



# MORTIMER *Matters*

## A Royal Claim Subverted: The Mortimers in 1399

In 1399 the Mortimer claim to the throne was subverted by Henry IV's deposition of Richard II, says historian and author, Matt Lewis. Furthermore, he suggests that the fate of the young Mortimer heirs at that time may suggest an alternative theory for that of the Princes in the Tower during Richard III's reign.

**T**here is plenty to fascinate in the story of the Mortimer family. For a Ricardian with an acknowledged man-crush on Richard, 3rd duke of York, there are two particular, and connected, points of interest. When York laid his hand on the throne of England in 1460 he did so, not as a descendant of the House of York, but as a Mortimer. He picked up the dusty, but not forgotten belief that the Mortimer claim to the throne had always been superior to that of the House of Lancaster. The details of this seismic moment as they played out on the usually dry pages of the Parliament Rolls are fascinating, not least for what was not said.

This moment of crisis and uncertainty reopened a debate that had been set aside for 60 years, since Henry IV became the first king of the House of Lancaster in 1399. The problem then centred on uncertainty over the succession while Richard II (whom Henry deposed) remained childless. It is possible that Richard cultivated this ambiguity, only making his real plans clear in the final few years of his reign. The question hinges on whether his grandfather, Edward III, entailed the succession to the crown in the male line before he died, and whether he had the power to do so if he did. Kings have always had a rough time trying to continue to rule from beyond the grave.

If such an entail existed, then it made John of Gaunt, who was duke of Lancaster and Edward III's third son, then subsequently his son, Henry Bolingbroke, Richard's heirs. Certainly, the existence of such an entail was not widely known of at the time. In the minds of those not privy to such a document, the Mortimer descendants of Lionel, duke of Clarence,



Richard II – who were his heirs?

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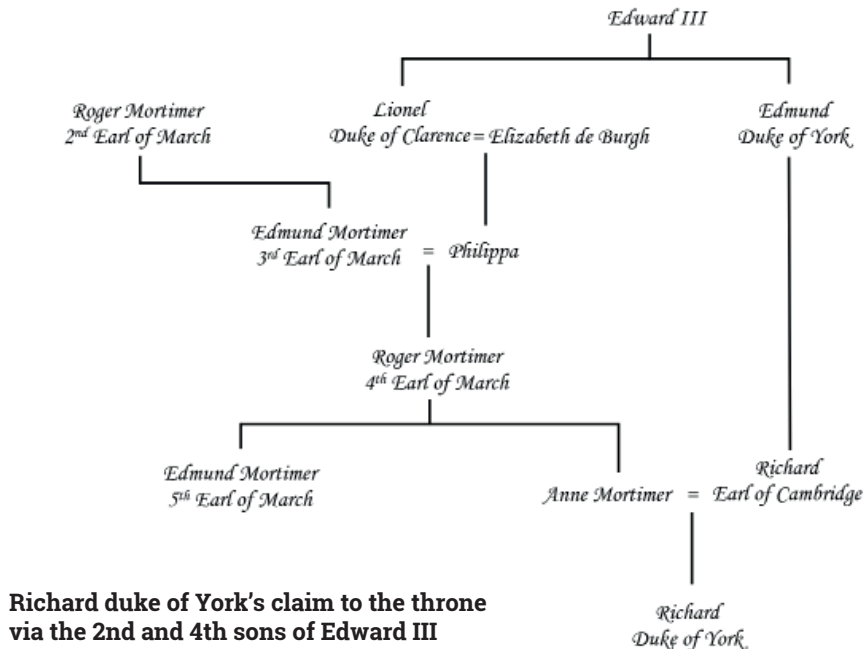
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Edward III's second son, were the correct heirs to the throne. It is telling that, when he took the throne in 1399, Henry made no reference to his grandfather entailing the succession in the male line and produced no document to demonstrate that he was the legal heir to his cousin's throne. In 1460, none of Parliament's objections to Richard, duke of York's claim centred on the succession having been entailed in the male line. Instead, Henry IV fell back on the odd assertion that Edward I had not been the oldest son of Henry III. In fact, Edmund Crouchback had been the oldest son, but had been deprived of his rightful position. As Henry IV's mother, Blanche of Lancaster, was the great-granddaughter of Edmund, Henry IV claimed to be the rightful king. It is interesting that Henry not only failed to produce or seek to rely on an entail of Edward III, but also crafted a claim that relied on descent through a female line. It seems he felt a need to rebut the Mortimer claim and could think of no other way to do so.

## Richard II's equivocation

Henry was able to get away with quashing the Mortimer claim in 1399 because the Mortimer heirs at the time were two small boys. Edmund, later 5th earl of March, was seven years old, and his brother Roger was six. Their father, Roger, 4th earl of March had died the previous year, following the pattern of dying young that marked the Mortimer line. Edmund and Roger were hardly able to champion their claim in 1399 and their uncle, Sir Edmund Mortimer, would suffer for his connection to his nephews and their claim to Henry's throne.

Dr Ian Mortimer has compellingly suggested that Richard II used the Mortimer family as a weapon against the Lancastrian faction who pressed their perceived right to be Richard's heir. In 1385, there were stories swirling that John of Gaunt meant to assassinate the king so that he might take the throne, suggesting there was a belief in some quarters that Gaunt was the heir. Gaunt was wealthy and powerful, so Richard needed him, but he was also growing older and it was his son Henry of Bolingbroke who represented the likely heir if the House of Lancaster was to succeed. Richard seems to have disliked Henry intensely, and so the Mortimer family were a perfect foil. Against that, it is worth considering the lack of honour Richard showed the Mortimer earl. He was not made a duke, as many others were, and was not provided with the precedence that would demonstrate a position as heir.



