to maintain law and order there. Moreover Charles was Queen Isabella's brother and he will have been very aware that her situation in England was unhappy. Edward's infatuation with Hugh Despenser meant that the queen



The priory at Saint-Sardos , a village in Gascony at the centre of a short war in 1324

was increasingly isolated. Just like Iago in *Othello*, Despensers worked to undermine the king's trust in his queen. Because she had tried to argue against some of Despensers's decisions, she was now suspected of being in league with Roger Mortimer. Her income was drastically reduced and other measures were taken to humiliate her.

Things were threatening to escalate out of control when Edward II eventually agreed to Charles's subtle suggestion that Isabella should negotiate on his behalf. It was with great joy that she was able to leave England in March 1325. Throughout the negotiations there remained the thorny issue of Edward's homage to Charles. Very reluctantly the king eventually decided to go to France, but Hugh Despenser feared for his life if the king left him alone in England. So the fateful decision was taken to send Prince Edward, the heir to the throne, instead. Alongside the Prince's arrival in Paris came a firm demand from Edward that Isabella should return home immediately. But she was not so naive. Re-united with her son, accepted at the French court and with Roger Mortimer waiting in the wings, she stayed where she was.

One of the strict conditions Edward laid down before he allowed his queen to travel to France was that she should have no contact with 'The Mortimer' and certainly Roger was in Hainault in northern France when she arrived. There is no hard evidence that Roger and Isabella became lovers, but it seems highly likely. United by a strong desire to rid England of Hugh Despenser they worked together to plot his downfall. Potential supporters in England must have been encouraged as these two key people presented a united front. Though their key objective was the removal of the Despensers, Roger & Isabella came to accept that their actions would inevitably have much more serious consequences. An attack on Despenser was an attack on Edward himself and there is no way the king would have forgiven his queen or Roger Mortimer for removing his favourite. So for their own long-term security Edward II would have to go too.



Prince Edward giving homage to Charles IV accompanied by his mother, Queen Isabella



Roger and Isabella on board ship

Roger and Isabella planned an invasion of England and a fleet was assembled with the help of Count William of Hainault. Before the final decision was taken, both sides made demands: Isabella insisted that Despenser should be exiled; Edward urged his son to leave Isabella and return to England; but nothing happened. Just before sailing, Roger heard that his old uncle, Roger Mortimer of Chirk had died in the Tower, while in the custody of Hugh Despenser. Failure to remove Despenser was to cost Edward his crown and maybe his life. On 24th September 1326, Roger and Isabella landed in Suffolk with possibly as few as 1100 men.

Edward didn't see this small force of foreigners as much of a threat. He summoned the huge total of 47,640 men to take up arms immediately and offered a reward of £1,000 for Roger's head. But Roger and Isabella played their cards well. Though Roger was the military commander, Isabella now took the lead and she presented herself as a religious and deeply-wronged queen coming with her son, the heir to the

throne, to rid the country of the pernicious Despenser. It was the right approach and the numbers going to her aid grew rapidly. Edward's great army failed to materialise and his support quickly evaporated. By late October the king was on the run with Hugh Despenser and a few retainers.

Now in complete control of the government of the country, Roger and Isabella appointed the 14 year old Prince Edward in his father's place, a move that was generally acceptable in the circumstances. And now a bitter revenge could finally be exacted for the Despensers' years of malpractice and self-aggrandisement. Hugh Despenser the Elder was executed at Bristol. His son was with Edward in Wales and they were eventually captured near Neath. Despenser was taken to Hereford where a tribunal prepared a detailed inventory of his misdemeanours. This almost endless list was read out in the market square before Roger and Isabella. He was then dragged to the castle to be dramatically executed. Tied to a high ladder, his penis and testicles were cut off and thrown into a large fire. His body was then cut open while he was still alive and his guts and heart removed and burnt. Then his head was cut off and his body cut into sections to be displayed in towns across the country. And so, in the ongoing vendetta between Roger and Hugh Despenser, the Wheel of Fortune had turned 180 degrees for the last time.



The death of Hugh Despenser the Younger

There remained the difficult question of what to do about Edward II. While he lived, he would always be a focal point for rebellion, but to be seen to execute an anointed king would be equally hazardous. The first step was to officially depose him and Roger skilfully managed the legal process to achieve this. On 20th January 1327 Edward was led into the great hall of Kenilworth castle where he was imprisoned. After his crimes had been read out, he offered to abdicate in favour of his son. It is not known precisely what happened to Edward II after his abdication. He was transferred to Berkeley Castle and, not surprisingly,



Effigy of Edward II on his tomb at Gloucester

attempts were soon made to free him. Then on 21st September 1327 it was announced that he had died of natural causes and his funeral was held in Gloucester cathedral on 20th December. However, it was widely believed that Edward II had actually been murdered and Roger was the obvious suspect. Be that as it may, there is absolutely no evidence to support the popular story that Edward had a red-hot 'poker' shoved into his anus to avoid any external indication of murder, or possibly as a crude reference to his supposed homosexuality. This gory tale emerged much later.

But did Edward actually die at all in 1327? There is circumstantial evidence that he was moved from Berkeley to Corfe castle and that he then survived in secret exile on the Continent for a further 15 years. But why would Roger possibly prefer Edward to survive? While recognising the political necessity for him to be officially dead, neither Roger nor

Isabella would have wanted the king's blood on their hands. Isabella was a devout Christian and, after all, Edward was her husband. And Roger knew that he was only alive because Edward commuted the death sentence passed on him in 1322. All along their real enemy was Despenser, not the king.

