



# MORTIMER *Matters*

## Hugh Despenser the Younger: Marcher lord, pirate, extortionist and royal favourite

Kathryn Warner, historian, author and expert on the reign of Edward II, describes the career of the infamous Hugh Despenser the Younger and ponders the nature of his control over the first king of England to face a forced abdication.



Hugh Despenser in Tewkesbury Abbey, commissioned by his wife, Eleanor de Clare

**H**ugh Despenser the Younger, Marcher lord of Glamorgan, suffered a traitor's death in Hereford on 24 November 1326. The execution was carried out on the orders of Edward II's queen, Isabella of France, and her ally Roger Mortimer of Wigmore (b. 1287), who later became the first earl of March. Hugh had been Edward II's virtual co-ruler for the previous few years, and had become the richest and most powerful man in Wales and England. But, as they say, Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, and alienating Edward's wife, Isabella of France, was to prove Hugh's fatal error.

Isabella had begun an association with Roger Mortimer at the French court in early 1326. In September that year she, along with Roger and their allies,

invaded England, intent on bringing Hugh Despenser down. In doing so – and whether this was part of their original plan or not is debatable – they also brought down Edward II. In January 1327 Edward was forced to abdicate his throne to his and Isabella's 14-year-old son Edward III. This was the first forced abdication of any king in English history.

### An early rivalry in the Welsh March

There was already a deadly rivalry between the Despenser and Mortimer families dating back to the 1260s and the reign of Henry III, Edward's grandfather. During the baronial wars of that era, Roger Mortimer's grandfather Roger Mortimer (d. 1282), supported Henry and his son, Lord Edward, against Simon de Montfort, earl of Leicester,

while Hugh Despenser's grandfather, Hugh Despenser, justiciar of England, supported Simon. Hugh the justiciar was killed alongside Simon at the battle of Evesham in August 1265, and it's possible that Roger Mortimer was the man who killed him.

Hugh Despenser, the justiciar's son, who came to be known as Hugh Despenser the Elder, was born in 1261. Although the justiciar died fighting against Henry III and his son the future Edward I, his son Hugh the Elder became a wealthy and influential courtier and diplomat high in Edward I's favour. His mother Alina, heiress of the Basset family, married Roger Bigod, earl of Norfolk (d. 1306) after her first husband, the justiciar, was killed. In late 1285, Hugh the Elder himself married Isabella Beauchamp, daughter

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of William Beauchamp, earl of Warwick (d. 1298). Hugh Despenser the Younger, second of their six children, was born around 1288, the same year as Roger Mortimer, who was destined to become his mortal enemy and first earl of March.

## A promising but frustrated youth

Thus Hugh the Younger had an impressive family background, and in May 1306 made a brilliant marriage when the elderly Edward I matched him with his eldest granddaughter, Eleanor de Clare (b. 1292), daughter of the king's daughter Joan of Acre and Gilbert 'the Red' de Clare, earl of Gloucester (d. 1295). This marriage resulted in at least ten children born between c. 1309 and 1325.



The coronation of Edward II in 1307

Edward I died in July 1307 and was succeeded by his 23-year-old son Edward II. Although Hugh the Younger was a member of the royal family by marriage, he lived in rather straitened circumstances for the first few years of Edward's reign. Though his father, a close ally of the young king, was still in possession of the sizeable Despenser/Basset inheritance, Hugh the Younger owned no lands at all and had little royal support. Despite Edward II's obvious affection for Hugh's father and for Hugh's wife, his own eldest niece, he showed no interest in or liking for Hugh the Younger and ignored him almost entirely. Indeed, until 1314 Hugh had no power, influence or wealth whatsoever.

## A change in fortune and a rise to royal favour

Everything changed when Hugh's brother-in-law Gilbert de Clare, earl of Gloucester, was killed at the battle of Bannockburn in June 1314. As Gloucester left no children, his heirs were his three sisters, including Hugh's wife, Eleanor.

Edward II, however, who did not trust Hugh at all, affected to believe that his nephew Gloucester's widow was pregnant with the earl's son and heir as a pretext for keeping Eleanor's share of the vast de Clare inheritance in Wales, England and Ireland out of Hugh's hands. Remarkably, the king kept up the pretence until 1317, when the lands were finally partitioned. Hugh and Eleanor's share included the de Clares' mighty Marcher lordship of Glamorgan. But it seems this was not enough for Hugh. Within months of the partition, he tried to take over the neighbouring lordship of Gwynllwg, which had been given to his sister-in-law Margaret de Clare and her husband. Hugh the Younger, proving to be a particularly acquisitive newcomer to the March, soon began to disrupt the delicate balance of power there, and worse was to come when, in 1318, he was appointed as Edward II's chamberlain by the English magnates, apparently against Edward's wishes.

Somehow, however, the man whom Edward had never previously liked or trusted worked his way into the king's favour as soon as the two men started spending time together. It is clear from accounts in contemporary chronicles and from Edward II's own behaviour that the king grew to love and depend on Hugh, though precisely how he loved him is difficult to say for certain; perhaps they were lovers, perhaps not. Hugh exploited to the hilt his role as the man who, as chamberlain, controlled access to the king, and many people, remembering Edward's excessive and politically divisive favouritism towards another man he had loved, Piers Gaveston (executed in 1312), grew uneasy.

## Trouble in the March

In the early 1320s, Hugh the Younger's attempts to gain control of the Gower peninsula in South Wales pushed the already disgruntled Marcher lords into violent opposition both to him and Edward II. In May 1321, the Marchers sacked Hugh's lands and castles in Wales, in a conflict that came to be known as the Despenser War. The vandalism continued when they rampaged through Hugh's and his father's manors across England as well. At a parliament held in August 1321, the Marchers forced Edward to exile Hugh the Younger and his father from England, whereupon Hugh became a pirate in the English Channel. Soon afterwards in the winter of 1321/22, however, Edward II led a successful military campaign against the Marchers, whom he took to calling the 'Contrarians'. The victorious king recalled Hugh the Younger and his father to England, and imprisoned or

executed the leading Contrarians, including Roger Mortimer and his uncle, who were incarcerated in the Tower of London in February 1322. Eighteen months later, however, in August 1323, Roger escaped to the Continent and joined the few Contrarians who had already managed to flee from England.