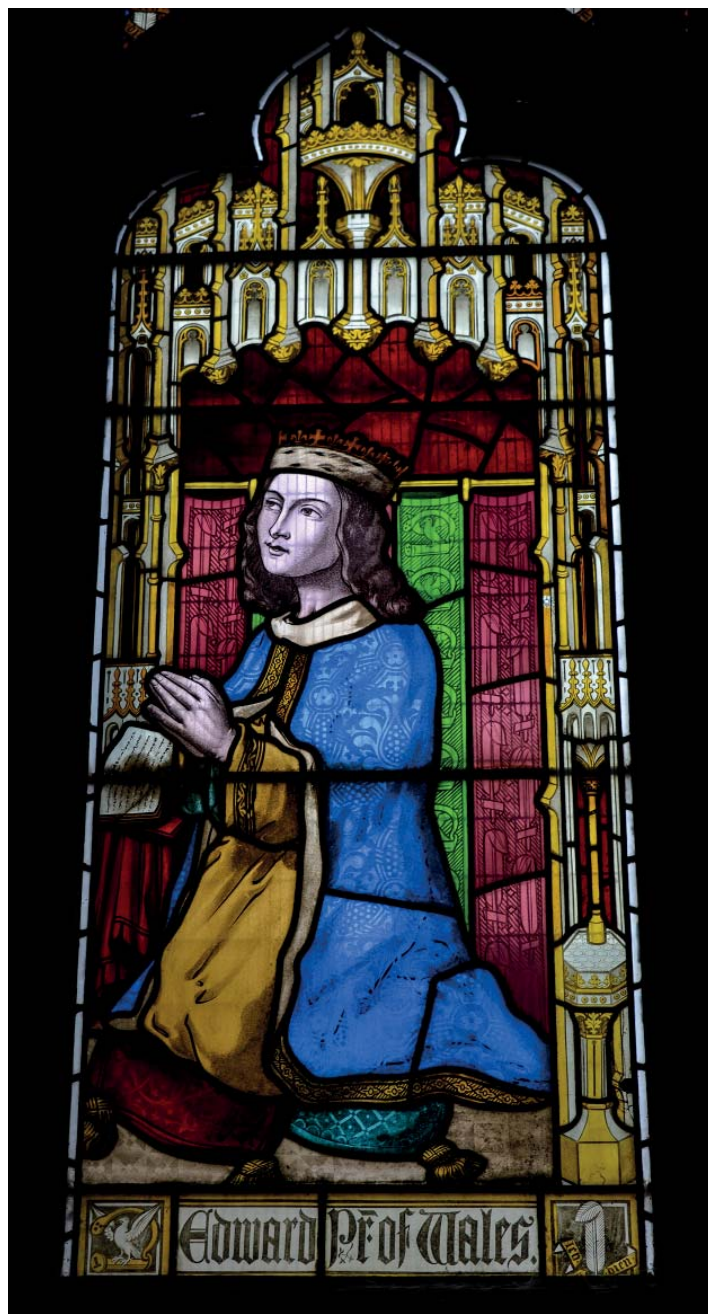
Towards the end of Richard's reign a third player was dealt into the king's game. Edward, earl of Rutland, the oldest son of Richard's uncle Edmund, duke of York was close to the king. Through the 1390s Edward received lucrative royal grants. In 1396 the offices of Constable of Dover Castle and Warden of the Cinque Port were given 'to the king's cousin Edward, earl of Rutland'. By the following year, when Edward was made Constable of England, he was described as 'the king's brother Edward, earl of Rutland'. He was soon made duke of Aumale and Richard seems to have been marking Edward out as his preferred heir, perhaps even adopting him as a brother. The Great Chronicle of London records Sir William Bagot, who had worked for Gaunt, repeating a conversation with Richard II. Bagot claimed the king had said he had no desire to rule longer than it would take to restore the dignity of the crown, and then 'if he were to renounce it, the most able, wise and powerful man to whom to renounce it would be the duke of Aumale'.

Perhaps Richard had given up on ruling. After the death of Anne of Bohemia, his hurry to marry the 6-year-old Isabella of Valois precludes any effort to father an heir for at least a decade. Whether Richard was playing his cousins off against each other or trying to prevent Henry of Bolingbroke succeeding him, first by favouring the Mortimer claim, then by promoting Edward, duke of Aumale, becomes irrelevant. Whatever Richard's intentions, the House of Lancaster would be haunted by the Mortimer name for the entirety of its kingship, until it was finally undone by it in 1460. With no publicised prevention on the transmission of a claim in

the female line, Edmund Mortimer remained, to most, the heir presumptive to Richard II. It was his name that brought the reign of Lancaster to an end when Richard, duke of York, claimed the crown based on his descent from Edward III's second son through the female line; Richard's mother, Anne Mortimer, was Lionel's great-granddaughter.

## The fate of the Mortimer heirs

I mentioned that there were two threads to this story that intrigue me. The second lies in the fates of the young Mortimer heirs, Edmund and Roger Mortimer, whose future looked so uncertain in 1399. When Henry IV became king, they were placed into reasonably loose custody in several royal castles. That led to their abduction in 1405 and an effort to whisk Edmund away to Wales and make him king. The boys were swiftly recovered and security around them tightened. The House of York was behind the scheme, with Constance of York kindly dropping her brother Edward into trouble by claiming he was in on the plan too. The boys were later transferred to the household of Henry, prince of Wales. On 21 March 1413, the prince succeeded his father as Henry V. On 8 April, the day before his coronation, Henry created Edmund and Roger Knights of the Bath, and on 9 June granted Edmund livery of his estates. Now 21 years old, Edmund was one of the wealthiest landowners in England, and Henry V clearly felt he had nothing to fear from the Mortimer name. Roger died shortly after his release, but Edmund's life is fascinating.



**Edward, eldest of the Princes in the Tower**

The king was to be proven correct to trust Edmund. As he prepared to leave for France in 1415 on what would become the legendary Agincourt campaign, the Southampton Plot was exposed. Again apparently led by the House of York, in the

guise of Richard, earl of Conisburgh, Constance and Edward's younger brother. The plan had been to assassinate Henry V and his brothers and place Edmund, earl of March on the throne. The plot was exposed by Edmund himself. He would serve the House of Lancaster loyally until his death in Ireland in 1425. In some way his upbringing had driven from him any desire to be king and caused him to see service to the House of Lancaster as his duty.

## The princes in the Tower

For a Ricardian, this is an exceptionally instructive set of events. In 1399 there were two young boys who arguably, and at least in the public mind, had a better claim to the throne than the man sitting on it at the time. The parallels to 1483 are striking. Richard III was offered the crown on the basis of Edward IV's bigamy and his sons' bastardy, but there were those who might still champion the claims of Edward V and his brother Richard, duke of York. The complaint against the possibility of the survival of the Princes in the Tower beyond the reign of their uncle Richard has always been that Richard had no choice but to kill them. Deposed monarchs had to die, using a model supplied by Edward II, Richard II, and Henry VI, though each of these is a problematic example.

The story of Edmund and Roger Mortimer demonstrates not only that murder was not the only course of action, but that an alternative path could work exceptionally well. Edmund Mortimer was Richard III's great-uncle, and it seems likely that his story would have been well known, particularly to those who owed their position to their Mortimer heritage. When Richard was confronted by the chaotic and frantic events of the spring of 1483, whatever your interpretation of those weeks and months might be, the story of Edmund and Roger Mortimer offers an alternative fate for the Princes in the Tower. They might have been nurtured, cared for, intended to take a part in the future of Yorkist government. In this scenario, the early Tudor government has an interest in obscuring any story of their survival as they become an increased threat. It allows that Richard's first response to the crises of 1483 was not to murder his young nephews. Such an act does not fit with any other example of Richard's character or behaviour. Add to that mix the example that Richard could look to in recent history, which gives him a template for how to behave. The only flaw in the plan in 1399 had been allowing everyone to know where the boys were making them easy to abduct. Amend this portion, Richard might suppose, and it could be perfect. The story of the Mortimer boys in the aftermath of 1399 might provide a key to understanding the fate of the Princes in the Tower and Richard III's determined silence on the matter during the remainder of his life

## About the author:

Matt Lewis is an author and historian of the medieval period. His main focus is the Wars of the Roses and Richard III, and he is currently Chair of the Richard III Society. Matt's books include biographies of Richard III, Richard, duke of York, Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine, and Henry III, as well as narrative accounts of The Anarchy, the Wars of the Roses, and Rebellion in the Middle Ages. Matt can be found on Twitter and Facebook @MattLewisAuthor, on Instagram @MattLewisHistory.



