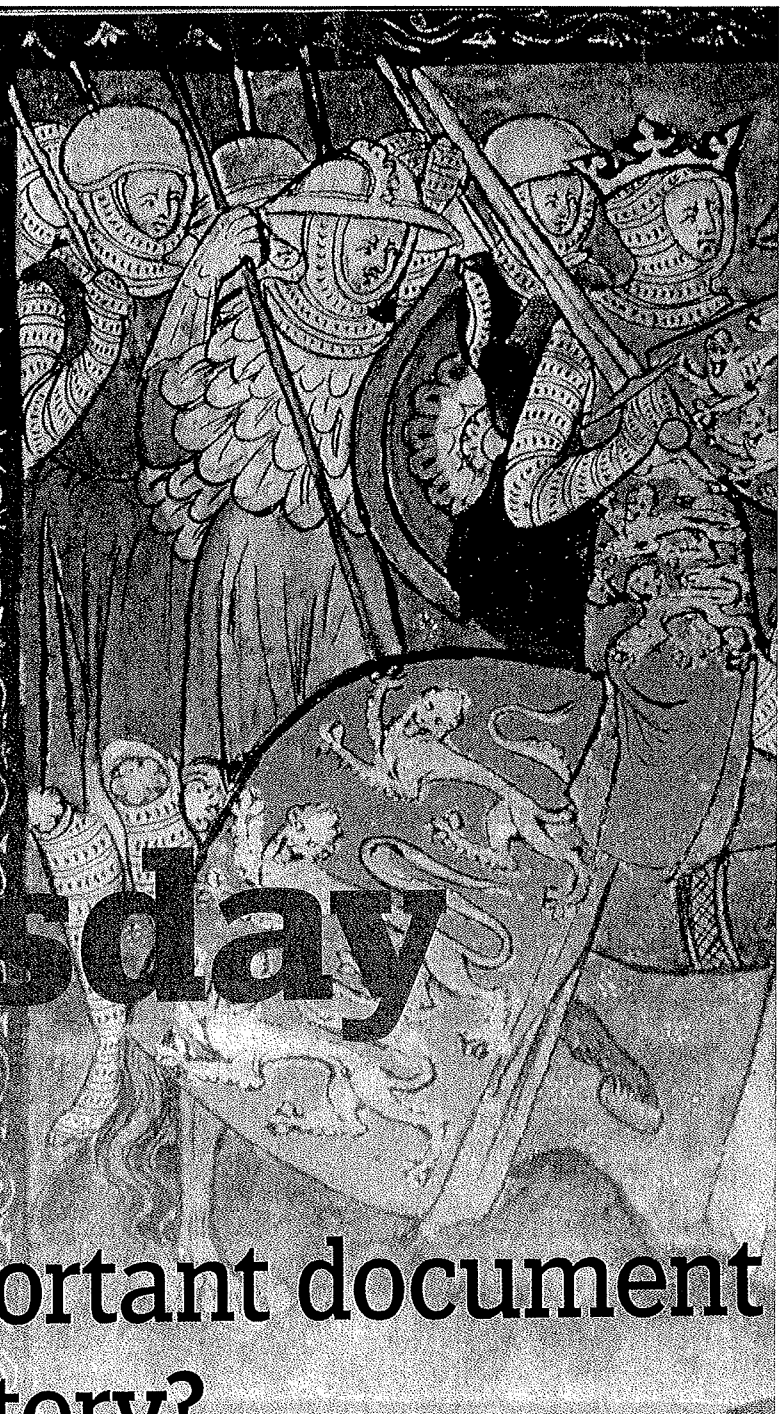
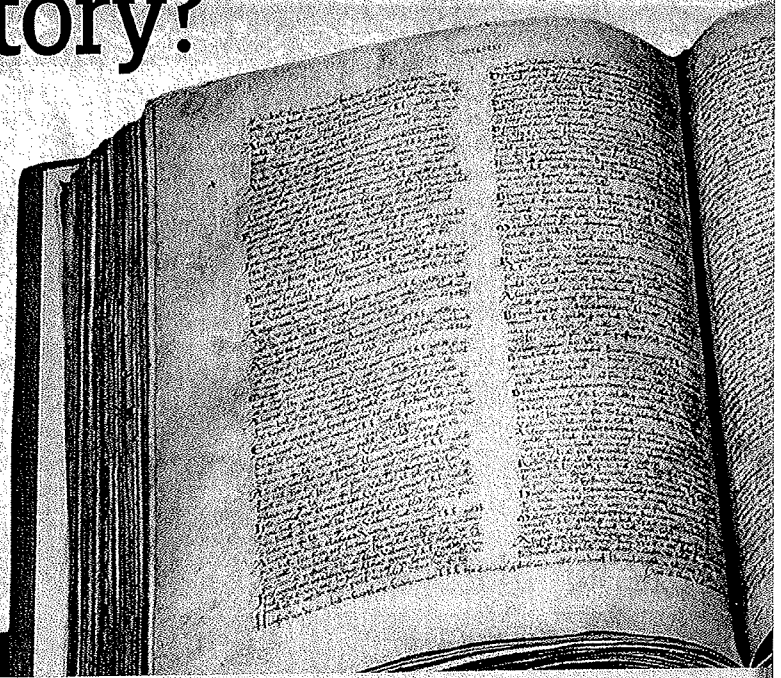
With the BBC's Norman season on TV screens this month, **Stephen Baxter** considers the big questions that need to be asked about Domesday Book, while **Robert Bartlett** explains why there's a lot more to Norman history than 1066 and the battle of Hastings

ON THE PODCAST THIS MONTH

Domesday Book

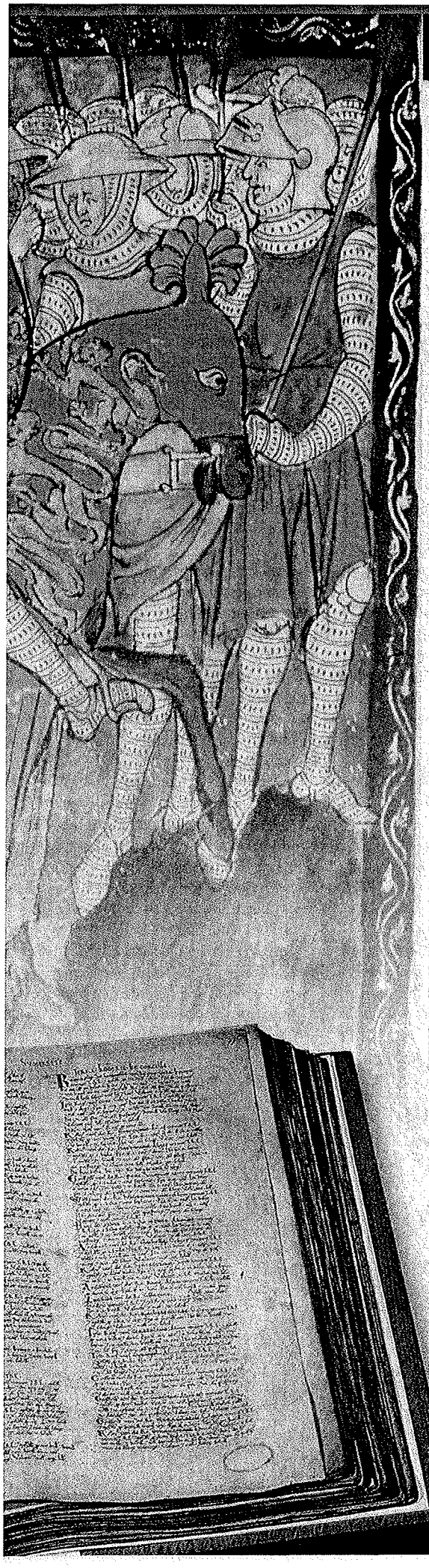
The most important document in English history?





ABOVE: **The 12th-century *Book of the Laws of Ancient Kings* shows William the Conqueror riding with his soldiers.** RIGHT: **Domesday Book, William's great "instrument of control", on display at the National Archives, London**

BBC History, August 2010



BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY/NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Q What is the background to Domesday Book?

A In 1085, William the Conqueror faced the greatest crisis of his life. This of course came two decades after his famous invasion and conquest of 1066. For the next 20 years he and his Norman followers colonised England, but then in the 1080s William's position as king began to look vulnerable. His eldest son, Robert, was in rebellion and courting allies in northern France for an attack on Normandy, and King Cnut of Denmark was preparing to invade England in alliance with the count of Flanders.

William's response was characteristically vigorous. According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, he mobilised the largest "force of mounted men and infantry" ever seen in England, compelled his vassals "to provision the army each in proportion to his land," and scorched the coastline to prevent his enemies from gaining a foothold – as his own army had done in 1066. The atmosphere of England in 1085 must have resembled 1588 with the Armada on its way, or 1940 with Hitler's forces poised for invasion.

Then, at Christmas, the king assembled his advisers to a council at Gloucester. There, he "had deep thought and very deep discussion with his council about this country – how it was occupied or with what sort of people". He then "sent his men over all England into every shire" to conduct a survey "so very narrowly did he have it investigated, that there was no single hide of land, nor indeed (it is a shame to relate but it seemed no shame to him to do) one ox nor one cow nor one pig which was there left out, and not put down in his record; and all these records were brought to him afterwards".

Confronted with the prospect of political and military catastrophe, William the Conqueror – one of the greatest military commanders of the 11th century – unleashed a bureaucratic fact-finding exercise. Why? How did he imagine that a book would help him resist a Viking invasion?

Q Why was Domesday Book made?

A The key to understanding why Domesday Book was made is to establish *how* it was made. The first step was to work out logistics. The kingdom was divided into seven 'circuits', most comprising five shires. Commissioners were appointed to conduct the survey in each and, to ensure their neutrality, they were chosen to serve on circuits where they did not themselves hold land.

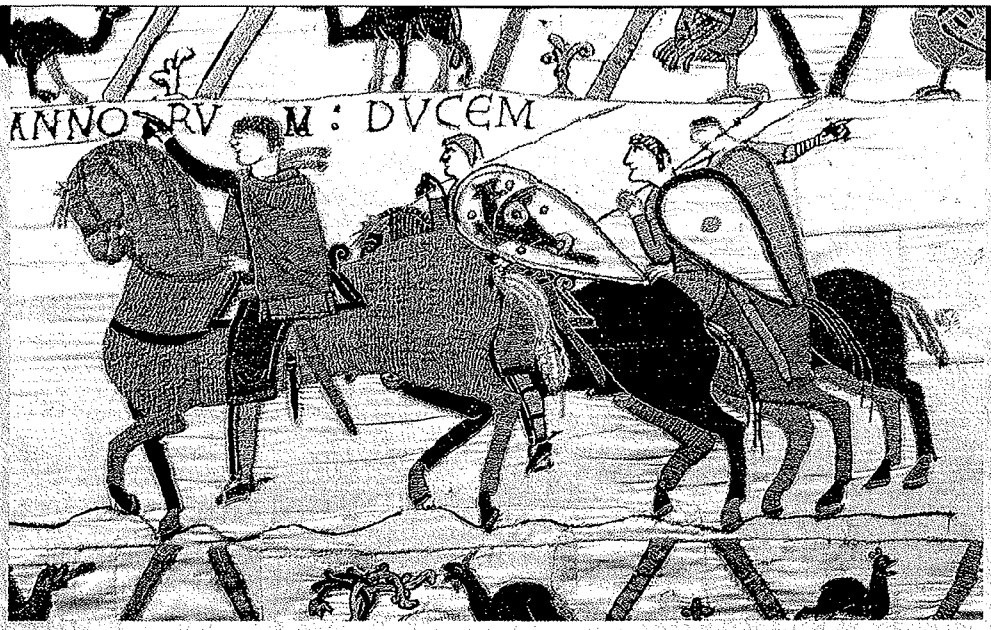
The commissioners were then furnished with terms of reference: a checklist of questions they had to answer for every parcel of property. Who held it in 1066? Who holds it now? How many people live there? How much livestock, woodland and meadow did it contain? What is its tax rating? How much money does it generate? Once these questions were made known, landholders and royal officials had a few weeks to gather the information they needed to answer them.

Then came the main event: the Domesday inquest, which was conducted at extraordinary meetings of shire courts throughout the kingdom. These must have been intensely exciting and dramatic occasions. Every landholder in the kingdom was called to give evidence before commissioners and panels of local jurors. This transformed the inquest into a political drama. It is known that some landholders even tried to pack Domesday juries with clients who could be relied on to support their verdicts, with varying degrees of success.

How did William imagine a book would help him resist a Viking invasion?

There must have been a moment of hushed excitement each time the crucial question was asked at the inquest: "Who holds the land now?" Thousands of verdicts were challenged, and not even the most powerful lords were immune. For example, Picot, the sheriff of Cambridgeshire, experienced a torrid time at the inquest. The monks of Ely later remembered him as "a hungry lion, a prowling wolf, a crafty fox, a filthy pig, a shameless dog," and to judge from the number of challenges to his title registered in Domesday Book, they said as much at the inquest.

Once the inquest hearings were complete, the commissioners and their scribes wrote up the results. One of their returns survives in its original form. It covers the south-western shires: ➢



William, Duke of Normandy (later the Conqueror) and his escort shown on horseback in the Bayeux Tapestry

Cornwall, Devon, Somerset, Wiltshire and Dorset. Although called the 'Exon Domesday', it is now known to have been written at Old Sarum, a castle and cathedral complex near Salisbury. As we shall see, this was a crucial focal point for the whole survey.

Finally, a single scribe was assigned the task of turning all seven circuit returns into a single document. This volume is now known as Great Domesday Book. The scribe probably began in the late summer of 1086 while results from the inquest were still coming to hand.

Scholars have estimated that it would have taken at least a year to write. It is possible that news of King William's death, on 9 September 1087, brought the scribe's work to an abrupt end. This would explain why he did not write up the return for the eastern circuit, which also survives in its original form, and is now known as Little Domesday Book. 'Domesday Book' is the collective term for these two volumes: the Great and Little Domesday Book.

Q Why is it called Domesday Book?

A During the lifetimes of William the Conqueror and his sons, royal officials employed politically correct language when describing Domesday Book. They called it a "descriptio (survey) of all England" (in 1086), a "volumen (volume) kept in the king's Treasury in Winchester," the "king's book," the "book of the Exchequer," the "book of Winchester," and so on.

But writing in the late 1170s, Richard fitzNigel, treasurer to Henry II, stated that it was popularly known by a very different name: "The natives [ie Englishmen] call this book 'Domesdei', that is, the day of judgment. This is a metaphor. For just as no judgment of that final severe and terrible trial can be evaded by any subterfuge, so when any controversy arises in the kingdom concerning the matters contained in the book, and recourse is made to the book, its word cannot be denied or set aside with impunity."

Domesday Book's name is therefore a function of its awesome reputation among the English. It invokes the Day of Judgment described in the Book of Revelations.

Q What was the purpose of the survey?

A This remains a deeply controversial problem. Many historians have argued that it was about taxation. That is of course logical. William desperately needed cash to finance his wars. Tax records from William's reign reveal that many landholders enjoyed tax breaks and loopholes, so there was a pressing need to make tax collection more efficient.

The survey's terms of reference support this hypothesis. Domesday commissioners were instructed to establish the fiscal liability of every parcel of land in England, and to collect further information that would enable them to establish that it could pay more. Every entry in Domesday Book supplies that information. A contemporary eyewitness account of the survey actually says that: "The land was vexed with much violence arising from the collection of royal taxes" during the process. Surely, therefore, Domesday Book was a tax book?

The problem is that the layout of Domesday Book makes it a spectacularly unhelpful guide to the logistics of taxation. To collect tax efficiently, royal officials needed information arranged in geographical order, hundred by hundred and village by village, so they would know exactly where to go and how much to collect. But Domesday Book does not work like that. Its main organising principle is personal, not geographical. Each shire begins with a numbered list, starting with the king and then listing the names of "tenants-in-chief" – lords who held land directly from the king. The holdings of the king and tenants-in-chief are then listed in the same order, under numbered headings, in the pages that follow. There are no totals and no indexes.

Any tax official trying to use this information laid out this way would have quickly lost the will to live, for as historians are painfully aware, it can take days to calculate the tax liability of particular areas or landholders, even with the benefit of modern editions with indexes.

The structure of Domesday Book does, however, make it an extraordinarily effective instrument of political control. Its tables of contents and numbered headings imply that all land was either held directly by the king, or from him by tenants-in-chief. It therefore enshrines a radically new political principle which lay at the heart of the Conqueror's regime: that the king claimed to be the source of all tenure. Domesday Book both asserts that principle and made it manageable. Armed with Domesday Book, King William could threaten to dispossess a recalcitrant baron in a matter of minutes. It is not hard to see how that would have brought comfort to a king who needed baronial loyalty

ART ARCHIVE

Domesday Book is the most complete survey of a pre-industrial society anywhere in the world

more than ever. So if we take Domesday Book at face value, its principal purpose must have been political, not fiscal.

