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# MEDIEVAL ENGLAND IN TIMES OF REVOLUTION – REFLECTIONS IN ARMORIALS

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War, conflict and heraldry are inseparable. That goes for the shoulder patches of the soldier on today's battlefields as much as for the medieval mailed knight – and all that time people have collected the emblems used and noted their affiliations. Some armorials, English as well as Continental, can be related to specific conflicts, and give at least a partial composition of an army. In most cases this was introduced in a heading, and subsequent research has confirmed that the contents support the declaration. For others, the connection between a conflict and an armorial is more subtle. The present paper will concentrate on five such collections. The three armorials central to the discussion are related to two of the major conflicts within the English royal family in the fourteenth century, while the other two have been implicated, but shown to have no connection to either of the parties. The favouritism and egotism behind the conflicts during the reigns of Edward II (ruled 1307–27) and Richard II (ruled 1377–99) have been recorded in both chronicles and numerous books, as have their depositions and presumed murders.

## **The Overthrow of Edward II**

The sad story of Edward II (1284–1327), who succeeded his father on July 7th 1307, is well known, as are his problems: favourites, unsuccessful wars and being an inept politician.<sup>1</sup> The relevant highlights are his major favourites, two crucial battles, and a political confrontation. The first, Piers Gaveston (c.1284–1312), son of a Gascon baron, became a companion of Edward from their late teens, was knighted with him in 1306, but was regarded as having an unhealthy influence, so Piers was banished in February 1307, shortly before Edward I died. The first act of government by Edward II was to recall Piers and create him earl of Cornwall – an unprecedented ennoblement as this rich earldom was formerly kept as an appanage for a senior member of the royal family. A few months later Piers married Edward's niece Margaret de Clare, sister of Gilbert de Clare, who as Earl of Gloucester was the second richest magnate in England. Piers' arrogance and greed so provoked the magnates that they twice forced Edward to banish him again for two periods: June 1308 – June 1309, and November 1311 – January 1312. On his last return he took shelter in a Yorkshire coastal fortress. Besieged there, he surrendered for guarantees to his life, but was abducted on his way to London, summarily tried, and executed.

The king subsequently adopted as his principal favourites Hugh Despenser, father (1260–1326), and son (1288–1326). Both had influence on Edward from childhood, but only gained prominence after the fall of Gaveston and the end of the activities of the 'ordainers', a group of magnates, who in effect ruled England during the period 1310–11.

## Armorial from the reign of Edward II

Let us first consider the struggle by Thomas, earl of Lancaster, the king's senior agnatic cousin, to get the position of influence which he regarded as his birthright. Two armorials, the *First Dunstable Roll* and the *Boroughbridge Roll*, have long been associated with this power struggle, which ended with the execution of Lancaster on March 22nd 1322 after he lost the battle of Boroughbridge.<sup>2</sup> It is now established that the latter armorial had nothing directly to do with the conflict, any more than did the *Nativity Roll*, a list of attendees at a tournament in 1306 or 1308.

## The Parliamentary Roll

From this same period we have the *Parliamentary Roll*, which is structured in such a way as to suggest that its compiler had chosen sides in that conflict.<sup>3</sup> It is a collection of 1030 names and arms in blazon among which were inserted a further 80 entries in the late fifteenth century. With 52 known manuscripts it is the most copied armorial, though all except two were made in the sixteenth century or later. There are also fifteen transcriptions, editions or websites. A closer examination of the layout and additions suggests that the principal manuscript, British Library *MS Cotton Caligula A.xviii*, ff. 3r–21v (known in Papworth and the DBA as roll N) is the original, and that the major part was written during August–November 1309, with cancellations and a contemporary addition in the same hand added from May 1310 until October 1311.<sup>4</sup> The key figure is Piers Gaveston (N3), and the original nominal dating of 1307–12 corresponds to his period as Earl of Cornwall. The more nuanced dating given above is based on Gaveston's place in the armorial, his exiles, his date of death, and some significant cancelled entries denoting death (Henry Lacy N4; Anthony Bek N15; Robert FitzRoger N26; Robert Tony N49/1049).

