

THE LADIES de CLARE & THE POLITICS OF THE 14th CENTURY

A lot has been written about the Despenser's and Piers Gaveston (who even has a 'secret' Society named after him), so it seems pointless repeating much of it here, but I have often wondered what their wives, Eleanor and Margaret de Clare thought of what their respective husbands were up to, and whether the two sisters ever met to discuss their plight whilst they were near neighbours at Woking and Byfleet?

Eleanor de Clare was the eldest daughter of Gilbert de Clare (the 6th Earl of Hertford, 7th Earl of Gloucester and Lord of Glamorgan), and his second wife Joan of Acre, who was the daughter of Edward I and Eleanor of Castile. She was born in 1292 at Caerphilly Castle and in 1306 at the age of thirteen or fourteen was married to Hugh le Despenser the Younger when he was about twenty.

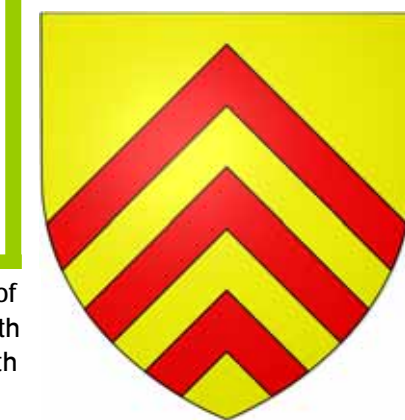
As a grand-daughter of Edward I she was obviously quite a catch for the Younger Despenser, although it has been suggested that because Edward I owed the Elder Despenser about 2,000 marks (a debt that was written off after the marriage), the young Eleanor was merely a 'reward' for the Despenser's loyal service to the king.

Having said that Eleanor and the young Hugh eventually had nine or ten children - so I assume they were reasonably happy - the first of which (also called Hugh) was born in 1308 (you can do the math on how old the young mum was)!

Eleanor was a great favourite of her uncle, Edward II, who apparently 'paid her living expenses throughout his reign', with payments being made from the Royal Wardrobe accounts for clothes and other items - a privilege that even his two sisters didn't enjoy! She was the principal lady-in-waiting to Queen Isabella and even had her own retinue, headed by her own chamberlain, John de Berkenhamstead.

Margaret de Clare was the second eldest de Clare daughter. She was born in October 1293 and married Piers Gaveston in 1307 when she was fourteen (whilst he was about twenty-three). According to one contemporary source the marriage was arranged by Edward II in order to 'strengthen Piers and surround him with friends', although if that was the case, it appears to have spectacularly backfired!

They had just one child, a girl called Joan, who was born in January 1312 in York, just six months before her father was executed, leaving Margaret a widow at nineteen without what should have (arguably) been her dower rights as



The Coat of Arms of Gilbert de Clare, 7th Earl of Hertford, 8th Earl of Gloucester.

Countess of Cornwall. Instead Edward II gave her Oakham Castle and from 1313 to 1316 she was High Sheriff of Rutland.