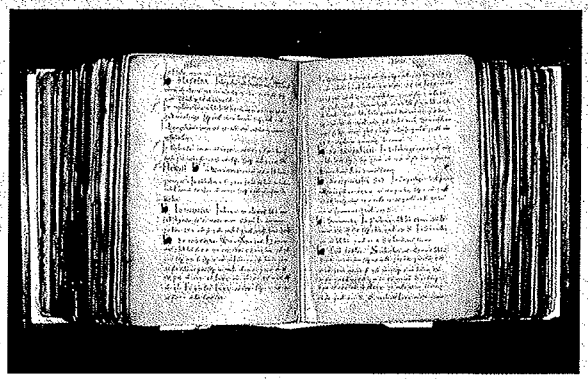
But there is a solution to the problem which embraces both possibilities. It is essential to register that there is a sharp distinction between the original survey and the book we can read today, and it is known that the inquest did generate information in a fiscally useful format. For example, Exon Domesday is bound up with geld lists which were updated in 1086, and the return for the south-east Midlands circuit is laid out in a fiscally useful geographical order.

By extracting information in different formats at each stage of the process, the king could achieve two objectives: a more secure tax base, and a formidable instrument of control over his barons.

Q Why did the barons accede to Domesday Book?

A The Domesday survey was completed with astonishing speed – within six months of the Gloucester council. This could not have been achieved without the active co-operation of the nobility. So what was in it for them?

Something that they had yearned for throughout the long period during which England had been colonised was security of title. The Domesday inquest created a great public stage on which to act out the ritual completion of the process of colonisation, and the records of the inquest constituted unassailable title to those loyal to the king. In other words, the Domesday survey was a hard-nosed deal between the king and his barons. That deal was sealed at Old Sarum. According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* King William travelled there on 1 August 1086, and "his councilors came to him, and all the people occupying land who were of any account over all England, no matter whose vassals they might be; and they all submitted to him and became his vassals, and swore oaths of allegiance to him". This extraordinary event was most likely the climax to the Domesday survey. Exon Domesday was written at Old Sarum, and it was almost certainly there that all the records of the survey were delivered to the king.



ABOVE: **Little Domesday Book, which was the survey for the eastern 'circuit' of England**
BELOW: **A c1030 calendar shows Anglo-Saxon farmers threshing corn**

Those records strengthened William's tax base and articulated the principle that he was the source of all tenure in England with astonishing precision. But they also constituted irrefutable evidence of the barons' title to property. That was enough to persuade them to swear allegiance and perform homage to the king. They did so in return for the land that William had granted them, now enshrined in the greatest charter of confirmation ever made in the medieval world.

Q Why is Domesday Book so important?

A It is the earliest English document preserved by the government that created it. That makes it England's earliest bureaucratic instrument.

But its importance extends well beyond the origins of English red tape. Domesday Book is the most complete survey of a pre-industrial society anywhere in the world. It enables us to reconstruct the politics, government, society and economy of 11th-century England with greater precision than is possible for almost any other pre-modern polity. Given the extent to which our knowledge of our past depends upon it, few would deny that Domesday Book is the single most important document in England's history.

Q Does Domesday Book help explain the causes of the Norman conquest?

A It certainly proves that England was rich and effectively administered. Two popular misconceptions are that England before the Norman conquest was in the 'Dark Ages', ie backward, and that the Normans began the process of bringing it to light. Forget them. England's economy was already not so much developing as highly developed. The population was large – there were at least two million people in Domesday England. In fact, it is likely that William the Conqueror ruled as many people as Henry VIII.

The landscape was intensively exploited. About 90 per cent of places on the modern map of England south of the Tees are recorded in Domesday Book.

There was also heavy investment in agriculture. Water mills were the most economically important machines in 11th-century Europe. Domesday records 6,000 of them. It also records that 650,000 oxen ploughed England's fields. That was enough to cultivate about eight million acres of land. A survey made in 1914 reveals that the cultivated area in England was then ➢

TOPFOTO/BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

The disappearing Normans

Dave Musgrove talks to **Professor Robert Bartlett** about how the Normans barged into history, and then gently faded away

THE CENTREPIECE of the BBC's Norman season this month is a three-part series presented by Professor Robert Bartlett. It traces the Norman story across Europe rather than focussing on the typical English preoccupation with 1066 and William the Conqueror's invasion.

"We are careful to follow the Normans not just in England, but throughout the British Isles," says Bartlett. "So we film in Scotland, Wales and Ireland, and we talk about the coming of the Normans to those countries and the different effects it had – for example, on the way that in Scotland the Normans were invited in. They strengthened the local dynasty and they assimilated. In contrast, in Ireland, you have more of a colonial situation with outsiders coming in, conquering and trying to maintain the separateness."

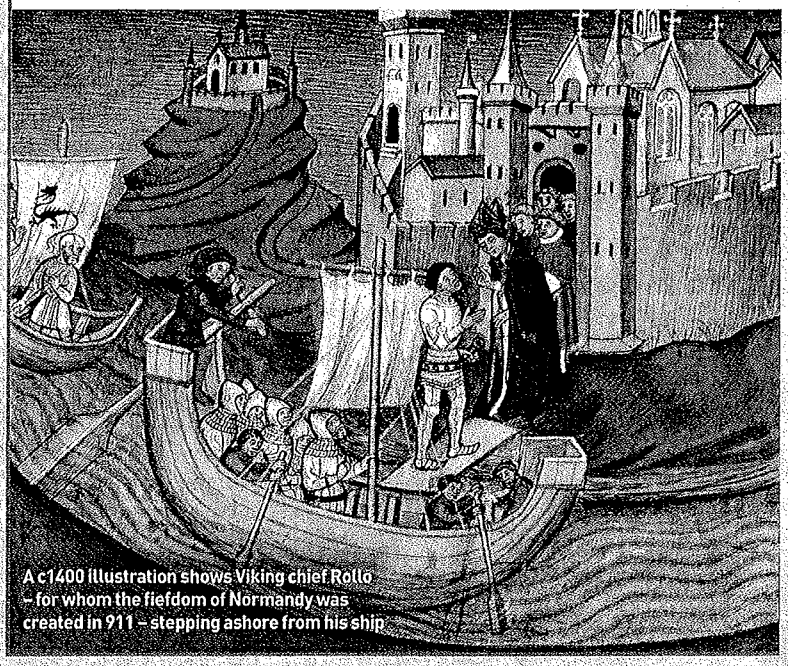
The story is not just one of the British Isles. It charts how the Normans went east, as well as north-west, and came to power around the Mediterranean. The journey, as Bartlett points out, is chronological as well as geographical.

"We start off with a bunch of Vikings, then they settle in northern France, where they undergo a very big change. They stop speaking Scandinavian languages and speak French. Then they adapt themselves to French society. The rulers become knights, they start fighting on horseback, they become Christian. So they have already made a transition from one set of identities – Scandinavian pagan raiders – to Christian knights in France."

In Britain, the Norman identity changed again, and so by the late 12th century, one of Henry II's administrators in England noted that it was now hard to tell who was of English and who of Norman descent. That wasn't the end of the Norman story – in Scotland, for instance, Robert the Bruce was a straight descendant of Norman settlers (Bruce deriving from Brieux in Normandy).

Robert wasn't, however, seen as Norman by the time he came to power in the early 14th century. He wasn't viewed as any different to other Scottish lords, for all his Norman pedigree. By that point, people were no longer talking of the Normans as a separate entity. As Robert Bartlett notes: "The Normans disappear but that's not a sign of their failure, it's a sign of their success. They spread everywhere and they intermarry and they assimilate, and eventually there's not much point talking about Normans because how do you tell?"

▶ Professor Robert Bartlett is presenting *The Normans* on BBC Two this month. See page 81 for more details



A c1400 illustration shows Viking chief Rollo – for whom the fiefdom of Normandy was created in 911 – stepping ashore from his ship

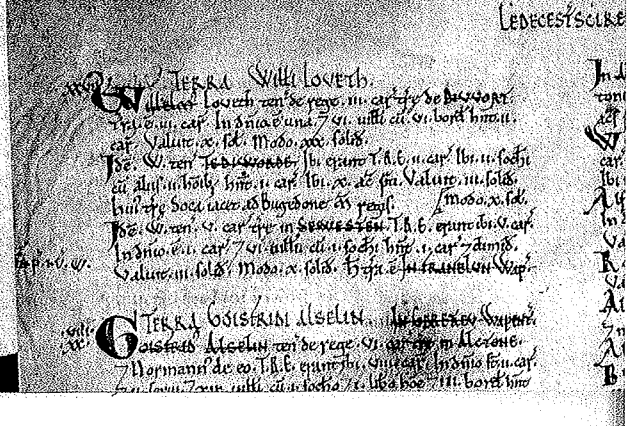
8.3 million acres. So there may have been almost as much land under plough by 1086 as there was at the start of the First World War.

Domesday Book also proves that England was tightly governed. The survey simply could not have been made without the machinery of government that the Anglo-Saxons bequeathed to the Normans. Domesday confirms that England possessed a sophisticated system of coinage, an effective system of taxation, a hierarchy of public courts and a robust system of justice.

All this enabled English kings to exploit their kingdom's wealth efficiently. But that is precisely why Duke William risked everything to invade England in 1066. In other words, Domesday Book proves that Anglo-Saxon England was a victim of its own success.

Q What does Domesday Book reveal about the impact of the Normans in England?

A Domesday Book provides irrefutable testimony to the fact that the Normans exploited the windfall of 1066 by displacing the English elite and extorting the peasantry. The English nobility was virtually wiped out. Domesday's tables of contents list about 500 tenants-in-chief in 1086. Just 13 of



A page from Domesday Book. It may be 900 years old, but the potential for research into this priceless document is far from exhausted

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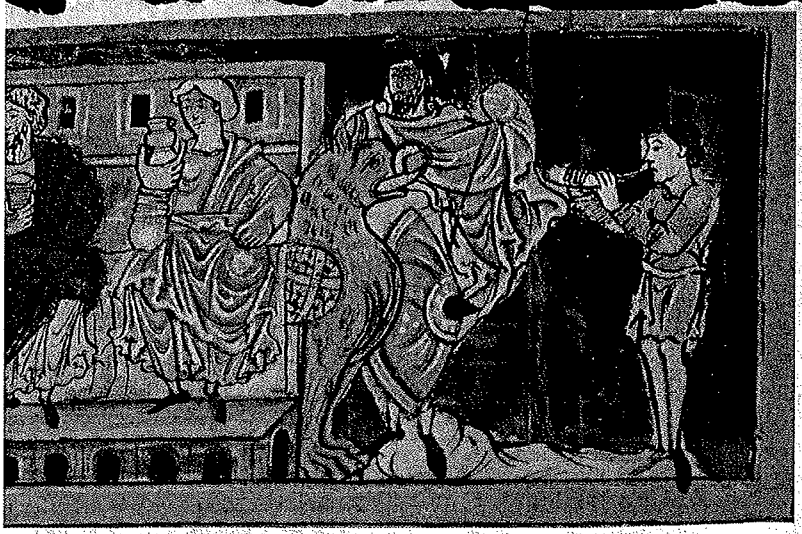


An illustration shows Anglo-Saxon aristocrats enjoying the fruits of their wealth, c1030. As Domesday Book reveals, that wealth was soon to be appropriated by the Norman elite

them were English. The kingdom was now dominated by a new class of super-rich Frenchmen gorging on their success.

Writing a generation or so after the Domesday survey, a monk named Orderic Vitalis, who was half-English and half-Norman by birth, offers a vivid description of Earl Hugh, one of William's richest magnates. "He was more prodigal than generous; and went about surrounded by an army instead of a household. He kept no check on what he gave or received. His hunting was a daily devastation of his lands, for he thought more highly of followers and hunters than husbandmen or monks. A slave to gluttony, he staggered under a mountain of fat, scarcely able to move." The Domesday inquest compelled Hugh to produce a precise account of what he gave and received. It confirms that he was fabulously wealthy, with more than 300 estates scattered across 19 shires which generated an income of about £800 a year. That may not sound much, but in 1086 it amounted to more than one per cent of the nation's wealth. Hugh was an Abramovich-scale billionaire.

The kingdom was now dominated by a new class of super-rich Frenchman gorging on their success

Some English landholders continued to hold property in reduced circumstances as subtenants, but even they were in a small minority. Domesday records that about 8,000 subtenants held land from tenants-in-chief, but only about 10 per cent of them were English, and they held less than four per cent of the landed wealth of England between them.

Most subtenants suffered loss of freedom and status. A case in point is Æthelric of Marsh Gibbon in Buckinghamshire. He held his land there freely in 1066, but in 1086 he told the Domesday commissioners he held it from a Norman lord "onerously and miserably".

The Norman conquest also had a catastrophic impact on the English peasantry. It proves that much of Yorkshire and the north-west Midlands had been laid waste in retribution for rebellions which took place early in the reign. It also demonstrates that there was a drastic fall in the number of free landholders across the country, a dramatic increase in the number of manors, and an equally dramatic increase in rent. The average rent-hike in Norfolk was 38 per cent.

Writing in the early 12th century, William of Malmesbury lamented that "England has become a dwelling-place of foreigners and a playground for lords of alien blood. No Englishman today is an earl, a bishop, or an abbot; new faces everywhere enjoy England's riches and gnaw her vitals, nor is there any hope of ending this miserable state of affairs." Domesday Book offers less eloquent, but emphatic, support for his melancholic testimony.

Q Is there anything more the survey can tell us?

A Since Domesday Book has existed for more than 900 years and has been intensively studied for centuries, it might seem reasonable to assume that its potential for research has been exhausted. Nothing could be further from the truth. Exciting new resources are making it more accessible than ever and have opened up the possibility of addressing new questions.

Take, for example, the structure of the pre-conquest nobility. No one yet knows how people held land in 1066, or how wealth was distributed between them. This is mainly due to logistical difficulties – the sheer scale of Domesday Book, its layout, and the challenge of differentiating people with the same names has prevented scholars from working this out.

However, a team of researchers based at King's College London and the University of Cambridge has recently published a database linked to mapping facilities as part of the Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England (PASE), a searchable database of all the people who lived in the country at the time. And in the next two years, researchers will be using this resource to reconstruct England's doomed elite for the first time. Only then will we be able to answer one of the great questions of English history: what was the impact of the Norman conquest on the structure of England's aristocracy?

And these resources are now freely available online, so anyone can quickly find out who held land in their village in 1066 and 1086, and then explore where else those lords held land. Domesday Book's own day of judgment lies in the future. BH

Stephen Baxter of King's College London is the author of *The Earls of Mercia: Lordship and Power in Late Anglo-Saxon England* (OUP, 2007)

JOURNEYS

Website

▶ **The Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England** is a database that provides details of the lives of every recorded individual who lived in Anglo-Saxon England. *www.pase.ac.uk*ils

▶ Have a look at the **BBC's Hands on History campaign** for more on the Normans. *www. bbc.co.uk/history*

TV

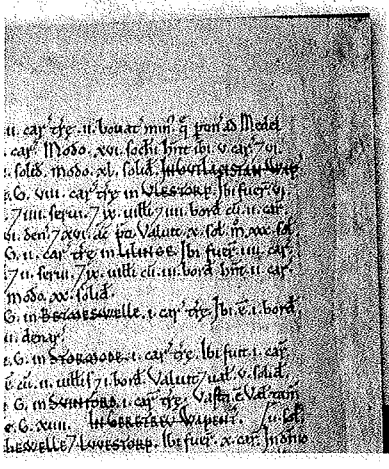
▶ In **The Normans** – a three-part series on BBC Two airing this month – Robert Bartlett traces the expansion of a warrior race. Turn to page 81 for more details

BBC TWO

▶ Stephen Baxter will be examining one of the most significant documents in English history in **The Domesday Book** this month

