

= Henry le Despenser =

Henry le Despenser (c . 1341 ? 1406) was a 14th @-@ century English nobleman and Bishop of Norwich whose reputation as the ' Fighting Bishop ' was gained for his part in suppressing the Peasants ' Revolt in East Anglia and in defeating the peasants at the Battle of North Walsham in the summer of 1381 .

As a young man he studied at Oxford University and held numerous positions in the English Church . He fought in Italy before being consecrated as a bishop in 1370 . Parliament agreed to allow Despenser to lead a crusade to Flanders in 1383 , which was directed against Louis II of Flanders , a supporter of the antipope Clement VII . The crusade was in defence of English economic and political interests . Although well funded , the expedition was poorly equipped and lacked proper military leadership . After initial successes , a disastrous attempt to besiege the city of Ypres forced Despenser to return to England . Upon his return he was impeached in parliament . His temporalities were confiscated by Richard II of England , but were returned in 1385 , the year he accompanied the king northward to repel a potential French invasion of Scotland .

Despenser was an energetic and able administrator who staunchly defended his diocese against Lollardy . In 1399 , he was among those who stood by Richard , following the landing of Henry Bolingbroke in Yorkshire towards the end of June . He was arrested for refusing to come to terms with Bolingbroke . The following year , he was implicated in the Epiphany Rising , but was pardoned .

= = Birth and ancestry = =

Henry le Despenser was the youngest son of Edward le Despenser (1310 ? 1342) , who married Anne (died 1367) , daughter of Sir Ralph Ferrers of Groby . Henry was born around 1342 , the year that his father was killed at the siege of Vannes . He and his three brothers all grew up to become soldiers . His eldest brother Edward le Despenser , 1st Baron le Despenser (around 1335 ? 1375) was reputed to be one of the greatest knights of his age : he and Henry fought together for Pope Urban V in his war against Milan in 1369 . Comparatively little is known of his other siblings : Hugh le Despenser fought abroad and died in Padua in March 1374 , Thomas fought in France and died unmarried in 1381 and Gilbert le Despenser died in 1382 . Their sister Joan was a nun at Shaftesbury Abbey until her death in 1384 .

The le Despenser family originated from the lords of Gomiécourt in north @-@ eastern France . Henry 's grandmother Eleanor de Clare was a granddaughter of Edward I of England .

Henry 's great @-@ grandfather Hugh le Despenser , 1st Earl of Winchester (1262 ? 1326) and grandfather Hugh Despenser the Younger (1286 ? 1326) , who was a favourite of Edward II , were both exiled and later executed after the rebellion of Queen Isabella and her lover Mortimer against Edward II of England . Hugh le Despenser had become Edward II 's adviser , holding power until the king 's defeat at the Battle of Bannockburn , but he was later restored to favour . His son was appointed the king 's chamberlain and enjoyed a still larger share of royal favour . The barons were hostile to the Despensers , due to their acquired wealth and perceived arrogance , and in 1321 they were banished . Their sentences were soon afterwards annulled and from 1322 they played an important role in the governing of the country , but in 1326 Isabella acted against them and both men were tried and executed .

In 1375 , Despenser 's nephew Thomas le Despenser , 1st Earl of Gloucester succeeded his father Edward . Thomas was captured and killed following the attempt to restore Richard II in the Epiphany Rising .

= = Early career = =

In 1353 (as an eleven @-@ year @-@ old boy) Henry ' de Exon ' became the canon of Llandaff and a year later he was secured a canonry of Salisbury Cathedral . By the age of nineteen he had become the rector of Bosworth and by February 1361 he was a master at Oxford University ,

studying civil law . He was ordained on 17 December 1362 . By 20 April 1364 he was archdeacon of Llandaff . Of his early life Capgrave tells us that he spent some time in Italy fighting for Pope Urban V in his war against Milan in 1369 :

'In this same tyme was Ser Herry Spenser a grete werrioure in Ytaile , or the tyme that he was promoted.'

= = Bishop of Norwich = =

In 1370 Despenser , then the canon of Salisbury , was appointed as Bishop of Norwich by a papal bull dated 3 April 1370 . He was consecrated at Rome on 20 April and returned to England . He received the spiritualities of his see from the Archbishop of Canterbury on 12 July 1370 and the temporalities from the king on 14 August .