# Obituary: John Grove (1937 – 2021)

It is with great sadness that we report the passing, on 27 December, of John Grove, Founder of the Mortimer History Society. Hugh Wood, Chair of the Society, looks back at his life with admiration and gratitude.

**J**ohn had been valiantly fighting a serious illness for several years, but remained active and enthusiastic until the last four weeks of his life, giving lectures on a variety of subjects in 2021 and planning new areas for research in 2022. An inspiration to us all, he certainly didn't look, or act, like one's normal idea of an 84-year-old.

On 30 May 2009, I was one of a goodly crowd of people who travelled to Much Marcle Memorial Hall in Herefordshire to attend a lecture by a person who wanted to set up a Mortimer History Society. Over the course of an hour or so, John dashed through nearly 500 years of Mortimer history and projected a wealth of slides. Not surprisingly his knowledge, enthusiasm and commitment met a ready response from many of us, and the Society held its first meeting on 24 October that year at Wigmore. John was very much at the helm in the early years of the Society, organising conferences and persuading national experts to travel to the Marches to talk to us. Never short of ideas, he was particularly keen on the development of a Mortimer Trail, linking sites with strong Mortimer connections, and was quite delighted when Philip Hume's *On the Trail of the Mortimers* was published in 2016.

John studied Economics and Theology at St Catherine's College in Cambridge. A committed Christian at that stage of his life, he felt himself called to missionary work in India and spent the next few years teaching in Calcutta and studying at Delhi Bible College. On his return to England,



## John Grove 3

he taught at schools around the country before being appointed Headmaster of Crestwood Comprehensive School in Kingswinford, Dudley. After retiring from teaching, he set himself new challenges, gaining an MA from Warwick in Scandinavian education, before teaching and lecturing in several countries in the Carpathian region. It was in Hungary that he met his lovely second wife Zsuzsa, known to many members of the Society.

John 'discovered' Wigmore and the Mortimers in 1984 and researching the history of the Mortimer family became an absorbing activity for him. Our Vice-President, Dr Ian Mortimer recalls "I first met John in 2004 when I was talking about Roger Mortimer to his local history group, the Friends of Usk Castle. He showed me his photo albums of Mortimer-related places and told me then about his plans for the society. Such enthusiasm was essential to the success of a venture like the Mortimer History Society. John demonstrated even before the start, that he had enough drive and commitment – and then some. We all owe him a great deal, not least because, for many of us, the Society he founded is how we know each other. I hope he found joy in reflecting on how many hundreds of like-minded people he brought together through his boundless enthusiasm for history."

Fortunately John lived to see his dream come true. The Mortimer History Society now has around 450 members worldwide – a fitting memorial for a truly inspirational man.

To honour the Society's Founder, the Society's Annual Summer Lecture will, from this year onwards, be known as the John Grove Memorial Lecture. See page 8 for details of this year's event.

# A wander in Weobley

Stay around after our AGM on Saturday 26 March and enjoy a wander around medieval Weobley with Society members Brian and Elizabeth Holley.



Medieval Weobley, with its iconic church tower

**B**efore setting out on a tour of Weobley Elizabeth will talk to us about the origin of the kingdom of Mercia, Weobley's place in it, and the royal family member who owned the land on which the village of Weobley developed. Shortly after the Norman Conquest a castle was erected, first in wood and later in stone, which remained in the ownership of the de Lacy family until it was captured by King Stephen in 1138. Eventually it was returned to the de Lacy's and then passed from one noble family to another, finally becoming the property of the dukes of Somerset and then the Thynne family. We will visit the castle site, now in the care of English Heritage, on our tour.

Elizabeth will also introduce us to the woollen, weaving and glove-making industries that made Weobley prosperous, and explain how the fact that Weobley had two Members of Parliament was a source of dissent for many local people.

Highlights of our Weobley tour will include...

- The site of the castle, from where most of the stones were removed to build medieval houses
- The Manor House, built in around 1400
- The Throne, originally an inn named The Unicorn, where Charles I stayed on 5 September 1645, after the Battle of Naseby
- The 17th century Old Grammar School
- Wealden houses, a style adapted from Kent by Herefordshire craftsmen.

Elizabeth and Brian Holley share a lifelong interest in medieval history and are both active members of the Weobley & District Local History Society. Brian is currently its Acting Chairman. Brian was involved in excavations on the site of Weobley Castle in 2005, and both he and Elizabeth are well-informed about the village's long history.

# From your editor



## Happy New Year

I hope you've all arrived in 2022 with an appetite for great history because, this year, your Society has a great programme of events in store for you! You can find out all about these on page 7. And in this issue of *Mortimer Matters* we give you sneak previews of our February conference and our AGM.

This year The Mortimer History Society will celebrate its 13th anniversary. What a long way we've come in that time. We are now one of the largest and, for sure, the fastest growing history society in the UK with a national and international membership of over 450. We owe a great debt to our founder John Grove, who sadly died just before Christmas and is eulogised by Society Chairman Hugh Wood on page 4. I didn't know John personally, but I chatted with him by email recently regarding book reviews he wrote for this newsletter. He seemed to me a man of great enthusiasm and generosity of heart. Let's make sure we continue his legacy by doing all we can as members to help the Society he founded evolve and thrive.

We've got some great features for you in this issue. I'm particularly pleased to welcome Matt Lewis' first contribution to the newsletter. His account of the Mortimer claim to the throne – and the fate of two young boys caught up in the machinations around it – is both insightful and thought provoking. I also recommend Rachel Sycamore's study of medieval church chests. It might sound like a niche interest but, I for one was intrigued to read it! And thanks to Alastair Ayton for insights into the March during Henry III's reign. Thanks, indeed, to all of our contributors.

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

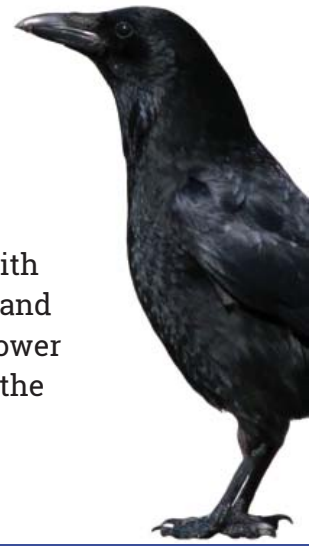
- Recommend a topic you'd like to see covered in *Mortimer Matters*
- Volunteer to write a book review or feature
- Tell us about a news item or event you'd like us to mention

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 in February, so please get in touch with your ideas as soon as you can.