On the podcast

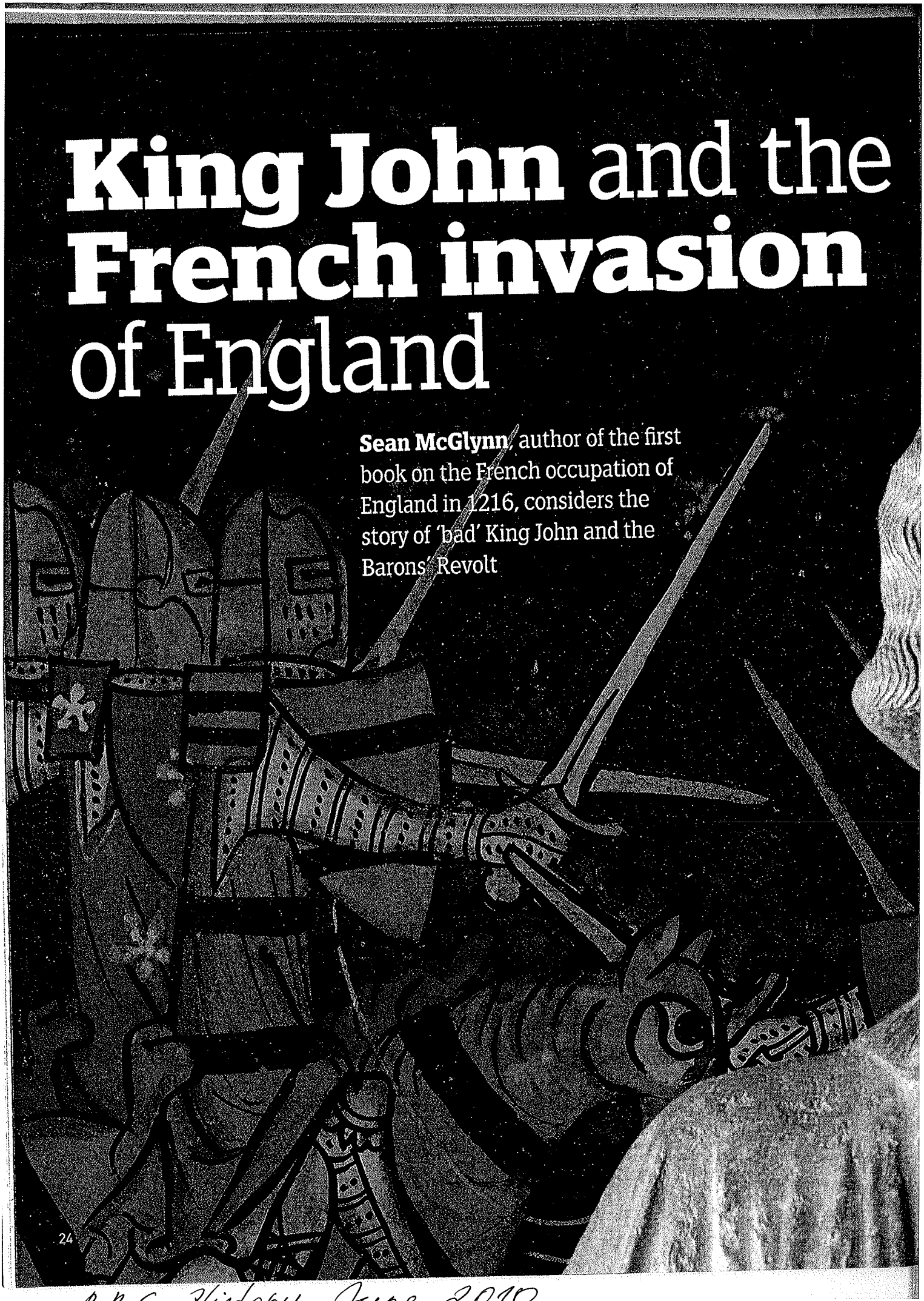
Listen to **Robert Bartlett** examining the Norman story on this month's podcast (online from 6 August) ▶ **www.bbc historymagazine.com/podcast-page**



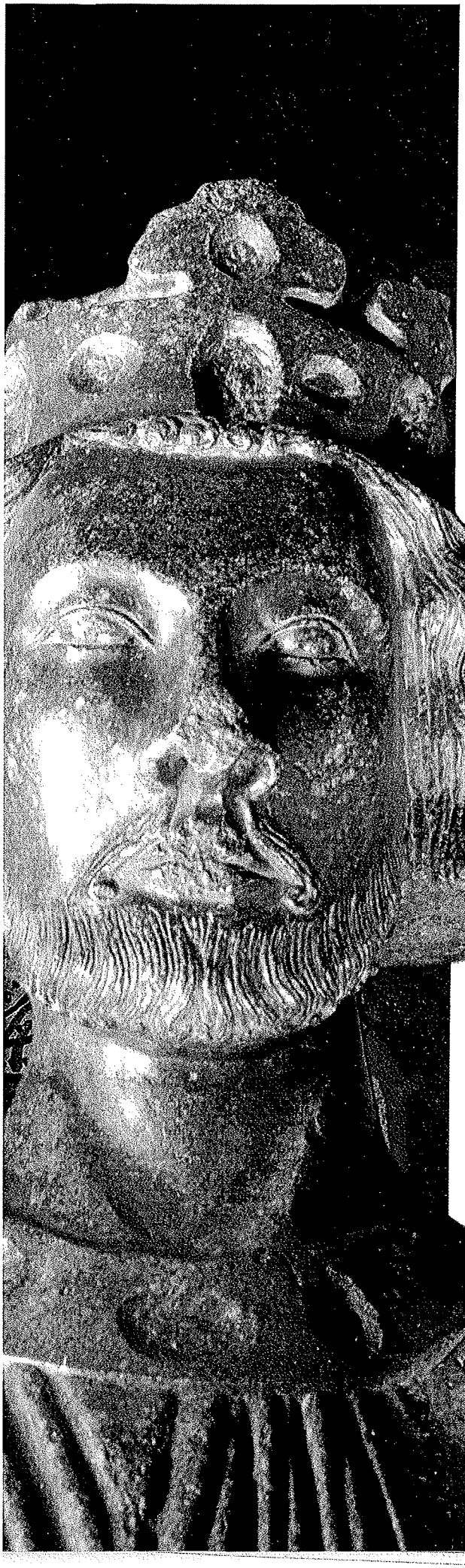
NATIONAL ARCHIVES

King John and the French invasion of England

Sean McGlynn, author of the first book on the French occupation of England in 1216, considers the story of 'bad' King John and the Barons' Revolt



BBC History, June 2010



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A king in retreat
Worcester Cathedral's effigy of King John, who almost lost his realm to the French. The background shows the battle of Bouvines, where a French victory increased baronial opposition to John in England

"The whole land was covered with these limbs of the devil like locusts, who assembled to blot out every thing from the face of the earth; for, running about with drawn swords and knives, they ransacked towns, houses, cemeteries, and churches, robbing everyone, sparing neither women nor children."

THUS WROTE the contemporary chronicler Roger of Wendover, describing events in England during the winter of 1215–16. "These limbs of the devil" were the troops of King John, engaged in a bitter civil war at the very end of the monarch's reign. This war witnessed the emergence of Magna Carta; the death of John; a French invasion of England that was almost a second Norman Conquest; 'King' Louis I ruling one-third of England for a year; an English naval victory that ranks with the defeat of the Spanish Armada; and a major formative period in the emergence of English national identity. Oh, and it may even provide the prototype for Robin Hood. Despite all this, until now there has been no book dedicated to this dramatic course of events.

In popular perception, John is 'Bad King John', an impression reinforced with exuberance through decades of negative imagery on the screen. Whether in *The Lion in Winter* (1968), the BBC series *Ivanhoe* (1997), or the new Robin Hood film starring Russell Crowe, John is portrayed as sly, cowardly, incompetent and completely reprehensible.

Despite some attempts at historical revisionism, the popular hostile view remains essentially correct and actually reflects the views of John's contemporaries. William of Newburgh calls him "nature's enemy"; the Barnwell chronicler labels him "a pillager of his own people"; Richard of Devizes depicts him as a raging madman who "emitted foam from his mouth". Even sources from men fighting for John have little good to say of him. The Anonymous of Béthune summed John up simply and damningly with "he had too many bad qualities".

The rebellion that began in England in 1215 was a long time in gestation, and John was its feckless father. Crowned in 1199, and momentarily victorious over his enemies at Mirebeau (western France) in 1202, John captured and almost certainly murdered his teenaged nephew, Arthur of Brittany, and alienated powerful Norman lords by the harsh mistreatment of his prisoners.

Worse still, his defence of his continental lands was fitful and ineffective. By June 1204, the French king, Philip Augustus, had conquered Normandy. Wendover hints that John, who had beaten a precipitous retreat to England, preferred "enjoying all the pleasures of life" with his barely teenaged bride, boasting that he had plenty of money to retake all that had been lost. However, it was the collection of this money that drained baronial incomes and fostered their discontent.

The rest of John's reign was dominated by his attempts to win back his lost lands and lost pride. To this end, he put the screws on England. Royal income rose to an all-time high as John relentlessly pursued all sources of revenue, happily capitalising on a papal interdict imposed upon his kingdom (from 1208) to exploit the wealth of the church.

More damaging was his treatment of the baronage. Infamously, in 1210 the chronicles unite in reporting that he had the wife and son of William de Briouze, a royal debtor, starved to death, probably in Windsor Castle. At court, his lecherous behaviour led to rumours and accusations that John was a serial seducer of barons' wives and daughters. Two of the rebellion's leaders, Robert fitz Walter and Eustace de Vesci, offered this as a major reason for their revolt. It seemed that no one was safe from John's arbitrary rule.

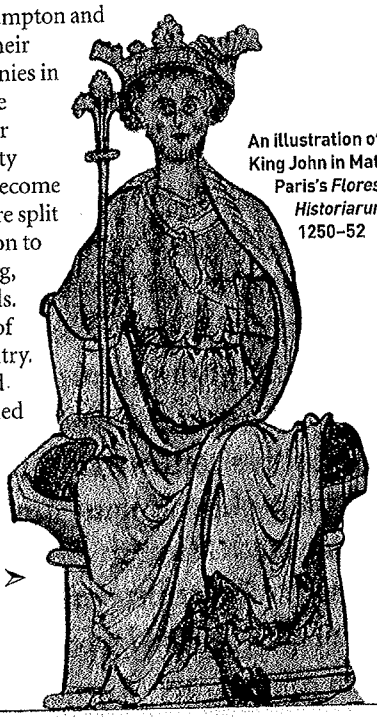
Oscar Isaac plays the "sly, cowardly, incompetent" John of popular perception in Ridley Scott's new film, *Robin Hood*

For his grand French campaign of the summer of 1214, John had exacted a record scutage. Scutage was a feudal relief by which barons paid money in lieu of military service to the crown. John had levied it so often (eleven times compared to Richard's three) that it now resembled a regular tax. It was the last straw. John had poured his huge resources into the campaign only to meet with complete failure in the summer. By September 1214, many barons simply refused to pay scutage. No one believed that John's military endeavours were worth investing in, a feeling readily expressed by the king's revealing contemporary nickname of 'Softsword'. In John's absence the barons had conspired to resist the king. John returned to England in October to face the greatest threat of his reign. Inconclusive talks between king and barons ran alongside military preparations. War was imminent.

John had the wife and son of William de Briouze, a royal debtor, starved to death, probably in Windsor Castle

By May 1215 it had broken. The rebels, under the title of 'the Army of God', mustered at Northampton and formally defied the king by breaking their homage and fealty. Of nearly 200 baronies in England, only some 40 declared for the rebels. However, only a similar number sided openly with the king; the majority simply stepped aside, not wishing to become embroiled in the conflict. Families were split in their loyalties: William Marshal, soon to be regent of England, stood by the king, while his eldest son opted for the rebels. John's main advantage was his string of some 150 royal castles across the country.

The same month, the Army of God had their greatest success: they occupied the city of London, a vital power base that they held for over two years. Across the country, Lincoln, Northampton and Exeter also fell to them as they gained momentum and the political initiative.



An illustration of King John in Matthew Paris's *Flores Historiarum*, 1250–52

John's battles

How England almost fell to a second foreign invasion in 150 years

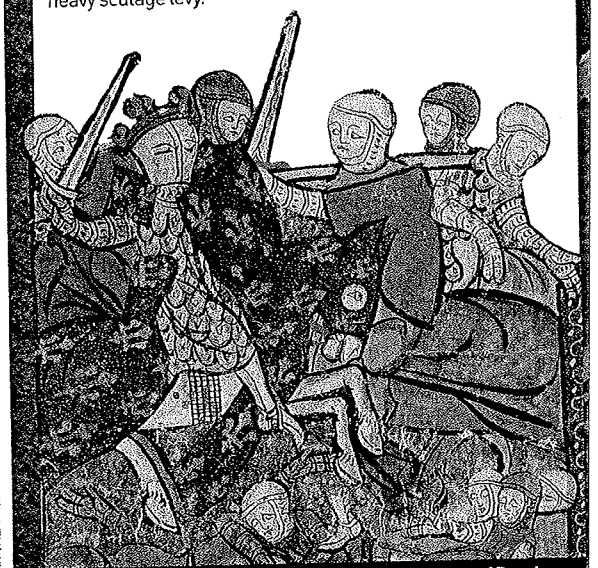
The French besiege Chateau-Gaillard in Normandy, 1204

1 June 1204 The French seize Normandy

Philip Augustus of France's campaign to annex Normandy succeeds with the fall of Rouen. He also makes gains at John's expense in Anjou and Poitou. John's need to recover his lands leads to increasingly heavy taxation in England.

2 July 1214 John's French campaign fails

John's grand campaign in France collapses when his allies are defeated by Philip at Bouvines. John returns to England in October where baronial discontent has been heightened by a heavy scutage levy.



The French capture Ferdinand of Portugal at the battle of Bouvines

3 May 1215 The barons revolt against John

The barons, led by Robert fitz Walter, renounce their homage to the king. The revolt begins with military operations at Northampton. The rebels soon take London.

vith the barons, French and Scots

4 June 1215 John agrees to sign Magna Carta

John seals Magna Carta at Runnymede. A council of 25 barons is formed to monitor John's adherence to the agreement.

5 December 1215 John ravages southern Scotland

Alexander II of Scotland invades northern England. John leads a ravaging expedition north and sacks Berwick.

6 21 May 1216 A French army lands in Kent

Prince Louis of France arrives in Kent with his main invasion force.

7 Summer 1216 The siege of Dover begins

Dover stood firm in the face of Louis's siege. The French king's failure to take the castle was to fatally undermine his campaign

Dover Castle was a crucial element in England's medieval defensive network. Matthew Paris called it, "The key to England". Prince Louis of France himself took personal charge of most of the military operations there, beginning the siege of royalist forces on in the summer of 1216. Drawing up his war engines, one of which was labelled 'Evil Neighbour', he unleashed a heavy bombardment against the castle's walls, taking the north-western barbican and setting a mine.

Dover was heavily garrisoned under the defiant leadership of Hubert de Burgh. The spirited defence pushed the French back, forcing them to withdraw their siege machines to a safer distance. Louis then applied psychological pressure by taunting the defenders with food, threatening starvation "to strike terror into them". With the defenders still defiant in October, Louis tried a new strategy: lifting the siege, he focused instead on "reducing the smaller castles throughout the country".

Following a truce, Louis restarted a short siege on 12 May 1217. But on hearing of the major defeat of his forces on 20 May at Lincoln, he left for London. Dover's stand proved disastrous for Louis: it forced him to hold back troops from Lincoln and it provided a significant proportion of the fleet that defeated the French at Sandwich.

8 19 October 1216 John succumbs to dysentery

Much of John's baggage train is lost in the Wash. John dies in Newark Castle and the nine-year-old Henry III is proclaimed king, with William Marshal acting as regent.

The obverse of a hammered penny of Henry III

9 20 May 1217 The French are routed

French and rebel forces are decisively defeated at Lincoln by William Marshal. French troops are attacked on their way back to their stronghold in London.

10 24 August 1217 The English destroy a French fleet

The French fleet bringing reinforcements is comprehensively destroyed off Sandwich. Louis sues for peace.

11 12 September 1217 Louis leaves England

The treaty of Kingston ends the war. An amnesty is declared for the rebels. Louis is paid 10,000 marks to quit England.

With the tide turning against him, John agreed to meet the rebels at Runnymede where, in mid-June, he sealed Magna Carta. Among its clauses, Magna Carta calls for a guarantee to all free men of protection from illegal imprisonment and seizure of property. It also demands access to swift justice, and, anticipating parliamentary assent for taxation, scutage limitations as agreed by a new "common council" of the realm. All are indictments of John's style of governance. The charter established a monitoring committee of 25 barons with a mandate to wage war on the king if he failed to uphold the agreement, something one historian has called "the most fantastic surrender of any English king to his subjects".

But John was only buying time and never had any intention of honouring the charter. It proved but a temporary truce. By the time the war restarted in September, much had changed. The king had the backing of the pope, who denounced Magna Carta as "not only shameful and demeaning but also illegal and unjust" and now placed the rebels' lands under interdict. Meanwhile the rebels had sought a powerful new ally of their own: Prince Louis of France, heir to the French throne. With no disaffected royal family member with whom to join in common cause (John was the last of Henry II's sons), Louis, later known as the Lion, was the natural choice. His wife, Blanche of Castile, was a grand-daughter of Henry II. (Louis might actually have inherited the Angevin lands legally had John died without children.) He accepted the offer of the crown of England and promised help.

This aid did not come soon enough to help the rebels besieged in Rochester Castle. Under the command of William d'Albini, they held out against the might of John's concentrated forces for seven weeks. The Barnwell annalist declares that "living memory does not recall a siege so fiercely pressed or so staunchly resisted". A mine brought down one tower but it was starvation that forced the defenders' surrender. "In his anger," says Wendover, John "ordered all the nobles to be hung", but was persuaded against this by a military adviser who warned of reprisals.

England here we come The *Chronique des Empereurs* (c1460) shows Prince Louis leaving France to head an invasion of John's England in 1216

The French moaned that the lack of wine meant they had to drink English beer

A small advanced French force arrived in London in November, grumbling that the lack of wine meant that they had to drink English beer. Meanwhile, the rebels' ally in Scotland, King Alexander II, went on the warpath. At the end of December, John led his army on a ravaging expedition north, causing the devastation described in the opening quote. He burned Berwick before returning south, seemingly triumphant. Ralph Coggeshall writes of John's troops: "They made great slaughter, as they did everywhere they went".

Willikin of the Weald: Robin Hood prototype?

Common men dwelling in the forest, using their bows to fight against tyranny under the charismatic leadership of a folk hero. An Arthurian-style mythology surrounds Robin Hood as one of England's most popular legends.

The French invasion of England in 1216 provides an historical figure as possible inspiration for the Robin Hood stories, which may have developed around this time. The opening sentence equally applies to William of Kensham and his band of volunteer archers, all loyal to the crown, who fought against the French during their occupation of southern England. Based in the great forest of the Weald in Kent and the south, this group waged highly effective guerrilla warfare against the French. We have only a tiny amount of information on William, but it is telling that he quickly took on a popular folk name: Willikin of the Weald.