Roger's position after the coronation of Edward III is an interesting one. Queen Isabella was the official Regent and Roger was her friend, advisor and spokesman. This position gave him considerable autonomy and power and he was prepared to use it, often in opposition to the wishes of the other senior barons. As the king's decisions and policies actually came from him, Roger was, in reality if not legally, the ruler of the country. But he had no official position and this made him vulnerable and was to contribute to his eventual downfall. Just as the barons had objected to the upstart Piers Gaveston and the wily Despenser, they soon grew tired of this man who increasingly behaved as though he was himself the king.



The stand-off between English and Scottish troops at Stanhope Park before the surprise night-time raid by the Scots

Crucially, the young king himself began to distrust and dislike Roger. Enmity between England and Scotland persisted after Bannockburn but, while still in France, Roger and Isabella had made an important agreement with the Scots. In return for an acknowledgement of Scottish independence, the Scots would not cause problems during the impending invasion of England by Mortimer and Isabella. But such a concession to Scotland was fiercely criticised by English lords once it became known, and the official ratification was postponed. Losing patience, the Scottish king planned an invasion. An English army moved north in July 1327 to counter the threat, with the young Edward III taking part in his first military campaign. Though the two forces never seriously engaged each other, the Scots killed

several hundred English in a daring night-time raid and then withdrew back to Scotland. It was a humiliating experience and both king Edward and the northern barons blamed Roger personally for the situation and for the demeaning Treaty of Edinburgh-Northampton that followed in 1328.

All this time, of course, Roger was married to Joan de Geneville. When Roger was sent to the Tower in 1322, all his possessions were forfeit and his wife was imprisoned too. It was to be five years before Roger saw his wife again, during which time he had acquired a beautiful and powerful new partner. Joan seems to have accepted the situation philosophically, but it must nevertheless have been difficult for her when she was expected to entertain Isabella at Ludlow castle in 1329.

Roger had himself created Earl of March in 1328, a significant title as all previous earldoms had been of single counties. As the inevitable result of unbridled power, his arrogance increased and he began to 'play the king' more openly. Previously deferential towards Edward III, he now was seen to walk beside him, sit in his presence and insist that his word was obeyed rather than the king's. He organised a great Round Table tournament at Wigmore. With his queen by his side, he had himself, rather than Edward, crowned as King Arthur, an attempt to pass himself off as a member of the royal family. His own son, Geoffrey, labelled him the 'King of Folly'. Edward III would soon be 17. He was finding Roger's arrogance and control increasingly irksome and looking for a way of exerting his own authority.

It has been argued that Edward III was made aware that his father was still alive soon after the king's apparent interment at Gloucester. Certainly Edward II's brother, the earl of Kent, believed it and Roger learned that he was plotting to free the ex-king from Corfe castle. His response was as tyrannical as Despenser's had been: Kent was to lose his life and his family were to be disinherited. Though the sentence was shockingly cruel, the king felt he had no option but to agree. When it came to the earl's execution on 19th March 1330, they had difficulty finding anyone willing to cut off his head.



Corfe Castle - was Edward II imprisoned here after his "death"?

Aware that his control over the young king would not last much longer, Roger now sought to enrich himself by every means possible. By claiming that his uncle Roger Mortimer of Chirk's son was illegitimate, he even



One of the man-made tunnels under Nottingham Castle

appropriated his cousin's inheritance. Roger was now widely hated and the dénouement was not far away. When the end came, it came quickly. Parliament was meeting in Nottingham Castle in October 1330. The castle sits on top of a knoll of soft sandstone and several tunnels existed, linking street level below with the castle above. One of these actually emerged right inside the royal apartments. On the night of 19th October the castle was apparently secure and on high alert, but the existence of the tunnel was not widely known. The young king seized the opportunity to rid himself of Roger. He unlocked the door at the top of the tunnel enabling a small armed group of his close friends to enter the royal apartments. It took only a short time for Roger to be overpowered. Realising that this was her son's doing, Isabella pleaded for the "gentle Mortimer" but to no avail.

Parliament met in London on 26th November to decide his fate. Like Hugh Despenser and the Earl of Kent, he was not allowed to speak. The 14 charges against him included taking royal power and government to himself; murdering Edward II; having himself created Earl of March; keeping other advisers away from the king; using his power to enrich himself; raising money through a parliamentary grant and then spending it himself; threatening to kill the queen if she returned to her husband and ordering that his word should be obeyed rather than that of the king. The verdict was inevitable. Three days later he was taken from the Tower and dragged nearly two miles through the streets before being hanged at Tyburn.

All Roger's estates and titles were forfeit, so his son Edmund did not become Earl of March. His loyal wife, Joan, suffered greatly because of her husband's actions. When he was arrested in 1322, she was imprisoned first in Hampshire. She then suffered great hardship when transferred to Skipton castle and was later moved to Pontefract, not being released until Roger and Isabella's invasion in 1326. Although she was treated fairly leniently after Roger's arrest in 1330, Joan was not pardoned till 1336 when she was given back many of her possessions. Her family castle of Trim was restored to her in 1347 and she eventually died in 1356 at the age of 70. Queen Isabella was never accused of any misdemeanours and was given a handsome income, dying in 1358.

So it was an ignoble end for a man who, for most of his life, had the best interests of his country at heart. Hugh Despenser was a sworn enemy of Roger, and Edward II was guilty of giving him free rein to tyrannize the Mortimers and other Marcher lords. Largely a victim of circumstance, Roger rebelled to save his country. It was only in the last five years of his life, after he'd achieved his main objectives for his country, that things went badly wrong.