# Passion and Power in the Marches

## A half-day online conference

Our 2022 events programme kicks off on the afternoon of Saturday, 12 February with an exploration of three fascinating individuals (or families) from medieval Wales and the March. Examining their lives, our eminent historians consider the drive for power in Powys, the nature of inter-Marcher warfare and how a Welsh princess became the mistress of an English king.



### People of the March



#### The Life of Gwenwynwyn ab Owain Cyfeilio, Prince of Powys

Dr Craig Owen Jones, Lecturer at San Jose State University, California describes how this twelfth century ruler of Powys attempted to establish supremacy in Wales. He'll examine Gwenwynwyn's exercise of power and overlordship, and his frequently stormy relations with both Llywelyn ab Iorwerth and King John. Dr Jones has published extensively on medieval Wales in numerous journals. His forthcoming book, *Princely Ambition: Ideology, Landscape and Castle Building in Gwynedd 1194 to 1283* will be published by the University of Hertfordshire Press in February and launched in partnership with the Mortimer History Society.



#### The Corbets and Inter-Marcher Warfare: Reconsidering Definitions

Dr Julian-Jones, a specialist in the Welsh March and its socio-political and ecclesiastical networks, uses the career of Thomas Corbet of Caus to examine the nature of inter-Marcher warfare. It's easy to assume that the feuds and confrontations of the time were simply disputes between Welsh rulers and Marcher Lords but, she purports, that assumption can be both simplistic and misleading. Dr Julian-Jones is a history tutor for the Cardiff University Centre for Continuing and Professional Education.



#### Nest Ferch Rhys: Princess, Mistress, Mother

John Fleming, currently working on the southwest volume of the Marcher Lordships trilogy, takes time out to talk about one of the great women of Welsh history. Born a princess, Nest became the mistress of the future Henry I and went on to marry his castellan of Pembroke, Gerald of Windsor. Their offspring subsequently formed the early foundations of both the Marcher lordships and the earl conquerors of Ireland. John Fleming has an MA in history from King's College London.

#### Online for all!

This conference – and all our winter events – will be held online via Zoom to make it easy for members to attend, wherever they are and whatever the weather. We'll return to in-person events in the spring. You can reserve your place at [www.mortimerhistorysociety.org.uk](http://www.mortimerhistorysociety.org.uk) Please note that we have introduced a small charge for Zoom events of £3 for members and £5 for non-members, to help cover costs, so you will need to book your place!

## Welcome to new members

Our membership continues to flourish. Thirteen new members have joined since the last edition of *Mortimer Matters* – including a Roger Mortimer! Welcome all! We hope you're enjoying your membership and look forward to meeting you.

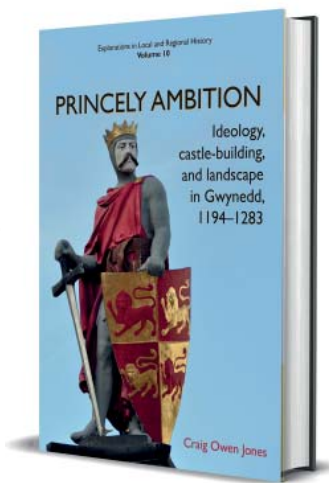
<b>Kim Brinkworth</b>	Hereford	<b>Jemima Lord</b>	Ludlow
<b>Peter Eccleston</b>	Neston	<b>Roger Mortimer</b>	Clevedon
<b>Choesang Fenner-Tenzin</b>	Puddleston	<b>Theo Wilkie</b>	Plymouth
<b>Ruth Hearn</b>	Sutton Coldfield	<b>Mike and Vanessa Williams</b>	Aberdare
<b>Caroline Irwin</b>	Birmingham	<b>Angela and Ben Yates</b>	Presteigne
<b>Rachel Knowles</b>	Evesham		

## Book Launch: Princely Ambition

The Mortimer History Society and the University of Hertfordshire Press join forces to launch Dr Craig Owen Jones' fascinating investigation of native Welsh castle-building in 13th century Gwynedd.

This ground-breaking book challenges the long-held theory that the native Welsh princes' approach to castle-building was characterised by architectural ignorance, a disregard for landscape and even pure whimsy. Dr Jones suggests a much more deliberate policy informed, in the first instance, by Llywelyn I ab Iorwerth's need to define territory and assert power after his violent assumption of the throne of Gwynedd in the 1190s. By the time of his grandson Llywelyn II ap Gruffudd's reign in the 1260s and 70s, however, the prestige value of castles had been superseded by the need to make the polity he had created – the Principality of Wales – defensible against external threat.

Taking advantage of recent innovative archaeological investigations at prestigious castle sites, Dr Jones offers a timely corrective to perceptions that the castles of the princes were poorly sited, weakly defended and whimsical. His exciting new account fills a crucial gap in scholarship on castle-building before the Edwardian conquest and provides a nuanced understanding of important military sites in the context of changing Welsh politics.



### Join us on Zoom

The launch of *Princely Ambition: Ideology, castle-building and landscape in Gwynedd, 1194 - 1283* will take place via Zoom at 7:00pm on Wednesday, 2 March. Zoom joining details will be sent to all members in advance. Attendance is free and all are welcome. Society Secretary Philip Hume will introduce Craig, who will then reveal the real driving forces behind the Welsh princes' ambition to build.

The book will be available to purchase at [www.uhpress.co.uk](http://www.uhpress.co.uk) from its publication date on 14 February. University of Hertfordshire Press is generously offering a 20% discount on the standard RRP of £16.99 from that date until the end of March – buy for just £13.59 with free delivery!

## Keep the date!

Our 2022 programme is now complete. Here's a summary of what's in store this year. While we're thrilled that we're now able to meet in person, many of our events will now be delivered in a hybrid format – join us in person or take part from the comfort of your home via Zoom!

### Saturday, 12 February 2022 Passion and Power in the Marches

An afternoon online conference. See page 6 for details and page 8 for a preview of one of the compelling talks.

### Wednesday, 2 March Book launch

Launch of Dr Craig Owen Jones' book, *Princely Ambition: Ideology, Castle Building and Landscape in Gwynedd 1194 – 1238*.

### Saturday 26 March AGM

Morning event to be held in Weobely, followed by our AGM lecture on medieval Weobely, including tour. See page 5 for details.

### Saturday, 14 May Murder, Mayhem and Marriage: the Mortimers and the Welsh Princes

Twice cancelled because of Covid, this full-day event, hosted in partnership with the Radnorshire Society will be held at last in Knighton. It features a great line up of speakers who will explore the tempestuous relationships between the Mortimers and the princes of Wales.

### Wednesday, 22 June The John Grove Memorial Lecture

Professor Daniel Power, one of the country's most respected medieval historians, examines the rupture of the Anglo-Norman aristocracy after the fall of ducal Normandy in 1204.