Turn to page 56 for our review of three Robin Hood films

A 1550 image of Robin Hood, whose legend may have been inspired by Willikin of the Weald

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Decapitated at sea A 13th-century vellum showing the English beheading the mercenary Eustace the Monk aboard his ship during the battle of Sandwich, 1217

However London remained in rebel hands. Militarily and politically, John made a major mistake in avoiding dealing with the most serious threat. Louis was able to reinforce the London garrison and on 21 May he launched a full-scale invasion force, landing unopposed on the Isle of Thanet (in Kent). Rochester was quickly retaken, and royalist forces were pushed westwards as Louis took control of the south.

Sensing the new momentum, leading royalist barons went over to the rebel side, including one of John's foremost generals, his half-brother William Longsword. Pockets of royalist resistance held out at Windsor, and, vitally, Dover. In the huge southern forest of the Weald, William of Kensham ('Willikin') led bands of archers in guerrilla attacks on the French (see left). But Louis and the rebels swiftly established control of about one-third of England. By the end of the summer, two-thirds of the baronage had declared for Louis.

John dies, royalists rally

Alexander II was able to progress from Scotland all the way to Dover where, in September, he paid homage to Louis, king of England in all but name. Just as it seemed England might be about to undergo a second foreign conquest 150 years after the first in 1066, everything changed in a moment. On 19 October, having contracted dysentery, John performed his best service to the protection of the country: he died.

This transformed the situation. The grievances against John could not be laid at the door of his unblemished heir, the nine-year-old Henry III. And so, under the protection of the elderly William Marshal as regent, the royalists rallied the English "to defend our land" against the French invaders, who had not helped their cause by their arrogant behaviour and expectations of landed spoils. Once again, the flow reversed to the royalists. A period of intermittent warfare and truces followed until the spring. On 20 May 1217, rebel and French forces were finally broken at the siege of Lincoln. Those who suffered in the war took their revenge on the French who attempted to flee back to London. Wendover records:

Many of them, especially the foot-soldiers, were slain before they got to Louis; for the inhabitants of the towns through which they passed in their flight went to meet them with swords and clubs, and, laying ambushes for them, killed many.

Hemmed up in London, the French now relied on reinforcements from France. These were dispatched in a major fleet that was met by an English naval force off Sandwich on 24 August. Displaying their superior skills, the English, using the wind direction to blind their enemies with lime dust, annihilated the French and beheaded their commander, the mercenary Eustace the Monk, on the deck of his flagship. It was the most important English naval victory until the Spanish Armada in 1588. On hearing of this defeat, Louis, says the Dunstable annalist, went mad with grief and rage and then, "destitute of present aid and despairing of the future", he sought peace terms. These were granted at Kingston on 12 September, marking the official ending of the war. Louis was back in France before the end of the month.

Louis' involvement in the baronial revolt might well have led him to being crowned Louis I of England, but his luck ran out when John died. He was also hampered by the fact that he was a foreigner. Resentment of French troops in England grew throughout the course of the war – just as the barons had resented the presence of John's foreign mercenaries.

As a result, England emerged with a strengthened sense of national identity. More importantly for its people, shocked by the impact of invasion, the rest of the century was to be relatively peaceful. The blame for the war itself can be fairly laid on John's incompetent shoulders. Contemporaries were certainly not inclined to exculpate him, as this rhyme demonstrates:

With John's foul deeds England's whole realm is stinking,
As Hell is, too, where he is now sinking.

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JOURNEYS

Books

▶ **Blood Cries Afar: The Forgotten Invasion of England 1216** by Sean McGlynn *(The History Press, later in 2010)*

▶ **King John** by WL Warren *(Yale University Press, 1997)*

TV

▶ Look out for a BBC **series on the Normans** in the summer for more on the background to Anglo-French relations prior to John's reign

BBC TWO

Stapeldon would discuss with him. This second visit was organised before 10 April 1319, the date of Edward II's letter to Count William.[5] However, Stapeldon did not receive his letters of safe-conduct – the equivalent of a passport – until 27 May, and at that point he was in the north, at York.[6] These letters stated he should return from his mission by Michaelmas (29 September). If we then check Stapeldon's register it appears that his reference to the Hainaulter girl appears on folio 142, after entries for May, June and July 1319.[7] The description therefore dates from his second trip to Hainault. This took place between 6 July (when he was at Canterbury) and 7 August (when he was in London). He did not return to see the king at York, but returned to the West Country, and sent his report by letter: hence the appearance of a copy in his register.[8] Therefore his reference to the girl as nine on the 'next' 24 June must refer to the next such date after 6 July, i.e. 1320. So we can be sure that the girl he was describing was born in 1311. This was Count William's eldest daughter, Margaret, who was born in that year, as mentioned above. It would follow that Stapeldon was looking over Margaret of Hainault for the possible marriage to Edward, not Philippa. Other documents confirm that Count William wrote to the pope on 10 December 1318 seeking dispensation for Margaret of Hainault to be married to Edward.[9] Although permission for the marriage was granted by the pope in 1321, as stated in Chapter One, nothing came of the attempt. By the time of Edward's visit to Hainault in 1326, Margaret had been married for eighteen months to Ludvig of Bavaria, the future Holy Roman Emperor; hence she never became Edward's bride.

As a result we may be sure of several things: that Margaret was Edward's first intended bride, and that the description is of her, and that the clerk who inserted the note that Stapeldon's description related to Philippa was doing so on an assumption that only one daughter of the count's was proposed as Edward's marriage partner. We may also be confident that Margaret's birthdate was 24 June 1311. It follows that it is very unlikely that Philippa was born before April 1312. In this context it is worth returning to older narratives, which suggest that she was younger than Edward. Froissart, who knew her in her later years, asserted that she was in her fourteenth year at the time of her marriage in 1328.[10] This implies that she was born between 25 January 1314 and 24 January 1315, and thus about three years younger than her sister Margaret, and about two years younger than Edward.

Ian Mortimer. The Perfect King. Pimlico 2007

APPENDIX 2

The Fake Death of Edward II

The definite assertion in my biography of Sir Roger Mortimer, *The Greatest Traitor*, that Edward II was not killed in Berkeley Castle in 1327 startled many readers, academics and laymen alike. The idea that historians could have been wrong for centuries about this matter was greeted with scepticism by most scholars and incredulity by many members of the public. As a result, I devoted a considerable amount of time in 2003–4 to revisiting the subject in much greater detail than it has previously received. After considerable research, rethinking, consultation and discussion, the final result was published by *The English Historical Review*, the leading peer-reviewed journal in the field of English medieval studies. Any reader who wishes to obtain an in-depth perspective on the fake death of Edward II in the period 1327–30 should refer to volume 120 of that journal (November 2005). What follows here is a brief synopsis for those who want a short explanation of why we may have sufficient confidence in this new narrative to begin to interpret Edward III's reign in the light of his father's survival after 1327.

The starting point is an examination of why we as a society have come to retell the popular story of the death. The main answer to this is that it is repeated in various forms in about twenty chronicles from the mid- to late fourteenth century. In some narratives Edward was smothered, in others he died with a burning piece of copper inserted into his anus, in one he was strangled, and the remainder just state that he 'died'. None say that he did not die. Therefore, when writers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were trying to construct a coherent story of England's past, they looked back to the fourteenth-century chronicles and found them unanimous on the subject of the death. Furthermore, they mostly presumed that the more detailed narratives were more accurate, on the grounds that they provided more information and were thus better-informed. These they assimilated into a popular story which became established and widely accepted before the mid-sixteenth century. The handful of interested antiquaries and textual scholars of the period would have found confirmation of the date of the supposed death in the archives then stored at the Tower. In particular, in the patent rolls they would have

found grants to commemorate the anniversary of the death of the king on 21 September, in the royal household accounts they would have found payments for pittances to be given to the poor on the anniversary of Edward II's death, and in the rolls of parliament they would have found direct accusations of murder levelled against Roger Mortimer, Simon Bereford, Thomas Gurney, Thomas Berkeley and William Ockley. This abundance of contemporary record evidence, coupled with the chroniclers' testimony, allowed them and their successors no room to doubt that Edward died on or about 21 September 1327.

What the early scholars did *not* do was to examine the many flaws and irregularities in the evidence. Until the late twentieth century scholars lacked the methodological sophistication to go beyond the face value of the records and chronicles and deconstruct the information structures underlying the various bodies of evidence. Furthermore, by the late twentieth century it had become academically very unfashionable to question whether specific kings were murdered. A general assumption was made that the evidence was insufficient to warrant any major revisiting of the deaths of any of the four secretly 'murdered' kings (Edward II, Richard II, Henry VI and Edward V), and any attempt to research and explain the supposed later lives of the first two and the younger brother of the last in terms of a genuine survival resulted in prompt scholarly dismissal, regardless of the merits of the argument. The result was an example of 'group think', an intellectual stalemate in which the scholarly élite is so hostile to deviation from an accepted orthodoxy that no individual within the élite is in a position to question it, and no individual outside the élite will be taken seriously if he holds such unorthodox views.

If we examine the chronicles of the fourteenth century, we are presented with about twenty texts, one of which – the shorter continuation of the *Brut* chronicle – has many variant versions on the matter of the death. No original contribution to narratives of the death was made after 1356; thereafter all the chronicle accounts are reworkings or direct quotations of earlier statements. The earliest chronicle has Edward dying on 21 September of a grief-induced illness. The 'anal torture' death – probably based on thirteenth-century accounts of the death of Edmund Ironside – first appears in a chronicle written at York by an anti-Mortimer polemicist in the mid-1330s. The first appearance of the red-hot 'poker' (as opposed to a copper rod) is in 1340. But if we examine all the explicit accounts of the imprisonment and death, and reconstruct the information threads repeated in the various stories, the detailed chronicles may be shown to descend from two original accounts, and one of those was very probably no more than an embellishment of the other. The more reliable of these two authors

(Adam Murimuth) actually distances himself from the idea that the king was murdered, saying it was merely 'common rumour', implying that he himself did not know the truth, although he was the only chronicler in the West Country at the time. Furthermore, these two chronicles are demonstrably incorrect in several ways: for instance, they both accuse John Maltravers of being one of the murderers, although he was not at Berkeley Castle at the time of the supposed death and was never accused of murder. The upshot of this is that no chronicle has any reliable information regarding the circumstances of the death, and all the chronicles together contain only one reliable fact: that there was a royal announcement at Lincoln in September 1327 that Edward II had died of a grief-induced illness at Berkeley Castle on St Matthew's Day (21 September).

This turns attention to the record evidence. There is no doubt that the announcement of the death was made between 24 and 29 September (when the court was at Lincoln). In most circumstances, when one knows that a specific royal announcement was made at a certain time and in a certain place, it is not necessary to question the detail any further. However, when a piece of information has a unique, geographically identifiable source, we may be far more rigorous in assessing its reliability. Putting it simply, we may ask the following question: could the person making the official announcement on behalf of the king at Lincoln have known the truth of what he had been led to believe had happened at Berkeley?

The answer to this is 'definitely not'. Edward III heard about his father's supposed death on the night of 23/24 September and began circulating the information with no check on the veracity of the message. This is proved by an original document in the National Archives – DL 10/253 – which is a letter from Edward to his cousin, the earl of Hereford, written on 24 September, in which he states he heard the news about his father's death during the previous night. It could be objected that Edward III checked the identity *after* he started spreading the news, but it needs to be borne in mind that Lincoln is 110 miles from Berkeley. If Edward III – who was only fourteen and under the strict supervision of his mother, one of the instigators of the plot – had been able to order anyone to go directly to Berkeley to check on the identity of the dead corpse, the man could not have got there within five days of the date of the supposed death. Had he done so, and if Lord Berkeley had let him see the corpse, he would have found it already embalmed. This means he would not have been able to identify it, as fourteenth-century royal embalming completely covered the face and features in wax-impregnated cloth. Further examination of the records reveals that there was no credible exhibition of the unembalmed corpse. As a result of this we may be confident that all the official

information about the death of Edward II was based on trust. The 'fact' of the death depends wholly on the assumption that Lord Berkeley's letter to Edward III about his father's death was written in good faith.

The first important fact arising from this is that we can begin to understand the flow of information underlying the extant evidence for the death. Edward III received Lord Berkeley's letter and believed what it said. As a result the death was officially announced, the news spread around the court and the country, chaplains were endowed to pray for the late king's soul, and a royal funeral was arranged to take place at St Peter's Abbey in Gloucester (now Gloucester Cathedral). This is why there is such an abundance of official evidence relating to the death. Lord Berkeley's letter was accepted in good faith.

We can show relatively easily that in one respect the letter was certainly not written in good faith, for it stated that Edward II died of natural causes. In the light of later events, this is not sustainable. The question is rather one of how Lord Berkeley lied: did he lie about the cause of the king's death? Or did he lie about the fact that the king had actually died? In answering this Berkeley himself stated in parliament three years later, in November 1330, that he 'had not heard about the death [of Edward II] until coming into this present parliament'. This seems to be a confession that he had lied in 1327. Various objections – for example, that he really meant he had not previously heard about the accusation of murder – can be shown to be implausible. Nevertheless, even if his statement had been unambiguous, it could still have been untrue. To test its truth, and its implication that Lord Berkeley had lied in announcing the death in 1327, we have to look for any irregularities in the information patterns created as a result of Lord Berkeley's statement that Edward II had died of natural causes.

The first series of irregularities which arise in the wake of the letter state unequivocally that the king was still alive. The plot of the earl of Kent provides the key evidence. Previous commentators have all followed the early twentieth-century scholar Professor Tout in declaring that Kent was 'stupid'. Tout's statement was based partly on the blatantly politicised accusations against Mortimer of November 1330, partly on the anti-Isabella prejudices of the chonicler Geoffrey le Baker, and partly on his own and his contemporaries' anti-revisionist prejudice. As a result of his condemnation, historians have never bothered to investigate the matter from Kent's point of view. Had they done so they would have realised that there is abundant evidence that he was anything but stupid. Certainly he was not executed for his stupidity. He was condemned to death in the parliament of March 1330 explicitly for the crime of trying to rescue the living King

Edward II 'to help him become king again, and to govern his people as he was wont to do beforehand'. There is no good reason to discount this as evidence that the king was alive and that he had been held at Corfe.

The parliamentary view that Edward was still alive in March 1330 has independent support, also previously overlooked. Kent had an informant, Sir John Pecche, who was the keeper of Corfe Castle until September 1329. Pecche cannot be said to have been deluded as to the presence of the king at Corfe prior to this date. His role in Kent's plot was to tell Ingelram Berengar that Edward II was still alive. As Pecche and Kent had the same information, either one must have informed the other or they must have had an independent source. Given his position as constable of the castle, we may be sure that Pecche did not have to accept the news that Edward II was alive – supposedly in his custody – without checking the truth for himself. It is unthinkable that he jeopardised his reputation, estates and life without ascertaining whether the supposedly dead king was in his own castle, given that it was in his power to do so. Pecche's role in Kent's plot is therefore independent corroborative evidence of the parliamentary view that Edward II was at Corfe in 1330. Both of these pieces of evidence in turn support Berkeley's statement that he had not heard about Edward II's death in 1330. And to these we may add two more contemporary documents which state that Edward was alive in 1330: a private letter from the archbishop of York to the mayor of London stating that he had 'certain news' that Edward II was still alive, and of course the Fieschi letter. We thus have a number of good, independent pieces of evidence that Lord Berkeley's letter announcing the death of Edward II was deliberately misleading.

The announcement that Edward II had been murdered was first officially made in the charges against Mortimer and his adherents after his arrest in 1330. These are riddled with inaccuracies, inconsistencies and anomalies. Not least of these are the conscious acceptance of a lie by Edward III of Lord Berkeley's statement as to where he was at the time of the supposed murder, and the failure to order the arrest of the two men condemned to death for the murder until a week after the trial (during which time they were permitted to leave England). Doubts about the accusations were shared by contemporaries: the majority of the manuscripts of the shorter continuation of the French *Brut* (completed in or after 1333) repeat the understanding that Edward II had died of natural causes, revealing a reluctance to follow the new accusations of murder. Similarly, in 1354 all the charges against Mortimer were found to be in error, including that which stated he had procured the murder of Edward II. But perhaps the most interesting aspect connected with the claims that Edward II was murdered is Edward III's treatment of the men responsible for keeping

his father safely. He never punished Lord Berkeley in any way at all, letting him keep his lands and lordship and allowing him freely to come to court. And Lord Maltravers was also allowed to keep his lands and lordship. Although he remained in exile in Flanders for several years for his part in betraying Kent, Edward was in correspondence with him as early as 1334. He allowed him to return to England secretly for a meeting in 1335, employed him in Flanders in 1339 and then employed him in Ireland, and rewarded him long before he was officially forgiven for his part in Kent's death. When he finally returned to England in 1351 Edward wrote a letter praising his 'loyalty and goodwill' and specifically stating that he wished 'to do something grandiose for him'. As many people have remarked in the past, Edward's subsequent patronage of the two men responsible for keeping his father safely in 1327 is not consistent with their murdering him.

