

Economic stagnation and political misrule continued at home while a treaty with France virtually ceded all English claims on the continent to Isabella's brother. In addition, the despised Treaty of Northampton of 1328, also known as the Treaty of Edinburgh, accepted the rule of Robert the Bruce north of the River Tweed. In the meantime, Mortimer forced a depleted and intimidated parliament at Salisbury in 1328 to grant him the inflated title of first Earl of March in an effort to legitimise his power base in the west. To many barons, it soon became painfully clear that the interregnum governed for the benefit of Mortimer while the country, and importantly their place in it, continued on its path to rack and ruin.

However, important members of the nobility were absent from the Salisbury parliament, and it was these men who were to rally around the young king when he, spurred on by the execution of his half-brother by Mortimer, audaciously rounded on his mother and Mortimer as they traveled for a meeting of parliament two years later at Nottingham Castle in October 1330. As a result, Mortimer was captured and transferred to London for trial before a new parliament for the murder of the old king.

The coup against Mortimer brought the barons flocking back to the crown, with a new phase in the topsy-turvy history of early fourteenth century England beginning after Mortimer's hanging at Tyburn at the end of November. After this, Mortimer's huge holdings were returned to the crown and distributed among the king's supporters. Important among these was Henry, the third earl of Lancaster, whose brother, Thomas, had been executed in 1322. It was to be Henry's son a generation later who was to be elevated to the newly created lofty rank of duke, with the fortunes and aspirations of the Lancaster line rising even further during the fifteenth century. After the execution of his lover, the king's mother, Isabella, was placed under comfortable house arrest before being slowly reintroduced to her son's court. Later, she became involved in endowing various convents during the last years of her life, and eventually died nearly three decades later in 1358.

Edward III was just shy of his eighteenth birthday when he orchestrated his coup at Nottingham Castle, and was to go on to rule England for fifty years. But Edward III, the affable, brave and hugely ambitious new king of England, saw himself very much as a Plantagenet-Angevin king whose kingdom should include all of the

However, he found that he was faced there with a huge French force of resistance who, loyal to Philip VI, bitterly opposed his intentions on their city and on this king. As a consequence, he was forced to beat a hasty retreat and headed north eastwards towards the Low Countries where he remained strong. But Edward III's forces were chased by the French, and it soon became clear that a decisive battle in the war was becoming inevitable.

This, which is often seen as the battle that began the end of the chivalric age, began on the evening of 26 August 1346 on the outskirts of Crécy, a town just to the north of the River Somme not far from where more young soldiers would again lose their lives in some of the fiercest battles of World War One 570 years later. This may be an even more apt given that Crécy may have been the first battle in Europe in which gunpowder was used. This at the time was being manufactured in the Tower of London with the English army in France in the opening years of the war employing over a hundred cannon. These cannons were also soon deployed to the series of Edwardian castles built to protect the south coast.

King Philip had arrived at Crécy in the late afternoon, and was advised not to fight a pitched battle so late in the day, with his army tired after days and days of marching. But he had been chasing Edward's army for weeks, and was determined to inflict a fatal blow against his enemy, rather than wait until the morning and see that once again he had stolen away into the night. Philip, commanding an army of some 30,000 men, began the battle by ordering a barrage from his Genoese archers who gathered together at the front of his army.

But these men, whose crossbows were badly affected by the rain, were soon cut to pieces by volleys from Edward III's longbows, with many of these carried by Welsh archers who had been incorporated into the Plantagenet army during the reign of Edward I. The 16-year-old Black Prince commanded these men, and their range and penetration, as well as their rate of fire, was much greater than the French crossbows they faced. Famously at one point in the battle, the Black Prince was supposed to have sent a message to his father asking for reinforcements, with the king refusing, saying that he must be left to earn his spurs.

Black Prince, and subsequently that of all the other Princes of Wales who followed him down the ages.

The enormous military success at Crécy could not, however, be followed up with any meaningful territorial gain, and Edward was faced with an army eager to return to England after a long and arduous campaign, and a parliament reluctant to finance further war. As a result, Edward grudgingly had to accept that he would not be able to build on the foundation that Crécy had given him, and he reluctantly instead moved northwards to besiege Calais. This had been for centuries a home port to piracy that had been a plague on English ships plying the lucrative Channel trade routes and this he was determined to stamp out.

The siege of Calais was to last for just less than a year and, in the end, was broken not by the efforts of the invading English but rather by famine and disease. This forced the townspeople to sue for peace and this gave the town to the English king. The capture of Calais confirmed the stranglehold over the English Channel gained at the Battle of Sluys six years before, and Edward III protected this position by ordering the construction of a ring of defensive castles that encircled the city. As a result, Calais was to remain an English possession for the next 210 years.

The victory at Crécy gave the king of England enormous status and standing throughout the continent of Europe, and this position of pre-eminence was further secured in the middle of October, two months later, after a massive win over the Scottish army of David II. This victory at the Battle of Neville's Cross near Durham followed a Scottish invasion of northern England that had assumed incorrectly that the army needed to protect the North had been withdrawn in order to support operations on the continent. At the battle, England's revenge for Bannockburn was completed when King David II was captured and taken south. He was to spend the next 11 years as a prisoner of the English crown, spending much of his time at Odiham Castle in Hampshire, and he was only finally released after the payment of a massive ransom.