## A tyrannous rule and the breaking of the royal marriage

In and after 1322, with his enemies dead, in prison or in exile, and with Edward II as infatuated with him as ever, Hugh Despenser the Younger had free rein to behave exactly as he wished. When Edward went to war against his brother-in-law Charles IV of France in 1325, Hugh was the man who directed the English war effort. Hugh behaved, and was treated by Edward, as though he had been crowned and anointed as another king of England. Unassailable at court, he embarked on a career of terror, using extortion, false imprisonment, blackmail and threats to take lands and money from numerous victims, both noble and common, men and women. His own sister-in-law, Elizabeth de Clare, was one of his many victims. The king not only tolerated Hugh's appalling behaviour but in some cases facilitated it.

Chroniclers say that the great English magnates grew frightened of Hugh, and with good reason; he was prepared to turn against even his own faithful adherents if they didn't do exactly as he wished. He had ample opportunity to make good on his threats to execute or imprison anyone who defied him and seems to have been determined to make his influence over the king absolute.

Queen Isabella had long been Edward's loyal and supportive wife and ally, but in and after 1322, Hugh the Younger did everything he could to reduce her influence as a politician, mediator and intercessor, and persuaded Edward that his wife was his enemy. The king and queen's personal relationship broke down completely. Isabella, devastated and angry, realised she couldn't rely on Edward to protect her from Hugh, whom she feared and loathed. While at her brother Charles IV's court in Paris in late 1325 with her and Edward's son and heir, Edward of Windsor (born in November 1312), she gave her husband an ultimatum: he must send Hugh Despenser away from him, or she and their son would not return to England. Edward refused, leaving the queen with little alternative but to form an alliance with the exiled Contrarians, led by Roger Mortimer, who desired Hugh's downfall and death as much as Isabella did.





Queen Isabella and Roger Mortimer join forces

### A turning of tables and the fall of the king

On 24 September 1326, a force of perhaps 1,500 men led by the queen and Roger Mortimer, with the teenage Edward of Windsor in their company, landed on the Suffolk coast. Edward II, in London, sent out numerous orders for men to muster and repel the force, but in most cases his orders were ignored or his soldiers simply joined Isabella and Roger instead, unwilling to fight in defence of the despotic and despised royal favourite or the king he so effectively controlled.

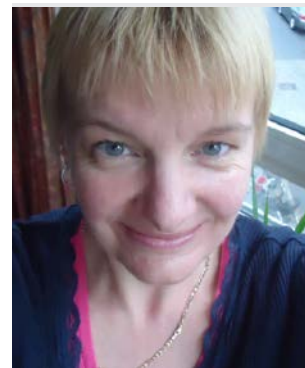
Edward and Hugh fled towards South Wales, where Hugh had built himself an empire from his wife Eleanor's inheritance and from the confiscated lands and castles of the defeated Contrarians. Even here, they found little support, and were captured on 16 November 1326. The king was placed in the custody of his cousin, Henry of Lancaster; Hugh Despenser the Younger was treated with all possible disrespect and taken to Hereford. He was given a show trial, then hanged, drawn and quartered in the presence of Queen Isabella and Roger Mortimer. The royal favourite was thus defeated and killed,

and barely two months later, the disastrous reign of Edward II, who had allowed his beloved Hugh to commit extortion on a vast scale and had failed to protect his subjects, stuttered to an end.

There can be no question that Edward II's relationship with Hugh was the doom of his reign. He had indulged favourites before and it had ended badly. His first, Piers Gaveston, had been executed by the barons, who feared and resented his control over the king. But it was Hugh's alienation of Edward's queen that proved decisive, forcing her into an alliance with the Contrarians and, inevitably, opposition to her husband, who had become Hugh's thrall. Seven hundred years later, we are left to ponder the nature of a man – Hugh Despenser the Younger – whose malign and vicious influence led to the downfall of the king that loved him to excess.



Hugh, executed in the presence of Roger Mortimer and the queen



**About the author:** Kathryn Warner grew up in the Lake District, and holds two degrees in medieval history from the University of Manchester. She is the author of many books on 14th century history, including biographies of Edward II, Isabella of France, Hugh Despenser the Younger and Philippa of Hainault.

## FROM YOUR EDITOR



In the last issue of *Mortimer Matters* we reported on an exceptional year. We're now embarking on the next, and I'm hoping that 2024 will be no less eventful and rich with new history-related endeavours. We continue to innovate, both for members and the wider community. First, we've introduced a new MHS Gift Voucher (perfect for that person who already has a Ferrari) see details on page 14. And, we're about to kick off the second

year of our MHS Bursary – our 2024 fundraising drive is underway, find out how you can give on page 4. Our events programme is heating up and we've got the details here. Our next big event is the annual AGM which, this year, will be held in the Mortimer town of Wigmore – read all about it on page 11.

And, thinking of events, hot foot from our January conference, we have a feature from speaker Erin Lloyd Jones, breaking down the myths of passive womanhood in medieval Wales (page 5). We've also news of exciting developments at Wigmore Church (site of our AGM) on page 9 and details of new faces and changing roles among your trustees and committee members (page 12).

So, lots to look forward to! I'm happy to take this opportunity to wish you a

happy and history-filled 2024!

We'd love to hear what you think about *Mortimer Matters* and the activities it reports on. Why not drop me a line at [mm@mortimerhistorysociety.org.uk](mailto:mm@mortimerhistorysociety.org.uk) and let me know your thoughts? And, remember, this is your newsletter too, so get in touch if you're keen to:

- Recommend a topic you'd like to see covered in *Mortimer Matters*
- Volunteer to write a book review or feature
- Tell us about a news item or event you'd like us to mention

I'll then get in touch to discuss your ideas and give you some useful tips on submitting your copy. We plan to publish our next issue in April and will start planning it soon, so please get in touch with your ideas quickly!

# Raising funds for this year's MHS Bursary

We want the Bursary programme we launched last year to go from strength to strength in 2024 – and we need your help. Please donate to our fund raising appeal, and do your bit to support up-and-coming historians as they advance our understanding of the medieval March of Wales.

**L**aunched last year the MHS Bursary programme is a valuable part of our commitment to support and enable new research into either the medieval March of Wales and the Marcher lordships in general, or the medieval Mortimers in particular. We need to raise at least £1,000 to support a year of study for one student. If we raise more, we can do more, so please dig deep!

Our fund raising appeal is open now! To donate, go to [www.mortimerhistorysociety.org.uk/society/bursary/donate\\_bursary/](http://www.mortimerhistorysociety.org.uk/society/bursary/donate_bursary/). Please remember to select 'Bursary Fund' in the drop-down menu.