As a result of these lines of research, it is found that the officially created evidence relating to Edward II's death is based on information arising from a single announcement which was not verified by the king, but which was in line with the political ambitions of Lord Mortimer, and very probably in line with Isabella's emotional attachment to her husband, which remained strong in his captivity and even up until her death. On their instructions Berkeley faked the death, sent Edward II to Corfe Castle to be secretly maintained by Sir John Maltravers while Sir John Pecche was overseas, and embalmed another corpse to be buried in place of the king. Unfortunately for the plotters, Sir John Pecche returned unexpectedly in early 1328 and discovered Edward II at Corfe Castle. Pecche then informed Kent, who subsequently took action to rescue the king. His plot was discovered by Mortimer's agents. Mortimer's threat to the royal authority – which had been great even before 1330 – now became unbearable for Edward III, who saw his uncle condemned to death in parliament for trying to rescue his sadly abused father from Corfe. Having no doubt that his entire dynasty was at risk, Edward III arranged the seizure of Mortimer and eradicated the widespread doubts about his father's fate by finally creating an official, royal version of the 'death': that Edward II had been murdered by Gurney and Ockley on Mortimer's orders in Berkeley Castle. This served both to destroy Mortimer's support and strengthen Edward III's own status as a ruling king, even though he was still under age. The story of the death of Edward II in Berkeley Castle was thus a political fiction invented by Mortimer and twisted by Edward III into a murder story for reasons of political legitimacy. The propaganda fall-out from this has misled scholars and deceived laymen ever since.

APPENDIX 3

A Note on the Later Life of Edward II

Research into the life of Edward II after the collapse of Mortimer's regime in October 1330 is complicated by a number of factors. Unlike the question of his 'death' – which is a finite problem which can be answered logically by examining the information structures underpinning the evidence for the death and scrutinising the evidence for events contingent on his survival – the matters of where he was after 1330 and when he died are potentially limitless. One is caught between the unending possibilities and the shortage of direct evidence. Most important business was conducted orally, through messengers, not in a written format. Therefore there is rarely any written material for us to evaluate. However, despite these problems it is important for readers to have an idea of the nature of the research in progress and some findings, in order to understand how Edward II's survival affected Edward III, as outlined in Chapters Four to Eight of this book.

There is only one piece of written evidence which overtly claims that Edward II was definitely alive after 1330. This is the famous Fieschi letter, written by Manuel Fieschi in about 1336, and known since 1877 from the copy in a cartulary of a mid-fourteenth-century bishop of Maguelonne. (Readers wanting to see the text and a reproduction of the original will find both in *The Greatest Traitor: the Life of Sir Roger Mortimer*.) In brief the letter states that, after the execution of Kent, Edward II was taken from Corfe to Ireland, where he remained for nine months. Up to this point he had the same custodian as had attended him in 1327 at Berkeley, but, after November 1330, he was released (probably partly on account of the danger of being found out by Edward III and partly on account of the fact that the mastermind of the plot, Mortimer, was dead). The ex-king made his way to Sandwich dressed as a pilgrim and then travelled to Avignon, where he saw the pope. If he had walked to Avignon at a rate of about ten miles per day with the other pilgrims travelling south, he would have taken about eight weeks to reach the papal palace, arriving about the end of February or early March 1331. After spending two weeks with the pope, Fieschi's letter states that he went from there to Brabant, and from Brabant to the shrine of the Three Kings at Cologne, then to

The Black Prince: hero or villain?

Edward III's eldest son has been both eulogised as the epitome of medieval chivalry and demonised as the instigator of brutal slaughter. **Barbara Gribling** charts the changing reputation of the victor at Crécy and Poitiers

WHEN COMPILING lists of English heroes, the Black Prince is not a character who immediately springs to mind. Yet in his time, and later centuries, his character was every bit as controversial as another Plantagenet who forged his reputation on the battlefields of France, Henry V.

To his contemporaries, the Black Prince was the hero of the battles of Crécy, Poitiers and Nájera, and the villain of the sacking of the city of Limoges. In his lifetime, Edward III's eldest son garnered a reputation as a chivalric hero. After his death, he became a focal point for debates about heroism and villainy.

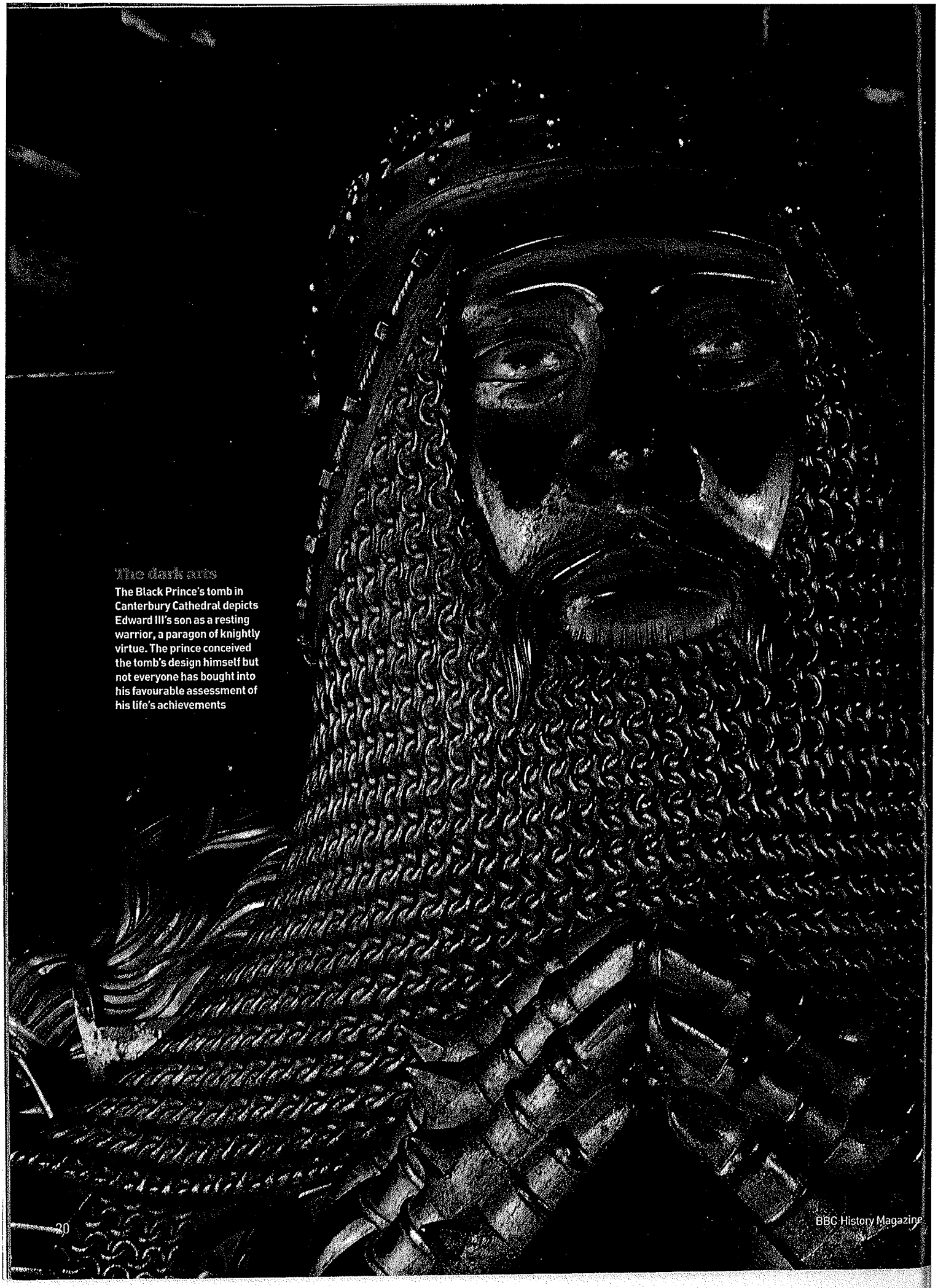
At the battle of Crécy in 1346, Edward III placed the 16-year-old Prince Edward in nominal command of part of his army. In the intense fighting, the Black Prince and his men received the brunt of the French attack. Forced to the ground, the prince had to be rescued by his standard bearer.

Alerted to the dangers that faced his son, Edward III refused to send reinforcements, stating instead: "Let the boy win his spurs." The prince performed admirably. As a major English victory over the French, Crécy confirmed his future martial promise, reinforced later when the prince became a founder member of the Order of the Garter.

Ten years later, in 1356, this promise was fulfilled when the 26-year-old prince decisively defeated the French army near the city of Poitiers and captured the French king, John II. This English victory significantly undermined the French cause, and simultaneously helped to establish Edward and his followers' reputations ➢

As a major English victory over the French, Crécy confirmed Prince Edward's future martial promise

BBC History, January 2013



The dark arts

The Black Prince's tomb in Canterbury Cathedral depicts Edward III's son as a resting warrior, a paragon of knightly virtue. The prince conceived the tomb's design himself but not everyone has bought into his favourable assessment of his life's achievements

A vision of hell King Edward III and the Black Prince are depicted as "apocalyptic horsemen ravaging France" in the Angers tapestries, commissioned by Louis D'Anjou in 1373

as warriors. Contemporaries praised the Black Prince's chivalrous character, in particular his modesty, courage and courtesy on the battlefield. According to the medieval chronicler Jean Froissart, after the battle the Black Prince held a banquet in honour of the captured king and served him dinner. This scene fostered an image of Prince Edward as a humble victor. In the 18th and 19th centuries, Poitiers would be celebrated alongside Agincourt as one of the great English triumphs of the Middle Ages.

So prominent was the Black Prince's reputation as a warrior that he was asked by King Pedro of Castile to aid him in his fight against his half-brother Henry of Trastamara for the Castilian throne. Prince Edward's victory at the battle of Nájera on 3 April 1367 sealed his reputation as a successful warrior, though the Spanish campaign resulted in debt and illness for the prince.

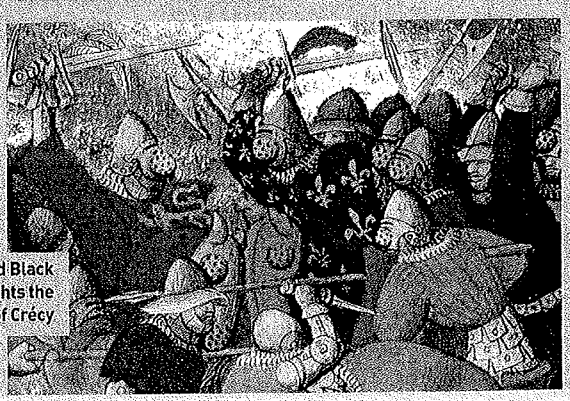
In the 14th century, Jean Froissart was seminal in helping to craft the Black Prince's image, much as Shakespeare would later shape Henry V's. Froissart's aim, to record the chivalrous deeds of knights, led him to manufacture and embellish scenes of chivalric virtues. However, Froissart's description of the Black Prince was not unanimously favourable; in fact, he offered a critique as well.

Even in his lifetime, contemporaries challenged the Black Prince's heroic image, recasting him as a villain. Criticism focused on his *chevauchée* (raiding expedition) in France in 1355–56, a brutal affair designed to demoralise the enemy. Starting in Bordeaux in September 1355, Edward moved across France passing Toulouse, Carcassonne and Narbonne. He focused his attention on towns where

Timeline The Black Prince's controversial life

15 June 1330
Birth of the prince
Edward is born at the Palace of Woodstock in Oxfordshire. He is the eldest son of King Edward III and Queen Philippa of Hainault

26 August 1346
Battle of Crécy
The recently knighted prince fights at the battle of Crécy in an army commanded by his father. The English inflict a crushing defeat on the French



The 16-year-old Black Prince (left, in red) fights the French at the battle of Crécy

1348 The Order of the Garter
Edward III creates the Order of the Garter which rewards knights for their exemplary deeds of arms. The Black Prince becomes a founder member

he could inflict the most damage with the least resistance. His troops looted, burned property and killed inhabitants. On campaign with the Black Prince in 1355, Sir John Wingfield wrote a letter to the bishop of Winchester proclaiming that "there was never such loss nor destruction as hath been in this raid".

No mercy

The sack of the city of Limoges in 1370 became a second source of contention. Granted Aquitaine by his father in 1362, the Black Prince ruled a principality that stretched across a third of France. The city under the prince's rule had surrendered to the French – and, for that, Edward decided that it must be punished, first laying siege and then sacking it. Froissart reported that: "Men, women and children flung themselves on their knees before the prince, crying: 'Have mercy on us, gentle sir!' But he was so inflamed with anger that he would not listen... and all that could be found were put to the sword."

Froissart records the deaths of over 3,000 men, women and children, though this figure is not corroborated by local sources. All the same, the sack became notorious for its brutality.

Edward's reputation in France was a dark one. The Angers tapestries commissioned by Louis D'Anjou (see left) illustrate the Black Prince and his father as apocalyptic horsemen ravaging France. Commissioned in 1373 when England's hold on France was waning, they provide a contrast to images presented by the herald of Sir John Chandos, whose poem painted the prince as a hero.

In 1376, the Black Prince died at the age of 46 from a lingering illness.

A gold coin showing the Black Prince as prince of Aquitaine, minted 1362–72

The Hundred Years' War between England and France saw Edward III and the Black Prince issuing a series of gold coins minted in the English-ruled duchy of Aquitaine in south-west France. Aquitanian coins were usually silver but Edward III wanted to press his claim to the throne of France by challenging the French king's monopoly of gold issue.

This coin was minted after the English king granted his son the rule of Aquitaine. In it, the prince stands beneath a Gothic portico, with two heraldic English leopards at his feet. In the background are four ostrich feathers, formerly the emblem of King John the Blind of Bohemia, which was reputedly adopted by the prince after John's death fighting with the French at Crécy.

"Men, women and children flung themselves on their knees before the prince, crying: 'Have mercy on us, gentle sir!'" But he would not listen

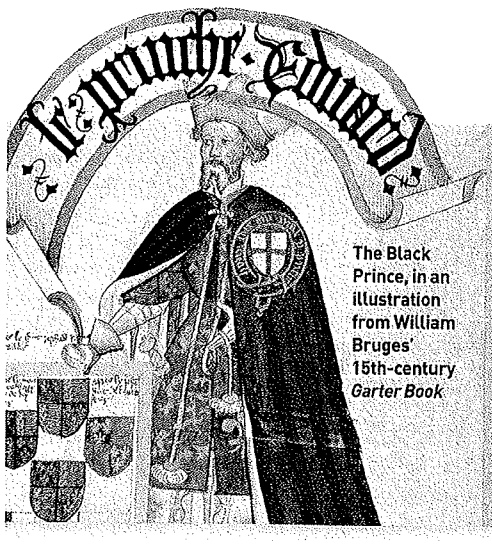
Keenly aware of the power of image, Edward sought to craft his own memory, requesting that his tomb be located in Canterbury Cathedral depicting him as a resting knight. His sword, shield and armour were arranged above his tomb, providing a lasting tribute to his feats in war. At his death, the Black Prince was mourned across Europe, and medieval chroniclers did their bit to polish his reputation, lauding his life's achievements.

However, future debates about what it meant to be a hero had to address the less palatable aspects of Prince Edward's story. His subsequent reputation, like those of many medieval royals, was shaped in part by Shakespeare, who captured the dual image of the Black Prince as both hero and villain in his plays *Richard II* and *Henry V*. Shakespeare's Black Prince was a consummate warrior who "play'd a tragedy on French soil" as a result of his victories there. This view was upheld in the play *Edward III*, which is now frequently attributed to Shakespeare.

If the Black Prince's appearances in Shakespeare's plays helped make him a prominent figure in England's medieval story, so did the power of his sobriquet. We know that Prince Edward became the 'Black Prince' during the 16th century but what we don't know is why the name changed when it did and why he earned this name. Later historians have speculated that the sobriquet came from the colour of Edward's armour and his dark reputation in France.