The *Parliamentary Roll* has three parts: a first segment of 169 entries of magnates mentioned as earls or bannerets, which indicate that they were known as military leaders. Most of these were of baronial rank, i.e. they were summoned to parliament by name. The second part consists of 30 segments, each with between five and 62 members of the knightly class noted for a specific shire or a pair of shires. Analysis reveals that between 53% and 100% of the men in each segment had property in those shires, or at least relatives who had. It appears from some sets of relatives that family association with a shire was more important for the compiler than that of the named individual. The roll concludes with four segments that appear to be a contemporary addition of nine extinct comital families, nine magnates (of which six had probably been overlooked), six Frenchmen, and 52 other knights – mostly from the northern shires.

Opinion on the value of the armorial has been divided. On one side stood Noël Denholm-Young, who claimed it as a survey of all the knighthood of Edward I made by herald of Robert Clifford, the then acting marshal.<sup>5</sup> On an absolute other side was Nigel Saul, who judged it next to useless, having too many knights misplaced in the shire studied.<sup>6</sup> David Simpkin might be placed in the middle, stating it as being a survey of contemporary war-capable knights, ordered by county, but with hardly any direct military connection.<sup>7</sup> The present evaluation has it as a survey of influential people at the beginning of the reign of Edward II. Denholm-Young's claim that it is representative of the knights serving during the 35 years of Edward I is patently wrong. Too many names are missing, even for a survey of the Scottish Wars of 1295–1304. His arguments for Clifford

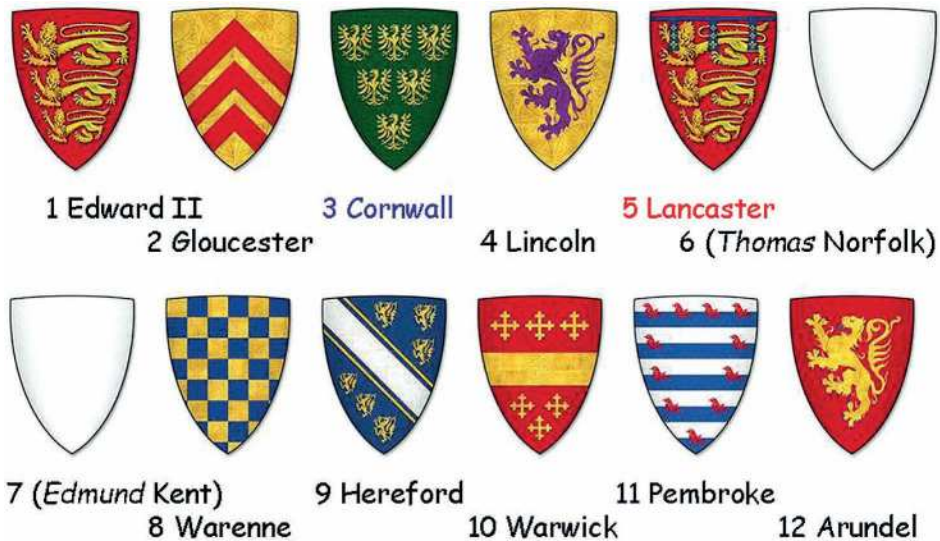


Figure 1: the earls in the *Parliamentary Roll*, 1309, numbers 1–12.  
Drawings courtesy of Aspilogia.com, 2014.

are thin, at best! Nigel Saul had a point in claiming that 43% of the 'Gloucestershire' knights had no possessions in that shire; but Saul focussed too much on one of the least accurate segments. A careful study of the names shows that the accuracy is high in the East and South East, usually in the order of 85–100%, but lower in the West and North.<sup>8</sup> There are no indications that the information in the *Parliamentary Roll* was collated, compiled or written by government officials using information collected by sheriffs, though the compiler may have had access to records of summonses, inquests or from the treasury. His knowledge obviously varied between regions.

