

66.04 Wars with France

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France and England had been at war for seven years when in 1303 Edward I's 19-year-old heir Edward (II) and Philip the Fair's daughter Isabella were betrothed in an effort to make lasting peace. In the 12th century England's possessions in France had extended from the Pyrenees to Normandy, but most of these had been lost by John by 1204, and in the reign of Edward I had been reduced to the southern part of Aquitaine, the wealthy wine-producing duchy of Gascony and the counties of Montreuil and Ponthieu. Philip, then the most powerful ruler in Christendom, invaded Gascony in 1296. One way to resolve the matter was by royal alliances: the widowed King Edward, aged 60, was to marry Philip's sister Marguerite, then about 20, and Edward's son was to marry Philip's daughter. Philip's grandson would be heir to the English throne; Edward would retrieve Gascony and achieve a brilliant marriage for his son. Even better, when his daughter became queen, Philip would give her all the lands of Eleanor of Castile.

The background at this time was one of continual turmoil, first with the wars of Edward I, and then Edward II giving his favourites Piers Gaveston and then the Despensers full reign, resulting in civil unrest and his deposition. Enmity between Thomas of Lancaster and his king ran deep, and after Edward's humiliation at the hands of Robert the Bruce at Bannockburn it was really Lancaster who ruled England (Wier 2005, 102). The rise of Thomas of Lancaster was meteoric; he was uncle to Queen Isabella and became increasingly wealthy and powerful; he was instrumental in putting Edward's favourite, Gaveston, to death and civil war again seemed likely to break out.

In 1322 Lancaster was embroiled in treason against the king. Edward declared war on a well-supported Lancaster, and seized Leicester, ravaging Lancaster's lands. The latter made peace with the king at Bedford, was fined the equivalent of half his lands and stripped of most of his offices; after his defeat at Boroughbridge he was beheaded but was subsequently viewed as a virtual saint and martyr. His brother Henry was his heir and, although he had no part in his brother's treachery, it took two years before Edward trusted him enough to give him just the earldom of Leicester. The Despensers were in power and much worse than Gaveston; the people and barons declared 'it was not to be endured, and that they could no longer tolerate his [Hugh the younger's] wicked, outrageous behaviour'. Henry blamed them for his brother's death and the loss of his earldoms. Isabella fled to France where she and Roger Mortimer, adviser to Prince Edward, became lovers. In 1326 they invaded England and moved to Dunstable before marching on a sympathetic London. Bishop Orleton preached that 'When the head of a kingdom becometh sick and diseased it must of necessity be taken off, without useless attempts to administer any other remedy.' Prince Edward was declared *custos* of the realm on the grounds that his father had deserted his people; Leicester's right to succeed to his brother's inheritance was acknowledged and he was once more Earl of Lancaster. The elder Despenser was decapitated, hung on a gibbet, chopped up and fed to dogs.

Isabella began governing in her husband's name; Henry of Lancaster was appointed constable of Kenilworth Castle and Edward II was moved there under guard. Lords and people refused to accept him as king; Archbishop Melton

declared the king deposed in favour of his son Edward (III); Edward II was forced to comply in Lancaster's presence and Henry formally succeeded to his brother's vast estates. The following year Edward III married Philippa of Hainault whose father supported the invasion. Isabella and Lancaster became rivals for control of the under-age king; Henry was Edward's official guardian and could legally take control. Meanwhile the country was subject to lawlessness because of weak rule and conflict during Edward II's reign, and it seems that Isabella tried to re-establish law and order.

In May 1337 Philip IV confiscated Isabella's Gascony, and in October Edward declared war; the following year he claimed the French throne through his mother – the start of the Hundred Years War. Also in 1337 Montagu was made earl of Salisbury, receiving many of Mortimer's estates [67.13].

Ladies of the manor

Two years before he died in 1307, Edward I placed English Fontevraldine lands in the custody of his nun daughter Princess Mary of Woodstock for the duration of the wars with France; she was lady of the manor of Leighton for 27 years from 1305 to 1332 when it was returned to Fontevrault for a short period. Famine gripped England in the early part of the 14th century and there was 'misery such as our age has never seen'. There are no accounts for La Grava at this time but there is no reason why the estate should not also have suffered. Edward made a number of visits to La Grava between 1309 and 1316, a period of poor harvests. At about this time the town of Leighton showed a decline in taxpayers – down nearly 16% from 145 to 136 between 1309 and 1332 – with the higher rate of tax return diminishing from £18 to £15. Luton showed a similar decline but Leighton returns include its rural hamlets; several cases of debt arose in its trading community (Godber 1969, 121-2). The Black Death may have had an effect, with both Luton and Leighton Buzzard losing more than one vicar that year, but this was slight compared with the effect of the plague on urban Bedford.

While Amesbury was in poverty La Grava appeared to flourish; Princess Mary spent its income on her own luxurious lifestyle, but was still frequently in debt. Nuns were not meant to hold property, but royalty was different; she was cherished by her royal relations and lived an extraordinarily secular life. In 1317 Mary became Visitor for the Order in England despite her obvious unsuitability. Edward II stayed many times at La Grava, sometimes probably to see his sister Mary, though none of her visitations are documented. One Extent of the manor survives from Mary's custodianship, in 1318, just two years after the worst of the famines.

In 1332 Princess Mary died and the manor returned to Fontevrault, probably to its role as monastic grange and headquarters of the Procurator General of the Order in England, then Richard de Greneburgh [67.13]. It was given to another female royal relative in 1338 for the period of the wars with France, the king's wealthy cousin Maud of Lancaster, who was Henry's daughter and Thomas of Lancaster's niece. Her husband was Robert de Ufford who was rewarded for his early support to Edward III by being made earl of Suffolk. She was at La Grava in 1341/42 en route to see her brother joust at Dunstable. In 1347 Maud decided to take the veil; as a nun she should not hold property but in this case the king owed her a large debt through her husband Robert de Ufford, Earl of Suffolk, and her executors were to continue to hold her Fontevraldine lands until it was paid. Naturally Fontevrault required the return of its valuable properties.