French tensions

Interest in the Black Prince as a person in his own right – rather than a character in a play – developed to a greater extent in the 17th century. In 1688, antiquary Joshua Barnes wrote the first authoritative historical biography of Edward III and the ➢



The Black Prince, in an illustration from William Bruges' 15th-century *Garter Book*

1355–56 Raiding in France

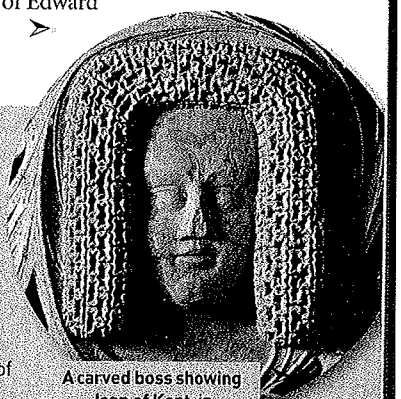
Edward launches a series of *chevauchées* (raids) in France. Designed to undermine French supremacy on the continent, these soon became notorious for their destruction and violence

1356 Battle of Poitiers

On 19 September, Edward and his troops defeat the French and capture King John II in a significant victory for the English

1361 Marriage to Joan of Kent

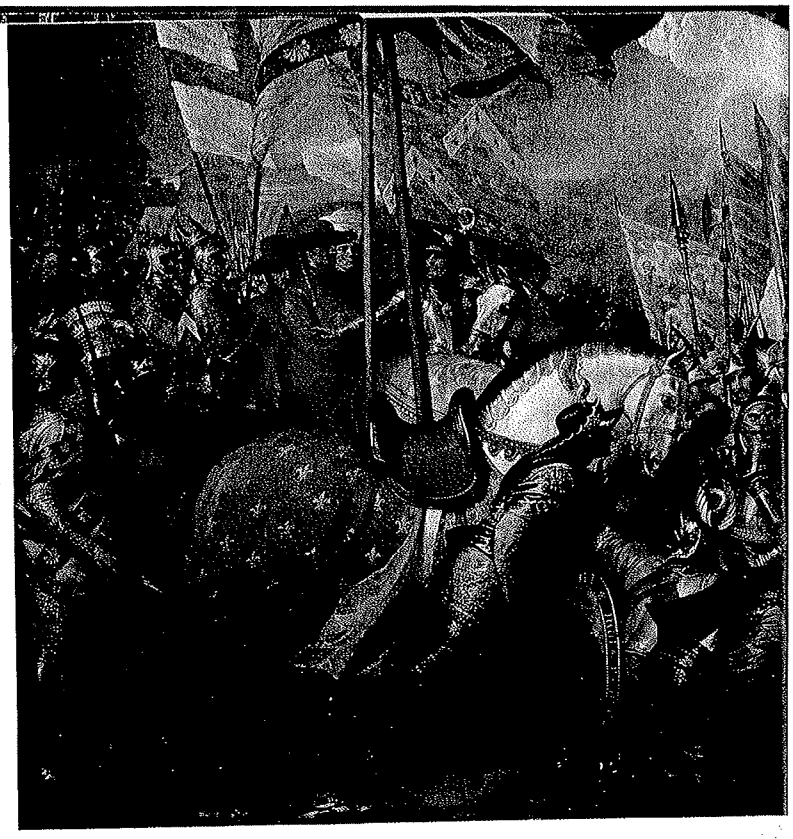
Edward marries Joan of Kent in a love match



A carved boss showing Joan of Kent, in Canterbury Cathedral

Black Prince, which later authors consulted as a key source. Tensions with France and a royal focus on the Middle Ages led to a renewed desire to reconsider the prince's battles. Barnes pinpointed the prince's military feats as being central to his heroic image.

The British monarchy of the 18th century, however, proved to be the driving force behind the Black Prince's re-emergence as a hero. George III commissioned the American artist Benjamin West to produce a series of grand history paintings in the late 1780s chronicling the deeds of King Edward III and his son for the Windsor Castle audience chamber. Fascinated by the medieval past, George saw the reign of Edward III as a time of royal power. His love of the medieval chimed with his wider programme to reinvent ceremony and splendour for the monarchy.



Magnanimous victor This painting by Benjamin West shows the Black Prince (right, in feathered helmet) meeting his prisoner, King John of France, following the battle of Poitiers

West reframed Edward's heroism in terms of 18th-century gentlemanly virtues, depicting a chivalric Black Prince who was courageous and honourable.

West chose to paint a scene from the aftermath of Crécy, featuring Edward with his father acknowledging the slain John of Bohemia, himself a hero of chivalry. In another painting (above), West depicted the Black Prince meeting his prisoner, the French king John, after the battle of Poitiers. His source, David Hume, whose medieval volume of *The History of England* was published in 1761, extolled the prince's heroic character and chose to ignore his battlefield violence. Based on Hume's written depiction, West portrayed Edward as a moderate and sympathetic gentleman conqueror. Not everyone bought into West's rather sanitised and bloodless versions of events though – his portrayals of Edward's battles were criticised at Royal Academy exhibitions for their lack of realism.

The robust and masculine warrior, Edward, became a special hero for young soldiers during the Georgian an Regency eras. And the prince was once again celebrated on the stage – William Shirley's drama of 1750, revived in the late Georgian period, offered him as a model of English masculinity for contemporary soldiers.

Patriotic warrior The statue of the Black Prince in Leeds City Square. The man who commissioned the statue chose the prince because he regarded him as a champion of the people

National heroes

It wasn't until the 19th century that th Black Prince's hero-villain dynamic really came to the fore. His image circulated in media of all kinds – from children's adventure novels to plays.

1362 Prince of Aquitaine
Edward the Black Prince rules Aquitaine from 1362, creating a lavish court in Bordeaux

1367 Battle of Nájera
Edward aids King Pedro of Castile, successfully restoring Pedro to the throne

1370 Bloodbath in Limoges
The Black Prince's sacking of the city in central France becomes notorious for its violence and brutality

The city of Limoges submits to John, Duke of Berry in 1370, triggering the Black Prince's terrible retribution

8 June 1376 Deat of the Black Princ
The prince dies on Trinity Sunday after a longstanding illness. He is buried in Canterb Cathedral in a tomb he helped to fashion

BRITISH LIBRARY/AKG IMAGES/MARY EVANS PICTURE LIBRARY/ALAMY

Fascination with national heroes and the Middle Ages spurred a diversity of Black Princes, and Edward became a focus for debates on character and war.

Children's books tended to emphasise the prince's more attractive qualities in order to teach young children proper behaviour. One of the most popular textbooks of the 19th century, *Little Arthur's History of England* (1835), added to Edward's repertoire of virtues by referring to him as "the bravest and politest prince at that time in the world".

The canon of Westminster suggested that the sacking of Limoges amounted to class violence against the poor

Yet Edward served as a villain as well. His sack of Limoges was used as a lesson about barbarous behaviour – one that the Victorians believed they had safely moved beyond. Children's author Meredith Jones wrote that at Limoges he was a frightening figure with "angry flashing eyes", violent and ruthless.

Jones wasn't the only Victorian to regard Limoges as a 'blot' on Edward's otherwise good character. In a public lecture on the prince's life in 1852, the canon of Westminster, Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, placed Edward's brutality in the city within a wider criticism of chivalry, ➢

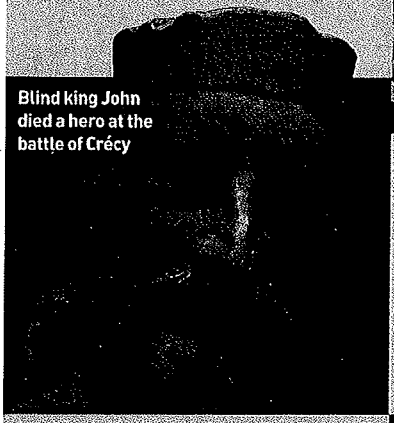
Five medieval war heroes

How did their reputations compare with the Black Prince's?

King Edward III ▶

Founder of the Order of the Garter and war hero of the 14th century, Edward III ruled England for 50 years. His reputation during his lifetime as an ideal statesman and chivalric hero continued into the 18th century. Victorian criticism of the Hundred Years' War led them to recast the king as a warmonger.

Edward III (left) with the Black Prince, 1362



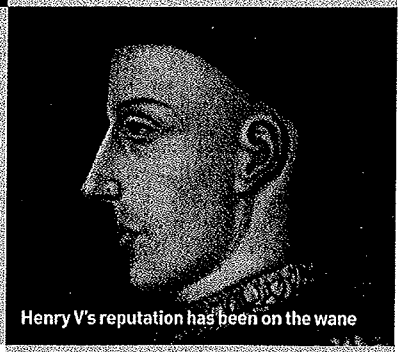
Blind king John died a hero at the battle of Crécy

King Henry V ▼

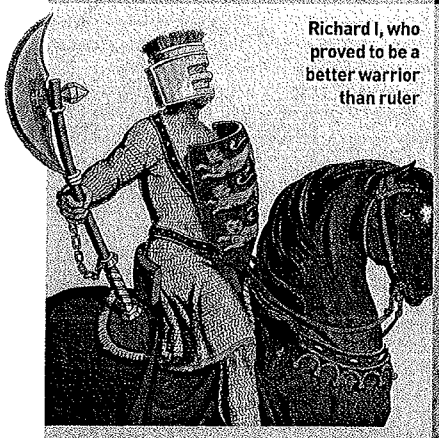
Hero of Agincourt, Henry V's reputation was crafted by Shakespeare, who presented the king as a consummate warrior. His image has undergone re-evaluation in the 21st century, focusing less on the 'hero' of Agincourt, more on his cruelty and coldness.

King John of Bohemia ▲

John fought with the French at Crécy. The quintessential brave knight, John, although blind, had his knights tie their horses to his as he went into battle. Killed alongside his men, his feats were celebrated both in the 14th century and after. According to legend, the Black Prince took John's feathers, which became the symbol of later princes of Wales.



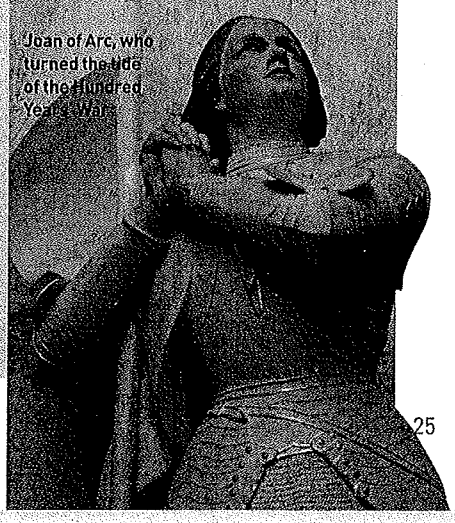
Henry V's reputation has been on the wane



Richard I, who proved to be a better warrior than ruler

Joan of Arc ▼

Born a peasant, Joan became a heroine in France, leading troops to victory against the English at the siege of Orléans. Her leadership turned the tide of the Hundred Years' War. Captured by the Burgundians, she was sold to the English. Charged with heresy and burnt at the stake, Joan was absolved by the pope after her death. The Victorians recast Joan as a martyr and war hero.



Joan of Arc, who turned the tide of the Hundred Years' War

King Richard I ▲

An archetypal warrior, Richard Coeur de Lion was known for his battles in the Holy Land during the Third Crusade. He spent less than a year of his reign in England and died on campaign in France. Praised for his skill as a warrior, the Victorians questioned his capability as a ruler.

suggesting that it amounted to class violence against the poor. While Stanley stated that the Black Prince was a model knight, he questioned whether Edward could indeed be an appropriate role model for modern men and boys. He concluded that the prince's successes were greater than his failures.

Many early 20th-century portrayals of Edward were less ambiguous about

In today's more cosmopolitan society, the Black Prince's story lacks cultural resonance

his legacy. One such was the Black Prince's statue in Leeds City Square – commissioned by the city's ex-lord mayor, Colonel T Walter Harding. Harding entertained the possibility of other heroes – Queen Elizabeth I, Simon De Montfort and Henry V – but settled on Edward because he regarded him as a champion of the people and a patriotic warrior – values he wished to instil in the citizens of Leeds.

Published in 1917, Henry Newbolt's *Book of the Happy Warrior* also placed the Black Prince within a tradition of warrior heroes who happily fought for their nation. The 1929 historical novel, *The English Paragon*, continued to define Prince Edward as a model of chivalry. Restoration work on the prince's tomb at Canterbury in the 1930s led to some re-evaluation of his character. But, by now, such debates about his memory lacked the lustre of Victorian discussions.

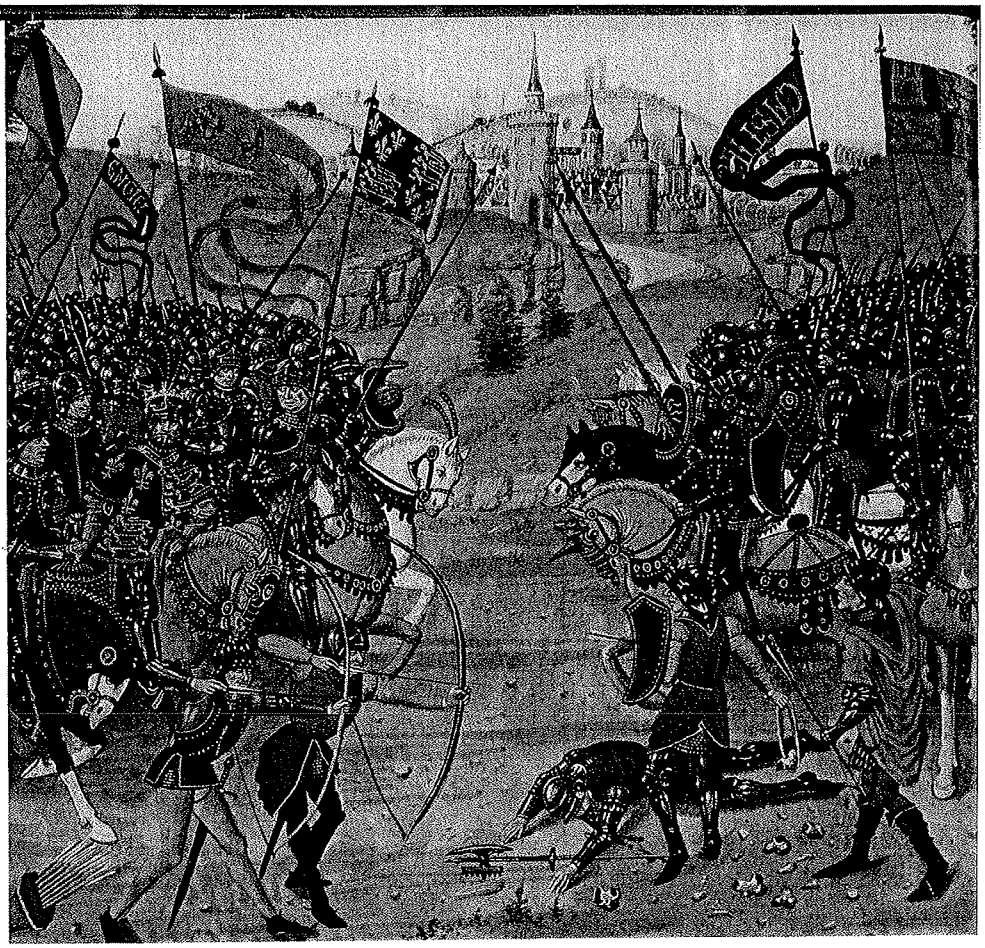
By the 1950s, Edward as a popular icon was disappearing from public view. Despite this, guidebooks to Canterbury Cathedral kept his memory alive, while the 1955 film, *The Dark Avenger*, had Errol Flynn play the Black Prince as a medieval cowboy saving the peasants and his lady from cruel French nobles.

Scholarly interest in the Black Prince has remained stronger with the publication of a number of papers and books about the prince's life and career by John Harvey, Barbara Emerson and Richard Barber in response to the 1976 anniversary of Edward's death. More recently, David Green has offered a re-evaluation of Edward, highlighting the need to understand the prince within the context of the 14th century.

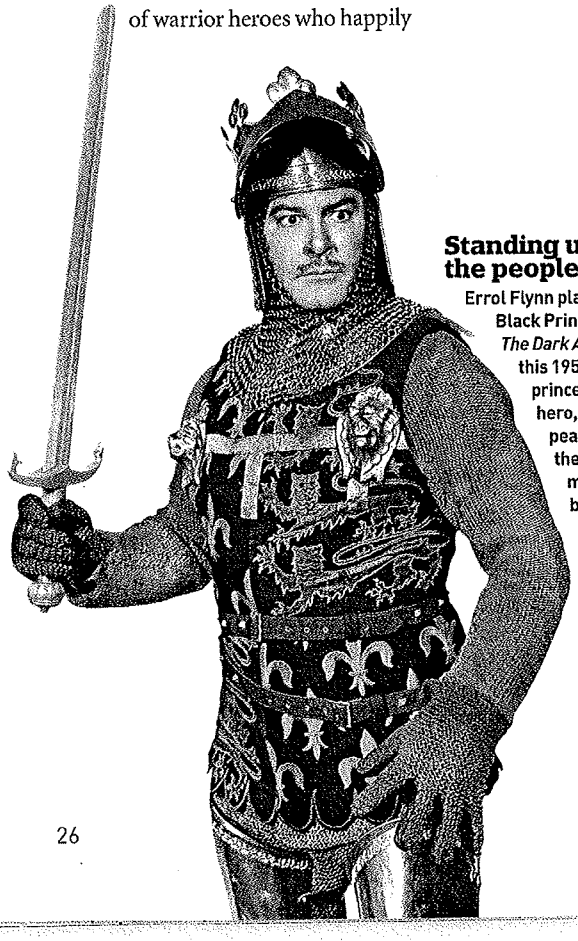
Despite this, the Black Prince's apotheosis as a prominent figure in the public consciousness undoubtedly occurred during the 18th and 19th centuries when both royals and populace celebrated him. Debates abou the nature of heroism and villainy, royalty, chivalry, war and character helped to market Edward's image.

These debates no longer have the same currency, and for many, Edward is an obscure figure. In today's more cosmopolitan society, the Black Prince's story lacks cultural resonance.