### The First Dunstable Roll

This roll (*Papworth* roll L) is said to record followers of the opposition led by Thomas, earl of Lancaster as they gathered at Dunstable in June 1309 to confer under the guise of partaking in a tournament.<sup>9</sup> Dunstable was a standard venue for tournaments, and being close to London, a convenient place for gathering an impressive armed following when attending Parliament.<sup>10</sup> The original was lost long ago, but we have 22 surviving copies agreeing on 235 names and blazons. The vast majority (226) can be found in the *Parliamentary Roll*, indicating that they were men of some renown. The sequence with six earls spread among the entries and a collective *commune* suggests parties, which supports the title claiming it as teams at a tournament.

Comparing the entries with records of indenture, feudal relations, and military service revealed a finer structure, with at least sixteen retinues belonging to earls and magnates, and a complex residue. A quarter are documented as members of the



opposition, so-called contrarians. Taken together with the known sympathies of the major names, this relatively high proportion of people whom the government wanted to punish or had to forgive, should be evidence enough to include the remaining three quarters as at least sympathizers, who were willing to stake their life and possessions in support of these magnates.

The earls headed six segments or retinues, and major magnates another nine. Six of the magnate retinues were placed between those of the Earl of Warwick (L37, segment 4) and the Earl of Lancaster (L92, segment 11), and included Robert de Clifford (L47, segment 5) the acting marshal, and Hugh le Despenser (L61, segment 7), later the principal favourite. This suggests that the gathering was less anti-king than anti-Gaveston. The header 'la commune' was written above the entry for the baron Robert de Tony (L165), but the commune has probably been split into two segments as segment 16 (L165–186). It appears to include some leaderless groups, including men retained by the absent Earl of Pembroke. It is likely that the men in 'la commune' had looser ties to the magnates, but were tied to the opposition by personal interest, or in defence of their property against interference from men in the affinity of Gaveston. A quarter of the known contrarians belong to 'la commune'.

### The Nativity and the Boroughbridge Rolls

The armorial listing the participants in the tournament held on the Nativity, i.e. September 8th in either 1306 or 1308 has nothing to do with contemporary political conflicts.<sup>11</sup> It has no discernible structure; most of the 79 men came from the northern shires. Like the *First Dunstable* it has a large overlap with the *Parliamentary Roll* of some 81%, but very little overlap with the former. The so-called *Boroughbridge Roll* has nothing to do with battle of 1322 or the list of proscribed Lancastrians, but contains participants in a tournament held outside Newcastle in 1319, while the army waited to move to Berwick to fight the Scots.<sup>12</sup> Neither armorial has anything to do with the political problems of Edward II, but the latter could be of interest for scholars of medieval armies.

### Comparisons

If we compare the *First Dunstable* and the *Parliamentary Roll*, it is evident that affinities and retinues had no place in the mind of the compiler of the latter. The main, if not the only, political statement is the placing of Piers Gaveston (N3), recently created Earl of Cornwall, as second only to the king's nephew Gloucester (N2), and two steps above the king's closest adult agnatic relative Lancaster (N5). In between is placed Henry de Lacy, earl of Lincoln (N4), an elder statesman and at the time regent of England (*custos regni*), see **Figure 1**. The compiler made room for two earls after Lancaster. These places must have been intended for the king's two brothers, still minors. This lead sequence is unusual compared to contemporary summonses.<sup>13</sup> Gloucester is usually the first name among the earls followed by Lincoln, Lancaster – and then Gaveston. The only exception was for the muster called for September 1310, when it was uncertain whether Lancaster would appear at all. In this summons, Gaveston and Warenne were placed ahead of him. Gaveston is not found in any other contemporary armorial.