### Saturday, 30 July How to Build a Castle

A special full-day conference exploring castle construction and development using Ludlow Castle as a template. Held partly in Ludlow Assembly Rooms and partly in the castle itself, this will be very much a hands on experience!

### Saturday, 8 October Autumn Symposium Castles of Wales and the Marches

A full-day given over to an eclectic range of talks on castles in Wales and the Marches.

### Saturday, 3 December Medieval Christmas

This half-day conference has a festive theme, and examines how Christmas was celebrated during the Middle Ages.

See future issues of *Mortimer Matters*, plus our web and social media pages for updates to our event schedule as our plans develop.

# A bid for power or drive to survive?

In the late 12th century, Gwenwynwyn ab Owain, leader of Powys, was forced to walk a delicate path. Sandwiched between the mighty power blocks of England and Gwynedd, was it his aim to make a bid for Welsh supremacy and stand as a bulwark against further Marcher lord insurgence, or simply to maintain the integrity of a polity under pressure? In our February conference, Dr Craig Owen Jones weighs up Gwenwynwyn's ambition.

In the complex geo-politics of medieval Wales, Powys' long and ill-defined borders with England and Gwynedd made it ripe for encroachment from every direction. English power seemed inescapable, while Gwynedd had clearly emerged as the dominant player among the native princes. However, in the crucial years after the death of Henry II of England, did Gwenwynwyn see an opportunity to change his fate?

The death of Henry led to a period of instability in England as his several sons vied for power. It's not hard to imagine that the royal eye was momentarily distracted from the Welsh ball. At the same time, a long period of civil war in Gwynedd was coming to an end but, although Llywelyn ab Iorwerth had come to power in around 1197, his hold was far from secure and, for several years, his attention would be focused on quelling rebels and discontents within his own lands. Dr Jones will show how, in this momentary power vacuum, Gwenwynwyn started to flex the muscles of Powys.

By styling himself Prince of Powys, mining his own silver and by chancing his arm with land grabs in Gwynedd and the March, was Gwenwynwyn showing ambition to lead a nation, or merely a survival instinct to keep his polity intact?

Ultimately, we'll never know. Defeated by Marcher Lords at the Battle of Painscastle in 1198 and imprisoned by King John at Shrewsbury in 1208, Gwenwynwyn's run of luck



**Powys – caught between England and Gwynedd**

had come to an end. He ultimately died in exile at Chester in or shortly after 1216 and much of Powys was annexed by Gwynedd.

Looking at that brief ten-year period, Dr Jones will investigate Gwenwynwyn's tempestuous relationships with England and Gwynedd and try to decipher the motives behind his actions and leadership style. And he'll evaluate Gwenwynwyn's legacy in history. How should he be remembered? As an ambitious failure? Or a proud upholder of Welsh rights?

## About the author

Dr Jones is an expert in medieval Welsh history and a lecturer at San Jose State University, California.

Book your place for our February Conference, 'Passion and power in the Marches' at [www.mortimerhistorysociety.org.uk](http://www.mortimerhistorysociety.org.uk)

## Telling friend from foe: the “Welsh” in the March of Wales during the reign of Henry III

Historian and Society Member Alastair Ayton considers the relationship between the Welsh and English in the medieval March, and the nature of the frontier society they forged.

In 1993, at the outset of his Presidential Address to the Royal Historical Society, Professor Sir Rees Davies declared, “Peoples are back on the historian's agenda”.<sup>1</sup> Like it or not, the study of peoples and identities remains in the historical limelight. These are subjects of keen debate and, in certain cases, of profound disagreement. Nowhere, at least in a medieval British context, is a discussion of identity arguably more vexing, and so perhaps more necessary, than in reference to the peoples of the Welsh March (*Marchia Wallie*).

Any study of the March and its lords must contend with the Welsh as inhabitants and, increasingly, as key movers and shakers in the region. What it meant to be Welsh in the Middle Ages, including aspects of Welsh life, has been discussed very ably and at great length by scholars elsewhere. Suffice it to say, we know that medieval peoples appear often to have thought of themselves and others as belonging to nations (*naciones*) and peoples (*gentes*), however tricky or unfashionable such terms appear in a modern context.





**Depiction of Welsh Archer  
(TNA E 36/274).**

Reproduced by permission of the National Archives.

Criteria including pedigree (bloodline and birthplace), language, law and custom, etc., were important dimensions, at least for some, of Welsh identity and identification in the Middle Ages. A sense of Welsh identity or Welshness had developed by the twelfth century alongside, and probably in reaction to, a burgeoning sense of English identity or Englishness. Thus, Gerald of Wales, the famous twelfth-century churchman, reformer, and Marcher propagandist, wrote in his *Description of Wales (Descriptio Cambriae)*:

“The English are striving for power, the Welsh for freedom; the English are fighting for material gain, the Welsh to avoid a disaster; the English soldiers are hired mercenaries, the Welsh are defending their homeland. The English, I say, want to drive the Welsh out of the island and to capture it all for themselves. The Welsh, who for so long ruled over the whole kingdom, want only to find refuge together in the least attractive corner of it, the woods, the mountains and the marshes, to which they have been banished for their sins<sup>2</sup>”

## A divided society?

A picture emerges of a highly divided society of Welsh and English, who, we are told, were segregated to all intents and purposes by their conflicting aims and fated to a state of opposition. But was it really like this? How are we to interpret Gerald's description regarding the Welsh March and its Welsh and Anglo-Norman or English inhabitants? After all, Gerald himself, born and raised at Manorbier Castle in Pembrokeshire to an Anglo-Norman father, William de Barri, and Welsh mother, Angharad FitzGerald (granddaughter of Rhys ap Tewdwr, King of Deheubarth), struggled with his own identity throughout his life; he does not fit comfortably into the binaries of Welsh or English.

Gerald's reference to the Welsh finding refuge in the woods, the mountains and the marshes is not complete hyperbole. The Welsh of the March typically, though not exclusively, populated the upland areas of Marcher lordships, called Welshries, while their Anglo-Norman lords and the English of the March inhabited the productive and often more valuable lowland areas, called Englishries. But Gerald's bold assertions about the contrasting motivations of the Welsh and English provide merely a partial account; many Welshmen, for example, were paid for their services and fought in the armies of successive medieval English kings. Anglo-Welsh alliances higher up the social scale, as others have shown,

posed real challenges to the crown, too. The Chester-Gwynedd partnership, for example, of Ranulf de Blundeville (d.1232), earl of Chester, and Llywelyn ap Iorwerth (d.1240), challenged crown authority in the north-west of England and North Wales (Earl Ranulf issued his own Magna Carta in about 1220 and, tellingly, the double gateway of his castle at Beeston faced England not Wales!).<sup>3</sup> The emerging friendship and subsequent alliance in the 1260s between Simon de Montfort (d.1265), earl of Leicester, and Llywelyn ap Gruffudd (d.1282), provides a similar example. Concepts of national identity, then, were neither entirely stable nor inflexible in this period, and it would be wrong to envisage wholly isolated communities of Welsh and English living cheek by jowl, each having little or nothing to do with the other save for violence.

