

# ROYAL ROGUES & FAITHFUL FAVOURITES

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**A** couple of weeks ago we looked at the Bassett family (favorites of the Angevin Kings) and left the estates of Woking and Sutton in the hands of Aliva Bassett, who inherited both manors from her father, Philip Basset, after the Barons War had apparently left them in ruins and the houses worthless.

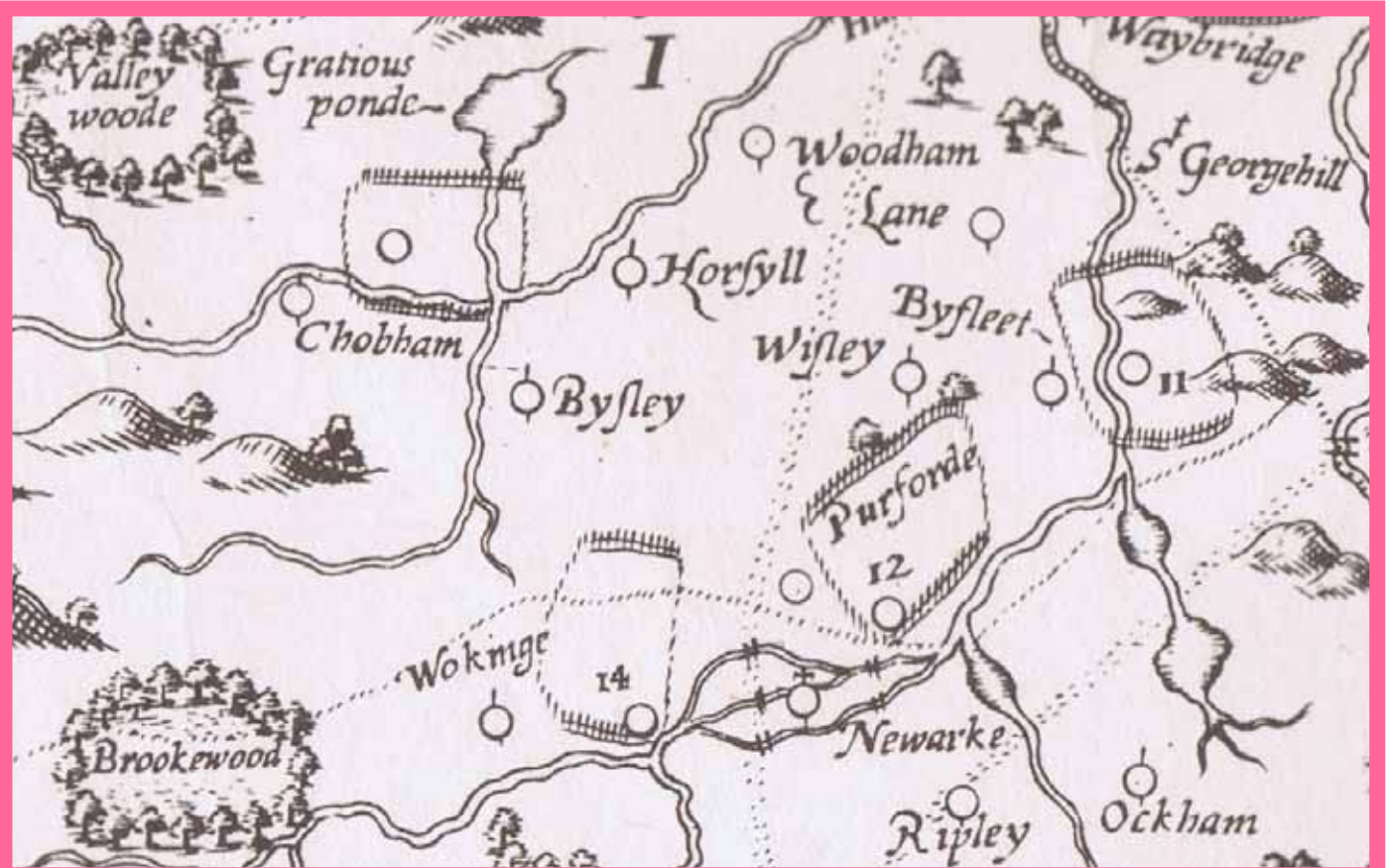
This week I want to look at the Bassett's successor – the Despenser's – and their near neighbour in Byfleet, Piers Gaveston, whose close (some say too close) friendship with Edward II was to cause all sorts of trouble.

**B**efore Aliva Bassett inherited Woking she had married Hugh le Despenser, a supporter of Simon De Montfort during the First Barons War. Their son, also called Hugh, inherited Woking in 1281. He is known (perhaps confusingly), as the 'Elder Despenser' with his son (yet another Hugh) being known as the 'Younger Despenser'. They were both favourites of Edward I and according to Arthur Locke in his account of Woking Past the Elder 'brought his own lands and England to ruin' persuading Edward to re-forest much of North-West Surrey, much to the dislike of his tenants.