Compilers of armorials are not infallible. They make mistakes, and too often misread and misspell notes and sources. If one compares the *Dunstable* and the *Parliamentary* there are 61 differences in the blazons for men present in both armorials, comprising

26% of those in the *Dunstable*. It can take a lot of research to decide which blazon is the correct one. Two examples must suffice, one with resolution, and one left open. The former is the example of the brothers Edmund and John de Mauley whose arms are reversed between the *Stirling Roll* (from the siege of the castle in 1304) and the *Parliamentary Roll*. The head of the Mauley family then bore *Or a bend sable*, which John differenced on the bend with *Three wyverns argent* in the *Stirling* (ST93), while the more famous Edmund, a steward of the household in the affinity of Gaveston, who died at Bannockburn in 1314, added *Three dolphins argent* (ST95). The *Parliamentary* has the reverse attributions: *dolphins* (John, N720), *wyverns* (Edmund, N721).<sup>14</sup> The resolution of this contradiction came by a reassessment of a tomb with the wyvern arms in a Yorkshire church, which had for a century been assigned to the famous Edmund. The history of the church and family clearly indicated that this magnificent tomb was made for John – and that the compiler of the *Parliamentary Roll* got the arms of the brother wrong.

The second example with inconclusive outcome concerns Roger le Brett [N821], a minor gentleman who left descendants. Roger began his career as a man-of-arms with Edmund Deincourt, a baron by 1299. David Simpkin suggested that Roger similarized his arms to his captain – changing the tincture of the field to *gules* and its powdering to *roundels*.<sup>15</sup> The arms of this Deincourt line are *Azure a fess dancetty billey or* (N105). So far, no problems, but all other Brett arms are billey, and these arms are identical to those of Roger Deincourt (fl.1301–05), a knight from Cumberland.<sup>16</sup> Two knights having identical arms and quarrelling over it is well-documented, but in such cases the contest always concerned the precedence of age-old family arms. It seems highly unlikely that a newly knighted person would select or be granted arms identical in every detail to one borne by a living relative of his captain or benefactor. In this case the compiler might be right, but Roger's descendants probably preferred the 'Deincourt billets'.<sup>17</sup>

## The overthrow of Richard II

While Edward II had gained considerable experience before he became king, Richard II (1367–1400) was only ten when he succeeded his grandfather in 1377. Though he mostly escaped unsuccessful wars, he developed the same penchant for favourites as his great grandfather, and over time became a self-centred and revengeful egotist. During his minority and early years he became dependent on his personal household, not least Michael de la Pole (created Earl of Suffolk), and his chamberlain Aubrey de Vere. Aubrey's nephew Robert de Vere, earl of Oxford, who was given unprecedented honours as Marquess of Dublin and Duke of Ireland, was compared by contemporaries with Piers Gaveston for his undeserved elevation and evil influence. Among the lesser favourites and long-time supporters were the king's Holand half-brothers, Thomas, earl of Kent and John, earl of Huntingdon. Richard II's disregard for the magnates led to a violent confrontation in the 'Merciless' Parliament of 1388, where the 'Lords Appellants' took control of the royal administration and removed fourteen of the king's 22 chamber knights (four of them executed).

During the following years Richard II gathered support until he in 1397 he felt ready to strike back. His first step was to charge his uncle Thomas, duke of Gloucester with treason. The duke was convicted, and secretly murdered. At the September parliament he crushed most of the other 'Appellants', and elevated the Holands and three cousins