The Black Death

The epidemic that forced the surrender of Calais and allowed England to claim victory in the opening phase of the Hundred Years' War was nothing in comparison

groin, would first suffer coughing and sneezing fits that soon developed into pneumonia. It is from this that the sneezing reference in the nursery rhyme 'Ring-a-Ring of Roses' originates. This was followed by the swelling, hardening and bursting of the buboes, before excruciating pain brought on delirium, madness and eventually death. This whole process could take an agonising five or six days.

Although affecting many peasants and those from the lower orders of society, the disease cut across social barriers and killed many noble born as well, including the Archbishop of Canterbury and the king's own daughter, Joan, although no European monarch was to die from the plague. England had experienced a huge economic boom during the previous century, and this had resulted in a growing population that had reached some 6 million by the 1340s. With the Bubonic Plague returning periodically over the next few decades, and with further severe outbreaks of plague recorded in 1360-61, which killed two more daughters of the king and, perhaps, another 20% of the population, 1368-69 and 1375, this figure was decimated by the Black Death and its aftermath by between a half and two-thirds, with the rolls of parliament for the 1370s suggesting a reduced population that had been driven down to about 2.7 million.

The resultant social, political and economic consequences were to be felt for at least a century. Most obviously, this included the creation of an itinerant, but scarce and therefore highly in demand, labouring workforce created from those few that survived. This was a workforce that parliament tried to control with the Statute of Labourers in 1351 that pegged wages at pre-1349 levels. But simple supply and demand economics made this impossible to implement with many landowners willing to pay over the odds in order to get fields tilled and ploughed, and harvests collected. This scarcity of agricultural labour in the second half of the fourteenth century created a radicalisation and politicisation that sometimes led to *ad hoc* local arrangements that benefited this peasant class. But more often than not the peasants found themselves at the bottom of society suffering from the poverty brought about by rampant inflation. The fuming and insolent resentment that this brought eventually led to the Peasants' Revolt some 30 years later. However, this was all conducted within the confines and limits of a strictly regimented social system led by the monarch and his magnates who at the time numbered no more than 70 families.

In many ways, Richard II's victory at Smithfield was to be the high point of a reign that was to stretch on for nearly two more decades. In general, it is hard to argue that these were years of success with the king never able to build up a power base within any one of the groups within elite society that were important in the smooth running of his kingdom. He was unpopular with the Church that increasingly sided with Rome against Richard's encroachment into their affairs. He was unpopular with the emerging mercantile class, especially in London, for his meddling in their matters. In addition, he remained unpopular with the lower classes who saw the years after 1381 as a betrayal of the agreement made at Smithfield.

But most crucial of all, he was unpopular with the barons who formed the one class that no Plantagenet had ever managed to rule without. For Richard's high-handed approach to government ignored, or at least tried to ignore, parliamentary developments and privileges that had been granted over the previous 150 years and, in the end, it was this that was to cost Richard his crown.

In January 1382, only a few months after his success in the Peasants' Revolt, Richard II married his teenage bride, Anne of Bohemia. Anne was the daughter of the Holy Roman Emperor, and their union was seen as a significant move in gaining a potential ally for the continuing battle to reclaim Plantagenet land in France. This was because the early years of Richard's reign coincided with the Great Schism, a split in the Catholic Church that had begun in 1378 and that led to the election of rival popes. Both Richard's England and the emperor supported the pope in Rome, Urban VI, rather than his rival at Avignon, Clement VII. However, the alliance was never to win any great victories, and when Anne died in the 1394, from the plague, she was deeply mourned by the king who was severely affected, psychologically and emotionally, by her death.

The first years of Richard II's reign were full of the stresses and strains of a society emerging from the rigours of the Black Death, and this was to have a profound effect on the religion of the country. This most obviously manifested itself in the development of a radical and highly modern form of Christian organisation that eventually 200 years later was to take over as the established Church. This early form of Protestantism, however, was radically different from the one eventually instituted by Henry VIII. Simply stated, this new philosophy, most eloquently

closest supporters. Four knights, as well as the king's chief justice and the mayor of London, were executed as a result while execution notices were served on de Vere and de la Pole *in absentia*.

However, Richard II was a petulant and strong willed fighter and, in the fast moving waters of late fourteenth century English elite society, he was to rise again within a year. This was helped by his coming of age in 1389 and his coronation at Westminster Abbey, as well as by his decision to enter negotiations with the French that ended the second stage of the Hundred Years' War. This had been continued after the catastrophe of 1376 and it was a cause that the Lords Appellant were keen to follow.

But the war was increasingly unpopular throughout the country, mainly due to the huge taxation it caused, and so Richard II's decision to end it in the summer of 1389 gained him much needed popularity. All this left him with a feeling that he was strong enough once again to attempt the creation of a new and powerful absolute state. In order to do this, Richard II knew that he would have to take on Bolingbroke and his royal uncle and, although he was never able to defeat them, he was able to marginalise them for much of the 1390s, forcing them, for a while at least, from his court. Bolingbroke himself went off to the Baltic where he served for a while with the Teutonic Knights with whom he went on pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the early 1390s.

So for a time, Richard II was even able to claim some level of popularity, a fact helped by the death in 1394 of his despised first wife, Anne of Bohemia. However, her death left him increasingly mentally unbalanced while his extravagance and his perceived weakness in dealing with Scotland and France, which included a second marriage to the seven-year-old Isabella of France to cement a truce with France in 1396, only added to his problems. However, the most important reason for his increasing unpopularity, which towards the end of the century made his downfall inevitable, was, while ruling with increasing capriciousness and tyranny, his refusal to accept a role in government for any of his barons, even from among those who nominally supported him against Bolingbroke.