

The Despencer War - The Revolt of the Marcher Lords

Written by John Eager

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Around December 1320 Ledbury came under attack from the forces of Roger Mortimer (3rd Baron Mortimer, 1st Earl of March) of Wigmore and Ludlow Castles after he and the Bishop of Hereford, Adam Orleton had held a secret meeting at the bishop's manor at Bosbury.

Their intention was to revolt against the king, Edward II. Mortimer's men pillaged Ledbury taking beef and pork, bread and ale and brass pots. They were later joined by the bishop's men and the two forces carried on with their looting and pillaging in Gloucestershire.

This intriguing footnote in history was recently delivered by historian Dr Sylvia Pinches' newsletter [Herefordshire Past](#).

This in turn compelled me to do some wiki research. What had so peeved Mortimer and Orleton to start a war against the King of England at Ledbury?



[Wikimedia: Commons](#)

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The answer was Hugh Despencer the Younger, a nastier and more ruthless piece of work than the BBC's Blackadder and described by BBC History magazine as the worst Briton of the C14th.

In 1306 Despencer was knighted, took up residency at Hanley Castle (7 1/2 miles from Ledbury) and married Eleanor de Clare, granddaughter of Edward I. From his landed gentry position Despencer became more wealthy and more powerful. In 1315 he seized Tonbridge Castle after mistakenly believing it belonged to his mother-in-law, only to return it to its rightful owner - the Archbishop of Canterbury.

In 1318 Despencer unlawfully executed Welsh nobleman Llywelyn Bren and stole his lands without the King's consent.

It was in this year that Despencer became royal chamberlain and by 1320 he was the king's favourite, displacing Roger d'Amory.

With his power unchecked Despencer began a land grab that included members of his own family and allegedly "had Lady Baret's arms and legs broken until she went insane." He was hated by the people, the barons and even the queen herself, whom it has been suggested was raped and sodomised by Despencer.

This was the context for Mortimer and Orleton's war on the king and their subsequent attack on Ledbury.

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So what happened next?

By August 1321 the barons had persuaded King Edward II to rid the country of Despencer. Despencer was exiled and became a pirate for a short while, before being summoned back to England the following year. Now Roger Mortimer was in trouble, but was spared execution and was sent to the Tower of London.

Mortimer managed to escape the Tower and he fled to France. It was there in 1326 that he conspired with Queen Isabella (remember - the king's wife who historians think may have been violated by Despencer) to invade England with a small army of 1500 mercenary heroes.

Despencer and the King ran away, but were caught. The king was imprisoned and forced to abdicate.

Despencer was tried on 24 November, 1326 at Hereford. He was accused and found guilty of being a traitor and a thief. Straight after the trial he was dragged by four horses to his execution place, where the Queen and Mortimer and their supporters partied. According to [Wikipedia](#) : "He was stripped naked, and Biblical verses denouncing arrogance and evil were carved into his skin. He was then hanged from a gallows 50 ft (15 m) high, but cut down before he could choke to death.

... Despenser was then tied to a ladder, and — in full view of the crowd — had his genitals sliced off and burned (in his still-conscious sight) then his entrails slowly pulled out, and, finally, his heart cut out and thrown into the fire.

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 mounted on the gates of London. Mortimer and Isabella feasted with their chief supporters, as they watched the execution."

A final twist to this macabre tale is that Despencer's DNA has been passed through the ages and inherited by some famous sons of America, notably Franklin D. Roosevelt and the George Bush clan.