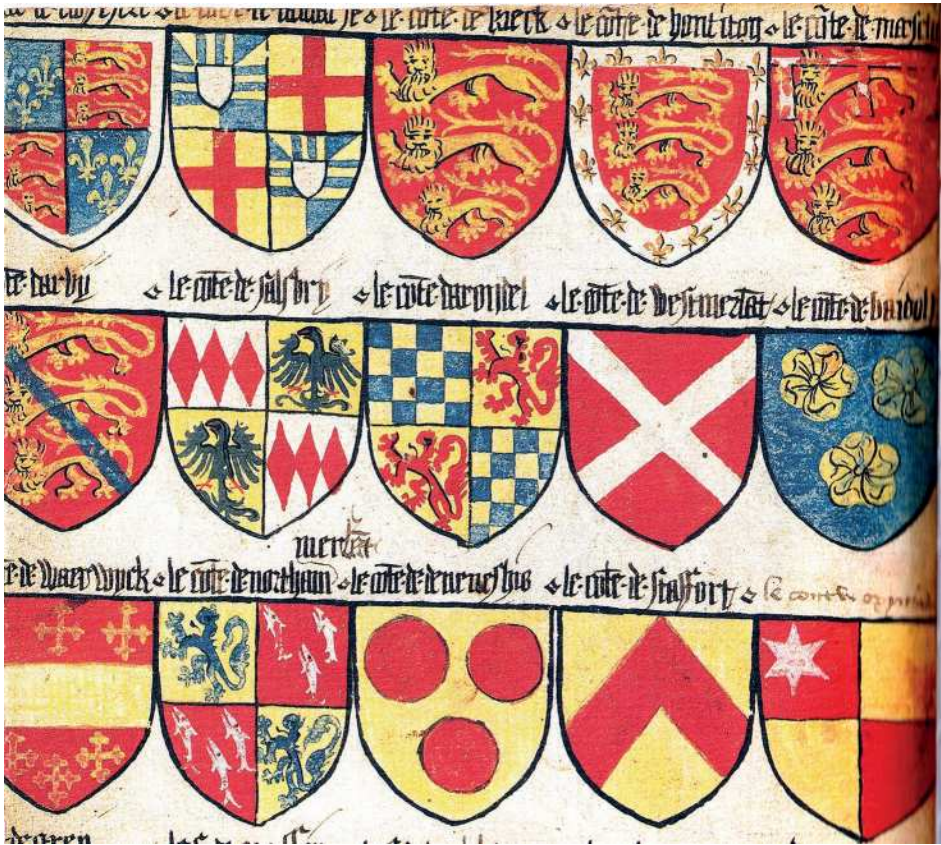


Figure 2: The principal series of earls in Armorial de l'Ordre de la Toison d'or (Golden Fleece), Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, ms.4790, fo.78v, nos. 707–721. 1 Gloucester, 2 March, 3 Kent, 4 Huntington, 5 Earl Marshal, 6 Derby, 7 Salisbury, 8 Arundel, 9 Westmoreland, 10 mistake, 11 Warwick, 12 Northumberland, 13 Devon, 14 Stafford, 15 Oxford. Photograph: Bibliothèque nationale de France.

to dukedoms (revoked October 1399), creating some other supporters as earls. The third step was to have the last 'Appellants', the Earl of Derby and the Earl of Arundel, exiled. The final act in the drama followed in 1399, when following the death of his uncle John of Gaunt, who as Duke of Lancaster was by far the richest magnate, Richard II denied the duke's son, the exiled Derby, his rightful succession. The response came promptly. Derby landed in England, gathered the opposition, chased, captured, and deposed Richard. Several of Richard's supporters were killed or executed during a feeble counter-rebellion, leaving the peerage much changed and Derby as King Henry IV.<sup>18</sup>

This sad story is known not only from English chronicles and documents, but also from French sources. Richard's queen was a French child princess, who had brought a native entourage. At least one of these, who lived with the Holands and was more interested in ceremonials than politics, wrote a chronicle of the deposition. He may have



compiled the collection of arms, which c.1435 was incorporated in a composite armorial, the *Golden Fleece* (Toison d'or) and much copied.<sup>19</sup> The armorial has 21 segments featuring Scots, Poles, Germans, Frenchmen, the knights of the Order of The Golden Fleece, and a segment with 168 English names and painted arms. The best fit for the English section would be c.1397, but some of the arms point to a revision c.1420, during the reign of Henry V, after Agincourt, and during the Anglo-Burgundian alliance.

