



MORTIMER *Matters*

The Bayeux Tapestry – embroidery with political heft

The Bayeux Tapestry is now in the UK for the first time since the 11th century. Ahead of its arrival – and of our own Bayeux Conference in October – we've asked historian and 1066 expert Dr David Musgrove to explain its significance and reveal its super power.

The Bayeux Tapestry is a medieval embroidery with a superpower. Today, circa 950 years after it was made, it's not only still being talked about, it's also still getting across its version of events, and perhaps even impacting on current politics and international relations. It's very much in the news this year, since French President Emmanuel Macron has announced that it will be loaned to the UK in September and be displayed at the British Museum. This is likely the first time that the Tapestry has been in Britain since the 11th century.

The basic facts of the Tapestry (technically an embroidery) are as follows: It's 68m long, and half a metre high. It's composed of nine linen panels, on which a story has been stitched in dyed woollen thread. The tale is told in graphic novel style, reading left to right (with some flashbacks) in the central frieze. There is a very terse Latin commentary that accompanies the action. There are borders above and below, in which we see decorative motifs, animals and birds (often paired, sometimes fantastical), and some

vignette scenes. What we see in the borders may or may not relate to the main frieze. It's clear that each panel was stitched independently and then they were joined together to make one continuous whole. In its current state, the final panel is obviously frayed and it's likely that we have lost the original ending.

The when and the why

Most scholars agree it was probably made shortly after the story it depicts – the invasion of England by duke William of Normandy in 1066. There is also a general consensus that it was the work of English embroiderers, stitching somewhere in the vicinity of Canterbury.



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The question of why it was made is more contested. A superficial reading would have it as a straightforward celebration of the victory, with the embroiderers either coerced to complete the project, or - more pragmatically - looking to curry favour with their new ruler. The prominence in the embroidery of Bishop Odo of Bayeux, duke William's half-brother, has led commentators to observe that he was the driving force behind the work, to glorify his victorious relative, while simultaneously stressing his key role in the conquest.

If you want a deeper take, other scholars have argued that this isn't a celebratory tale at all, but rather a moralistic lesson intended for the monastic community in Canterbury, and an opportunity to reflect on the dangers of seeking worldly power, perhaps even something to be digested in the monks' refectory.

The victors and the vanquished

Somewhere in-between these ideas, theories have focussed on the relationship between the victors and the vanquished in the aftermath of the Battle of Hastings. It has been argued, for instance, that there is a message of subtle resistance by the defeated English in the Tapestry, with encoded subversion against the Normans disguised in the images. A more compelling take, in my view, is that rather than hiding its secrets, the embroidery holds a straightforward message in plain sight: namely that though William won the crown by might and right, his adversary King Harold was a worthy opponent and he and his men put up a good fight. Maybe it was made to give the surviving military men

on both sides something to bond over, in an attempt to foster rapprochement between the Normans and the English in the immediate aftermath of the conquest. There is a very narrow window of time for this to have been appropriate, before King William's reign starts to get much more heavy-handed with his new subjects in the late 1060s.

A tale of two men

The depiction of King Harold is key in all this. And that's where we get to the narrative that the Tapestry tells, and its enduring power today. The embroidery is essentially a tale of two men: Harold and William. In the first half, Harold is shown in a broadly positive light. He's yet to become king and the Tapestry relates his adventurous sea voyage from England to Northern France. This results in him becoming the unwilling guest of Count Guy of Ponthieu, who in turns hands him over to duke William of Normandy. The pair then go campaigning in Brittany. Harold is decidedly heroic at one point, where he rescues some Norman soldiers from drowning near Mont St Michel. It's at the crux point of the Tapestry, the oath scene, where Harold is shown, physically convoluted, swearing on holy relics while William looks on, that Harold's portrayal turns. The Tapestry does not specify the nature of the oath, but other documentary sources relate that Harold promised to support William's claim to the throne of England.

The next time we see Harold, he's back in England but he's not the man he was: he's crook-necked and seemingly guilt-ridden, on the end of an accusatory gesture from the ailing King Edward

the Confessor. The Tapestry is clearly showing that he has something to be sorry for. Immediately after this, Edward dies and is buried in Westminster Abbey, and Harold is shown being crowned. A hairy star (which we would now call Halley's Comet) rips across the sky above him, perhaps portending trouble ahead.

After that, the positive and dynamic figure is William, shown leaping into action to marshal his forces ready for an invasion. It is clear that he feels that Harold has no right to the crown. We are treated to a lengthy view of the preparations on the French side, and then a rich vista of ships crossing the Channel, followed by several scenes of Norman establishment of a beach-head in England. Harold is nowhere to be seen. It's all about William (and Odo), until the English king finally gets back into the action as we get to the Battle of Hastings. Then famously, of course, Harold is shown dying with his retainers in a last stand. Whether the embroiderers originally intended to show him receiving an arrow in the eye, or whether that is the result of a later restoration, is open to debate. Shortly after, the English are showing fleeing the field in disarray, and the Tapestry peters out in a mangled fashion. Likely, there would have been a final panel showing William being crowned in Westminster Abbey.

A two-way fight

The point of all this is that the Conquest is shown as a two-way fight. It's William vs Harold. Harold is a worthy opponent to the Norman duke, an admirable military figure, but a man brought down



by his own actions, by his perfidy in reneging on the oath and taking the crown when he had agreed to support William's claim (that last statement is not explicitly made in the Tapestry, so we're relying on other sources for that colour). William beats a man who has wronged him and takes the crown by right and might. It's a simple and clear narrative to follow, a justification for the actions of the Norman duke that anyone looking at the Tapestry can immediately draw.

Any good PR person will tell you that a straightforward message is more likely to get cut-through than a complicated one. The Tapestry simplifies a complicated story. It omits some pertinent events and figures. It says nothing at all of the events in the north of England that preceded Hastings (the invasion of the Norwegian Harald Hardrada and King Harold's own brother Tostig), and the fact that Harold secured a mighty victory over Hardrada at Stamford Bridge a few weeks before he faced William's army. It also affords no space in the story to Edgar Aetheling,

the closest blood relative to Edward the Confessor and – some would say – his designated heir. The inclusion of a third man in the succession battle would have done nothing to help the narrative of William justly claiming the throne from the perfidious Harold, so the Tapestry cuts Edgar out completely.