## See what your money can do

Last year we granted our first bursary to Gabriella Williams, who is studying for a PhD at the University of Winchester. Here she tells us how the extra money is already helping her...

"In navigating the early stages of my PhD, the MHS Bursary has proven to be a significant asset," says Gabriella. "This financial assistance has allowed me to acquire essential books and primary source materials, contributing greatly to the progress of my work. Moreover, the bursary has facilitated my attendance at historical discussions, particularly the London-based Late Medieval seminars offered by the Institute of Historical Research, which provide valuable opportunities for networking and learning with my supervisors and other academics."

Gabriella has also enjoyed the first few months of her MHS membership, which was also included in the Bursary award. "I attended the Autumn Symposium virtually and the Writing the Past event in person, and I very much enjoyed all of the talks and the opportunities to meet members of the society. I'm looking forward to meeting more of you soon! Looking ahead to 2024, I plan to use the remaining funds for visits to the National Archives and the British Library, as well as attendance at the annual Fifteenth Century Conference, which this year will be hosted by Oxford University."

We all know that finances are hard for students right now, so it's especially heart-warming to hear Gabriella say, "Without the MHS bursary, I would probably have needed to take

on freelance work alongside my full-time job to finance my research trips. Instead, the bursary has allowed me to focus my free time on research, and as a result, I've already managed to draft the first 3,000 words of my thesis."

We'll announce the results of our fund raising efforts in the April edition of *Mortimer Matters*, and applications for students will open in mid-May. All Bursary recipients are required to share their learning with the Society by writing for this *Mortimer Matters* and the Journal, and by speaking at our events. So, rest assured, we'll all gain as much as we give!



Gabriella, recipient of the first MHS Bursary

Donate NOW so that we can help this year's students achieve their ambitions and improve our knowledge about the medieval March. Go to [https://mortimerhistorysociety.org.uk/society/bursary/donate\\_bursary/org.uk/donation-form](https://mortimerhistorysociety.org.uk/society/bursary/donate_bursary/org.uk/donation-form) and donate before 15 April.



# Rediscovering the medieval women of Wales

Dr Erin Lloyd Jones reprises her presentation at our January conference to introduce us to the noble and not so noble women who helped build the political and physical infrastructure of medieval Wales.



Dr Erin Lloyd Jones

As far back as the 10th century, and probably before, Wales stood as a trailblazer for equal rights. The Laws of (King) Hywel Dda, a system of native Welsh law, embraced progressive and egalitarian principles. Notably, marital dynamics differed significantly; infidelity by a man was met with consequences, and a woman's dowry was rightfully hers, with equal sharing granted only after seven years of marriage. Yet the historical narrative of medieval Wales remains overwhelmingly centred on tales of men. In this early and progressive societal landscape, why does our historical story not mirror such advancements? It begs the question: What is the authentic history, and is it now time to recalibrate history into HERstory in Medieval Wales?

Women, when noted, are usually those deemed 'notable', therefore often noble. But they are often referenced in the history books only as wives to powerful men, not in their own right. First, it's time to shout louder about their roles and impact in Wales which go far further than the traditional image of sewing and making tapestries.

## Noble is as noble does

My first example of this must be Gwenllïan. She led an army into battle against the Normans in 1136 when they took advantage of her husband's absence. There was no time to wait for his return, and so Gwenllïan took up her own sword and raised an army to lead and fight the battle herself near Kidwelly. Despite her death in that battle, her actions inspired other Welsh lords, including her brothers further north, to fight back against the greedy Normans and regain their lands. For generations to follow, the Welsh battle cry would echo with the call for 'Revenge for Gwenllïan' as they charged into the fray.

Siwan, often referred to as the 'Lady of Wales,' may have entered into Welsh royalty through a strategic alliance, but her political influence should not be overlooked. Siwan, or Joan, the illegitimate daughter of King John and the wife of Welsh prince Llywelyn ap Iorwerth (Llywelyn the Great), showcased her diplomatic astuteness on several occasions. One of her significant achievements was successfully brokering a peace settlement between Llywelyn and her father in 1211, effectively resolving a dispute centred around land ownership.

And allow me to reacquaint you with Queen Eleanor, wife of King Edward I. Eleanor was highly educated and took a keen interest in military affairs. Unusually, she accompanied the

king on his military campaigns, including those in Wales, even whilst pregnant. Beyond her royal responsibilities Eleanor amassed considerable land and could be described as a very successful medieval mortgage broker and business woman, ensuring her own financial independence. We also have insights of her commissioning her own garden, or vivarium, at Rhuddlan Castle. Although the details are lost to the depths of time, primary sources mention commissions 'in the work of the queen' for an enclosed fishpond with seating area, a fenced courtyard, and a well.



Astute Eleanor secured her financial independence



## Women workers

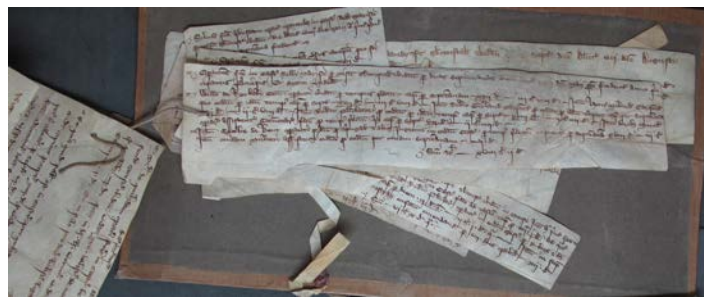
Now, let's shift our focus to women who may resonate more closely with our own experiences – those without immense wealth and influence, leading ordinary, everyday lives.

In 2016, I was tasked with reinterpreting Beaumaris Castle, the final castle erected by Edward I in north Wales. Given its royal stature, a wealth of records have survived chronicling the skilled workers integral to the castle's construction. However, amidst the narrative, a conspicuous gap emerged concerning the role of women on the medieval building site. As historical accounts painted a male-centric portrait of masons, carpenters, glaziers, and soldiers, the absence of women in the story became clear. Did wives follow their husbands to wherever paid work took them? Or were homes and families abandoned for long periods of time as workers were taken on to a new project? Delving into the early 14th century records of Beaumaris Castle's construction, a revelation emerged, challenging the notion of women as mere bystanders or 'camp followers'. Rather than being relegated to domestic roles or left behind, it became evident that women played a more robust and significant part in Medieval British society.