The Welsh March was, in many ways, a frontier society or borderland par excellence. It was, of course, a region of feuding and war but also of social and cultural cross-pollination, even assimilation. It was simultaneously a periphery or edge and a zone which bridged both England and Wales, and their peoples, within which struggles between the Anglo-Normans or English were as common as those between English and Welsh, and where alliances had less to do with national identity or ethnicity than they did with political necessity.

Moreover, the Welsh were not a homogenous bloc with indistinguishable objectives. Marriage alliances, landholding, patronage, and neighbourhood, all provided a framework of complimentary and at times competing ties which reflected and informed the aspirations of leading Welsh figures in the March. They pursued opportunities and rivalries as ruthlessly as their Anglo-Norman or English counterparts. This understanding is borne out when we examine the relevant sources for Henry III's reign.

## Service to Lords and Crown

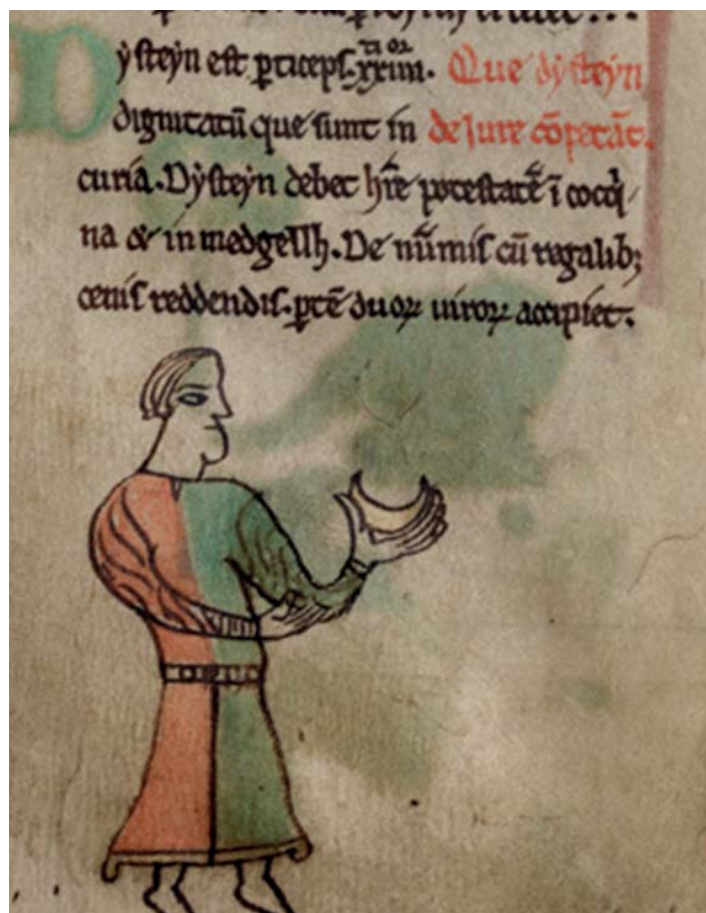
Several Welshmen were active within the political milieu of the Welsh March in the thirteenth century, serving Marcher lords many of whom were leading barons of England, and the crown alike. As officials, arbiters (of truces), messengers and, in some cases, military commanders, they were entrusted with a great deal of responsibility and authority. This extended to the management and defence of royal and Marcher strongholds and their wider estates. Those who performed well and faithfully in their roles received promotion and enjoyed the fruits of royal favour. The names of some of these Welsh custodians are known to us: Gruffudd Fychan, Rhys and Hywel ap Meurig, Gwlym ap Gwrward (or William Gorwareth), and Philip ap Goronwy. To these might be added, among others: John of Monmouth, Hugh of Brecon, Robert le Walays, and Trahaearn ap Hywel. These figures either came from the March or were particularly active in its politics.

Some, like John, enjoyed prominent careers in royal service. John was sheriff of Staffordshire and Shropshire in 1229, served as justice of the king's forest in diverse counties, and was appointed constable of the castles at Chepstow and Caerleon in 1231. A decade later, as the king's justiciar in south Wales, John became chief bailiff of the new counties centred on Carmarthen and Cardigan. John remained in royal service until his death in 1248, when his son, also John, swore homage to the king and paid a £100 relief for his father's estates. This John then served the crown in the March until his death in 1257.

1 R. R. Davies, 'The Peoples of Britain and Ireland, 1100-1400 I. Identities', *TRHS* 4 (1994), p. 1.

2 Gerald of Wales, *The Journey Through Wales and The Description of Wales*, trans., L. Thorpe (Penguin, 2004), p. 274.

3 R. Swallow, 'Gateways to Power: The Castles of Ranulf III of Chester and Llywelyn the Great of Gwynedd', *Archaeological Journal* 171 (2014), pp. 289-311.



**Dysteyn or steward, dish in hand, in *Leges Hywel Dda* (NLW Peniarth MS 28 folio 3v). By permission of Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru/The National Library of Wales**

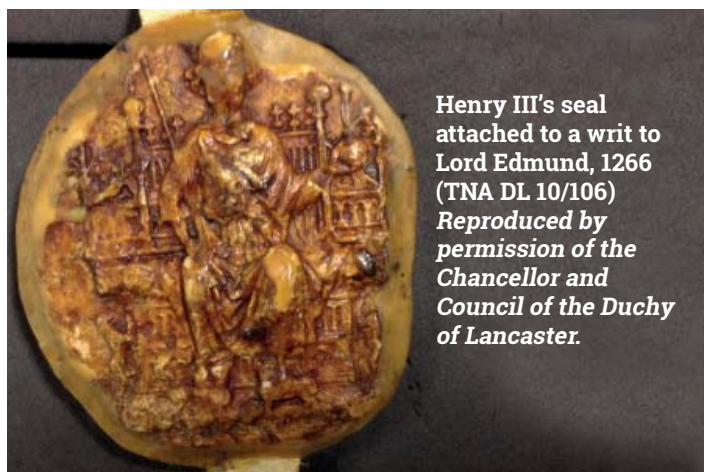
Others, like Trahaearn, performed less conspicuous but nonetheless significant tasks for the crown. Trahaearn was a shadowy figure; his beginnings are unclear. He went on Henry III's ill-fated expedition to Gascony in 1242 and, by 1255, he had been appointed constable of Deganwy Castle. In January 1259, he was ordered to travel with Gwilym ap Gwrwarded, another Welshman in royal service, to Abergely near Carmarthen (*Abergely prope Kermerthin*) to make amends for offences committed by Marcher lords against Llywelyn ap Gruffudd of Gwynedd. Later, in the 1260s, Trahaearn appears to have been knighted and granted property in Eye, Suffolk, which he held in fee and retained even after his homage and service was transferred to the king's clerk and future royal justice, Roger of Gloucester, in July 1266. Trahaearn continued to serve the crown; after the Treaty of Montgomery, an agreement brokered between Henry III and Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, when Llywelyn complained of further abuses (his lands were damaged or seized), it was to Trahaearn (and others) to whom the king looked to ensure the preservation of the peace according to the law and custom of the March.