However, exploring the Georgian and Victorians' fascination with Edwar allows us to evaluate changing values and ideas about the hero in history. Perhaps now, it is time to revisit the Black Prince's character once more. H



A leader of men An illustration from Jean Froissart's *Chronicles* shows the battle of Nájera in 1367. It was in this clash between Anglo-Gascon and Franco-Castilian forces, in what is now northern Spain, that the Black Prince sealed his reputation as an accomplished warrior



Standing up for the people
Errol Flynn plays the Black Prince in *The Dark Avenger*. In this 1955 film, the prince is cast as a hero, protecting peasants from the injustices meted out by French nobles

Barbara Gribling is a visiting scholar in the Department of History at the University of British Columbia. She is the author of a forthcoming book on the image of Edward the Black Prince in Georgian and Victorian England *(The Royal Historical Society)*

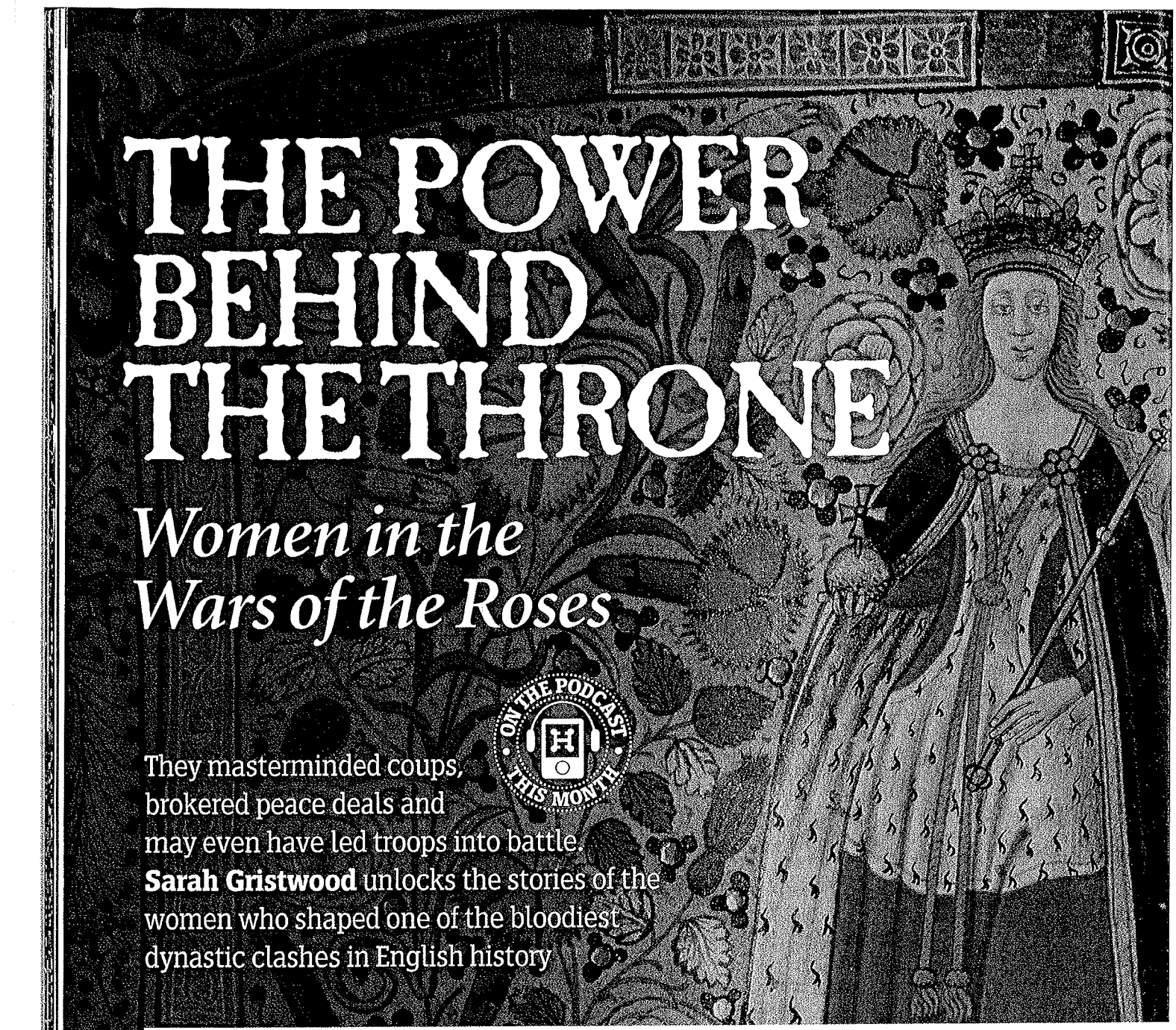
JOURNEYS

Books

- **Edward the Black Prince** by David Green *(Longman, 2007)*
- **Edward III** by W Mark Ormrod *(Yale, 2012)*
- **Chronicles** by Jean Froissart *(Penguin, 1978)*

THE POWER BEHIND THE THRONE

Women in the Wars of the Roses



ON THE PODCAST THIS MONTH

They masterminded coups, brokered peace deals and may even have led troops into battle. Sarah Gristwood unlocks the stories of the women who shaped one of the bloodiest dynastic clashes in English history

THE EVENTS of the middle and late 15th century were, we have always been told, driven by men. It was a story of the battlefields on which kings, dukes and earls fought for control of the country during the Wars of the Roses; a great dynastic confrontation that saw the houses of York and Lancaster battle for control of the English crown from 1455–85.

This assumption of male dominance is as automatic as the one that saw Margaret Beaufort ignore her own claim to the throne in favour of her son, Henry Tudor, or as the heiress Anne Neville being passed between Lancaster and York as though she were as insentient as any other piece of property.

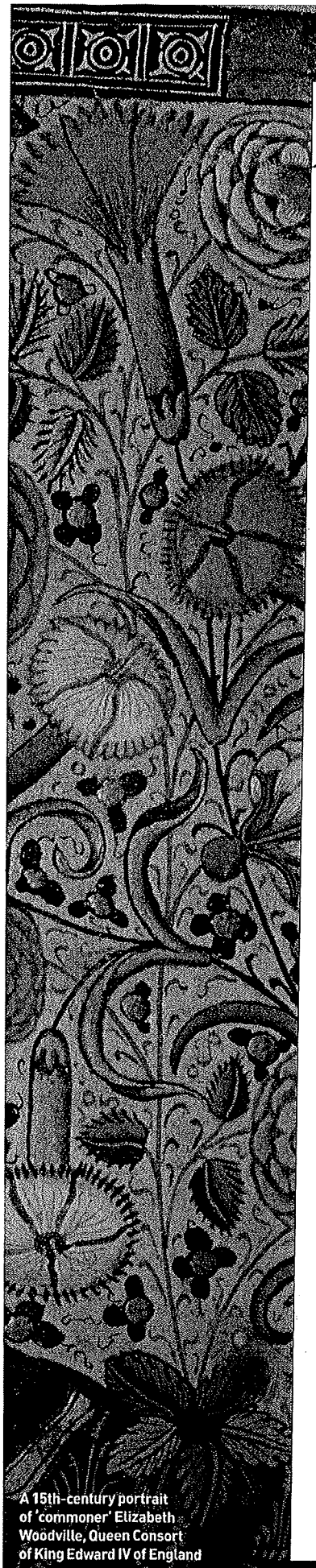
Yet the actions of the women forged during the Wars of the Roses would, ultimately, prove to matter as much as the battlefields. Referred to as that "great and strong-laboured woman" by Sir John Bocking in 1456, Margaret of Anjou, with her determination to hold onto the reins of power, played a vital part in pushing England into civil war. It was two other women, Margaret Beaufort and Elizabeth Woodville, who brokered the marriage that sealed the peace deal. From Henry VI's wife to Henry VII's mother, it was women who acted as midwives to the Tudor dynasty.

The women behind the so-called Wars of the Roses were playing a game of thrones. The business of their lives was power; their sons and husbands the currency. The passion and pain of the lives echo through Shakespeare's history plays – and yet, those plays apart, most of us know very little about their extraordinary stories.

This is due, in part, to the patchy nature of the source material. The sources for this particular period are "notoriously intractable' as JR Lander, an expert on the Wars of the Roses, put it – and more so for women who fought on no battlefields and passed no laws. The detailed records – and the aristocratic letters you find even from the days of Henry VIII less than 50 years later – are largely absent

What's more, the years that saw the disappearance of the princes in the Tower of London hold more than their fair share of insoluble mysteries and popular history has traditionally preferred to deal in certainties. But it is worth persevering and trying to unlock these women's stories. The more you look at their actions, their alliances and at the connections between them, the more you start to see an alternative engine of history.

BBC History, September 2012



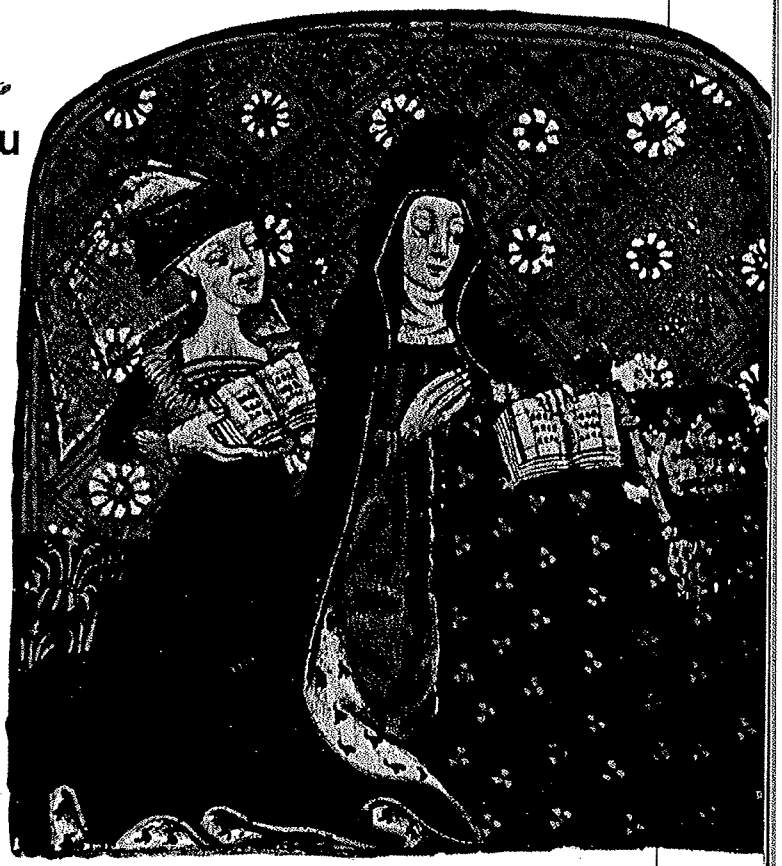
A 15th-century portrait of 'commoner' Elizabeth Woodville, Queen Consort of King Edward IV of England

The she-wolf

Margaret of Anjou

1430–82

Wife of Henry VI



The epitome of strength and determination: Queen Margaret, wife of Henry VI, was a prominent figure in the political arena during the 1450s

WHEN MARGARET of Anjou was brought to England in 1445, to wed the Lancastrian king Henry VI, she was widely regarded as little more than a pawn in a marriage contract designed to cement a truce in the long war with France. Within a matter of years, her single-mindedness would prove a major catalyst in sparking the Wars of the Roses. In fact, such was Margaret's impact upon her adopted nation that, a century or so after her death, Shakespeare immortalised her as a "she-wolf", with a "tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's hide".

Despite Shakespeare's verdict, it's possible that Margaret would never have figured so prominently in the political arena if events had not forced her hand. In 1454 the queen (who was, to contemporaries, "a manly woman, using to rule and not be ruled") made a bill of five articles – "whereof the first is that she desires to have the whole rule of the land", or so one correspondent said.

By then, just as she gave birth to Edward, their only son, her husband fell into a catatonic stupor. Margaret was desperate to prevent power falling entirely into the hands of Henry's cousin the Duke of York and his party, who she saw as dangerous rivals to royal authority.

As rivalry turned to armed conflict, the queen, as a woman, could only act through deputies. (Though 30 years before, legend had it, her grandmother Yolande of Aragon, a powerful protector to Joan of Arc, had donned silver armour and led her own troops against the English.) But time and again, reports would speak of Margaret's Lancastrian forces – rather than of her husband's – and at the second battle of St Albans in 1461 one reporter, the Milanese Prospero di Camulio, seems to suggest that she was in the fray. "The Earl of Warwick decided to quit the field, and... pushed through right into Albano [St Albans], where the queen was with 30,000 men."

The chronicler Gregory wrote that in the midst of the battle, "King Harry went to his queen and forsook all his lords, and trust better to her party than to his own..." An anecdotal report of a speech once credited to Margaret is as heroic in its own way as Elizabeth I's at Tilbury. "I have often broken [the English] battle line," she told her men. "I have mowed down ranks far more stubborn than theirs are now. You who once followed a peasant girl [Joan of Arc] now follow a queen... I will either conquer or be conquered with you."

A report of a speech once credited to Margaret is as heroic in its own way as Elizabeth I's at Tilbury

After Richard of York's heir, Edward IV, captured Henry VI's crown in 1460, Margaret by no means ceased campaigning. The next decade saw her tirelessly touting for support around the continent and in Scotland, where she won help from another prominent woman, Mary of Guelders, ruling as regent for her infant son James. Indeed, it would be Margaret's unlikely alliance with a former Yorkist, the powerful Earl of Warwick, the 'Kingmaker', (cemented by a marriage between her son and his daughter Anne Neville) that led to Henry VI's brief reinstatement in 1470. But the following spring, the deaths of her husband and son at Yorkist hands left Margaret no pieces to play on the political stage and she died in France impoverished and embittered.

The Rose of Raby

Cecily Neville 1415–95

Mother of Edward IV and Richard III

BORN THE BEAUTIFUL 'Rose of Raby', daughter of the powerful Earl of Westmorland, Cecily Neville was 15 years older than Margaret of Anjou, and already long married to Richard, Duke of York when Margaret, her sometime friend and rival, became queen.

Ironically, it was the death of Cecily's husband (and her second son) at the battle of Wakefield, a decisive Lancastrian victory fought in 1460, that gave her a political role. Only three months later, her eldest son took the throne as Edward IV and, in the early days of his reign, it was said of her that she, "holds the king at her pleasure", to rule as she wished. Perhaps that perception did not last long; certainly it did not survive Edward's marriage to Elizabeth Woodville – but it is Cecily's subsequent role that has been a matter of most debate among historians.

A line engraving of Cecily Neville, who lived to the, then, grand old age of 80

Where, firstly, did she stand over the dissent between Edward IV and his younger brother Clarence? The dispute led ultimately to Clarence's execution – allegedly drowned in a butt of malmsey – in 1478. Even more importantly, what was her view of her son Richard's seizure of the throne and dispossession of her grandsons after King Edward's death in 1483? How did she react to suspicions that Richard had murdered them in the Tower?

One theory – that of historian Michael K Jones – suggests that Cecily supported Clarence's claim that his elder brother (Edward IV) was illegitimate, and that he himself was the rightful heir. She may even have been the guiding spirit behind Richard III's coup. It would be at her house that the meetings that prepared his takeover were planned.

Evidence is, however, somewhat scanty. It is possible that Cecily took a large step away from the spotlight in the years following Clarence's death. She was, after all, already in her sixties, which was old, by the standards of the day. It would have been quite understandable if she were simply as punch drunk as any other old fighter, keeping herself out of the fray.

Cecily's long life was beset by conflicts as shocking as can ever have rent any family

Cecily is perhaps the best example of the comparatively poor biographical legacy of the last Plantagenet women. Though her long life was beset by conflicts as shocking as can ever have rent any family, we cannot, rather frustratingly, be sure where her own strongest allegiance lay.

The tragic lady Anne

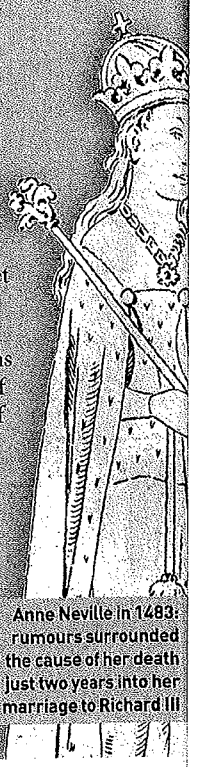
Anne Neville 1456–85

Wife of Richard III

BORN THE DAUGHTER of the powerful Earl of Warwick, Anne Neville was first married off by her father, the 'Kingmaker', to the Lancastrian Prince of Wales, to cement an alliance with Margaret of Anjou, hitherto Warwick's bitter enemy.

After both the prince and Warwick himself were killed in a crushing Yorkist defeat of the Lancastrians at the 1471 battle of Barnet, Anne (the great niece of Cecily Neville) passed into the hands of the Duke of Clarence. He, according to one contemporary chronicler, tried to keep her hidden, disguised as a kitchen maid, for fear her fortune should fall into his brother Richard's clutches. Clarence failed and in 1483, after a decade of largely obscure married life, Anne was crowned as Richard III's queen.

Within two years she was dead amid rumours Richard had caused her demise either through poison or psychological warfare; a figure as tragic, if less scandalous, as Shakespeare imagined her in his Lady Anne (*Richard III*).