Attention was drawn to the accounts for Beaumaris in May 1306 by Dr Jeremy Ashbee. A 'Cecilia of Kent' and 'a woman helping her' were paid for working on pilum or pikum for 'springalds (a mechanical catapult, used for launching bolts or stones, using a crossbow configuration) and other engines'. These women were making weapons. 'Cecilia of Kent' was paid 3 shillings within this specific account, and received a weekly wage of 18d. Her assistant was paid 2d for one week. References to medieval women, especially those of non-noble birth, are uncommon and working women in trade even more so. This account at Beaumaris clearly reveals a skilled worker, with an assistant, being paid the same daily wage as a male carpenter or mason. This skilled worker just happens to be female.

This spurred me on to delve further, and I soon discovered records of other women working at nearby Caernarfon Castle: Juliana *filia fabri* (meaning 'daughter of a carpenter', Emmota *filia fabri*, Eleanor de Engelond and Julia *uxor Ade*, listed as

*hottarri* (hodmen) and *fauconarii* (mortar carriers). The re-examination of original accounts has brought to light highly-skilled early 14th century women workers in north Wales.



### Accounts from Beaumaris reveal women's work

Around the same period, financial records from the Welsh castle of Dolwyddelan document instances where other women are receiving payment. An Isabella of Chester and an Agatha of Chester are both paid for delivering supplies such as malt and oats.

These tantalising glimpses left behind in the record, but often omitted from the history books, encourage a re-evaluation of the masons who built the castles of Wales, the wonderful women of everyday Wales, and a refreshing new perspective on the role of women in medieval Britain.

The historical narrative of medieval Wales often underestimates the profound impact and multifaceted roles played by women, relegating them to the margins of recognition. Beyond the conventional depictions of queens and noblewomen, the unsung heroines were not only dynamic forces shaping the political, cultural, and societal landscapes but, quite literally, part of the building blocks of the period's legacy.

Recognising and understanding the overlooked and diverse contributions of lay women in Medieval Wales serves as a poignant reminder that historical narratives are often incomplete. It begs the question - what other captivating tales may still await discovery, offering promising insights into the untold stories of women in Wales?



Beaumaris Castle – where women made weapons

**About the author:** Erin Lloyd Jones is a historian, archaeologist and TV presenter. She has worked with the National Trust, Cadw and Creative Wales and is a regular co-presenter on BBC Wales' *Weatherman Walking*.



# MHS Chair embarks on PhD

Forty-three years after deciding the time wasn't right to start a PhD, our chairman Philip Hume has changed his mind. This month he's become a student once again – and his area of study is at the heart of Mortimer history. Here he tells about his plans to investigate the life of Roger Mortimer (d.1282) as architect of the March and regent of England, and about how, through this lens, he'll examine lordship, society, politics, and family advancement in the 13th century.

**W**hen we started this series of articles in which members of the Society describe the new and fascinating research that they are doing, I had no inkling that within just three years I'd be writing one of those articles myself. Yet, when I told Annie about my plans to study for a part-time PhD at Swansea University, your editor immediately responded that I must write the research article for this edition of *Mortimer Matters*!

My research will use the life and career of Roger Mortimer (d.1282) to explore a number of key aspects of English, Welsh, and Marcher history across the middle decades of the thirteenth century. During his lifetime, Roger propelled his

family from the standing of an important regional barony to one of the most significant and powerful families in the country. Referred to as 'one of the great architects of the late medieval March', Roger began his ascent by becoming a close friend of the Lord Edward, the heir to the throne who later became Edward I. He was then instrumental in two key events: the royalist victory over the barons in the 1260s (indeed, he personally struck the blow that killed Simon de Montfort at Evesham) and the defeat of Llywelyn ap Gruffudd in 1277. Furthermore, in the absence of the new king for two years after the death of Henry III, he was co-regent of England alongside Robert Burnell and Walter Giffard, archbishop of York.

## A reputation unresearched

The chronicler, Thomas Wykes, described Roger Mortimer as 'the most famous man and most powerful knight known through the ages.' Edward I, in a letter written to Roger's younger son, Roger of Chirk, to console him on the death of his father wrote 'As often as the king ponders over the death [of Roger] he is disturbed and mourns the more his valour and fidelity; and his long and praiseworthy services to the late king and to him recur frequently and spontaneously to his memory.' In his biography of Roger's grandson, Roger Mortimer (d.1330), Ian Mortimer describes the grandfather thus 'the elder Roger Mortimer was a heroic figure, famous throughout England, and feared throughout Wales. He was a knight of the first rank, a military commander and a champion tournament fighter ... after the death of de Montfort, the Mortimers were drawn closer to the royal family.'

Intriguingly, despite these epitaphs by his contemporaries, chroniclers, and historians, very little research has been done into the life and career of this Roger Mortimer, compared to his grandson, Roger Mortimer (d.1330). Indeed, despite the importance of this Roger to the trajectory and influence of the Mortimer family, the recently published anthology of essays on the Mortimers, edited by Paul Dryburgh and myself, doesn't include one pertaining to him, reflecting the lack of in-depth research into his life. It is my hope that my work will go some way to filling that gap.

My study will take a thematic approach by examining several aspects of Roger Mortimer's life and achievements. Placing them within the broader context of 13th century Marcher and English baronial society and politics will significantly contribute to the scholarship of a number of key aspects of the period. The four main research areas I'll address are:

### 1. Landed wealth

I'll analyse Roger's lands and Marcher aspirations by looking at how he built up his estates and landed wealth through marriage, conquest, service to the Crown



Grandfather Roger with Simon de Montfort's severed head





and legal struggles over property. Within this topic there are three particular aspects where there is real potential to add significantly to the existing scholarship.

First, by opening up new areas of knowledge about the Marcher lordships through a better understanding of the processes and mechanisms through which Roger Mortimer withdrew his lordships of Wigmore and Radnor from the county of Herefordshire, taking for himself the powers and liberties of a Marcher lord.

Second, by identifying the first stirrings of Mortimer lordship in Ireland through the management of the estates which were part of the inheritance of Roger's wife, Maud de Braose.

And third, aspects of the Mortimers' economic lordship, as Roger was possibly the only Mortimer to establish new boroughs. He rebuilt New Radnor after one of its frequent destructions, and, later, founded Newtown, moving the settlement from the hilltop outside Dolforwyn Castle into the valley below. He also founded boroughs at Cefnlllys and Knucklas.