A PR triumph with political heft

That brings me to the Tapestry's superpower. Because it is such a unique survival, and because its images have such potent energy and are so easy to grasp, the narrative it tells of Harold vs William is the one that's stuck. I would argue that we tend to see 1066 as a straight punch-up between two men and very much an Anglo-Norman story, with the events in northern England a sideshow, and Edgar Aetheling not in the picture at all.

Who doesn't love an easy-to-follow action story, with great images? That's why the Tapestry continues to get its 11th-century political message across,

why it's still such a famous object today. Britain requested a loan of the Tapestry no fewer than five times in the 20th century, and now it's finally coming, it's going to be a big deal. Lord Peter Ricketts is the UK government's Envoy for the Bayeux Tapestry Loan, and he reckons that the embroidery still has political heft today: "I think Emmanuel Macron understood that the loan of the tapestry would be a hugely powerful cultural event here. It would underline the links between the two countries at a time when they'd been going through some pretty rocky times after Brexit. Now, with war raging in Europe once again, after the Russian attack on Ukraine, it's a good time to remind the people of the two countries how much we share."

Those links between England and France were born originally in violence, but now they might help to bring the countries closer. There are not many medieval works of art that can still have a say in shaping 21st century international relations today. That is the superpower of the Bayeux Tapestry.



About the Author

Dr Dave Musgrove is content director of **HistoryExtra.com** plus its sister print magazine *BBC History Magazine*. He has a PhD in archaeology. He is author of *100 Places that made Britain* and with Michael Lewis, *The Story of the Bayeux Tapestry: Unravelling the Norman Conquest*, which will be re-issued on 3 September in paperback.

The Bayeux Tapestry will be exhibited at the British Museum from 10 September 2026 to 11 July 2027. See www.britishmuseum.org/exhibitions/bayeux-tapestry for details.

FROM YOUR EDITOR

Summer is at its giddy height, so take this issue of *Mortimer Matters* out into the sunshine and dive in!

There's so much to enjoy. MHS Vice President Ian Mortimer delights us with a Mortimer A to Z, gender expert Kit Heyam explores the evolution of Edward II's sexual reputation, and David Musgrove ruminates on the Bayeux Tapestry in the lead up to our autumn conference dedicated to this iconic artwork. You'll find details of the conference here, as well as of our first online conference that will lead us into winter, and a round-up of our events to the end of the year.

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 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 back to you to discuss your ideas and give you some useful tips on submitting your copy. We plan to publish our next issue in October and will start planning it soon, so please get in touch with your ideas as soon as you can!



Annie Garthwaite

Edward II and his reputation: putting the 'story' in 'history'

Seven hundred years ago this month Queen Isabella was in France plotting an invasion of England that would cost her husband, Edward II, his throne. She cited the interference of Hugh Despenser the Younger as her main grievance and the cause of her marital collapse. Today a sexual relationship between the two men – and between Edward and other male favourites – is assumed by most. But can we be sure? Dr Kit Heyam, a queer historian of gender, looks at how Edward's sexual reputation has evolved, and why.



Edward II – England's controversial king

When I typed the opening words of my PhD thesis on Edward II, I wanted to make it clear that I was about to be reductive. 'Despite the multifaceted nature of Edward II's reign and the scholarship it has generated,' I wrote, 'two aspects of his historiographical reputation have attracted a disproportionate amount of academic attention from literary critics as well as historians: the nature of his relationships with his male favourites, particularly Piers Gaveston and the younger Hugh Despenser, and the manner of his death.' As I sit down to type this article for *Mortimer Matters*, over a decade later, I know many of my readers will feel the same as I felt, only more so. We all know that the Mortimers are more than the 14th century; that the 14th century is more than Edward II; that Edward II is more than his relationships, and more than his death. And yet, when I tell people I wrote a book on Edward II, those are still the questions that recur. 'Is he the gay one?' 'Is he the one who was murdered with a red-hot poker?' 'Is he the camp one in *Braveheart*?'

When I first set out to research Edward II, I was fascinated by the possibility of uncovering *why* we ask those questions. I didn't want to shame those who asked them, especially those who asked from a place of vulnerable identification with Edward; on the contrary, as a queer person, I understand all too well the visceral need to find a sense of kinship with the past, and with it proof that we're not alone or unprecedented in what we feel today. But I wanted, as far as possible, to establish *how* these became the salient facts about Edward in our public consciousness. Why don't people ask, 'Is he the one who ruled through the Great Famine?' or 'Is he the one who won a civil war and then executed his own cousin?'

Sex leaves no trace

This couldn't be a project about establishing what Edward 'really' did with or felt towards his favourites. Sex leaves no

traces in the archive; historians of sex point out that, in the strictest historical sense, there's no more or less evidence that Edward had sex with Gaveston than that he did with Isabella. (Isabella's children are evidence she had sex with someone, and, of course, the overwhelming likelihood is that it was Edward, but overwhelming likelihood isn't the same as certainty.) Instead, it became a project about the development of a reputation. How did a consensus develop in England, by the end of the 16th century, that Edward's relationships with his male favourites were romantic and sexual? What were the factors that meant this consensus took the shape it did?

As far as I could establish, the earliest reference to Edward's sexual behaviour as transgressive comes in a prose narrative known as *The Last Kings of England* or *The Prophecy of the Six Kings*, written around 1312. Casting the text as a prophecy of 'the reign to come', the anonymous author writes, 'In the beginning of his reign [there] should be haunted [habitually practised] much lechery'. Given the date of 1312, the year in which Gaveston was murdered, it's hard not to see the reference to 'the *beginning* of his reign' as significant; is the writer implying that, with Gaveston gone, Edward's habitual lechery will now end?

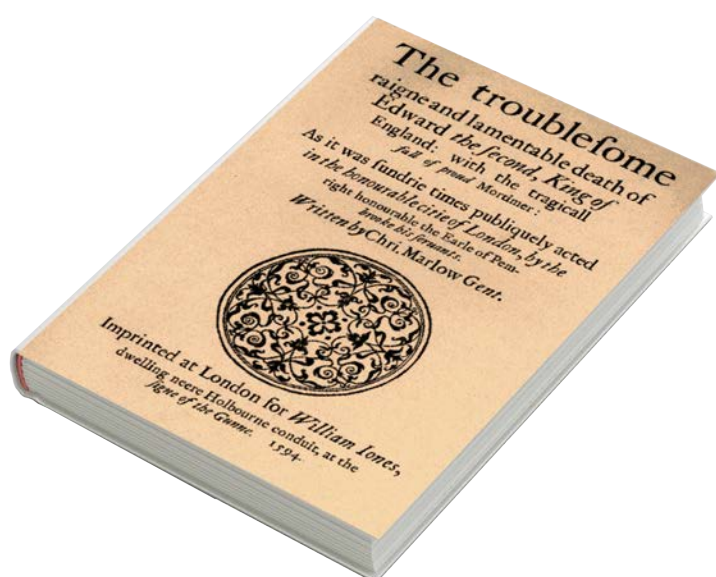
A tyrant and a sodomite?