= = Involvement in the suppression of the Peasants ' Revolt = = =

During the Peasants ' Revolt of 1381 , rebels from Kent and Essex marched to London and , once admitted to the city , managed to capture the Tower of London . King Richard , who had promised to agree to all the demands of the peasants , met the rebels outside the city , where the leader of the peasants Wat Tyler was killed and the rebellion was ended . The king 's promises were retracted .

The rebellion quickly spread to other parts of England , including the diocese of Norwich , where it lasted for less than a fortnight . On 14 June a group of rebels reached Thetford and from there the insurrection spread over south @-@ western Norfolk towards the Fens . At the same time the rebels , led by a local dyer , Geoffrey Litster , moved across the north @-@ eastern part of the county , urging insurrection throughout the local area . Over the next few days , the rebels converged on Norwich , Lynn and Swaffham . Norwich , then one of the largest and most important cities in the realm , was taken and occupied by Litster and his followers , who caused considerable damage to the property and possessions of their enemies once they managed to enter the city . The Norwich rebels then travelled to Yarmouth , destroying legal records and landowners ' possessions ; other insurgents moving across north @-@ east Norfolk destroyed court rolls and taxation documents ; there were numerous incidents of pillage and extortion across the whole county .

Despenser first heard news of the rising in his own diocese at a time when he was absent at his manor of Burley in Rutland , 100 miles (160 km) west of Norwich . Armed , he hastened back to Norfolk via Peterborough , Cambridge and Newmarket , with a company of only eight lances and a small body of bowmen . His followers increased on the way , and by the time he reached North Walsham , near the Norfolk coast , he had a considerable force under his command . There he found the rebels entrenched and defended by makeshift fortifications . According to Thomas Walsingham , in the Battle of North Walsham the bishop himself led the assault and overpowered his enemies in hand @-@ to @-@ hand fighting . Many were slain or captured , including the rebels ' leader , who was hanged , drawn and quartered soon afterwards . Despenser personally superintended Litster 's execution . In the following months he proceeded to deal with other rebels in his diocese . But the rigour with which he put down the rebellion made him highly unpopular in Norfolk and in the following year a plot was organised to murder him . The scheme was betrayed in time by one of the conspirators , and the plotters were dealt with by the authorities .

= = = Norwich Crusade of 1383 = = =

Soon after Urban VI had been elected pope in 1378 , Robert of Geneva was elected as a rival pope , taking the name Pope Clement VII and removing himself to Avignon . The so @-@ called Western Schism subsequently caused a great crisis in the Church and created rivalry and conflict throughout Christian Europe . It was eventually resolved as a result of the Council of Constance (1414 ? 1418) .

In the autumn and winter of 1382 , Flanders had been invaded by Charles VI of France . Philip Van Artevelde had fallen at the Battle of Roosebeke and the country had been compelled to submit to

the French king , who obliged all the conquered towns to recognise Clement VII . In response to events in Flanders , Pope Urban issued bulls for the proclamation of a crusade , choosing Bishop Despensers to lead a campaign against the followers of Clement VII in Flanders . He granted Despensers extraordinary powers for the fulfillment of his mission and plenary indulgence to those who should take part in or contribute support to it .

Both the commons and King Richard II were enthusiastic about the launch of a crusade to Flanders , for political and economic reasons : revenues from the English wool staple (that had ceased following the advance of the French) could be resumed ; sending the bishop and not the king or his uncles to Flanders would enable John of Gaunt 's unpopular plans for a royal crusade to Castille to be abandoned ; French forces would be drawn away from the Iberian peninsula ; and Anglo - Flemish relations would be strengthened . Another advantage in approving a crusade was that its cost would be borne by the Church and not by means of government levies : ever since the Peasants ' Revolt , the government was fearful of the consequences of imposing a tax to pay for a new war against the French .

On 6 December 1382 , Richard ordered the crusade to be published throughout England . Later that month the bishop and his men took the cross at St. Paul 's Cathedral . In February 1383 Parliament , after hesitating in entrusting the mission to a churchman , ultimately assigned to him the subsidy which it had granted the king in the previous October for carrying on the war in Flanders . The king 's only stipulation was that the crusaders should await the arrival of William Beauchamp before launching offensive operations against the French and their allies .