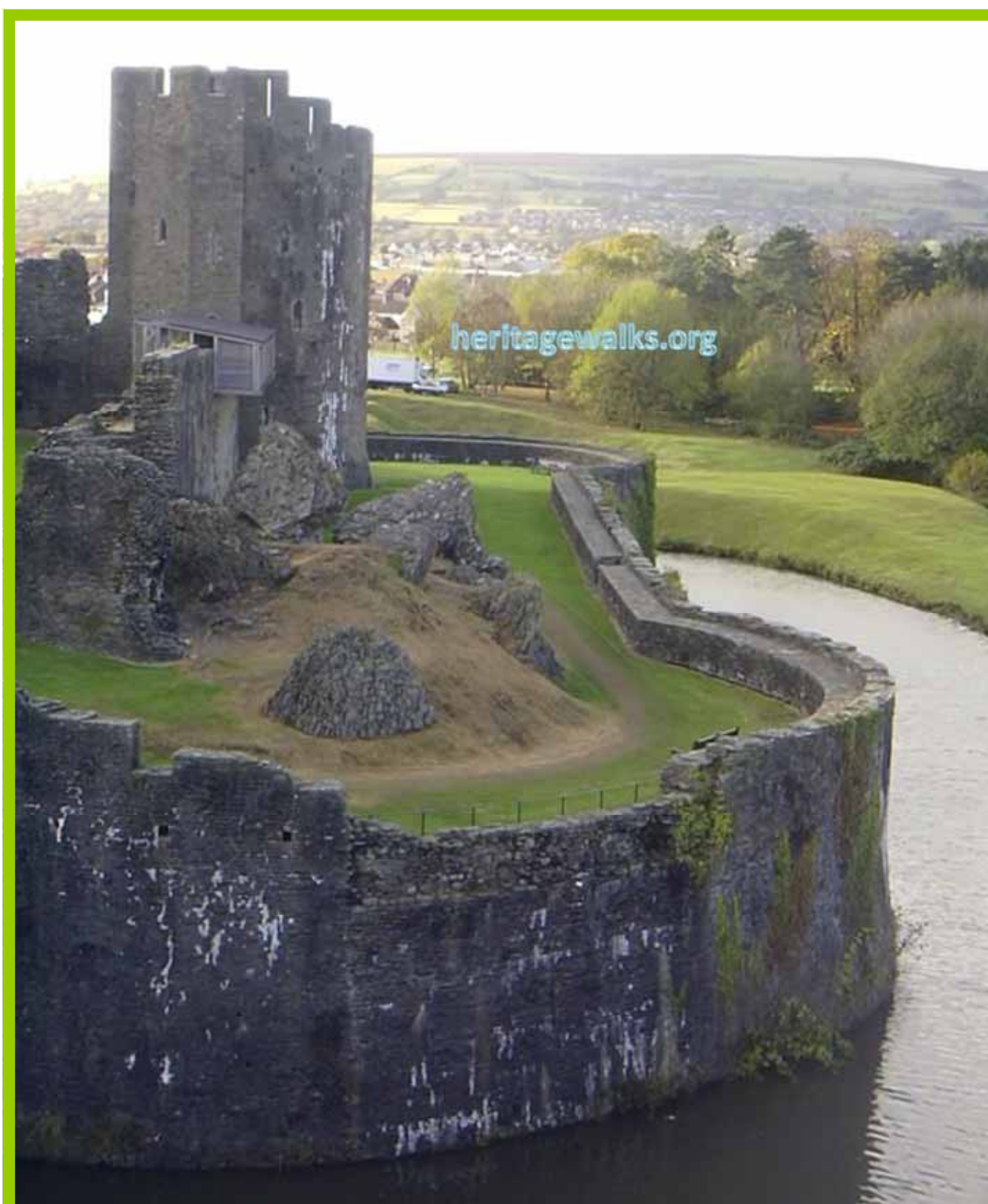
There was a third de Clare sister, Elizabeth (born 1295), who also married when she was about thirteen in 1308, to John de Burgh, the son of the Richard de Burgh, the Second Earl of Ulster. Their marriage took place in Ireland with John de Burgh's sister, Matilda, marrying the de Clare's brother Gilbert (7th Earl of Hertford, 8th Earl of Gloucester) on the same day - but I don't know whether Eleanor and Margaret were present at the double wedding.

It was this Gilbert de Clare who was involved in the expulsion of his brother-in-law, Piers Gaveston in 1311 and negotiations between the king and Gaveston's killers in 1312. One cannot help wonder what his sister thought of it all, bearing in mind the 'close' relationship that Piers enjoyed with the King (presumably at her expense)

If she was upset with her brother of his part in the death of her husband, she couldn't have been angry for long as Gilbert de Clare himself was killed at the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314 and Margaret, along with her two sisters inherited the vast Gloucester estates (to be divided equally amongst them - although as we shall see one ended up more 'equal' than the others).

Sadly Elizabeth's husband, Richard de Burgh, died in 1313, when their son, William, was barely a year old, and with the young widow now a rich heiress, it was not long before Edward II recalled her to England, placing her in Bristol Castle, where he planned to marry her to one of his supporters. His plans were thwarted, however, when Theobald II de Verdun (who she had apparently engaged soon after the death of her husband), rescued her and married her in February 1316 before tragically dying of typhoid only a few months later. The pregnant Elizabeth apparently went to Amesbury Priory where she gave birth to a daughter, Isabel, in March 1317, before Edward II finally managed to marry her off to Sir Roger D'Amory a few weeks later.

Of course her sister Margaret was also a wealthy heiress, allowing Edward to arrange another marriage that year between her and another favourite, Hugh de Audley, son of another Hugh de Audley and his wife Isolde, daughter of Roger de Mortimer, another of the powerful Marcher Lords (who had killed Hugh Despenser's grandfather, Hugh, at the Battle of Evesham during the Barons War in 1265).



Caerphilly Castle, birthplace of Eleanor de Clare and held by her son, Hugh Despenser from the forces of Roger Mortimer and Queen Isabella in 1326/7.

Hugh de Audley was made 1st Earl of Gloucester upon his marriage to Margaret, but it was not long before he and Elizabeth's husband, Roger D'Amory, fell victim to their new bother-in-law, Hugh Despenser the Younger, who was intent upon gaining as much of the de Clare inheritance for himself as he could.