Two other accusations of sexual transgression, close to the end of Edward's reign, may well have been politically motivated. The continuation of the Westminster Abbey chronicle known as the *Flores Historiarum*, written by the monk Robert of Reading around 1326-30, condemns Edward's 'insane foolishness': he 'should not have loved his own sin and illicit copulations, full of sin, nor by any means removed from his side the noble consort of his realm and her sweet marital embraces, in contempt for her noble birth!' And then in 1334, Adam Orleton (lately appointed Bishop of Winchester) was accused of saying that Edward II 'was a tyrant and a sodomite'.

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It's not clear whether Orleton actually said this (he denied it, but then, who wouldn't deny slandering the king's father?) – but the affair does suggest that his accuser, John Prickehare, thought it was something Orleton could plausibly be accused of having said. Likewise, although the Flores Historiarum is not a neutral source (in fact, the historian Antonia Gransden goes so far as to argue that it was effectively 'official history' written for Roger Mortimer and Isabella's party), it's still notable that the writer chose to accuse Edward of 'illicit copulations, full of sin' rather than something else. It may well be that both accusers were relying on existing gossip about Edward's relationships with his favourites to make their accusations plausible – gossip which *The Last Kings of England* both reflected and contributed to.

Over the next 250 years, accusations of sexual transgression popped up here and there, and gradually began to snowball. With the advent of printing came a rash of short, cheap, derivative chronicles which repeated stock phrases about Edward's behaviour: Gaveston 'brought the king, by means of his wanton conditions, to manifold vices such as adultery and other [sins]'; following Gaveston's 'wanton counsel', Edward 'gave himself to the appetite and pleasure of the body'. By the 1580s, any reader who opened a history of Edward's reign could expect to learn that he was sexually transgressive, and that these sexual transgressions were because of his male favourites, especially Gaveston...but no chronicler quite dared to join the dots. They needed a push – and when that push came, it came from an unexpected direction.



Enter, Christopher Marlowe

Around 1591-2, Christopher Marlowe wrote his play *Edward the Second*. English history was in vogue, and in the anxious late Elizabethan political climate – with no clear successor to the childless queen, and plenty of rumours about her affairs with the young and attractive male favourites that surrounded her – a play about Edward II was bound to be a success. Marlowe drew not only on English chronicles, but also on French sources, which (influenced by the climate of sexual slander surrounding the unpopular Henri III) threw around sexual accusations against Edward and his favourites with more freedom. The result was that his play, first printed in 1594 following multiple performances, is the earliest text to explicitly present Edward's relationships with Gaveston and Despenser as romantic and sexual. In the play's opening scene, Gaveston expresses his wish to 'die' upon Edward's bosom (in early modern English, that meant not just to swoon



The Royal Shakespeare Company's 2025 production of Marlowe's play starred Daniel Evans

but to orgasm); later he fantasises about arranging erotic entertainments for Edward featuring naked men. Onlookers compare the two of them to the god Jupiter and his cupbearer Ganymede, which was one of early modern England's most accessible and specific modes of referring to a man who had sex with other men.

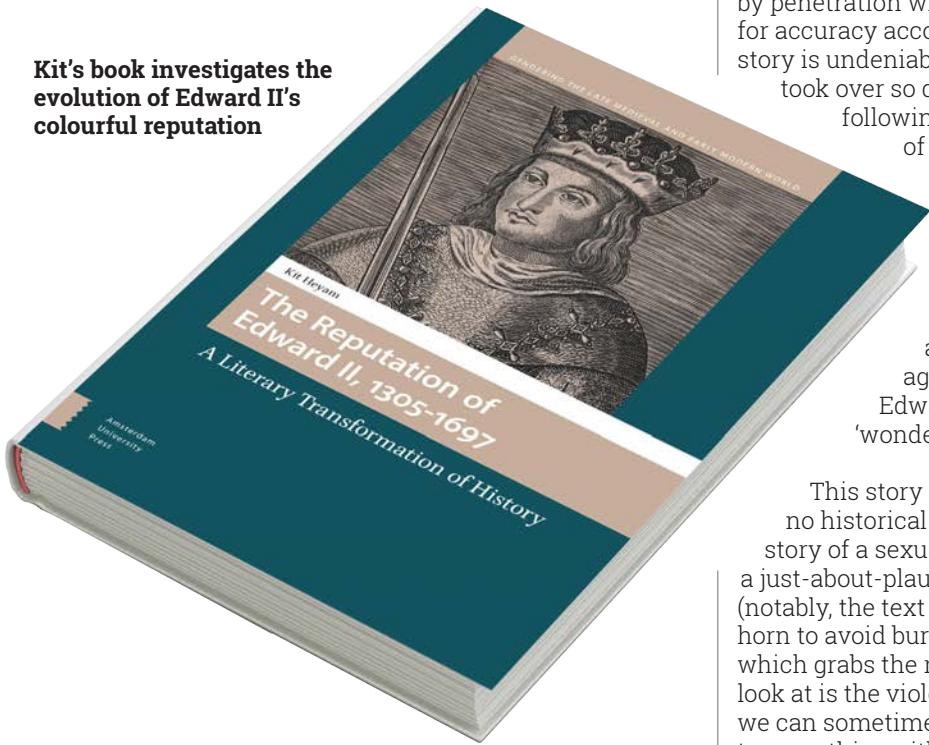
Marlowe had finally made explicit what, for centuries, chroniclers and poets had been only hinting at – and by setting a precedent, he gave his successors permission to do the same. Following the publication of *Edward the Second*, chroniclers and poets felt far more free to explicitly present Edward as someone who loved and had sex with men. In effect, then, one answer to the question of 'Why did sexuality become *the* salient fact about Edward II?' is 'Because Christopher Marlowe made it so.' But that answer isn't an especially satisfying one. All it does is to generate two more questions: Why did Marlowe make it so? And why did other writers – especially chroniclers – continue what he started?

What makes a story?