Hugh was obviously keen on hunting but when he was away in Rome in 1305 the locals apparently broke down the paling around the Great Park at Woking, freeing the deer into the forest and then proceeded to release his peacocks from the manor house gardens.

Meanwhile Piers de Gaveston was becoming a very close friend of the young Prince Edward. He was knighted in May 1306 but soon after was exiled by King possibly as punishment for the young prince, who had insisted on lavishing money and gifts upon his friend.

Gaveston's exile to Aquitaine didn't last long, however, as when Edward II ascended the throne in July 1307 he seems to have almost immediately recalled him, making him Duke of Cornwall, and giving him (amongst others) the Manor of Byfleet.



Between Gaveston's Manor of Byfleet (11) and Despenser's Woking (14) were the more stable lands of the Abbot of Westminster at Pyrford (12). How much the tenants of the other two estates envied the relative security of the Westminster Abbey's lands is not known.

It is known that Edward II visited Piers several times at Byfleet, with the initial order suppressing the Order of the Knights Templars, apparently being signed by him at Byfleet.

Despite the support of the King (and the Despenser's), Gaveston's 'friendship' with Edward soon landed him in trouble with other noblemen and especially Edward's new wife,

The pale of the deer park would have been set back from the road and on Pyrford Common can still be seen the original bank and ditch. It is this 'park' that Park Road refers to, the road going from the Deer Park by the Maybury Inn across the common and the Royal Forest of Windsor.





Isabella, whose father Philip IV of France virtually forced his son-in-law to exile his friend once more – this time to Ireland.

It wasn't long before the Lord of the Manor of Byfleet returned again, resulting in a number of prominent earls refusing to attend Parliament so long as he was present. Gaveston was once more exiled, although this time he stayed away only two months, returning at Christmas 1311, rejoining the King in January 1312 in Yorkshire, before being killed by his opponents at Kenilworth just over six months later.

After Gaveston's murder in 1312, Hugh Despenser represented the king in negotiations with the barons and even appears to have acted as the king's creditor. Despenser too fell from power, however, when the King was defeated at Bannockburn in 1314 and like

Gaveston before him was forced by Parliament to flee the country together with his son - the Younger Despenser. Again according to Locke, 'the men of our district, headed by local landowners from miles around, and by parsons and by the Canon of Newark, raided his manors'. Bagshot and Sutton Manor were supposedly destroyed, but Woking may have been saved, as Edward II stayed there in 1320.

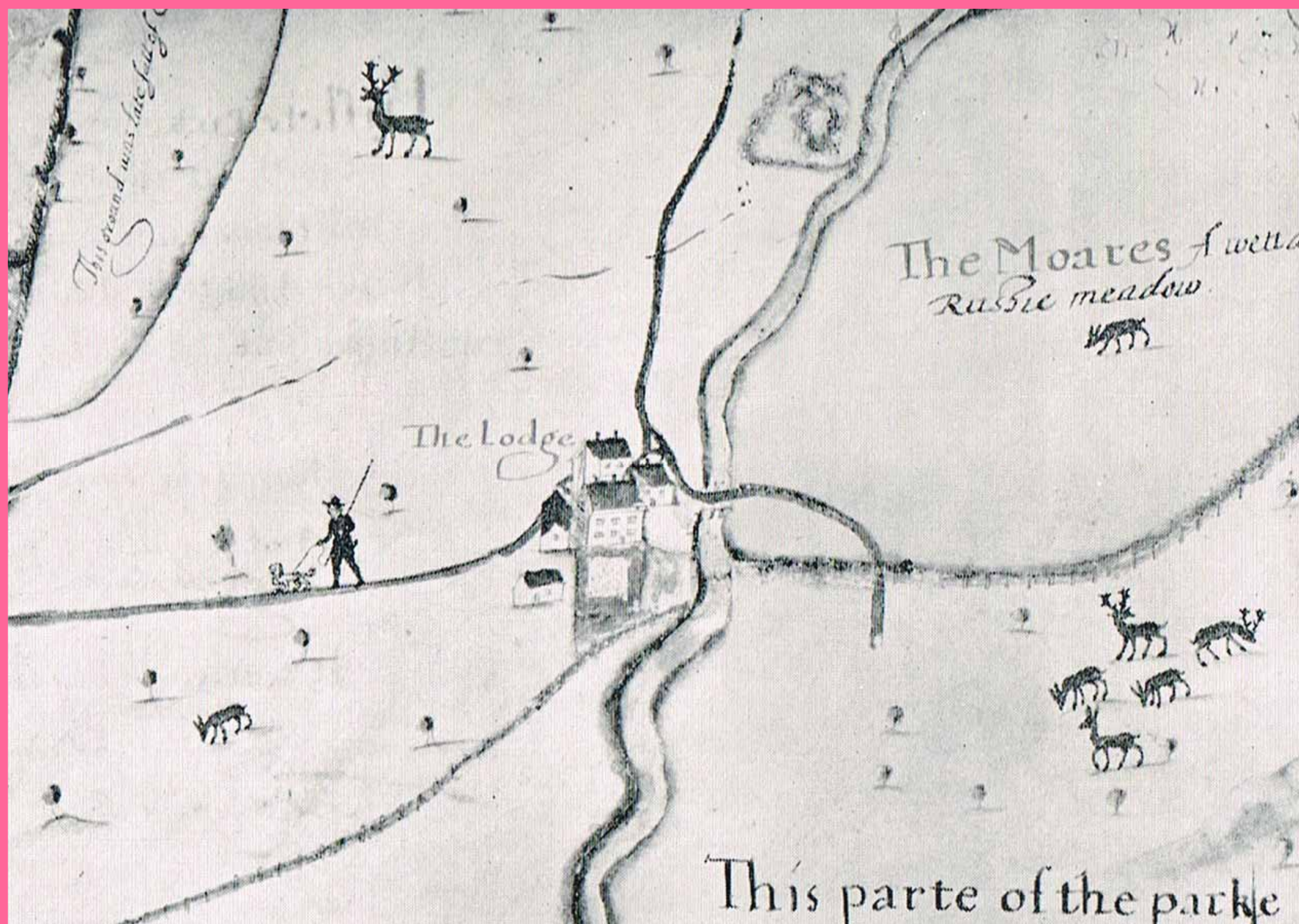
By then the Despensers were back in the country and back in favour. The Elder Despenser was created Earl of Winchester and the Younger Despenser was hard at work trying to expand his estates in Wales and the Marches. This brought him into conflict with Roger Mortimer (a supporter of the Queen) and when, in 1324, the Despensers' caused a split in the royal household (the Younger Despenser trying to obtain an annulment of Edward II's