## 2. Kinship and wider family connections

I'll assess how Roger utilised, promoted and navigated his kinship connections, both English and Welsh (through his mother, Gwladys Ddu, Roger was half-Welsh, a grandson of Llywelyn ab Iorwerth, prince of Gwynedd and ruler of Wales). Often, the study of leading

barons focuses on their involvement in politics, national affairs, military campaigns, and warfare. Emma Cavell's work, though, provides us with pointers to take a different and novel perspective – to assess a great baron in the context of family relationships. A number of studies, particularly by Emma, who will be my supervisor at Swansea, have explored the independent agency of Roger's mother, Gwladus Ddu, his wife, Maud de Braose, and their daughter Isabella, finding strong indications that Roger and Maud had a close working relationship, so too did Roger and Isabella. Assessing the ways in which a husband and wife, and indeed a whole family, worked together in joint enterprise will provide a much fuller understanding of marital dynamics and family advancement.

Roger's often (though not always) hostile relationship with his own first cousin, Llywelyn ap Gruffudd (d. 1282), prince of Wales, and the Mortimer family's role in the fall of native Wales will also be important.

## 3. Personal lordship - affinity, administrators and tenants

I'll explore Roger's relationships with his Welsh gentry and tenants, and their role in his affinity and the management of his affairs. Comparing and contrasting Mortimer's English and Welsh networks and affinities, and his relationships with tenants, will provide new insights into the lordship of the mixed and intermingled communities of a key Marcher lord.

## 4. The governance of England:

A detailed exploration of Roger Mortimer's relationship and friendship with the Lord Edward/Edward I, will provide valuable insight into the nature of patronage, friendship and mutual dependence between a prince and a baron. Arguably, this was a relationship that, as well as being transformational to Roger's own standing, was beneficial to the Lord Edward at a crucial stage in his own career. In particular, this aspect of my thesis will address Roger's role as one of the regents of England between the death of Henry III in 1272 and the delayed return from crusade and coronation of Edward in 1274, and thus his part in the continued governance of England without a king. This has never been explored before.



Overall, the aim of my PhD is to assess the ways in which this Roger Mortimer deployed all his resources and relationships to propel his family from the March of Wales to the absolute forefront of national affairs. Annie has made me promise I'll come back and update you as this work progresses. Watch this space, as they say!



# Mortimer church finds friends

The Friends of St James' Church, Wigmore has been formed to keep this important church – a spiritual home of the Mortimers – open to the public and part of its community. David Swatton, Secretary of The Friends, tells us about their work to continue 1,000 years of history – and how you can help.

At first glance, the Church of St. James, Wigmore, appears too large for a small village, but if one considers that for a brief period in the early 14th century the country was virtually ruled from Wigmore Castle, then perhaps a little architectural hubris may be excused.

Ralph de Mortemer [Mortimer] was the manorial lord of Wigmore at the time of the Domesday Book and it was he who founded a college of priests at Wigmore Church, which was consecrated in 1105.



View of St James's from Wigmore Castle

## A long history

It's likely the Norman church was built on the site of an earlier Saxon church and it has been suggested that the round shape of the churchyard may denote an earlier Celtic site. Be that as it may, the builders of the Norman church were thinking big, because the nave is one of the largest of the early Norman period. Local stonemasons would probably have been used for the bulk of the work and the classic "herringbone" style of masonry, typical of the late Anglo-Saxon period, can still be seen on the northern wall of the church.

Wigmore achieved its political apogee under Roger Mortimer, 1st earl of March, at the beginning of the 14th century. The earl lavished money on the castle to make it a palatial residence, and on the church to raise it to a status fit for the most powerful patron in the country.

Recent years, however, have not been kind to our ancient church. Over time, the local congregation has dwindled to the point that regular church services became unviable and formal closure of the church by the local Parochial Church Council (PCC) was mooted.

A proposal to convert the church into a community centre with a café was quashed in 2018 after objections from a few local residents and the parish council, and it began to look like closure was inevitable.

## The founding of The Friends

In late 2022, however, a small group of local people decided to form the Friends of St. James' Church, Wigmore with the purpose of making more use of the church building for cultural events involving the local community. With the active

support of the local rural dean, we obtained the agreement of the PCC to our constitution and to how monies raised by the Friends would be used – focused on using the building as a venue for cultural events to engage our community and enhancing the visitor experience for both local people and tourists.

**We're happy to say that the MHS AGM will be held in St James' Church on 23 March. See page 11 for details.**

We have commissioned an interpretation display that presents the history of our community through the "voices" of the people who have shaped it over the centuries – including, of course, the Mortimers. The plan is to install this in the church early in 2024. We are also planning to install a nature board in the churchyard once planning permission is obtained. Furthermore, we have prepared a diary of events for 2024. This includes musical events with the Ludlow Concert Band and Bulth Male Voice Choir, as well as talks from novelist Anne O'Brien and Conservation Advisor, Tim Bridges. You can find our full events programme at [www.friendsofstjameswigmore.org.uk](http://www.friendsofstjameswigmore.org.uk).

But, all this costs money. From performance fees to Port-a-loo rental, everything has its price. You can help us by becoming a member of The Friends. All money raised will fund future projects and subsidise our events programme. And you'll receive discounted entry to our events.

Individual membership of The Friends costs just £10 or £17 for joint membership. If you'd like to join, click the link on our website home page [www.friendsofstjameswigmore.org.uk](http://www.friendsofstjameswigmore.org.uk) or email us at [admin@friendsofstjameswigmore.org.uk](mailto:admin@friendsofstjameswigmore.org.uk) to arrange a bank transfer. Or do just get in touch if you'd like more information. You can also find us on Facebook – search for Friends of St. James' Church, Wigmore



A kite flies high over 1,000 years of history



**About the author:** Having worked as business analyst on major IT projects for large multi-nationals for 30 years, David Swatton retired to Wigmore. As Secretary of The Friends he takes care of communications and administers its website and social media.



# Joan de Geneville steps out of the shadows

In her latest book, historical fiction writer Anne O'Brien turns her attention and her pen to Joan de Geneville who, though married to Roger Mortimer, made way for a queen. Here she tells us why she's so intrigued by this enigmatic woman.

Joan de Geneville was an heiress, inheriting extensive lands in Ireland, in France, as well as in the Welsh Marches, including the impressive fortress of Ludlow Castle. Without doubt she was a valuable bride for any family with foresight and ambition; the perfect bride for Roger Mortimer (d. 1330), son and heir of the Marcher Mortimer lords.