The answer to these questions is, of course, more complex – but at the heart of it lies the question of what makes a good story. For late medieval and early modern readers, the answer was much the same as it is today. It had to be emotionally compelling, drawing you in to care about the characters, feel what they felt, and shout at the book when they made terrible decisions. It had to be exciting, surprising, sensational. It had to have a good narrative structure, balancing the joy of unexpected twists with the pleasures of recognising age-old patterns. And it had to feel relevant to the audience's life today, shedding new light on the present moment in large or small ways.

This was exactly what Marlowe did. He gave his readers and audiences a compelling tragic love story between Edward and Gaveston; a miserable downfall; a structure they'd recognise as the medieval 'wheel of fortune', where triumph is inevitably followed by a spectacular descent; and a political commentary on contemporary Elizabethan favouritism and the need for stability. Of course, this is to be expected of drama – but importantly, writers of other genres were just as preoccupied with all of these things. Historians, poets and playwrights alike wanted people to read and enjoy (and buy) their books. When, for my PhD, I read every account of Edward II's life

Kit's book investigates the evolution of Edward II's colourful reputation



published in England between his birth and 1700, two things were very clear: the anecdotes and phrases that writers most often copied from their sources were the bits that made their texts enjoyable to read; and the changes they made to their source material were changes in service of narrative structure and emotional engagement, far more often than they were changes in service of historical fact.

There is perhaps no better example of this than the evolution of the other salient aspect of Edward's reputation: the murder

by penetration with a red-hot poker (or, if we're being sticklers for accuracy according to the earliest sources, spit). This story is undeniably a sensational one, which explains why it took over so quickly as the consensus version of events following its earliest occurrence (the long version of the Anglo-Norman *Brut* chronicle, written between 1333 and 1347). Today it's often interpreted as a homophobic narrative, a method of murder that grotesquely mimics sex between men. But in the earliest version, that's not what comes across. Edward's murderers are described as 'false tyrants' and 'mad traitors', 'forsworn against their homage and their fealty'. Edward, by contrast, is a 'good man', who dies 'wonderfully, sorely afraid'.

This story of Edward's murder is an invention, with no historical basis. But in its earliest form, it's not a story of a sexual sinner who deserved to die this way; it's a just-about-plausible story which can't be easily disproved (notably, the text specifies that the spit is inserted through a horn to avoid burn marks) and a sensational, horrific murder which grabs the reader's attention and emotions. If all we look at is the violence of late medieval anti-sodomy rhetoric, we can sometimes forget that people have always been able to empathise with other people's pain.

Likewise, if all we do with historical accounts is assess how factual they are, we can sometimes forget that they were written to be read. The story of how Edward II's reputation developed – and why, out of everything people could know about him, they usually 'know' about his relationships and his murder – is, at its heart, a story about stories. And while that might be frustrating and reductive in some ways, isn't it also understandable that human beings would love stories? Isn't that one of the reasons we love history, in the end?



About the Author

Dr Kit Heyam (they/he) is a writer, historian, heritage facilitator and educator. They are the author of *The Reputation of Edward II. 1305 – 1697*, the first book to investigate how Edward acquired his queer reputation, and *Before We Were Trans: A New History of Gender*, which was nominated for the 2023 Lambda Literary Award. They work with museums and in the media to change the way we tell stories of the queer and trans past.

Welcome to new members

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

Professor Janet Burton
Rachel Callow
Leanne Ellul
Lynne and Richard Hanson
Charlotte Martin
Laura Mortimer

Oxford
Bradley Stoke
Innsworth
Ledbury
Bromyard
Rochester

Maressa and Richard Mortimer
John Owen
Ann Pointing
Pretti Vaid
Carolyn White
Professor Louise Wilkinson

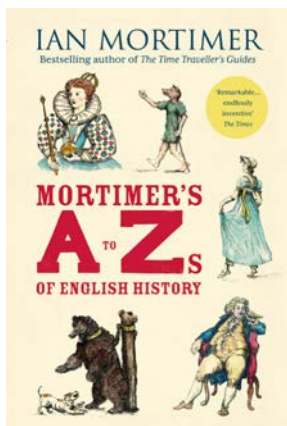
Stroud
Caerphilly
King's Lynn
India
Newtown
Lincoln

The medieval Mortimers – An A to Z

In the last *Mortimer Matters*, we highlighted Ian Mortimer's latest book, *Mortimer's A to Z of English History*. It's a centuries-spanning work, so we thought it would be fun to throw down a challenge, and ask him to zone in tight on the Mortimers. So, here it is – Ian Mortimer's A to Z of the medieval Mortimers! This issue takes us from A to M. He'll be back in our autumn issue to finish the alphabet. Take it away, Ian!

A few years ago, when promoting *The Time Traveller's Guide to Elizabethan England*, I hit on the idea of doing a talk in the form of an A-Z. It struck me that, in the course of an hour or so, I could give the equivalent of 'flicking-through-the-book', picking out points from the text to inform, entertain and educate the audience. It went down well, so I did similar A-Zs for the other three *Time Traveller's Guides*. Last year, I published these along with a fifth A-Z talk, in which I outlined what I'd learnt from writing social history in this 'up close and personal' style. It's out now in hardback, e-book and paperback. There's even an audio read by yours truly. I think of it as a chocolate box 'assortment' of choice historical delicacies. Alternatively, if somewhat less sweetly, an ideal book for the downstairs loo!

The great thing about the A-Z approach is that it allows me to be both serious and thought-provoking and to have fun at the same time. I hope you'll find it so with the medieval Mortimers.



A is for Augustinians

One of the often-overlooked aspects of the medieval Mortimers of Wigmore is their long-lasting relationship with this religious order. Originally their spiritual lives were guided by canons from Saint-Victor-l'Abbaye in Normandy; later, canons were bought from this house to England to serve the family in what eventually became Wigmore Abbey. Thus Augustinians sang prayers for the souls of every member of the family, from the first, Roger Mortemer, in the mid 11th century, to the last, Edmund Mortimer, in 1425.

B is for Belligerence

It has to be said, the Mortimers were a warlike lot. Just to pick a few examples: Ralph Mortimer, the first lord of Wigmore, fought upstart rebellious Saxons and Welshmen, and took part in the battle of Tinchebray in Normandy in 1106. The family thereafter fought the Welsh frequently. Roger Mortimer, 1st earl of March, took arms against the Scots in both Scotland



Wigmore Abbey, where the MHS often meets

and Ireland, as well as against his English rivals in Wales and England. His grandson, Roger, the 2nd earl, took a leading role in the Crecy campaign of 1346. You'd be unwise to pick a fight with a Mortimer and expect him to turn the other cheek.