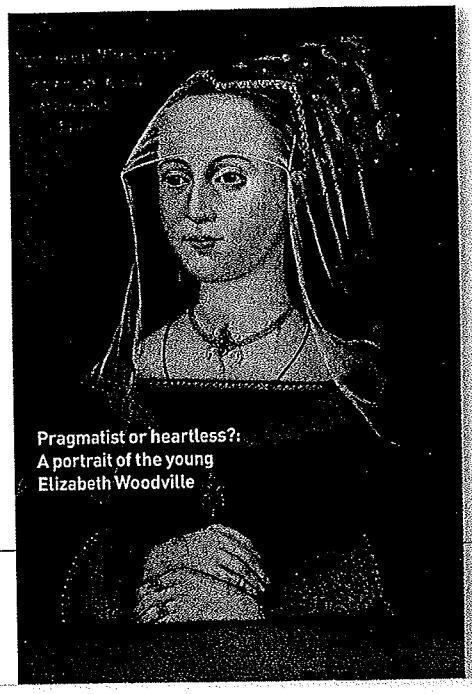
Anne Neville in 1483: rumours surrounded the cause of her death just two years into her marriage to Richard III

The commoner queen

Elizabeth Woodville c1437–92

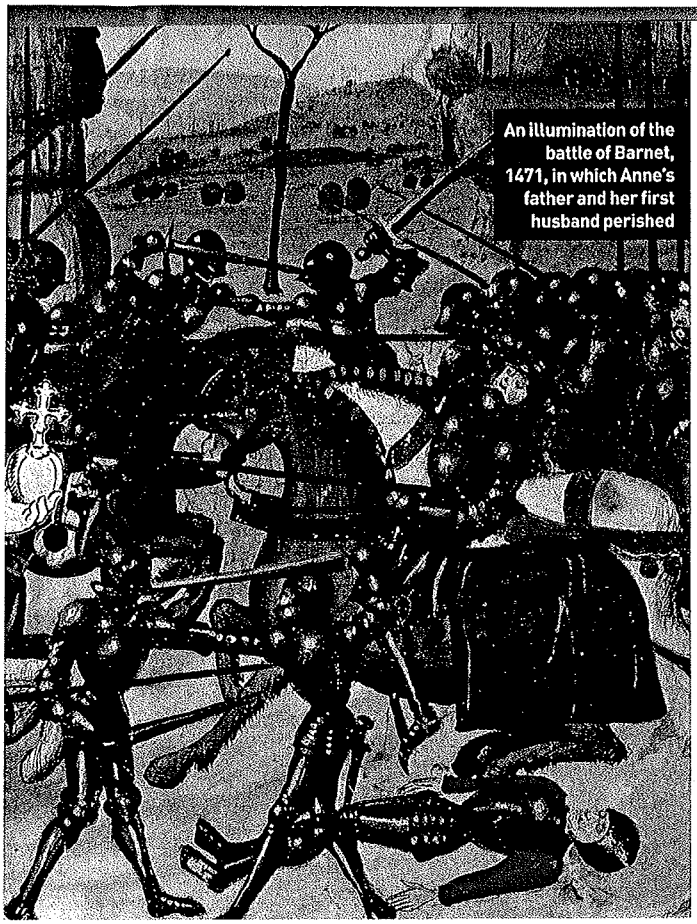
Wife of Edward IV, mother of the princes in the Tower

WHEN ELIZABETH Woodville was wed in secret to the young Yorkist king, Edward IV, in 1464, she became the first English woman to be crowned queen consort since the Norman Conquest. She is said to have demanded marriage as the price of her virtue, just as Anne Boleyn would do to Elizabeth's grandson, Henry VIII.



Pragmatist or heartless?: A portrait of the young Elizabeth Woodville

The daughter of a minor peer (though her mother came from a royal European house), Elizabeth was the widow of a Lancastrian knight, with two children already to her name. The idea of a king making a love match with a commoner was itself controversial, and no less anger was aroused by the sudden rise to



An illumination of the battle of Barnet, 1471, in which Anne's father and her first husband perished

prominence of the whole Woodville family. Elizabeth Woodville has often been dismissed as a woman of almost unparalleled shallowness, yet the plots of her later years may tell a more complicated story.

After her husband died in 1483, news that Richard, Duke of Gloucester (Richard III) had taken possession of her young son, Edward V, sent Elizabeth flying into sanctuary. Her behaviour in the following months has been extensively canvassed. Her decision to allow her younger son to join his brother in the Tower, where the boys disappeared from public view, and the fact that she allowed her daughters to leave sanctuary and go to dance at their uncle's court – the court of the man who may have murdered their brothers – has been scrutinised.

Probably she felt she had no other options, but generations of historians have struggled to explain a pragmatism that seems to verge on sheer insensibility. One theory goes so far as to suggest that at least the younger of the princes in the Tower may have been alive and secretly released into her care.

There was something else going on here. The 16th-century Italian historian Polydore Vergil relates how, only weeks into Richard III's reign, Elizabeth gave her consent to a joint conspiracy suggested by the Lancastrian heiress Margaret Beaufort and relayed to the dowager queen in sanctuary by Margaret's physician, the Welshman Lewis Caerleon. Vergil reports that Elizabeth promised Margaret that she would recruit all of Edward IV's friends if Henry Tudor would be sworn to take Elizabeth's daughter Elizabeth of York in marriage as soon as he had the crown. Although the 1483 rebellions failed to topple Richard from his throne, this was the deal that would ultimately produce the Tudor dynasty.

Generations of historians have struggled to explain her pragmatism that seems to verge on sheer insensibility

The key male players in the Wars of the Roses

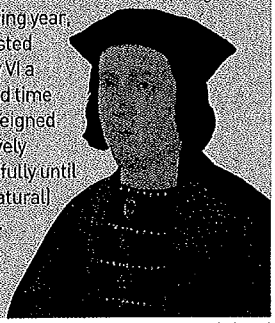
Henry VI 1421–71

Henry was a weak king who presided over defeats in France and then suffered a mental breakdown in 1453, whereby his cousin Richard, Duke of York took charge in his place. Despite recovering a couple of years later, Henry was unable to prevent the outbreak of hostilities between the Lancastrian and Yorkist factions that would drag on for three decades. He was deposed by the Yorkists in 1461 after losing the battle of Towton and later imprisoned by Edward IV.

Briefly reinstated by Warwick the Kingmaker in 1470, Henry was then ousted once again by Edward IV the following year and he was probably murdered shortly afterwards.

Edward IV 1442–83

Edward was the son of Richard, Duke of York, who spearheaded the Yorkist faction in the 1450s. After his father was killed at Wakefield in 1460, Edward took on this mantle and seized the throne from Henry VI in 1461. Edward's reign was interrupted by the rebellion of Warwick the Kingmaker in 1470 and he was forced to flee. Returning the following year, he ousted Henry VI a second time, then reigned relatively peacefully until his (natural) death.



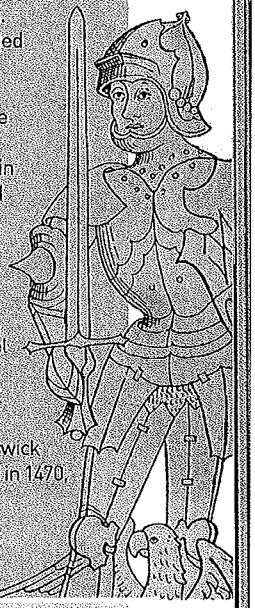
Richard III 1452–85

Brother to both Edward IV and the Duke of Clarence, Richard was named protector to Edward's young son Edward V in 1483. He swiftly asserted his own claim and shortly afterwards Edward V and his brother disappeared, probably murdered by their uncle. Amid growing dissatisfaction with Richard's rule, Henry Tudor landed in Wales in 1485. The resultant battle of Bosworth dealt a body blow to Yorkist aspirations as well as to Richard himself.

Warwick the Kingmaker 1428–71

Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick was a hugely powerful noble whose support was crucial for prospective monarchs. Neville sided with the Yorkists in 1453 and he was later instrumental in ousting Henry VI in 1461. Warwick grew dissatisfied with aspects of Edward IV's reign, ultimately leading him to abandon his former ally and rebel against him alongside the Duke of Clarence.

Fighting with the Lancastrian cause, Warwick helped restore Henry VI in 1470, but he was defeated and killed by Yorkists at Barnet in 1471.



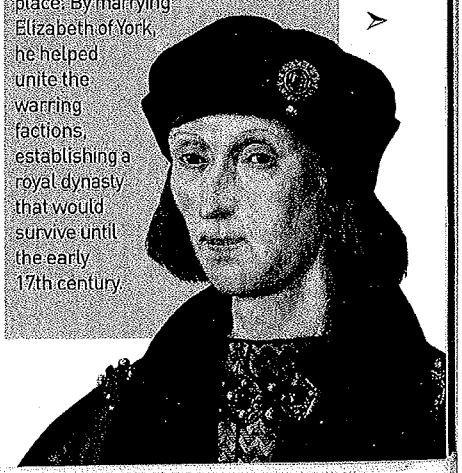
The Duke of Clarence 1449–78

The younger son of Richard, Duke of York, Clarence was persuaded by Warwick to revolt against his brother Edward IV in the late 1460s. He helped topple Edward in 1470 but he then fell out with Warwick and was reconciled with his brother before he returned to the throne the year after.

However, this friendship proved to be brief. Later in the decade Clarence began scheming against Edward once again and was sentenced to death in 1478.

Henry VII 1457–1509

Henry Tudor was the leading Lancastrian claimant by 1483 and two years later he killed Richard III at Bosworth, becoming king in his place. By marrying Elizabeth of York, he helped unite the warring factions, establishing a royal dynasty that would survive until the early 17th century.



Margaret 'of Burgundy', c1477: an adroit plotter depicted as driven by "insatiable hatred and fiery wrath"

The fiery plotter

Margaret 'of Burgundy'

1446–1503

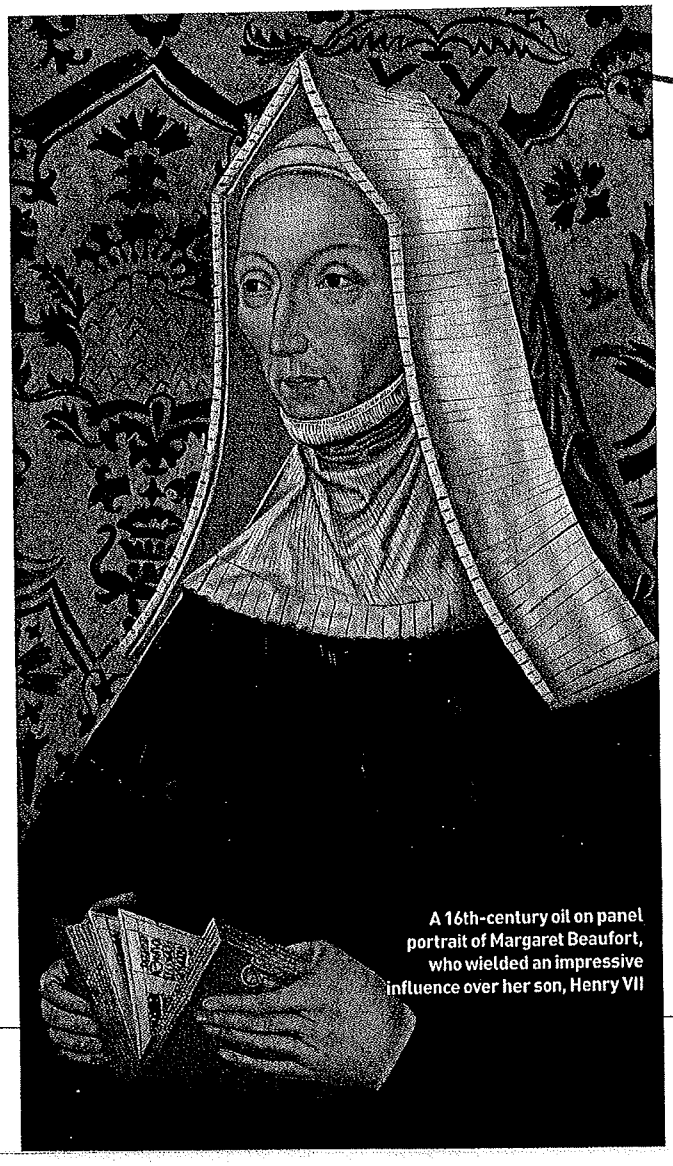
Sister of Edward IV and Richard III

YOUNGEST DAUGHTER of Cecily Neville, sister to Edward IV and Richard III, Margaret's childless marriage to Charles, Duke of Burgundy never deterred her from intervening in the affairs of her native country.

Once a mediator between her warring brothers Edward and Clarence, it was after Henry VII assumed the throne that Margaret plotted most actively as chief promoter of the pretender to Henry VII's throne Perkin Warbeck, as well as of his predecessor Lambert Simnel.

With more than a touch of the misogyny displayed by most contemporary commentators, Vergil claimed Margaret, driven by "insatiable hatred and fiery wrath", continually sought Henry's destruction – "so ungovernable is a woman's nature especially when she is under the influence of envy".

Margaret is presented to Charles, Duke of Burgundy in a 15th-century French manuscript, *Life of Alexander the Great*



A 16th-century oil on panel portrait of Margaret Beaufort, who wielded an impressive influence over her son, Henry VII

The ambitious Tudor

Margaret Beaufort 1443–1509

Mother of Henry VII

MARGARET BEAUFORT was England's wealthiest heiress when, at the age of 12, she was married to Edmund Tudor, who was a comparatively humble Welshman.

Margaret was something of a dark horse throughout the years of Yorkist power yet, crucially, she was – through her descent from John of Gaunt – a vital carrier of the Lancastrian bloodline.

She was still only 13 and already a widow when she gave birth to her son Henry, Edmund having died of the plague. The experience possibly damaged her slight physique, since her two subsequent marriages produced no more children and, later in life, she would take a vow of celibacy.

This meant that all her ambitions centred on Henry. Yet in 1471 she felt compelled, for safety, to send him into exile in Brittany. She would see her son again only 14 years later and in the most dramatic of circumstances.

In the summer of 1485, Henry Tudor landed with a small invasion force on the Welsh coast. He launched a campaign to take King Richard III's throne, urged on by a flow of money and messengers from his mother. The fact that Margaret was able to

Margaret was quick to claim the power and position she felt was owed to her once Henry assumed the throne

offer her son any support at all was, in itself, quite an impressive achievement. She was then being kept under genteel house arrest on the Lancashire estates of her third husband, Lord Stanley – the penalty for her part in plotting with Elizabeth Woodville to

launch that earlier rising against Richard.

But just how much influence was Margaret able to exercise on Stanley? It's a question that historians have been pondering over for years. The Stanleys' last-minute decision to send their forces to support Henry helped win the day for the Lancastrians and secure Richard III's demise.

Margaret would be quick to claim the power and position she felt was owed to her once Henry had assumed the throne. 'My Lady the King's Mother', as she came to be known, in some ways overshadowed her daughter-in-law, Elizabeth of York, maintaining Henry's authority in the Midlands, laying down the rules for the ceremonies of court and exercising to the full her own powers of patronage.

Outliving her own son by a few months, she survived to play an active role in shepherding her grandson into power – a final coup for the woman who, above all others, did the most to usher in the Tudor century.

The unifier

Elizabeth of York 1466–1503

Daughter of Edward IV & Elizabeth Woodville, wife of Henry VII, mother of Henry VIII

AS THE NEW HENRY VII strove to confirm his rule after victory at Bosworth and bring unity to the country, his own fragile claim to the throne from his mother's Lancastrian blood was immeasurably strengthened by marriage to the Yorkist heiress.

There seems to have been no thought, in the world of practical politics, that Elizabeth of York might actually take the throne herself. A century on, Francis Bacon would nonetheless report that Henry feared he might be seen as ruling only though Elizabeth's right, and being "but a king at courtesy". Perhaps that is why she seems to have been sidelined by her cannier husband into anonymous domesticity and a string of pregnancies, the last of which caused her death in 1503. "The queen is beloved because she is powerless", one ambassador reported, damningly.

But once again there is a question mark – a hint of something stranger and stronger behind the placid facade. The 17th-century antiquary George Buck claimed to have seen a letter written by Elizabeth herself early in 1485, expressing her burning desire to marry her uncle Richard III, and her fear that his queen – that same Anne Neville who had once been married to a Lancastrian prince – "would never die". There are many question marks over Buck's alleged discovery of the letter, but there were indeed rumours that Richard wanted to marry his niece. He was forced to go into London and deny them publicly.

Whatever doubts may have remained, Elizabeth's marriage to Henry VII seems to have been broadly happy. The union certainly fulfilled the main, dynastic imperative, producing the prince who would become Henry VIII.

Looking back to the sometimes turbulent lives of medieval queens it might almost be argued that a quieter and more predominantly domestic model for the consort's role was on the way. Except, of course, that Elizabeth of York was grandmother to two queens (Mary and Elizabeth) who did assume the throne in their own right; and that, too, is her legacy.

Elizabeth's marriage to Henry VII seems to have been happy, and fulfilled its main, dynastic imperative

A c1500 portrait of Elizabeth of York who, with the birth of her son Henry VIII, ensured that the Tudor dynasty thrived

Sarah Gristwood is the author of *Blood Sisters: The Women Behind the Wars of the Roses* (Harper Press, September 2012)

JOURNEYS

Books

- **The Last Medieval Queens: English Queenship, 1445–1503** by JL Laynesmith *(OUP, 2004)*
- **Bosworth 1485: Psychology of a Battle** by Michael K Jones *(Tempus, 2002)*
- **Queens Consort: England's Medieval Queens** by Lisa Hilton *(Phoenix, 2009)*

On the podcast

Sarah Gristwood discusses women in the Wars of the Roses on our weekly podcast
www.historyextra.com/podcast-page

BOSWORTH

THE DAWN OF THE TUDORS

BBC History, June 2013