

# Queen Isabella's Revenge

When doing genealogy, you find a lot of historical sidelines. This one gets wild.

We have three infamous Isabels in the family tree: Isabella MacDuff, Isabel of Angouleme, and Isabella of France

Isabel of Angouleme and Isabella of France were both were French girls famous for their beauty and intelligence who were married at age 12. Isabella MacDuff was Scottish and was probably a little older.

Isabel Angouleme was the only one who had a happy marriage and that was with her second husband. For all three, their important family connections caused a great deal of trouble for themselves and for many others.

This is the story of Isabella of France and her revenge on our grandfather Hugh Despenser, one of the blackest of all our black sheep.

## Isabella of France

Our 20th great grandmother Isabella of France was the wife of Edward II, King of England. This Isabella was also famously beautiful. She was married to Edward when she was just 12 years old in 1307. She had her first child at age 17.

She was the daughter of King Phillippe IV of France and Queen Jeanne, the daughter of the King of Navarre. The marriage was part of a attempt at a political settlement to the continuous state of war among the rulers of France, England, and Scotland. Her new husband, Edward II, had major flaws of personality and character issues that were not to her liking in several ways.

Isabella of France was quite a character. She (and apparently everybody else) took a severe dislike to (our 18th and 19th Great grandfathers) Hugh le Despenser and especially his son Hugh "the Younger,"

If you saw the movie Braveheart, Isabella was the pretty French wife of the young Prince Edward. The portrayal of Edward in the movie seems fairly accurate and to be based on real events. You can clearly see why Isabella despised him. And if Hugh raped her and was trying to have her killed, she wouldn't care much for him either. In the movie, she had an affair with William Wallace played by Mel Gibson. That didn't happen. In real life she took up with Roger Mortimer:

## Enmity of Hugh Despencer

It seems the Despensers really deserved to be disliked. Hugh Jr became royal chamberlain in 1318. By 1320 his greed was running free. Hugh seized the Welsh lands of his wife's inheritance, ignoring the claims of his two brothers-in-law. He

forced Alice de Lacy, Countess of Lincoln, to give up her lands after he killed her husband, cheated his sister-in-law Elizabeth de Clare out of Gower and Usk, and allegedly had Lady Baret's arms and legs broken until she went insane. Hugh "the Younger" was selected in 2006 by BBC History Magazine as the 14th century's worst Briton.

By 1321 he had earned many enemies in every stratum of society, from Queen Isabella to the barons to the common people.

Alison Weir, in her 2005 book, *Queen Isabella: Treachery, Adultery, and Murder in Medieval England*, speculates that Hugh Jr. had raped Isabella and that was the source of her hatred.

### **Rebellion and Roger Mortimer**

Charles IV King of France was Isabella's brother. He seized all the property of Edward II in France. Edward sent Isabella to France to try to negotiate a settlement with Charles. That was a mistake. Charles and Isabella began organizing a rebellion against Edward. While Isabella was in France, she met Roger Mortimer, another enemy of Edward.

Mortimer was in France evading an arrest warrant issued by Despenser. Despenser had captured Mortimer and locked him in the Tower of London and seized his properties. Mortimer bribed the guards and escaped to France. He was looking for a way to restore his positions in England.

Mortimer joined the plot and also became Isabella's lover. They began planning an invasion to overthrow Edward. (Roger Mortimer, by the way, is out 20th great-grandfather. He is an ancestor of the Woodsons. His sister is an ancestor of the Chanceys.)

Hugh Despenser supposedly tried to bribe French courtiers to assassinate Isabella, sending barrels of silver as payment.

On 21 September 1326, Isabella and Mortimer landed in Suffolk with an army, most of whom were mercenaries. King Edward II offered a reward for their deaths and is rumoured to have carried a knife in his hose with which to kill his wife. Isabella responded by offering twice as much money for the head of Hugh the younger Despenser.

The invasion by Isabella and Mortimer was successful: King Edward's few allies deserted him without a battle; the Despensers were killed (see below), and Edward himself was captured and forced to abdicate in favour of his eldest son, Edward III of England. Since the young king Edward III was only fourteen when he was crowned on February 1, 1327, Isabella and Mortimer ruled as regents in his place for the next three years.

One of their acts was ending of the war with King Robert the Bruce of Scotland

## **The Death of Edward II**

Edward II may have died in mysterious circumstances only a few months later.

According to legend, Isabella and Mortimer plotted to murder the deposed king in such a way as not to draw blame on themselves, sending a famous order (in Latin: *Eduardum occidere nolite timere bonum est*) which, depending on where the comma was inserted, could mean either "Do not be afraid to kill Edward; it is good" or "Do not kill Edward; it is good to fear". In actuality, there is little evidence of just who decided to have Edward assassinated, and none whatsoever of the note ever having been written. In September 1327, Isabella and Edward III (age 14) were informed of Edward II's death of a "grief-stricken illness".

It is thought that he died on 21 September 1327 at age 43 at Berkeley Castle in Gloucestershire, murdered with a red-hot poker in the bowels, done on the orders of Isabella or Roger Mortimer. King Edward II was buried at Gloucester Cathedral.

Or perhaps not: Alison Weir's biography of Isabella proposes that Edward II in fact escaped death and fled to Europe, where he lived as a hermit for twenty years.

## **The Coup of Edward III and Isabella's End**

When Edward III turned 18, he and a few trusted companions staged a coup on 19 October 1330 and had both Isabella and Mortimer taken prisoner. One has to conclude that Mortimer may have refused to give up power when Edward became 18. Why else would a coup have been necessary? Why else would it be necessary to kill Mortimer?