C is for Chronicles

It's not widely appreciated that the Mortimers of Wigmore were assiduous in documenting themselves – or, rather, having the canons of Wigmore Abbey write about them. First there was a history of the foundation of Wigmore Abbey, written around 1200, followed by a first version of the family history in 1262. A third chronicle, written in the 1390s, extended this latter work; it's now housed in Chicago. A fourth chronicle is the Wigmore Annals covering events from 1105 to 1306, now in Manchester. Another chronicle now in Dublin records events from 1360 to 1377. We could add to this Adam Usk's chronicle – he being a protégé of the Mortimers – which covers 1377 to 1425, and the Ludlow Chronicle, written sometime after 1338. Most medieval noble families had nothing like this level of coverage.

D is for Domesday Book

Ralph de Mortemer of Wigmore was not the largest landowner in England at the time of Domesday Book but he was not far off: he was, in fact, the twentieth-eighth. According to Open Domesday, he held a total of 159 manors directly from the crown. These were spread across twelve counties, ranging from Hordle in Hampshire, near the south coast, to East Gilling in Yorkshire, and from the borders of Wales across to Grimsby in Lincolnshire.

E is for Evesham, battle of

Everyone knows that Simon de Montfort, the founder of parliament, died at the Battle of Evesham in 1265. But did you know he died at the hands of Roger Mortimer of Wigmore? What's more, Roger had the man's testicles cut off, draped them over the nose of the severed head, and sent the whole caboodle as a present to his own wife, Lady Mortimer, at Wigmore. I suspect the visit of several of de Montfort's sons to Wigmore not long before – during Roger's absence – had involved some atrocity that was avenged by this act. Remember what I said about belligerence?



Roger Mortimer with Simon de Montfort's severed head

F is for Family names

There was a tradition among many Norman families to name a lord's eldest son after his (the lord's) father. Thus Edmund

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the son of Roger would naturally name his eldest son Roger. What is remarkable about the Mortimers of Wigmore is that they maintained this tradition throughout their entire history – all the way down to 1425.

G is for Guns

In 1327 Roger Mortimer used 'crakkis of warre' on the Weardale campaign against the Scots. This is the first known use of cannon in England. Ironically, Roger was a champion of old knightly values. You can see how Edward III copied him, simultaneously advancing chivalry and knighthood while at the same time investing in the cannon and gunpowder that would eventually blow castles, knights and chivalry to smithereens.



H is for Heraldry

The arms of the medieval Mortimers of Wigmore are remarkably distinctive. And you find them everywhere – in dozens of cathedrals and churches. This means that, if you too are an avid church visitor, you can have great fun with your small children. All you need to do is to show them what the Mortimer coat of arms looks like and promise them a bar of chocolate if they spot the design anywhere. This has two great advantages; it keeps them out of mischief while you look at the church, and adds to your research, if they're successful. It's a particularly rewarding strategy (for you) when visiting a church in which there are no Mortimer coats of arms.

I is for Ireland

Which is the largest of all the Mortimer castles? Most people will immediately think of Ludlow but in fact it's Trim. Trim was not only the largest Mortimer castle, but the biggest in Ireland. It was the chief seat of the Mortimers on that side of the sea for more than a hundred years. It makes sense. The Mortimers had extensive estates in the Emerald Isle, and it occupied much of the later Mortimers' time. Indeed, the last three earls of March died there.



J is for Jousting

Jousting began as a way of training knights to charge together, as a tactic in war, so it originally involved high-speed manoeuvres and melees. Unsurprisingly, these were lethal: in 1240 eighty knights were killed in a single tournament

at Neuss in Germany. Hugh Mortimer, lord of Wigmore, was killed jousting in 1227. John Mortimer, younger brother of Roger, 1st earl of March, was killed in a tournament at Worcester in 1319. His nephew and namesake, son of the 1st earl, met a similar fate in a tournament in 1328. It wasn't an easy job, being a medieval Mortimer.

K is for the King of Folly

There's no doubt that Roger Mortimer, 1st earl of March, overreached himself. By 1330, even his own son was referring to him as 'the King of Folly'. It is possible that this is a mistaken anecdote or even a bad translation – perhaps he described him as 'the king' *in folly* (i.e., in error) – but, either way, it didn't bode well. By the end of his period in power, after the execution of the earl of Kent, 'King of Folly' is a good way to describe him.

L is for Literacy

You might have thought a brutal lot like the Mortimers would have had little time for reading. However, we know that both Edmund Mortimer (d.1304) and his son Roger (d.1330) were literate, and probably many other members of the family were too.

M is for Mortemer, battle of

It's usually said that the Mortimers took their name from their chief seat of Mortemer-sur-Eaulne in Normandy. That might not be correct. Roger de Mortemer originally called himself Roger fitz Ralph; he seems only to have called himself Roger de Mortemer after the battle fought there, at which he led his forces to victory against duke William's enemies. However, he released one of those enemies (his father-in-law) after the battle, thereby enraging the duke. Consequently all his Norman lands were confiscated. Thus he called himself Roger de Mortemer either in memory of the battle or in order to underline a claim that Mortemer-sur-Eaulne was rightfully his lordship. I suspect the former was the case. Naming yourself after a battle was rare but not unknown: Bernard de Neufmarché (a kinsman of Roger de Mortemer) did it too. In fact, I can't think of any *contemporary* evidence that Roger was lord of Mortemer before the battle. The castle was later in the possession of his nephew, William de Warenne, who was also at the battle, and I wonder if he had not always been the lord. Perhaps Roger's erstwhile possession is just a presumption by generations of historians and really the family is named after his once-famous victory.

Come back for more!

I'll leave you pondering that idea. Let me know if you're aware of any contemporary evidence of Roger having the Mortemer lordship. I'll be back in the autumn issue of *Mortimer Matters* with the rest of the Mortimer alphabet!



Historian and author Ian Mortimer is best known as the Sunday Times bestselling author of four *Time Traveller's Guides*, as well as four critically acclaimed medieval biographies, including *The Greatest Traitor: the Life of Sir Roger Mortimer, 1st earl of March*, a prize-winning novel and several other titles. He's a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society and the Society of Antiquaries. *The Times* describes him as 'the most remarkable medieval historian of our time'.

The Bayeux Tapestry: story of a Conquest

Ludlow Assembly Rooms
Saturday, 10 October
9:15am to 4:45pm

This September the Bayeux Tapestry will be at the British Museum. Do book your ticket for this once in a lifetime opportunity to see it. But, first, book for our Bayeux conference, which examines the impact of both the tapestry and the conquest it depicts.