Their marriage offered much satisfaction and even happiness. Joan travelled extensively with her husband, to Wales, to Ireland, and within the Welsh Marches, while Roger escaped death in skirmish and battle. They had twelve children who all grew to healthy adulthood.

## What could go wrong?

Threats against the lands of the Marcher lords by the royal favourite Hugh Despenser drove the area into insurrection. When raising the Mortimer banners against Despenser was interpreted as treason by King Edward II, Roger was dispatched to the Tower of London with execution hanging over

his head, while Joan and the Mortimer offspring were subjected to rigid and penurious confinement. Would this be a lifelong penance for Joan?

All was not lost. Joan and the young Mortimers were released when Roger returned from exile with an invading force. A matter, it seemed, of rejoicing. Except that Roger returned to England with Queen Isabella in a relationship that roused much comment and rumour.

For appearances' sake Joan had little choice but to work in tandem with her errant husband, to accomplish the prestigious marriages of their daughters. Did she enjoy the experience, sharing her castles and her authority with the Queen at her husband's side? Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned! Even with the accession of a youthful King Edward III there was no suggestion of change in this situation. The reins of power were firmly held by Roger and Isabella.

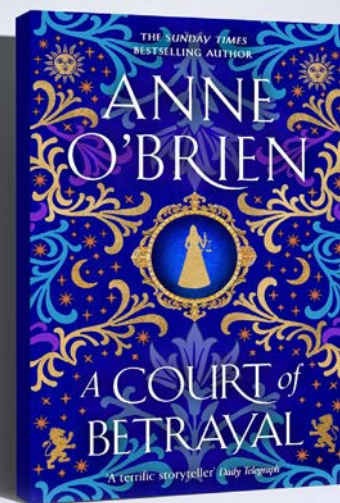
But as King Edward grew into maturity, fired with a desire for revenge, his first priority would be to take back those reins of power. All eyes turned to the Court and the inevitable Mortimer downfall.

What a denouement for this tale of treason! What would be the outcome for Roger Mortimer and for Joan? Would Joan be forced to pay the penalty of her husband becoming an over-mighty magnate, punished for the treason that took him to the scaffold?

History hides Joan under the usual medieval shadow of female anonymity, but she was far more than an obedient wife and rejected lover. Joan proved to be a woman of courage, both resourceful and resilient; a woman intent on keeping her family safe, fighting for the restoration of Mortimer land and power for future Mortimer descendants. As for Roger, in spite of everything, perhaps in the end Joan felt that she had a debt to pay to him.



Ludlow Castle – brought to the Mortimers by Joan



Joan de Geneville emerges as an irresistible protagonist in *A Court of Betrayal*, which will be published in February by Orion.

**Look out for it in bookshops.**



# Annual General Meeting

MHS AGM to be held at 10am on Saturday 23 March in St James' Church, Wigmore – the spiritual home of the Mortimer family.

The church which is our venue stands, of course, in the shadow of Wigmore Castle, the primary seat of the Mortimer family from the 11th to the 15th century. The castle is now in ruins, making it hard to imagine how it might have looked in its heyday. However, as many of you will know, the MHS has commissioned architect and castle reconstructionist Chris Jones-Jenkins to create a detailed and accurate reconstruction drawing of Wigmore Castle, which will allow us to see it at its best.



Wigmore castle – an imposing ruin

Chris' work is ongoing but, on 23 March, he'll be our very special guest speaker, giving an illustrated talk on his progress so far. He'll show how he's using a survey of the site and the architecture of the ruins alongside archival records, antiquarian representations and recent photographs to reconstruct Wigmore Castle from the ground up and to the height of its palatial splendour in the first part of the 14th

century, when its lord, Roger Mortimer, 1st earl March, held sway as de facto ruler of England.



Chris Jones-Jenkins

Following Chris' talk – and weather permitting – there will be an opportunity to visit the castle and wander through its ruins.

We are hoping, too, that our AGM will coincide with a launch, hosted by the Friends of St James', to celebrate the installation of a set of interpretive panels in the church. We are in conversation with the Friends about how we might dovetail these two events into a single celebratory day. Watch your inbox for more news as our plans progress. For more details about the work of the Friends of St James', see page 9.

**The AGM is open to all members and we do encourage you to attend. In addition to this fascinating talk, it's the place where the important business of your Society is discussed and decisions made!**

Welcome to 2024 – and our exciting programme of events. Take a note of these vital dates for your diary and watch out for more news to come!

## Saturday, 23 March 2024 AGM

Held in St James' church, Wigmore, this year's AGM will be followed by a presentation by Chris Jones-Jenkins about progress to date on his reconstruction drawing of Wigmore Castle, commissioned by the MHS.

## Saturday, 18 May Spring Conference: Landscapes of the Marches

Our first major conference of the year will be held at Ludlow Assembly Rooms and feature presentations from archaeologists, landscape historians and castle experts.

## Wednesday, 19 June John Grove Memorial Lecture

Join us at Grange Court in Leominster where Professor David Carpenter will take us on an investigation of Henry III's relationship with Wales.

## Saturday, 5 October

Autumn symposium focused on the research interests of Society members. Details to be confirmed.

**KEEP  
THE DATE!**



# New faces and changing places on the MHS committee

Your society never stands still and we're pleased to be adding to the fire power of our committee and board of trustees as we look forward to ever more ambitious plans to raise the profile of the Mortimers and the Marches.

**A**s much-loved Hugh Wood stands down after two years as MHS Chair, Philip Hume steps into his shoes. Philip has been Secretary of the society and a mainstay of its activities since 2015, so he certainly knows the ropes. He'll be assisted by *Mortimer Matters* editor Annie Garthwaite, who takes on the newly created role of Vice Chair. She thinks that means she'll be in charge of all the Society's vices, but don't worry, Philip will put her right!

Angela Iliff, Membership Secretary since 2019 will now combine this vital job with Philip's old role of Secretary for the Society.

Three new faces have joined the MHS Committee with particular and valuable expertise.