Isabella really seems to have cared for Mortimer, but he was married and had twelve children. Marriage was not possible under the circumstances.

Despite Isabella's cries of "Fair son, have pity on gentle Mortimer", Mortimer was taken to the Tower of London. Accused of assuming royal power and high misdemeanours, he was condemned without trial and hanged at Tyburn on 29 November 1330.

Edward III could have had Isabella's tried and executed as well, but he spared her life - she was, after all, his mother - and she was allowed to retire to Castle Rising in Norfolk. She did not, as legend would have it, go insane; she enjoyed a comfortable retirement and made many visits to her son's court, doting on her grandchildren.

Isabella took the habit of the Poor Clares before she died on 22 August 1358, and her body was returned to London for burial at the Franciscan church at Newgate. She was buried in her wedding dress.

For some really peculiar reason, Edward's heart was buried with her.

## **Details of the Executions of the Despencers:**

In the early part of the rebellion, the Despencers were captured by Isabella and Mortimer. Isabella had Hugh Sr. hanged in his armor, but he was not really the main target of her hatred. She had Hugh Jr. tortured to death by having him hanged, beheaded, drawn and quartered in 1326. A more complete description is below.

(Keep in mind that Hugh, Jr. was our 19th GGF. Hugh Jr's daughter Isabel le Despenser is a greatgrandmother on both sides of the family.)

Hugh Jr. tried to starve himself before his trial - he knew what was coming. He lived and was tried on November 24, 1326 in Hereford before Mortimer and the Queen. He was judged a traitor and a thief, and sentenced to public execution by hanging, as a thief, and drawing and quartering, as a traitor. Additionally, he was sentenced to be disembowelled for having procured discord between the King and Queen, and to be beheaded, for returning to England after having been banished. Treason was the grounds for execution; the belief being that these he had misled the King rather than the King himself being guilty of folly.

### **You may want to skip a paragraph or two - it gets gross.**

Immediately after the trial, he was dragged behind four horses to his place of execution, where a great fire was lit. He was stripped naked, and biblical verses denouncing arrogance and evil were written on his skin. He was then hanged from a gallows 50 ft (15 m) high, but cut down before he could choke to death, and was tied to a ladder, in full view of the crowd. The executioner climbed up beside him, and sliced off his penis and testicles which were burnt before him, while he was still alive and conscious; (although castration was not formally part of the sentence imposed on Despenser, it was typically practised on convicted traitors). Subsequently, the executioner slit open his abdomen, and slowly pulled out, and cut out, his entrails and, finally, his heart, which were likewise thrown into the fire. The executioner would have sought to keep him alive as long as possible, while disembowelling him. The burning of his entrails would, in all likelihood, have been the last sight that he witnessed. Just before he died, it is recorded that he let out a "ghastly inhuman howl," much to the delight and merriment of the spectators. Finally, his corpse was beheaded, his body cut into four pieces, and his head was mounted on the gates of London. Mortimer and Isabella feasted with their chief supporters, as they watched the execution.

### **The symbolism of the method of execution**

As well as satisfying Mortimer's and Isabella's desire for revenge, the manner of Despenser's death was rich in symbolism. As Despenser was dragged to his place of execution, the crowd was able to jeer at him, proving that he had lost his power. Hanging was a shameful death, the punishment for a common thief. Castration

showed to the crowd that he had ceased to be a man; his evil desires were thought to reside in his heart and entrails. Thus, his disembowelling, and the burning of his innards showed that the land was being purged of evil. Finally, the quartering and beheading of his corpse was considered to jeopardise his chances of Salvation after death. The man once known as Sir Hugh Le Despenser, Lord of Glamorgan, was thus physically and spiritually obliterated.

### **Aunt Isabella certainly got her revenge.**

After his death, Despenser's widow, Eleanor de Clare, asked to be given the body so she could bury it at the family's Gloucestershire estate, but only the head, a thigh bone and a few vertebrae were returned to her.

### **Modern evidence:**

What may be the body of Despenser was identified in February 2008, at Hulton Abbey in Staffordshire. The skeleton, which was first uncovered during archaeological work in the 1970s, appeared to be the victim of a drawing and quartering as it had been beheaded and chopped into several pieces with a sharp blade, suggesting a ritual killing. Furthermore, it lacked several body parts, notably including the ones given to Despenser's wife.

Radiocarbon analysis dated the body to between 1050 and 1385, and later tests suggested it to be that of a man over 34 years old. Despenser was 40 at the time of his death. In addition, the Abbey is located on lands that belonged to Hugh de Audley, Despenser's brother-in-law, at the time.

### **The Genealogy** - We are related to all of them

Hugh Despenser, the blackest of all our black sheep, is our 19th GGF .

Despenser was married to Eleanor de Clare, our 19th GGM in the Garner line.

Elizabeth's sister Margaret de Clare was married to Hugh de Audley, our 21st great-grandfather. Margaret's first husband was Piers Gaveston, our 19th great-grand-uncle. Before Despenser, Gaveston had been the greedy bad guy in charge. Gaveston was killed for his misdeeds in 1312. Gaveston is also portrayed in the movie Braveheart, partly accurate, partly not.

Hugh Audley's mother is Roger Mortimer's sister, Iseulde Mortimer, our 20th GGM in the Chancey - Percy line.

Edward II is the son of Edward I, our 21st GGF.

Roger Mortimer is our 20th great-grandfather. His father is our 21st GGF.

Isabella of France was our 20th great grandmother: