

LIONEL GREEN has another tale to tell of Merton priory and its place in national history: EDWARD II AND ISABELLA

Edward II: a lonely childhood

“O, solitude! where are the charms
That sages have seen in thy face?”

Wm Cowper

A critic of Edward has suggested that he was over-endowed with human failings, and some probably arose from happenings he endured in early childhood. When he was only two his parents went abroad for three years.¹ His mother, the cherished Eleanor of Castile, died when he was six, and no doubt he was taken to see some of the crosses later erected to commemorate her. As he progressed towards youth, Edward of Caernarfon had no living brothers to play with.

In 1298 the son of Sir Arnaud de Gaveston was made a royal ward and became an official companion of the king's son. Both were about 14. In the following year prince Edward was betrothed to the daughter of the king of France, when she was only eight. His immediate introduction to Piers Gaveston must have been more satisfying to Edward than the distant prospect of marriage to someone who was then a child.

The cause of many of the prince's failings arose from his intimate friendship with Piers Gaveston. Convention would have governed the relationship with a code similar to courtly love, and homosexuality would have been strongly censured. His infatuation was to an individual more than to a sexual habit.

Edward II: an unloved king

“And, seeing there was no place to mount up higher
Why should I grieve at my declining fall?”

C Marlowe *Edward II*

Edward reigned from 8 July 1307 and was always short of money, having taken over the debts of his father. The priory of Merton was also pleading poverty, “the result of the care displayed in ministering to the poor and the exercise of frequent hospitalities”.² On 11 June 1309 the king granted a licence for the priory to appropriate revenues of the church of Cuddington.³ The bishop of Winchester also graciously granted his permission.⁴ In June 1310 the king ordered the prior of Merton and others to send wheat, malt, beans and oats to York to help feed his army. On 2 August 1310 he requested 20 marks (£13.33) for the king's use as a gift for the war in Scotland. The prior was admonished for not supplying the victuals which had been requested, “... and his excuses ... were considered insufficient”.⁵

The most depressive moment of Edward's reign must have been the death of Gaveston, brought about by the king's cousin Thomas earl of Lancaster in 1312, followed by the total defeat by the Scots at Bannockburn in 1314. The nadir for the country came in 1315-7 when the crops failed for three consecutive years and famine was rife, especially in London. In 1317 Merton priory mortgaged all tithes of corn and fruit in Effingham to the archdeacon of Surrey for six years in return for a loan of £26.⁶

The highlight of his reign was probably the defeat of Thomas of Lancaster, who had never allowed him unfettered sovereignty. The king had been desperate to remove the earl of Lancaster, and exhorted the nation to muster at Coventry. He even turned to monastic communities, and on 16 February 1322 asked the prior of Merton to raise men-at-arms to march against the earl.⁷ The king's army began marching north from Coventry in January 1322 to attack the earl at Pontefract. On 17 March Lancaster surrendered himself at Boroughbridge and was sentenced to a traitor's death by hanging. The king commuted the sentence to beheading as an earl.⁸

Throughout this period Isabella had played her part as the dutiful queen, acting as peacemaker between the barons and the king. On 13 November 1312 she gave birth to a son, the future Edward III. Eventually the king's fondness for the dissolute Gaveston, and later for Hugh le Despenser, proved too much for his wife Isabella, and she began to complain of her husband's coldness and neglect.



*Effigy of Edward II,
Gloucester Cathedral*

Isabella: she-wolf of France

“Ranging like a she-wolf ... drenched by the rain of exile ...”

B Brecht *The Life of Edward II of England*

In 1325 Isabella went on an official visit to France as mediator between the king of England and her brother, Charles king of France, over the land of Aquitaine⁹ (Guienne and Ponthieu). She arrived in Paris on 1 April 1325 and concluded a settlement by 14 May. The treaty was drawn up on 30 May, whereby the lands were to be held by Edward with homage due to the king of France.¹⁰

Edward made plans to do homage and was at Dover on 24 August but feigned illness, not willing to be mortified as a lesser king. He created his son duke of Aquitaine and count of Ponthieu and Montreuil, and sent him to France. At the Bois de Vincennes on 21 September 1325 prince Edward acted as the king's substitute to perform homage to the French king. The 13-year-old heir apparent was now in the power of the queen and her family.

Isabella spent the winter in Paris and formed a liaison with Roger Mortimer, who had escaped from the Tower in 1323 to live in France. The king of France, Isabella's brother, did not approve of her conduct, and in June 1326 asked them to leave France. They made their way to William II, count of Hainault, Holland and Zeeland. Here Isabella arranged for her son prince Edward to marry Philippa, one of the daughters of the count.¹¹

The count of Hainault advanced a portion of Philippa's dowry to the queen, which enabled her to raise an army, led by the count's brother, John of Hainault. Isabella returned to England, landing at the estuary of the river Orwell, Suffolk, on 23 September 1326. With her were Mortimer, John of Hainault, many disgruntled exiles and a force of 2757 soldiers.¹² London received her, and she advanced to Bristol on 26 October. The king was captured on 16 November and placed in Kenilworth castle until his fate could be decided by a parliament summoned for the purpose. Isabella was at Woodstock from 3 December until the 22nd, and spent Christmas 1326 at Wallingford.