Already in 1315 he had seized Tonbridge Castle in Kent thinking it was one of the de Clare properties, only to discover that it actually belonged to the Archbishop of Canterbury, but not daunted he then went on to rob his sisters-in-laws, Margaret and Elizabeth, of their lands.



Tonbridge Castle, seized by Hugh Despenser in 1315, thinking it was part of the de Clare estates.

He also persuaded Edward II to confiscate Gower from William de Braose and give it to him, which led to a rebellion by the Marcher Lords, led by Roger Mortimer and Thomas, Earl of Lancaster. In 1321 both Hugh de Audley and Roger D'Amory joined the other Marcher Barons in seeking revenge, looting, burning and destroying as much of Despenser's lands in the region as they could. Whether Woking was affected at that time is uncertain (although Arthur Locke seems to think so).

Unfortunately for Elizabeth her husband was captured and killed by royalist forces at the Battle of Boroughbridge in 1322 and Elizabeth and her children were imprisoned at Barking

Abbey, with Despenser gaining most of her confiscated lands, including Usk in Wales which Despenser very kindly 'swapped' for the disputed lands of Gower. To add insult to injury, William de Braose then persuaded the king that the peninsular should never have been taken from him, so that Elizabeth had to even give that up – although de Braose's victory was short-lived as the king promptly confiscated it again and gave Gower back to Despenser!

Margaret was slightly luckier. Her husband was also captured at Boroughbridge but through her pleading was saved from a hanging and imprisoned, whilst she was sent to Sempringham Priory in Lincolnshire.

Of course it wasn't just Despenser's in-laws that were being imprisoned – Queen Isabella also became a virtual prisoner with Eleanor in constant attendance as her 'housekeeper' or 'chaperone' (or her 'gaoler and spy' as some historians have put it). She had instructions to carry the Queen's seal with her 'at all times' and to read all her letters before they were sent! Isabella's three young children were even taken away from her on the grounds that, 'as a Frenchwoman, she might encourage them to commit treason against their father'. Apparently all were initially put into the care of Eleanor Despenser, before the two young princesses were put into the care of Hugh's sister, Isabella, Lady Monthermer.

Things were really getting out of hand with one Flemish chronicler claiming that the king was having an affair with his favourite niece, whilst others have claimed that Edward was really in a homosexual affair with Hugh. Some have even speculated that there was some bizarre sexual triangle involving all three – but if any of the above was true it is strange that Isabella and her supporters didn't mention it in any of their propaganda against Despenser and Edward at the time.

Margaret remained at Sempringham until her husband escaped and she was released in 1326, by which time, of course, the hated Despensers (both Younger and Elder) had been executed and Eleanor this time found herself

confined to the Tower of London (where she had been holding the young Prince John). Their eldest son, Hugh, held out in Caerphilly Castle against Queen Isabella's & Roger Mortimer's forces, before surrendering in July 1327. He was then held prisoner until July 1331, whilst three of his sisters (Eleanor, Joan and Margaret), were forced to become nuns (at Sempringham Priory, Shaftesbury Abbey and Whatton Priory).

Mortimer confiscated the Despenser properties for himself, but finally fell foul of Isabella's son, Edward III when he gained power executing Mortimer and partially restoring the de Clare lands to Eleanor, who by now had married her second husband (or possibly her third) – William de la Zouche.

He had apparently abducted her, or rescued her, or eloped with her (depending on which story you believe) from Hanley Castle in 1329, she giving birth to two children by him in 1330 and 1331. As I say he was possibly her third husband as Sir John de Grey, 1st Baron Grey de Rotherfield, claimed that he had married her first, although his claim was dismissed (even after appeal to the Pope on several occasions) before Zouche died in 1337, followed by Eleanor only a few months later.

In the summer of 1336 Margaret and Hugh de Audley's only daughter, Margaret (then aged eighteen) was also 'abducted' by Ralph Stafford, 1st Earl of Stafford, and despite protests from her parents, was married to him later that year – but that is another story.

Margaret de Audley died in April 1342, with her sister, Elizabeth said to have paid for prayers to be said for her soul at Tonbridge Priory, where she was buried (followed five years later by her husband).

After the death of Roger de D'Amory, Elizabeth took a vow of chastity becoming a patroness of many religious houses and using her part of the de Clare fortune to found Clare College, Cambridge. She died in 1360 aged 65 – the last of the de Clare ladies to have become entangled in the politics of the 14th century.

The Tower of London where Eleanor Despenser stayed with the young Prince John whilst her husband fought his last battle in 1326, and where later she was held prisoner by Roger Mortimer.