Dr Marc
Morris

1066: Why did it matter?

Acknowledging that 1066 is the most famous date in English history, Dr Marc Morris, medieval historian and author, looks beyond the eventful story to look at its impacts. Why do the events of that year matter so much and how have they shaped us?



Dr Dave
Musgrove

The Bayeux Tapestry: a medieval embroidery with superpowers

Dr Dave Musgrove, content director of History Extra Magazine and co-author of The Story of the Bayeux Tapestry, considers how this unique work of art has shaped our knowledge of the Norman Conquest and continues to assert its influence to this day. See Dave's introductory article on page 1.



Dr Rebecca
Thomas

Wales and the Welsh on the eve of 1066

Dr Rebecca Thomas, Senior Lecturer in Medieval History at Cardiff University and specialist in medieval Wales, considers the political makeup of Wales on the eve of conquest and how the country responded to it. Just how significant was 1066 for the Welsh?



Dr David
D'Avray

Conquest and the structures of Government

Dr David D'Avray, Emeritus Professor of History at University College London, considers the long term structural effects of the conquest and how it led to a governmental system unique in world history and, eventually, a constitution.



Dr Katherine
Keats-Rohan

Wallingford: Turning point 1066

William of Poitiers recounted how the Normans crossed the Thames at Wallingford, an episode of pivotal importance, as Dr Katherine Keats-Rohan, historian of the Conquest, will explain. Drawing on Domesday Book, the Bayeux Tapestry and recent archaeological research at Wallingford, she'll show how Wallingford paved the way for Duke William's coronation.

Attend in person or on Zoom

This anticipatory conference can be attended in person or via Zoom. For details of ticket prices and to reserve your place, please to go www.mortimerhistorysociety.org.uk.

Writing to reach you: Manuscript culture in medieval England and the March of Wales

**Online conference
Saturday, 21 November 2pm**

We mark the arrival of winter with a fascinating deep dive into the beauty and secrets of medieval manuscripts. Just the thing for the season when all you want to do is curl up with a beautiful (illuminated) book!



Mortimer Ambition: The political and historical context of Chicago University Library MS 224

Georgia Henley, Associate Professor at Saint Anselm College in New Hampshire USA, reveals how this document, likely compiled at Wigmore for the Mortimers, presents an argument for Roger Mortimer, 4th earl of March's legitimacy as the successor to Richard II.



Mortimer from the Margins? Sir Geoffrey Luttrell's view of faith and politics revealed in the marginalia of his psalter

Michelle Brown, Professor Emerita of Medieval Manuscript Studies at the University of London and formerly Curator of Illuminated Manuscripts at the British Library, reveals Sir Geoffrey's loyalty to Edward I and his reactions to the regime change that followed Edward II's deposition. The Luttrells, she insists, were colourful characters in a colourful age.



From Parchment to Binding: Materials and processes of the medieval manuscript maker

Working at London's Institute of Historical Research, Dr Sara Childs is a practitioner exploring how medieval manuscripts were created. Her talk will open a window into the life of a medieval scribe, examining every step of manuscript production, from the creation of parchment, ink, pigment and quills, to the binding of the final book

View from wherever you are

This fascinating conference will be held via Zoom only.
Details and tickets will be available online shortly.

KEEP THE DATE!

Our programme of events will keep you entertained right through to the year's end...

Friday, 28 August Ludlow History Festival

This 10-day festival runs from 21 to 30 August at the Ludlow Assembly Rooms. Friday 28 August is Mortimer History Society day, with novelist Annie Garthwaite and historian Matt Lewis hosting an afternoon of presentations and discussion around Ludlow's ultimate power couple – Richard Duke of York and Cecily Neville.

Saturday, 10 October Autumn Conference: The Bayeux Tapestry: the story of the Conquest

Marking the arrival of the Bayeux Tapestry in Britain and the opening of a major London exhibition. We investigate the Conquest of 1066 and the transformation of the country. Join us at the Ludlow Assembly Rooms. See page 9.

Saturday, 21 November Online Conference: Medieval Manuscripts

This half-day online conference takes a deep dive into the magical beauty of medieval manuscripts. See this page for details

Put these dates in your diary and look out for details of these and all Mortimer History Society events at www.mortimerhistorysociety.org.uk.

Come to Cwmhir

The MHS summer visit to Abbey Cwmhir on 11 July focused on unfinished business for the Mortimer family.



Our hosts, Mel Walters, Julian Lavell, and Julian Ravest of the Cwmhir Heritage Trust and Sian Rees, trustee of Heneb, the national trust for archaeology in Wales.

Abbey Cwmhir, located between the Severn and the Wye in the medieval cantref of Maelienydd, is one of the most significant historical sites in Wales. It was founded by the Welsh prince, Cadwallon ap Madoc in 1176, but the extraordinary building that we see in ruins today was probably championed by Roger Mortimer (d.1214) when he took Maelienydd after killing Cadwallon in 1279. However, this high-status religious house, which boasts one of the longest naves of any abbey in Britain, was never completed, and it seems likely that, after Roger's death in 1314, energy, enthusiasm – and funds – for this ambitious project simply drained away.

Visiting the ruins, we were able to view partial walls of a never-completed transept, likely planned to include a substantial tower, at the west end of the nave, but it's evident the work was abruptly halted and the unfinished transept walled up. The abbey, however, continued to function, supported by numerous Marcher lords and Welsh princes, until the dissolution of the monasteries in the 16th century. It was later slighted during the English Civil War.



Julian Ravest, expert in drone photography and photogrammetry is unlocking the secrets that lie under the surface of the soil – lost areas of the abbey, including its cloister are revealed by his work.



Stone robbed from abbey after the dissolution and Civil War has found its way into buildings across the area. This tympanum now forms part of the garden wall at Home Farm. Today the abbey is accessed via the farm.

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We're extremely grateful to the team at the Cwmhir Heritage Trust for hosting a wonderful day for us, which began with a morning of insightful lectures followed in the afternoon by a tour of the abbey and the village that grew up around it. Although the weather was challenging – over 30 degrees in the sunshine – we spent a good deal of time in the ruins and the village, unravelling the mysteries of Cwmhir's creation, building and long decline.

Thanks to everyone at the Abbey Cwmhir Heritage Trust for wonderful day.



Caroline Bennett and Cathy Cowell arrive at the village hall of Cwmhir.