By charting the careers of John of Monmouth, Trahaearn ap Hywel, and others, we see how talented and experienced Marcher figures and Welshmen were not only *not* prohibited from royal service but were appointed, promoted, and rewarded as agents of the crown. As others have noted, studying these figures and their careers reveals how local lordship and regional sentiment often combined, reflecting and creating an increased desire among some Welshmen to maintain and protect systems of local and royal governance which had started to benefit them by the mid-thirteenth century.

## Shifting realities

Henry III himself increasingly recognised the complex and shifting reality of the March and its politics. In the aftermath of the Second Barons' War, which followed the seizure of power from the king by Simon de Montfort, earl of Leicester, Henry ordered his second son, Lord Edmund, to intervene in Wales. On 15 August 1266, Edmund was ordered to recover all the lands in the March "which are in the possession of our [the king's] Welsh enemies who do not come forth into our [the king's] peace<sup>4</sup>". Crucially, Edmund was also told to return all occupied lands then "in the hands of the said Welsh [enemies]... which they [Welsh enemies] seized from the same our faithful Welsh", to all those who had been dispossessed and remained loyal to the king. This admittedly convoluted set of instructions reveals the complexity of an evolving situation in the March. It also reflects a wider royal strategy, whereby Henry attempted to reshape the political structures of the March to his own benefit, chiefly by expanding his authority in the region by increasing his hold over its lords. That Henry ordered his son, Lord Edmund, to punish those he called "our Welsh enemies" (*Walenses inimicos nostros*) expressly for the transgressions committed by them upon his "faithful Welsh" (*Walenses fideles nostros*) subjects, is striking. Ultimately, this suggests that a more nuanced reality existed or later developed in the March than is suggested in Gerald of Wales's *Description of Wales*.

Further research into the Welsh knightly class and into the lives of those who lived and operated within the March will doubtless yield further results, which might challenge our preconceptions of Marcher society and improve our understanding of its peoples. For a recent study which addresses the themes discussed here in more detail, through the lens of one family, see Dr David Stephenson's important new book: *Patronage and Power in the Medieval Welsh March: One Family's Story*, published in 2021 by University of Wales Press and reviewed in the October 2021 edition of *Mortimer Matters*.



**Henry III's seal attached to a writ to Lord Edmund, 1266 (TNA DL 10/106) Reproduced by permission of the Chancellor and Council of the Duchy of Lancaster.**

## About the author:

Alastair completed his PhD at the University of St Andrews in March 2020. His thesis is entitled: *Politics, Policy and Power: the Marcher Lords and the English Crown in the March of Wales, 1254-1272*. Alastair became a member of the Mortimer History Society in February 2021.

<sup>4</sup> TNA DL 10/106.

# Anthology writers...

In 2023, the Mortimer History Society will mark the 700th anniversary of Roger Mortimer's escape from the Tower by publishing *Dynasty of Destiny: the Mortimers of Wigmore in the Middle Ages, 1066-1485*, an anthology of Mortimer-related essays. Here two of our contributing scholars give us an insight to their coming contributions. Ian Mortimer is an author, archivist, and Vice President of the Society. John Kenyon is a castle specialist and an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Wales.



**Ian Mortimer** © Stuart Clarke

## Who was Sir John Mortimer?

Sir John Mortimer of Hatfield was arrested in October 1418. He was imprisoned in the Tower of London for five and a half years without trial, on the orders of Henry V and contrary to the terms of Magna Carta. In 1422 he escaped, but was recaptured in Wales. Two years later, Parliament was persuaded to change the law temporarily, so that anyone escaping from prison while suspected of treason could automatically be deemed guilty without having to be tried. Sir John's gaoler was then instructed to help him escape. Inevitably he was recaptured as soon as he was outside the Tower. Within three days he was drawn, hanged, quartered and beheaded. Then he was given two high-status burials – one for his heart and one for the remainder of his body.

But who was he? An impostor? A renegade? A bastard? Or a genuine Mortimer heir? Ian's contribution will look at the men supporting Sir John, his connections with the Mortimer earls of March, and the possibility of his coming from a minor Hertfordshire family that preserved a memory of their ancestry in their coat of arms. He will also reveal a network of relationships between all the lines of descent from Ralph Mortimer (d. 1246) of Wigmore, making the Mortimers much more of a clan than a single family. Finally, he will suggest a new, much darker reason why the Lancastrians locked Sir John up without trial and had him judicially murdered.



**John Kenyon**

## The Castles of the Mortimers: An overview

John introduces us to a remarkably diverse range of structures built or owned by the Mortimers. "They range" he explains, "from the centre of Mortimer power at Wigmore, which is one of the greatest castles in the land and about which we still have much to learn, down to castles such as Knucklas and Castell Dinboeth (Tinboeth) which show us only impressive earthworks and long-buried masonry. Nor is Mortimer ownership straight forward, some castles were in Welsh hands at times, or even originally built by them.

"I'll pay particular attention to the domestic improvements made to castles that came into Mortimer possession from the late thirteenth century onwards, particularly those at Dolforwyn and Ludlow. Increasing recent interest in the so-called baronial castles established as part of Edward I's conquest of north Wales has meant that what remains of Roger Mortimer's Chirk is now under the spotlight.

"I'll also look at Mortimer castles in Ireland, including Trim and Dunamase, although what remains at these castles today seems to have little to do with their Mortimer ownership."

*Dynasty of Destiny: the Mortimers of Wigmore in the Middle Ages, 1066-1485* is slated for publication by Logaston Press. It will be launched at the Tower of London on 1 August 2023, when the Society will meet to commemorate Roger's daring bid for freedom.

# Church Chests

## A study that takes the lid off history

Rachel Sycamore's MRes thesis takes a look at a too-long overlooked piece of church furniture – the church chest. Her systematic archaeological study of medieval dug-out church chests across Herefordshire and Worcestershire, opens the lid on their history and provides a sound methodology that can be applied to church chests anywhere.

The first step in my research was to locate extant medieval church chests in the counties of Herefordshire and Worcestershire and identify them within four main groups. I then focused my attention on the 'dug-out' type of chest and, through an archaeological study, considered its broader social and symbolic context. My thesis gives the first comprehensive analysis of construction methods, saw-marks, tools, and techniques employed in making dug-out chests. The results have shed new light on accepted critical frameworks established by earlier authors that dug-outs are the 'crudest' and 'most primitive' type of chest in the Medieval period.