The section is headed with a duke and thirteen earls, a collection of arms and titles only found in the spring and summer of 1397 (**Figure 2**). The six earls at the top of the opposite page comprise two doubles, three of them anachronistic, and a Pole Earl of Suffolk. The latter earldom was forfeited in 1388, revived in 1397, lost again in 1399, and revived later the same year. A single baron (Bardolf) was placed out of sequence with the higher nobility. It appears that the compiler 'lost' Richard II's two eldest uncles John of Gaunt, duke of Lancaster and Edmund, duke of York.

The whole sequence is slightly unusual. Richard's youngest uncle Thomas, duke of Gloucester leads, followed by Roger Mortimer, earl of March who was the king's senior agnatic cousin as grandson of Lionel, second son of King Edward III. March was by some regarded as next in line to the throne. Next come Richard's two non-royal Holand half-brothers, in the place which would normally be ascribed to members of the royal family. The brothers and the Earl of Nottingham are ahead of the king's agnatic cousin Henry Bolingbroke, earl of Derby and by September 1397 Duke of Hereford.<sup>20</sup>

Henry of Bolingbroke appears to have been slighted, with his arms anachronistically rendered as those of the earldom of Derby, as had been used by Henry Plantagenet (d.1345) before acceding to the earldom of Lancaster in 1324, and by his son Henry, earl of Derby (d.1361) prior to becoming Earl of Lancaster in 1345: *Gules three lions passant guardant in pale or with a bendlet azure*. Bolingbroke's arms are given correctly in *Willement's Roll* of c. 1392 as *France quartering England with a label party per pale ermine and France*<sup>21</sup>). This and the other anomalies suggest that, as with the *Parliamentary Roll*, the compiler had political preferences and changed the precedence in favour of his 'heroes'. Thus we have two similar examples of armorials from times of revolution, one belonging to the reign of Edward II, the other from the reign of his grandson and admirer Richard II, which demonstrate the political manipulation of heraldry by supporters of two monarchs and their favourites who were subsequently deposed.