The walls of the nave – amongst the longest in Britain – are all that remains of Roger Mortimer's audacious project.



The weather was hot, but so was the history. We gather for a pic in the never-realised transept. Note the base of a huge pillar at the right of the photo, designed to support a tower that was never built.



The Light of the World. Stained glass in St Mary's Church by London firm Heaton, Butler and Bayne. (Image by Peter Rowland).



Mel Walters (right) and Ruth Butler in St Mary's, Cwmhir's village church – not medieval, but well worth a visit, with wonderful 19th century stained glass.

Work in progress

Work of unravelling Cwmhir's mysteries is ongoing, thanks to the Abbey Cwmhir Heritage Trust. There's a wealth of information about the abbey and its history on the trust's website, www.abbeycwmhir.org. The trust also hosts regular events and annual tours of this fascinating site.

Downfall & Aftermath: 700 years since the of the downfall of Edward II

Mortimer History Society members are welcome to attend a two-day conference at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge this September. Dr Andrew Spencer shares his vision for this landmark event.



24 September 2026 will mark 700 years since the first successful invasion of England since the Norman Conquest. It was an invasion of English exiles and foreign mercenaries, led by the Queen of England, her son, the future Edward III, and the man rumour said was her lover, Roger Mortimer of Wigmore. It resulted in the overthrow of King Edward II and, within four months, to the first successful deposition of an English king by his own subjects. Barely four years later, Mortimer would himself be dead and Isabella quietly removed from political influence, while Edward III would take power himself and lead England to war against Scotland and France.

The events of 1326-30 match the drama of any episode in English history and had consequences that echoed through the remainder of the middle ages and beyond, and not only in England.

For most people the anniversary will pass largely unnoticed, but not at Gonville & Caius College, Cambridge. On the day following the anniversary, 25 September, we're hosting a two-day conference that will consider the downfall of Edward II afresh. It will bring together scholars based across the UK and the US to place the events of 1326 and their aftermath in contemporary and historical context, looking not simply at the roles of the key characters at the heart of events but at the broader story.

Yes, this was a family drama taking place within the most important family in the kingdom, but it was also so much more than that. It was a drama that affected and was affected by parliament, the localities, lords, peasants and towns as well as all England's neighbours and many more besides. For the last six years, I've co-taught a final year paper at Cambridge on the first two decades of Edward III's reign, and one of the key themes of that paper has been the interlocking nature of politics, economy and society. In organising the conference, I aim to bring together scholars working on different aspects of the period, so that we can see more clearly how those strands connect. The fall of Edward II is not just a lurid court story. It marks a turning-point in political society, in relations between centre and locality, and in England's dealings with Wales, Scotland, Ireland, France and the papacy.

The programme runs across two days, but allows plenty of time for conversation over food and drink, including a conference dinner in College. There isn't space here to highlight every paper, but a few examples will give a sense of its range.

Some papers, most notably our keynote by Professor Christine Carpenter, one of the most distinguished historians of late medieval England, take a macro view of the crisis. Her paper places the violence and disasters of Edward II's reign in the broader context of the medieval English constitution and the interplay of king, nobility and lesser landowners. The crisis of Edward's reign, she will argue, brought about a reassessment of expectations on the parts of each of these which set the foundation for how English governance worked for the next two centuries.



Speakers include, Professor Christine Carpenter, Professor Mark Bailey, Katy Bennett and the MHS President Dr Paul Dryburgh

At the other end of the scale, Professor Mark Bailey of the University of East Anglia, who like Professor Carpenter has delivered the prestigious Oxford Ford Lectures on British History, focuses on a single place: Bury St Edmunds. His paper revisits the famous riots of 1327, which took place amid the collapse of royal authority, and shows that they had a previously overlooked rural dimension. In doing so, it links town and countryside at a time when much historical writing has tended to keep these spheres apart.

One of our younger scholars, Katy Bennett of York, will pick up another theme, that of how the crisis of 1326-7 affected

Cont/d on page 14

Edward II's other territories and neighbours. Katy's PhD has focused on Gascony and, in her paper, she'll be looking at how events in Gascony played in destroying Edward's kingship, how the king's overthrow was received by his subjects in Gascony and what it meant for the future of Plantagenet rule there.



"I would be delighted to welcome members of the MHS to Caius in September – either in person or online"

And Roger Mortimer himself is not neglected. His policies in the Welsh Marches and in Ireland will come under scrutiny elsewhere in the programme, while Dr Paul Dryburgh, well

known to members of the Society, turns our attention to the men who remained loyal to Edward II even as his cause collapsed. His paper examines those "loyal to the last", asking who still stood by the king in 1326 and after, and what their resistance tells us about the nature of loyalty, politics and the transfer of power.

The conference is open to all who have an interest in late medieval England and will have especial resonance for members of the Mortimer Society. It offers a unique opportunity to hear about cutting edge research on the key figures of this great crisis, but also on lesser-known players and events and to understand their place in the wider canvas of medieval Europe. The hope is that it will bring together academic historians and the wider community of enthusiasts who have helped keep interest in this period so lively. I would be delighted to welcome members of the Mortimer History Society to Caius in September either in person or online.

For details, and to secure your place at the conference, go to www.tickettailor.com/events/edwardiiconference/2185120
Or contact Andrew Spencer at ams88@cam.ac.uk

Open for entries! 2026 MHS Essay Prize

Time to sharpen your quills as the MHS Essay Prize enters its second decade.

Since 2016 the Mortimer History Society has offered an essay prize rewarding excellent scholarship and research into the medieval Mortimer family and the Welsh March and, in recent years, borderlands more generally. Entry are now invited for the 2026 prize! For the lucky winners, success will garner financial prizes, the opportunity for peer-reviewed publication, membership of the MHS and speaking opportunities.



**2025 winner, Dr Andy King.
Could it be you?**

Entries are welcome on the following topics:

1. The history of the medieval Mortimer family of Wigmore and its cadet branches, including those of Chirk and Chelmarsh, and the family's impact on the history and culture of the British Isles.

Or

2. The history, geopolitics, topography, laws, economy, society and culture of medieval borderlands, including comparative studies, between 1066 and 1542.

And, of course, anyone can enter.

There will be a first prize of £750, a second prize of £300 and a third prize of £200. Also, this is a great opportunity to have your work published in next year's academic journal if you're selected by our esteemed judges, led by Louise Wilkinson, Professor of Medieval Studies at the University of Lincoln.