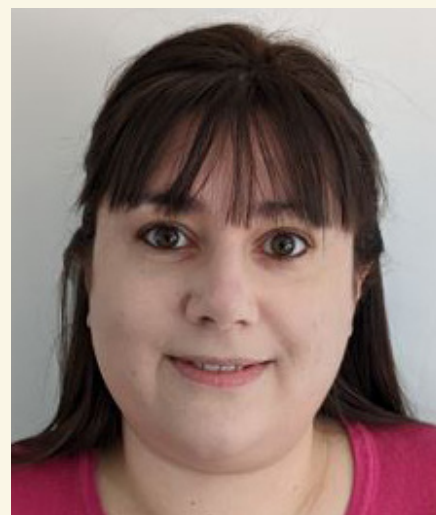
**Alastair Ayrton**

Alastair Ayrton has come onboard to assist Paul Dryburgh as editor of the MHS Journal. He'll also administer the MHS Essay Prize, now in its 8th year. Alastair has been an active member of the Society since 2021, joining soon after completing his PhD at the University of St Andrews. His thesis, *Politics, Policy and Power: the Marcher Lords and the English Crown in the March of Wales, 1254-1272* puts him at the very heart of our area of interest. He is currently a St Leonard's Associate at the University of St Andrews.



**Pamela Thom-Rowe**

With our events activity becoming ever more ambitious, it's great to have Pamela Thom-Rowe as a new member of our Programme Committee. Pamela is an independent writer and researcher focused mainly on the history and context of folklore and tradition, particularly that of the Welsh Marches. Ten years ago she left the NHS to study for an MA in Celtic Studies at University of Wales Trinity St David. She has a special interest in the impact of landscape upon tradition and folk belief, the 12th century Hereford cleric Walter Map and medieval graffiti. She lives in the South Shropshire hills with her husband Chris.



**Sophie Ogilvie**

Pamela will be joined on the Programme Committee by Sophie Ogilvie, who has recently moved from Kent to the village of Sarn, near Montgomery, where she lives with her partner and four cats. Sophie has a law degree from the University of Warwick and practices as a commercial property solicitor. However, she took a career break in 2019-2021 to undertake a Masters in medieval and early modern history. She's been part of the MHS medieval documents group for a few years, but now that she lives in the Marches has joined the committee to support events.

## And one goodbye...

Kirsten Lawton-Smith, who has been a valued member of our team for several years, organising events and helping with *Mortimer Matters*, has resigned from her role as trustee in order to focus on family, work, and on writing the third book in our Marcher Lordships series, which we hope will publish this year. We so appreciate all of the work Kirsten has done – and continues to do – for the Society.

# A tribute to Hugh

As the much-loved Hugh Wood stands down as MHS Chair, Philip Hume reflects on his contribution to the Society – and the challenge of stepping into his shoes.

Although I knew in advance of his intentions, it was an emotional moment when Hugh announced during our event at the Tower of London in August that he would stand down as Chair of the Society and a Trustee. Hugh has been such a massive presence in the Society for so long that it was fitting that his final months in role should include our John Grove Memorial Lecture at Powis Castle and our most ambitious event yet – our day at the Tower of London to mark the 700th anniversary of Roger Mortimer's escape, and to launch the new anthology of Mortimer-related essays commissioned by the Society.

Hugh was one of the founding members of the MHS in 2009, quickly becoming a driving force in its development over the following 14 years. Throughout that time, he's been a Committee member and Trustee, taking on responsibility for a number of roles including Treasurer, Editor of *Mortimer Matters*, Membership Secretary, member of the Programme Committee, and the person responsible for the development and maintenance of our website. He's also led the Society's work on heraldry and been the inspiration behind, and organiser of, the annual Autumn Symposium when it was introduced to the programme of events. And, of course, he's been Chair of the Society for the last two years. Indeed, before becoming the Chair, there were times when Hugh successively juggled all the other roles at the same time, as well as his involvement with the Ludlow Palmers (chair for two years) and as a guide at St Lawrence's, Ludlow. Apart from his multitudinous practical contributions, I know that many

members will remember and appreciate just as much Hugh's welcome, gracious and friendly presence at MHS events.

## Still on the scene

When Hugh informed us of his intention to stand down, the Trustees immediately invited him to become one of the Society's Vice-Presidents in recognition of everything that he has done for the Society. We are fortunate that Hugh accepted and that, whilst stepping back from the day-to-day running and administration of the Society, he will continue to be involved, particularly developing resources on heraldry. At the moment he's working on an online training course/resource facility, which will feature in *Mortimer*

*Matters* soon. I know that Hugh's continuing involvement and support will be welcomed by many people in the Society who, like me, treasure their friendship with Hugh and his wife Doris.

When I moved at the end of 2014 to live near Ludlow, it was Hugh who introduced me to the Mortimer History Society. When I attended my first event, the AGM in March 2015, it was a slightly intimidating experience to be introduced by Hugh to the then Chair, Jason O'Keefe as, although I'm average height, Jason and Hugh at six-foot-something both towered over me! It is now an honour to follow them in the role, even though my footprint is somewhat smaller than theirs!



Hugh with his wife Doris at the Tower of London in August 2023

## Welcome to new members

Eighteen new members have joined since the last edition of *Mortimer Matters*. Welcome all! We hope you're enjoying your membership and look forward to meeting you soon!

<b>Jem Batley</b>	<b>Braintree</b>	<b>Robin Hall</b>	<b>Malvern</b>	<b>Susan Pollard</b>	<b>Leominster</b>
<b>Michael R Bromby</b>	<b>Tunbridge Wells</b>	<b>Jack Hanbury</b>	<b>Pontypool</b>	<b>Debra Powell</b>	<b>Stoke-on-Trent</b>
<b>Tim Chilton</b>	<b>Caersws</b>	<b>Carole Hughes</b>	<b>Rochdale</b>	<b>Tan Qiging</b>	<b>Bristol</b>
<b>Anna Dunne</b>	<b>Ludlow</b>	<b>Penelope Joy</b>	<b>Ystrad Meurig</b>	<b>Dr Elizabeth Rogan</b>	<b>Omaha, USA</b>
<b>Crystal and Carl Goetz</b>	<b>Washington, USA</b>	<b>Janet Mortimer</b>	<b>London</b>	<b>Gabrielle Stanley</b>	<b>Hereford</b>
		<b>Jane Phillips</b>	<b>Torquay</b>	<b>Gryuffydd Williams</b>	<b>Aberystwyth</b>



# Academics and scholars thriving online

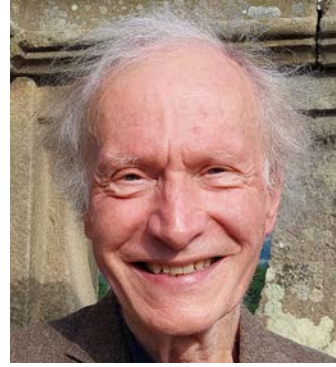
Philip Hume reports on the success of an important MHS initiative launched in 2023 – our programme of online seminars about medieval Wales and the March aimed at the academic community.

During the summer of 2022, two ideas came together to inspire a new initiative: first, one of the important roles of the MHS is to encourage, stimulate and support new research into the Mortimer family of Wigmore and the medieval March of Wales; second, that although there is a national medieval seminar based in London, we felt there was a need for a group focused specifically on medieval Wales and the March. Our ambition was to create a forum for scholars and academics to share new research and to generate discussion and feedback. When we tested our idea with colleagues in universities, there was strong support, particularly, they said, if the seminars were held online, so that they could be accessible to more people without the need to travel.

With this encouragement, and with support from MHS members at Swansea, Chester, and Bristol universities, we began to contact as many historians of medieval Wales and the March as possible. We were nearly overwhelmed with the response! Within a short space of time, the confirmed mailing list had swollen to over 150 scholars, academics, and members of the MHS (it's now over 200), with enough offers to give seminar papers to fill the programme for all of 2023 and into 2024.

## Wide ranging interests

The membership of the group reflects the whole range of study of medieval Wales and the March – social, cultural, religious, language and literature, legal, economic, and political history. Thus, in January 2023, the *Online Seminar Group: Medieval Wales and the March* was launched with a programme of six seminars in the spring term, followed by four in the summer, and three in the autumn term. The diverse interests of the members is reflected in the variety of the seminars. Seminar subjects have included aspects of monasticism in Wales and the March, and the cult of saints in south-Wales; political events in the mid-13th century; Offa's Dyke in Welsh-language texts; medieval Welsh poetry; the use of seals; how Marcher baronial literature reveals their interest in the past in Wales; the destruction of Painscastle



Dr David Stephenson and Dr Janet Burton were among our prestigious seminar presenters in 2023.



Professor Helen Fulton and Dr Alastair Ayrton feature in our 2024 line-up.

by Llywelyn ap Gruffudd; the Anglo-Welsh border in the 9th century; Owain Glyn Dwr's links with Ireland; the Marshal family and Wales; medieval Arthurian texts.

## New year – new topics

As I write this now in early December 2023, the programme for the 2024 spring term is being finalised. Four seminars are planned, including one on the Tironensian Community at Titley, and one on a new project based at Bristol University - Mapping the March: Medieval Wales and England, c.1282-1550 (mapping literary geography in a British border region).

If you'd like to be added to the mailing list email [chair@mortimerhistorysociety.org.uk](mailto:chair@mortimerhistorysociety.org.uk).

## The gift of Mortimer history

Christmas may be over, but gift giving should be an all-year-round business. And we've made it easy. For every event or celebration, give the history lover in your life an MHS Event Gift Voucher.

Gift vouchers can be purchased directly from the MHS website – just look out for the 'Buy an Event Gift Voucher' link on the home page. You can buy a voucher for whatever sum you like. Pay for it online and it will be emailed directly to you, so that you can personally forward it to the person you're gifting to.

Vouchers are easily exchangeable for attendance at MHS events. When booking an event simply call or email the event contact to authorise payment via your voucher. Couldn't be easier!

So, start thinking who in your life would benefit from this special gift. And, remember, Valentine's Day is just around the corner!



# For your bookshelf

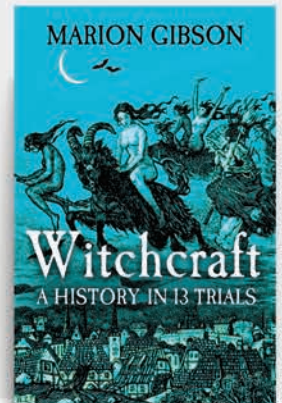
Start the new year with some great reading. From witchcraft to marital betrayals and the loss of England's dreams in France.

## Witchcraft: A History in Thirteen Trials

By Marion Gibson

This book uses thirteen significant trials to explore the history of witchcraft and witch hunts. As well as investigating some of the famous trials from the Middle Ages to the 18th century, it takes us in new and unexpected directions – 'witch hunt!' is still a common term in our language and witches are still on trial around the world.

Published by Simon and Schuster in June 2023 and available now in bookshops or online. RRP £20.

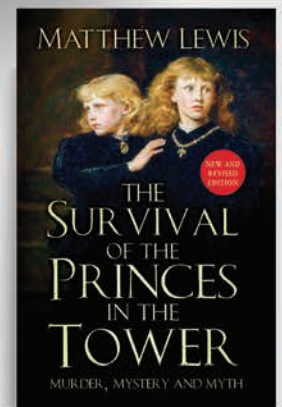


## The Survival of the Princes in the Tower

By Matthew Lewis

This new and updated edition gives a fresh look to the fate of the Princes. Who might have murdered them, and were they murdered at all? A re-examination of Britain's hottest cold case.

Published by The History Press, December 2023. RRP £14.99. Available now in bookshops or online.

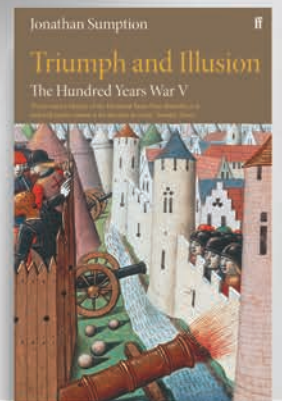


## Triumph and Illusion: The Hundred Years War V

By Jonathan Sumption

This eagerly anticipated final volume of Sumption's prize-winning history of the Hundred Years War tells the story of the collapse of the English dream of conquest during the reign of Henry VI, which culminated in the loss of all English dominions in France except Calais. This is the culmination of a project described by Dan Jones as 'one of the great historical undertakings of our age.'

Published by Faber, August 2023, RRP £40 (ebook for £29.99). Available from bookshops or from [www.faber.co.uk](http://www.faber.co.uk).



## A Court Betrayal

By Anne O'Brien

Heiress Joan de Geneville's marriage to Roger Mortimer seems happy until he returns from exile in the company of the queen and intent on removing Edward II from his throne. Roger rules England like a king at Isabella's side, but what will this new allegiance mean for Joan?

Published by Orion, 29 February 2024, RRP £20. Available from bookshops and online.

