The abbey where seeds of the Wars of the Roses were sown

Marking 900 years since its foundation, *JOANNA LAYNESMITH* examines the pivotal role that Reading Abbey played in the backdrop to political struggles of the fifteenth century

This summer has seen a series of anniversary celebrations in the town of Reading, focused on a collection of lumpy flint and limestone ruins in the shadow of the town's infamous gaol. Hard though it is to believe now, those ruins were once the third-largest abbey in England. It was renowned for its magnificence and hospitality. It was also a centre for royal family occasions and political gatherings. These included some key moments connected with the Wars of the Roses.

The Abbey was founded exactly 900 years ago, by Henry I. Until the Dissolution, every one of his sovereign descendants stayed there at some point in their lives. Edward III was a particularly frequent visitor and it is in his reign that we find the Abbey's first connection with the Wars of the Roses. As is well known, descendants of three of Edward III's sons were the protagonists of the Wars. Those sons were – in age order – Lionel of Antwerp, Duke of Clarence (whose great-granddaughter married into the House of York); John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster; and Edmund of Langley, Duke of York. John of Gaunt acquired his Lancastrian title, and the estates that made his family powerful enough to seize the throne, through a marriage made at Reading Abbey.

Blanche of Lancaster

Gaunt's bride was Blanche, co-heiress to Henry, Duke of Lancaster. The details of their spectacular wedding have caused some confusion among historians. Even Gaunt's most recent biographer has fallen prey to this tangled evidence. The problem, as Mark Ormrod set out in his magisterial 2011 biography of Edward III, is that the wedding had been preceded by a betrothal ceremony. That ceremony happened, not at Reading, but in the Queen's Chapel at Westminster Palace, and two other royal couples were affianced at the same time. The Exchequer payments for this betrothal have frequently been confused with those for the wedding. This has even led to claims that John of Gaunt's niece, Philippa of Clarence, was married to Edmund Mortimer in the Reading Abbey ceremony. In reality three-year-old Philippa and six-year-old Edmund were only betrothed at the same time as John and Blanche. They were not married until 1368.

John and Blanche's wedding in Reading Abbey took place on 19 May 1359. The officiant, according to a contemporary chronicler known as the Anonymous of Canterbury, was Thomas Wyvil, Bishop of Salisbury. Wyvil was a logical choice, since Reading Abbey lay within his diocese. The paper trail of expenses for the occasion is scattered between different sources. The Close Rolls recorded £225 spent on linens, silks and cloth of gold. Among the accounts of the King's Remembrancer is a list of wedding presents including a ruby surrounded by pearls and a diamond ring, which were John's gifts to Blanche. The royal family had spent £670 5s on gifts (more that £330,000 in today's money).

The service was followed by a series of jousts. According to John Capgrave, a tournament was held specifically in honour of the bride: 'the new Diana'. Diana, goddess of hunting, was renowned for her beauty and chastity. Royal women were often compared with her, despite the expectation that they would bear children. Blanche, indeed, fell pregnant almost immediately and it has been speculated that her frequent pregnancies contributed to her premature death after just nine years of marriage. She was survived by two daughters and a two-year-old son, Henry Bolingbroke. In 1399, this Henry seized Richard II's throne, making himself the first Lancastrian king: Henry IV.

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Constance of York

One of those who lost most by the Lancastrian usurpation was Thomas Despenser, Earl of Gloucester. He was son-in-law to Edmund, Duke of York. In 1400 Despenser attempted to overthrow Henry IV – in the Epiphany Rising – and was lynched at Bristol after the rebellion failed. Despenser's widow, Constance, provides the next connection between Reading Abbey and the Wars of the Roses. After her husband's death, Constance was granted some of his manors, and it is likely that she made her home then at Caversham, just across the Thames from Reading. She must have developed a particular affection for the abbey at Reading since she eventually chose to be buried there, even though her husband lay at Tewkesbury, and none of her natal family had been buried at Reading since the thirteenth century.

Five years after her husband's death, Constance herself became embroiled in a plot against Henry IV. Although there had been rumours that her brother Edward was involved with the Epiphany Rising, Henry IV seems to have been confident of his loyalty. So Constance was probably the first member of the House of York to challenge the House of Lancaster's right to the throne. Her plan was to support existing rebels by providing them with an alternative king: a descendant of her uncle Lionel, Duke of Clarence. Lionel's heirs were two young boys, Edmund and Roger Mortimer, who were being brought up with the king's own younger children. Constance spent Christmas 1404 at Windsor

Cluniac grandeur: The remains of Reading Abbey, once the third-biggest abbey in England prior to its destruction with the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1538. Among its relics were said to be the hand of St James

Photo: D. Calcutt. © Alamy

Abbey ruins (above) with, below, the gateway of Reading Abbey, watercolour by Charles Tomkins, 1757–1823

Image © Alamy

Castle, where her son was in attendance on Queen Joan. This provided her with an opportunity to have duplicate keys made. The following February one of her men smuggled the boys out of the castle. Constance attempted to take them to join their uncle, Sir Edmund Mortimer, who had recently allied with the Welsh rebel, Owain Glyn Dŵr. However, Constance and the boys had only reached Cheltenham when they were captured.