The closing date for entries is 20 February 2027. For further information about the prize and how to enter, please go to www.mortimerhistorysociety.org.uk/society/essay-prize.



Meet your trustees: Yve James

Introducing you to the people who, behind the scenes, do so much to keep the MHS on the up and up. Our trustees are elected to oversee the society – its activities and operations, and to be accountable to its members – you!

This month, meet Yve James...



Yve, how long have you been a member of the MHS and when did you become a trustee?

I've been involved in the society since its inception in 2009 – a member and a trustee from the very start. In those early days I was involved in writing the Society's constitution. Required by the Charity Commission, it outlines what we do and aim to achieve. It has evolved a little over time, but remains true to those initial ideas – that we would promote interest in and study of the medieval Mortimers and the March of Wales.

What's your role in the Society?

You might say I have a finger in many pies. I am chair of our annual Bursary Programme, co-ordinator of the Medieval Document Group, and I represent the MHS for the Victoria County History group, which has recently begun work in the North-West of Herefordshire, in preparation for a comprehensive book on the area, known as *The Red Book*. I'm also responsible for printing and posting mailings to members who don't have access to the internet. An ever decreasing number, I'm glad to say! You can find out more about these things – especially the Bursary Programme and Medieval Document Group – in the pages of *Mortimer Matters* and on our website.

What have been the greatest pleasures and the biggest challenges?

I'd say I take greatest pleasure in our in-person events, where I can meet up with people – friends, acquaintances and those I have never met before. Of course, it's also the chance to hear first-class speakers telling us of their passion and discoveries in their chosen speciality. My challenge is that it's becoming more difficult for me to participate in all of these events – so I'm very grateful for our hybrid and online-only events, too. The ongoing challenge for the society, I think, is to continue to arrange events that cover a wide enough spectrum of interests, particularly for those not so academically inclined.

How did your interest in the Mortimers and the Welsh March come about

Some years ago, and quite by chance, I saw a poster describing a meeting, with the idea of forming a society about the Mortimers, organised by John Grove. It sounded interesting and I went along to discover exactly what was proposed. At that second meeting, John was forming a committee and persuaded me to join it, though at that point I knew next to nothing about the Mortimers. I have learned an enormous amount since!

Where does your love of history come from?

I can't remember a time when I wasn't interested in historical things. When my brother and I were children, my parents took us to various places, and they always knew I'd be keen to investigate, especially if there was a church or a castle involved. I also loved looking at old buildings. I'm glad to say my interest shows no signs of abating!

Tell us a little about your history-related interests and passions

My daughter instigated my interest in family research. I still continue to pursue it from time-to-time. Most recently my cousin has whetted my appetite to research our mothers' side of the family. They were sisters, of course. It should prove interesting and, perhaps as challenging as my own Welsh ancestry, since I think we'll soon find ourselves researching Scottish ancestors. My other passion isn't related to history or the Mortimers – it's knitting. I belong to a group that knits a variety of items for sale, such as hats, scarves, blankets and toys. All of the money raised goes to the Midlands Air Ambulance. We also knit and donate blankets and bonding squares for premature babies at the local hospital, as well as making sensory mitts and blankets for people either in hospital or care homes. The photo shows me knitting the border of a single bed blanket for a child. I based the design on a double rainbow, hence the bright colours!

Tell us a little bit about life outside of history – what about your career?

I was fortunate to be able to train and do the only job I ever wanted: teaching. Sadly, ill-health forced me to give this up when I had been teaching for quite a while. After some time had elapsed and I felt well enough, I joined my husband in our engineering business, which we ran until well past our retirement ages. Now I am retired, I can do some of the things I couldn't when I was working. Like knitting. And history!



Yve's knitting habit supports hospitals, care homes and the Midlands Air Ambulance

For your bookshelf

Our selection this time includes glimpses of the Bayeux Tapestry, an investigation of the medieval marriage market, a deep dive into the lives of medieval women and an exceptional novel that brings the Peasant's Revolt to glorious, gritty life. Happy reading!

Doom Painting

By **AK Blakemore**

Exceptional, exquisite and urgent, *Doom Painting* captures within its pages both the rebelliousness of the 14th century and the urgent spirit of our own age. The very writing of it might be considered an act of rebellion, itself. A reminder that, through the ages, there have been people willing to stand up to England's leaders and say, enough is enough. Blakemore's intellectual grasp of history and her compassion for its characters make this an exceptional work.

Published by Granta and available from bookshops and online. From 24 September. RRP £20.

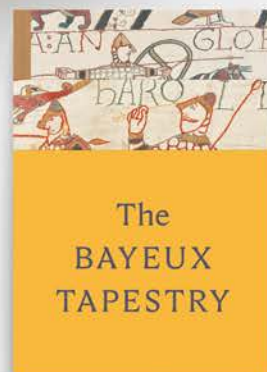


The Bayeux Tapestry

By **Sue Brunning**

Published for the British Museum display of the Bayeux Tapestry, this official exhibition book provides an authoritative exploration of its history, artistry and significance. It includes a full-colour reproduction of the tapestry, while contributions from international experts unpick its importance. An examination of its patronage, design, production, depictions of everyday life and status as an iconic artwork.

Published by the British Museum Press on 10 September 2026. RRP £45, but available from the exhibition for £40.

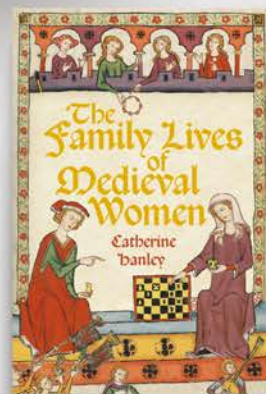


The Family Lives of Medieval Women

By **Catherine Hanley**

This book turns the spotlight on the lives of medieval women across all classes and sections of society. Not just the exceptional women whose elite lives have attracted study and biography, but regular women – the vast majority, who were obliged to live within the constraints imposed on the female half of the population.

Published by The History Press on 9 April 2026. Available online and in bookshops. RRP £25.



Princesses of the Early Middle Ages: Royal daughters of the Conquest

Daughters of kings were often married to forge alliances and peace with England's enemies. This book explores their lives – the marriages they made and those that were never realised. More than that, it explores how they were sometimes able to control their fates and exert their own will, sometimes refusing the husbands on offer. A fascinating glimpse into the medieval royal marriage market.

Published by Pen & Sword, April 2026. Available online, in bookshops and direct from www.pen-and-sword.co.uk. RRP £25.