marriage to Isabella), the stage was set for war.

In 1326 Isabella's forces invaded, Edward's men were defeated at Bristol in October, and the Elder Despenser was captured. After a brief 'trial' he was executed.

His son soon suffered the same fate, being captured and beheaded at Hereford, and the Manor of Woking reverted to the Crown – not that Edward II ever benefited. He was murdered at Berkeley Castle in January 1327, brought down despite, or some might say because, of his friendship with our local Lords of the Manor.

The Deer Park at Byfleet was obviously created before 1267 as the owner of the Manor at that time, Geoffrey de Lucy, brought a case against a John de Faunceys and others for entering the part of Byfleet and taking away 'bucks, does, pigs and horses' as well as rabbits from the warren.



An aerial photograph of Monument Hill, Old Woking, in the late 1970's (in advance of the laying out of the Hoebridge Golf Course – which opened in 1982) showed crop marks of field systems that did not match any known post-medieval field boundaries recorded on maps since the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Unfortunately excavations on the site in 1977-8 could not come up with a positive date for the system of ditches discovered, although there was a small amount of 12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century pottery found in the upper fill of at least one of the ditches and gully.

The theory is that this field system must have predated the enlargement of the Deer Park at Woking by Hugh le Despenser.





## THE HARSH 'FOREST LAWS' OUTSIDE THE LAW OF THE LAND

**W**hilst the lords or the manors of Byfleet and Woking were enjoying royal patronage, and luxurious houses, the poor villagers of the area were suffering under the strict Forest Laws imposed by both Edward I and his son. But you should not think of the Forest of Windsor as it is today with acres of woodland and just a few 'rides' between the trees.

The term 'Forest Law' is a corruption of the Latin 'foris' (meaning outside) so that the area of 'forest' was any area that was outside the normal law of the land. It is only in more recent times when these forest areas became thickly wooded with trees that we have come to associated 'forests' with 'woods' – originally two distinctly different things. Indeed it would have been important that the 'forest' area was not thickly wooded to aid hunting the deer – much like the parts of Chobham Common (or even Horsell Common) are today.

In medieval times most of the local people would have lived in simple wooden buildings



with heather thatched roofs and wattle and daub walls (such as the Gamekeeper's Cottage

pictured at Brookwood in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century), with just one room for their family and the little



**A**lthough there is no mention of a house (and certainly not this one, which dates from the 18<sup>th</sup> century at most), there must have been quite a considerable residence here in medieval times, as in 1274 Edward I stayed at Byfleet, a Writ being signed by him at Biflet.

The Manor at that time was owned by Geoffrey de Lucy who was the son of another Geoffrey de Lucy who held the manor from Chertsey Abbey in 1242. When the second Geoffrey died in 1284 his son – also called Geoffrey – took over the manor. He was just seventeen. The de Lucys not only owned Byfleet, but also the manors of Weybridge, Bisley and Frogbury. The park then covered ten acres, with 70 acres of arable and 20 acres of meadow.

Geoffrey de Lucy III sub-let the property to the Dean of St Paul's before selling the property to Henry de Leybourne in 1294. This gentleman appears to have been quite a character. In 1302 he and six of his friends were supposed to be fighting on the King's behalf in Scotland, but they left without the King's permission and to make matters worse headed for Byfleet where illegal jousting matches were held. It wasn't long after that the Manor of Byfleet was confiscated by the Crown and ultimately given as part of the Duchy of Cornwall to Pier de Gaveston.