She was treated remarkably leniently for her treason. The locksmith who had helped Constance was executed, but she escaped with a brief imprisonment and temporary confiscation of her estates. It is highly likely that she was pregnant at the time and this perhaps inspired the King's mercy. She died in 1416, although, according to the *Tewkesbury Abbey Chronicle*, it was more than three years later that she was buried at Reading.

Constance's nephew, Richard, Duke of York, may have felt less warmly about Reading Abbey. In March 1453 Henry VI presided over a Parliament there from which York was excluded. It was only a year since York had been humiliated by the Lancastrians at Dartford after his attempt to have the Duke of Somerset arrested. It appears there was talk now of limiting York's power even further. The Parliament Rolls mention a petition from 1453 against 'your traitors assembled in the field at Dartford'. It suggested that royal grants of estates previously made to York and his allies should be confiscated. Parliament moved to Westminster in April and shortly afterwards York was removed from his role as Lieutenant of Ireland. It was the lowest point in his career so far. It can only have reinforced York's conviction that regime change around the king was essential to his own political survival.

Edward and Elizabeth

Reading Abbey's final appearance in the story of the Wars of the Roses was the most dramatic. It is probably the most familiar to *Bulletin* readers. It happened in the autumn of 1464, when Edward IV, the son of Richard, Duke of York, finally seemed secure on the throne. That May, John Neville, Lord Montagu, had spectacularly defeated the Lancastrian resistance and executed its leaders. Edward's ministers were keen for him to take advantage of this security and marry a foreign princess. Such a match would not only provide a valuable alliance for the kingdom, it would also prove that foreign royalty recognised Edward's kingship. Plague was raging in London. The death rate was allegedly 200 a day. So Edward's Great Council chose to meet at Reading Abbey.

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Their principal business was financial. However, as soon as the Council ended, the Earl of Warwick and Lord Wenlock were due to return to the Continent for negotiations about a peace with France. So they also pressed the King to agree to Louis XI's proposal that Edward should marry the French Queen's sister, Bona of Savoy. This prompted Edward to reveal that he was unable to make such a commitment: he was already married. He had secretly wed Elizabeth Woodville, the widow of a Lancastrian knight. Edward IV's ministers made no secret of their anger at the king's marriage. Venetian merchants who left London on 26 September were under the impression that the Council at Reading had been called 'for the sake of finding means to annul it' (*CSP Venice*, no. 395).

At the end of September, Edward and Elizabeth's union and her new status as queen were affirmed in a unique service in Reading Abbey. The Earl of Warwick and the Duke of Clarence escorted her into the splendid church where she was 'honoured as Queen by the lords and all the people'. (Stevenson, *Letters and Papers*, II:783). Lord Wenlock wrote to the Burgundian envoy, Jean, Seigneur de Lannoy, reporting the lords' displeasure, but concluding that they would have to make the best of it since it was a *fait accompli*. Yet Warwick was clearly still seething. On 12 October, the Milanese ambassador at the French court reported that Louis XI had received a letter in which Warwick had reported that he was 'in discord' with Edward. The French king commented that he thought Warwick wished 'to make himself king' (Mandrot, *Dépêches des ambassadeurs milanais*, II:304-5). This was no doubt Louis's wishful thinking but probably indicates his sense of the Earl's ego.

By the following February, news of the 'very great division and war' between Warwick and Edward had reached Henry VI's queen, Margaret of Anjou (CSP Milan, no. 142). She hoped to capitalise on this to launch another invasion in her husband's cause. There is no evidence that Margaret imagined joining with Warwick at this point, only taking advantage of division among Yorkists. Marie Barnfield's excellent article in the 2021 issue of *The Ricardian* shows how Edward IV did his best to heal this breach.

In 1469, Warwick did finally rebel against Edward. According to the Crowland Continuator, who seems to have been better placed than most to know, Warwick's real motivation for rebellion was Edward IV's foreign policy. A later chronicler, who was probably reporting John Howard, the Duke of Norfolk's, assessment, claimed the breach was purely the result of Warwick's ambition: 'his insaciable mynde could not be content' (Hearne, *Sprotti Chronica*, 299). Nonetheless, Warwick's own story was that the King's marriage and the Woodville family's influence was the cause of their falling out. Whether it really was the motive, or just a more acceptable justification to put into his propaganda, we can probably never know. One of his complaints was that Elizabeth had aggrandised her relations by arranging prestigious marriages for them. The first of these had taken place only weeks after Elizabeth's own wedding became public. Her sister Margaret married the heir of the Earl of Arundel at Reading Abbey while the court were still there.

The upheavals of 1469–71 were not the only political consequences of the unconventional nature of Edward and Elizabeth's wedding. In 1483, it was announced that their marriage had been invalid and that their children were consequently illegitimate. This was the heart of Richard III's title to the throne. Those who rebelled against him in 1483 (and supported Henry Tudor in 1485) chose to believe that the wedding revealed at Reading was really legitimate. In this way, events at Reading Abbey and their consequences were seminal to the Wars of the Roses: they made the House of Lancaster and were used to shatter the House of York.

Dr Joanna Laynesmith is Research Officer of the Richard III Society