Parliament had been called for 7 January, summoned in the king's name, but he refused to attend. Isabella set out for Westminster and the journey included visits to Reading, Windsor, Chertsey and Merton.¹³

The queen visits Merton

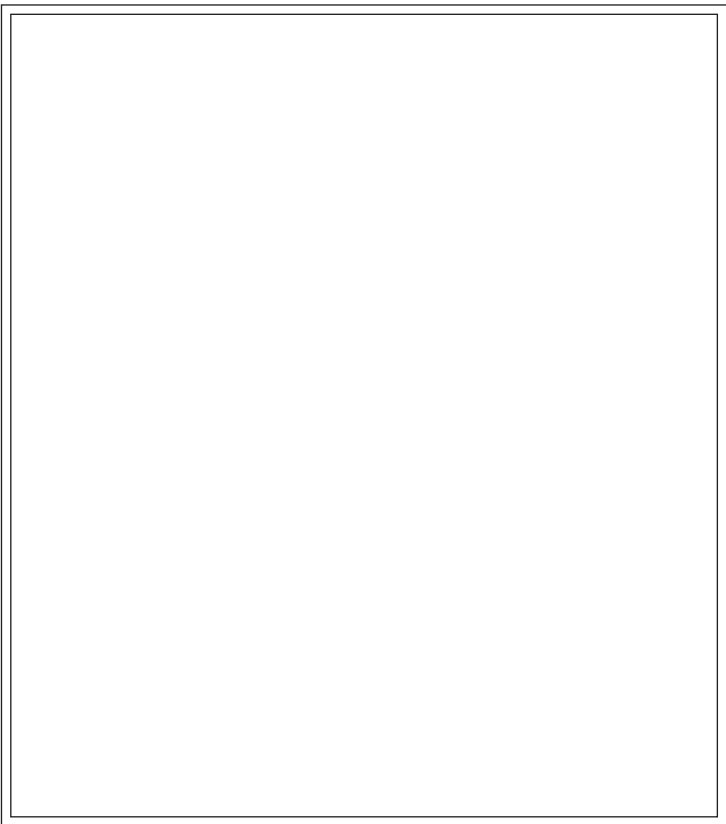
“Hear the other side.”

St Augustine of Hippo

The superiors of the monasteries of Reading, Chertsey and Merton were parliamentary barons, and Isabella would have sought their support to force the king to abdicate. She arrived at Westminster on 4 January, which suggests that the visit to Merton priory was on the 3rd. She would have been received by the prior, William de Brokesborn (1307-35), who had been prior for longer than Isabella had been queen. She may have wished to use him as a sounding board for her scheme to rid England of Edward II. The queen's visit, with many attendant persons, must have been a strain on the resources of the priory and its officials.

How the inhabitants of Merton must have chattered as news passed around that the queen had been in their midst! They would not have guessed that within a month they would have a new king.

Edward was deposed, and on 29 January 1327 the royal son was proclaimed king as Edward III. He was 14 years old, and his father was finally monstrously murdered in Berkeley castle on 21 September 1327.



*Queen Isabella with John of Hainault
returning from France and The Netherlands
(Biblioteche Nationale)*

Isabella the queen mother

“Tomorrow do thy worst
For I have lived today.”

J Dryden

The queen virtually ruled England with Mortimer from 1327 until 1330, when Mortimer was tried before parliament and executed as a traitor. Edward III obliged his mother to retire to Castle Rising, Norfolk.

On 24 May 1337 Philip of Valois, now Philip VI of France, confiscated Aquitaine from the English crown. He had assumed the throne of France as nephew of Philip IV. This caused Edward III to revive his claim to the French crown through his mother Isabella, daughter of Philip IV and sister to the last three kings of the Capetian line (begun in 987), which became extinct in the male line in 1328.¹⁴ Thus began the Hundred Years' War.

In June 1340 Edward destroyed the French navy at anchor in Sluys (Sluis, Netherlands). In July 1346 he returned to Normandy and took Caen. This was followed on 26 August by a battle at Crécy-en-Ponthieu which involved Edward's son the Black Prince. Finally the English were able to take Calais in 1347. (For Edward's celebrations involving Merton on 6 January 1347 see *Bulletin* No.141 [March 2002] p.8.)

Throughout all these engagements queen Isabella was still living at Castle Rising, no doubt enjoying vicarious satisfaction over her son's successes. The king visited her “twice or thrice a year”¹⁵ until she died on 22 August 1358. She was buried at Greyfriars monastery in London.

1 C Bingham *Life and Times of Edward II* 1973 p.22

2 Merton cartulary f146; *Victoria County History of Surrey* II p.97

3 Patent Roll 2 Edward II pt.2 m4; *V C H Surrey* II p.97; A Heales *Records of Merton Prory* 1898 p.201

4 Manning and Bray I p.250; Heales *op.cit.* p.202

5 Heales *op.cit.* p.203; Close Roll 4 Edward II m4; *V C H Surrey* II p.97

6 Merton cartulary f184; *V C H Surrey* II p.97; Heales *op.cit.* p.218

7 Heales *op.cit.* p.224

8 Bingham *op.cit.* p.145

9 Julius Caesar named southern Gaul Aquitaine, from the numerous rivers and fine ports. The poetical inhabitants of the district adopted the name for their dukedom. Guienne possessed the ports which provided the ships for the Gascon wine trade.

10 T Rymer *Foedera* p.601; J Hunter 'Journal of the mission of Isabella to the court of France' in *Archaeologia* 36 (1855) p.247

11 Hunter *op.cit.* p.256

12 A Strickland *Queens of England* 1866 Vol. I p.512

13 Hunter *op.cit.* p.257

14 The title 'king of France' was retained by the kings of England until George III.

15 J Froissart *Chronicles* Ch XXIII

*A queen's head at Beverley Minster, believed to be Isabella
(Pitkin Pictorials)*