14th century Dug-out chest, Munsley, Herefordshire

### Four types of chest

There are four pure types of church chest worthy of note. Boarded or planked chests made from six large boards nailed together; clamped chests, so called because their front and back comprise a large board (or boards) clamped between two wide stiles; panelled chests comprising loose panels inserted within a frame to allow free movement; and dug-out chests, made by hollowing out a single tree trunk, which became the subject of my study.

In total, I recorded 132 church chests in Herefordshire and 80 in Worcestershire. That included 14 dug-outs in Herefordshire and 13 in Worcestershire. A dug-out chest at St. George's Church, Orleton may be associated with the Mortimer family – more on that later.

### Reasons for church chests

The injunctions of Archbishop Aelfric (d.1005) tell us that dug-out chests were among sacred items in churches long before the Norman Conquest. During the Medieval period the church chest underwent a process of transformation in complying with various edicts issued by kings and popes, which affected their form, function, significance, and even physical position in the church. In 1166, King Henry II ordered money trunks

to be placed in all parish churches to receive offerings for the relief of the Holy Land, with a similar order being made by Pope Innocent III in 1199 and also in 1200. These edicts specifically instruct that the chest should be strongly constructed, dug-out from a solid tree trunk, reinforced with ironwork, and have three locks with three keys and a money slot. A similar order is made in 1206 by Pope Innocent III under King John, for a hollow trunk with three keys.

The Synod of Exeter in 1287 established the role of churchwarden and forbade the use of trunks for alms collection, instructing that existing money slots be covered, and the chests used solely for storing books and vestments. It was around this time that boarded chests and clamped chests began to appear in churches. The use of chests for the storage of books and vestments was reinforced in 1289 by Bishop Gilbert of Chichester, but in 1308 Pope Clement V made injunctions for chests to collect alms once more, so in many chests the money slot was simply uncovered, or new slots made. Following the Black Death in the 14th century, many chantries were established to house post-mortem chests, bequeathed to the parish church for prayers to be said for a testator's soul, and these tended to be boarded or clamped chests.

The introduction of loose panels in a frame marked the end of Medieval chest construction in the 15th century. This coincided with changes in the church during the Reformation, when many church chests and their contents were sold, burnt, or taken into noble households. Those chests which survived lost their importance and many were adapted for the provision of a 'poor man's box' with three locks and keys, in accordance with 16th century injunctions.



15th century chest, Feckenham, Worcestershire

### Dating the dug-outs

Antiquarians and scholars in the 19th and early 20th century denoted dug-outs to the earliest phase of chest development, given their 'simple' and 'crude' design, believing that once the tools and techniques were developed to make other forms of chest, they were no longer made. However, my own research challenges this theoretical framework. Further, it demonstrates that analysing the angle of saw-marks on the

undersides of lids, construction methods, ironwork, and lid attachment methods, can aid in giving stylistic date estimates for dug-out chests.

Prior to my study, only five dug-out church chests had been tested using dendrochronology in Britain, providing dates between the 15th and 17th centuries. Obtaining funding from the Regional Furniture Society, dendrochronological dating was carried out on seven church chests in the Herefordshire and Worcestershire with the aim of adding to the national database and shedding light on stylistic dates.

The chest at St. Michael's and All Angels in Kingstone, Herefordshire, returned a felling and conversion date between 1243-1273, Orleton (II) chest at St. George's, Herefordshire, has a felling and conversion date between 1347-1377. Similarly, the chest at St. Bartholomew, Munsley, Herefordshire, returned a felling and conversion date between 1354-1388; the chest at St. John the Baptist, Feckenham, Worcestershire, returned a date of between 1435-1465 for the felling and conversion of the chest base, and the chest in St Lawrence in Lindridge, Worcestershire has a felling and conversion date between 1519-1549. Each chest was made from a locally-grown tree. The Kingstone chest is the oldest dated dug-out chest in Britain and has the most intricate ironwork. The Lindridge chest, the simplest in design and with simplistic ironwork, is in fact the youngest of the four chests.



The youngest chest (16th century) – Lindridge, Worcestershire



The oldest chest (13th century) – Kingstone, Herefordshire

## Orleton and the Mortimers

The dug-out chest (II) at Orleton is dated to just after the death of Adam of Orleton (d.1345), who was promoted from the position of Bishop of Hereford to Bishop of Worcester, and finally became Bishop of Winchester, so perhaps the chest was commissioned to commemorate his death. The church of St. George's at Orleton is also associated with the Mortimers, so if the chest is original to the church, it is possible that it was made under Mortimer patronage.

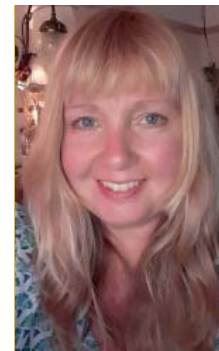


14th century Dug-out chest II at Oreleton, Herefordshire has a possible Mortimer connection

## Summary research conclusions

- Five dug-out church chests dated by dendrochronology returned felling and conversion dates ranging from the 13th- 16th century.
- Contrary to conclusions drawn by early scholars, the method of constructing a dug-out chest continued throughout the Medieval period and was not chronologically confined to the 'earliest' period.
- Dug-out chests actually persisted the longest amount of time, from pre-Norman to post-Reformation.
- Analysing saw-marks, construction methods, ironwork, and lid attachment methods, can aid in making stylistic date estimates for dug-out church chests in the absence of dendrochronology.

My thesis highlights the importance of consistent and systematic recording of chests surviving in parish churches to form a chronology of the varying styles of dug-outs and their ironwork, and that county studies of church chests are vital to further our understanding of how significant these artefacts were during the Medieval period.



### About the author

Rachel completed her MRes at the University of Worcester in June 2021. Her thesis is entitled: *Medieval Dug-*

*out Church Chests in Herefordshire and Worcestershire: A Systematic Archaeological Study.* She is a furniture restorer and furniture consultant to the Herefordshire Diocese.

Find out more at  
[www.sycamore-restoration.co.uk](http://www.sycamore-restoration.co.uk)

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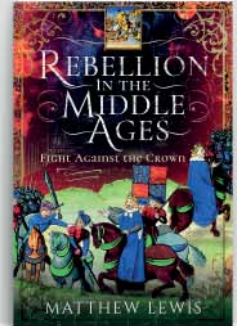
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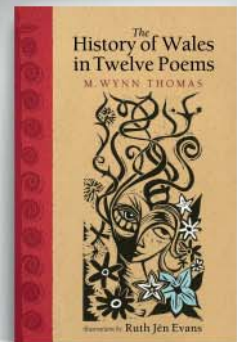


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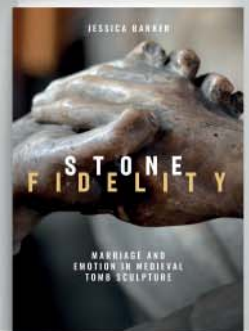


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By **Jessica Barker**, Boydell & Brewer, April 2021

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