## MEDIEVAL ARMORIALS

- <sup>1</sup> Edward II is credited with cunning political manoeuvrings by his recent biographer, but the 'inept' remains a valid descriptor: his realm almost disintegrated during his reign. Seymour Phillips, *Edward II* (London, 2010).
- <sup>2</sup> *First Dunstable Roll* (L), edited in C.E. Long, 'Tournament at Stepney, 2 Edward II', *Coll. Top. & Geneal.*, vol. 4 (1837), pp. 61–72, analyzed in A. Tomkinson, 'Retinues at the tournament of Dunstable, 1309', *English Historical Review*, vol. 290 (1959), pp. 70–89. *Boroughbridge Roll, recte Newcastle Tournament* (O), edited in Steen Clemmensen, *The Newcastle armorial, formerly known as the Boroughbridge roll of arms. An armorial of knights in the host collected for the siege of Berwick in September 1319* (Farum, 2016), [www.armorial.dk/english/Newcastle.pdf](http://www.armorial.dk/english/Newcastle.pdf), analyzed by Bridget Wells-Furby: "The 'Boroughbridge roll or arms' reconsidered", *Historical Research*, vol. 86 (2013), pp. 196–206.
- <sup>3</sup> *Nativity Roll* (M), in Gerard J. Brault, *Rolls of Arms Edward I 1272–1307* (Woodbridge 1997), vol.1, pp. 495–505; *Parliamentary Roll* (N), in Michel Popoff, *Parliamentary Roll* (Paris, 2020); Steen Clemmensen, *The Parliamentary Roll a.k.a. The Great or Banneret's Roll* (Farum,2022), [www.armorial.dk/english/Parliamentary.pdf](http://www.armorial.dk/english/Parliamentary.pdf).
- <sup>4</sup> Clemmensen *Parliamentary Roll*, pp. 8–10, 75–76, 79.
- <sup>5</sup> Noël Denholm-Young, 'The Song of Carlaverock, the Parliamentary Roll of Arms, and the Galloway Roll', *Collected Papers* (Cardiff. 1969, original paper 1949), pp. 121–122.
- <sup>6</sup> Nigel Saul, *Knights and Esquires: The Gloucestershire Gentry in the Fourteenth Century* (London, 1981), p. 30.
- <sup>7</sup> David Simpkin, *The English Aristocracy at War. From the Welsh Wars of Edward I to the Battle of Bannockburn* (Woodbridge, 2008), pp. 22–23; idem, 'Total War in the Middle Ages? The Contribution of English Landed Society to the Wars of Edward I and Edward II', in A.R. Bell et. al. *The Soldier Experience in the Fourteenth Century* (Woodbridge, 2011), p. 68.
- <sup>8</sup> Percentages may be misleading, when the actual number is only 20 as is the case for Derbys & Notts segment 17. Here the accuracy of the roll is 60%, with seven living in one of the shires, three having property there, two without other evidence of ownership, six without apparent interests in the shires, one who had served as sheriff, and one with next to no information at all. In addition, there were twelve bannerets with interests in those shires – a dominant group, each with an affinity.
- <sup>9</sup> Tomkinson *Retinues*.
- <sup>10</sup> Phillips *Edward II*, p.155, suggesting a meet before the April 1309 Parliament.
- <sup>11</sup> Brault *Rolls of Arms*, vol.1, pp. 495–505.
- <sup>12</sup> See Clemmensen *Newcastle, Wells-Furby Boroughbridge*.
- <sup>13</sup> Francis Palgrave (ed.): *Great Britain. Parliamentary Writs and Writs of Military Summons*, 4 vols. (London 1827–34), vol. 2, pp. 15, 30, 38, 43, 45 (1308–10).
- <sup>14</sup> Clemmensen, 'A question of wyverns or dolphins', *The Coat of Arms* no.239 (2022), pp. 120–126. There are also anonymous glazed windows with the arms in York Minster. Brault *Rolls of Arms*, vol. 1, pp. 492–493.
- <sup>15</sup> Simpkin *English Aristocracy*, p. 27; Brault *Rolls of Arms*, vol. 2, p. 73 (LM411, billey).
- <sup>16</sup> Brault *Rolls of Arms*, vol. 2, p. 138.
- <sup>17</sup> *DBA*, vol. 3, pp. 314–316 citing PRO seals for John le Brett, 1359.
- <sup>18</sup> Michael Bennett, *Richard II and the Revolution of 1399* (Stroud, 1999).
- <sup>19</sup> Paris, Bibl. Arsenal, ms. 4790, ff. 78r–81v (*Toison d'or / Golden Fleece*); Steen Clemmensen, "The English in the Golden Fleece group of armorials", *The Coat of Arms* no. 211 (2006), pp.11–44.
- <sup>20</sup> The important events to consider here are: The Duke of Gloucester was imprisoned and murdered in 1397; The Earl of Kent and Duke of Surrey was executed 1400, dying without issue; The Earl Huntingdon and Duke of Exeter was executed 1400, earldom restored 1417; The Earl of Nottingham, also Earl Marshal and Duke of Norfolk was exiled in 1398; The Earl of Salisbury was executed in 1401, and restored 1409; The Earl of Arundel was executed in 1397; earldom restored 1399; line extinct 1415; The Earldom of Westmoreland was created in 1397; The Earl of Warwick was exiled 1397–99.
- <sup>21</sup> BL, Ms. Egerton 3713, membrane 1, row 1, no. 4, (S29).