The bishop issued mandates for the publication of the bulls and the archbishop did the same . The enterprise was ardently seconded by the friars and contributions of immense value were made from all quarters , but especially , according to Henry Knighton , from " the rich ladies of England " . The English landed at Calais in May 1383 and proceeded to attack Gravelines , which was in the hands of the French . Gravelines , Dunkirk and the neighbouring country (including the towns of Bourbourg , Bergues , Poperinghe , and Nieuport) soon fell . On 25 May the crusaders put to flight a Franco - Flemish army , under the command of the Count of Flanders , in a pitched battle fought near Dunkirk . Despensers was then persuaded by his followers to attempt to besiege Ypres , which was to prove to be the turning point of the crusade . He was unwilling to attack the city but his Gantois allies and some of his officers insisted that Ypres should be taken .

The inhabitants of Ypres were well prepared for a siege by the time the English and their allies arrived and attacked the city on 8 June 1383 . Dwellings in the outlying suburbs had been abandoned ; the timber from them was used to strengthen the earth ramparts and the stone gates of the city . A mission had been dispatched to Paris to replace artillery powder stocks . The city was well organised under the command of the Castellan of Ypres , John d 'Oultre , and had been divided into different defensive sectors . Although the ramparts were low , they were well protected with a double wet ditch , a high thorny hedge reinforced with stakes and a wooden stockade and fire - step .

The English attacked the Temple Gate on the first day but were beaten off . Over the next three days the city gates were attacked simultaneously , without success . Before the end of the first week of the siege , reinforcements arrived to completely encircle the city walls and the outer ditch was breached using soil . On the eighth day (15 June) Despensers attacked the defences with artillery , firing on the Messines Gate and damaging it , but not enough to cause the city defences to be breached . Over the following days of the siege , sustained artillery attacks had little overall effect and the assaults of Despensers 's troops were all beaten off . An attempt to drain the ditches seriously threatened the Yprois , but the attempt was unsuccessful and the besieged managed to communicate with the Duke of Burgundy through Louis le Mâle , who was able to raise a large French army to come to the aid of the city . On 8 August , after eight weeks of effort , Despensers abruptly decided to abandon the siege , leaving his allies to continue on their own .

After the débâcle at Ypres , the bishop 's forces divided , some going back to England , some remaining with the bishop and others under Sir Thomas Trivet and Sir Hugh Calveley retiring to Bourbourg and Bergues . The bishop and Calveley had wished to advance into France , but Sir William Elmham , Trivet and some of the other commanders refused to go . The bishop , after

entering Picardy for some distance , was obliged to fall back upon Gravelines . It turned out that the French had little stomach for a showdown with the English and their allies , preferring instead to negotiate : part of the French army was unwilling to fight when Despenser and Calveley encountered it when moving towards Picardy . It is possible that had King Richard crossed the Channel with a large English army , the campaign would have ended in a famous victory . However , for the demoralised and disease @-@ ridden English forces , the arrival of the French headed by the boy @-@ king Charles VI was decisive . Charles had taken the oriflamme on 2 August and his army was mustered in Arras on 15 August . They advanced into Flanders , reaching Théroutanne by the end of August , Drincham on 5 September , Bergues on 7 September (forcing Trivet 's and Elmham 's retreat to Bourbourg and Gravelines) and Dunkirk on 9 September . Bourbourg was besieged on 12 September : two days later the Duke of Brittany persuaded the French to negotiate a surrender and the English garrison was given safe conduct from the town . The French army then proceeded along the coast and besieged Gravelines . There , without Despenser 's authority , the defenders accepted bribes and the bishop 's treasurer pocketed 5000 francs . Despenser at first refused the surrender terms , but a few days later Gravelines was evacuated and Despenser ordered it to be sacked . By the end of October the remaining crusaders had returned across the English Channel .

= = = Career after 1383 = = =

Soon after returning from Flanders , the bishop was impeached in parliament , on 26 October 1383 , in the presence of the king . The chancellor Michael de la Pole accused him of not mustering his troops at Calais , as had been agreed ; not recruiting a high enough number of armed men ; refusing to certify properly who his military leaders were ; deceiving the king by not allowing a secular lord to command the expedition to Flanders ; and disbanding his forces prematurely . Despenser denied all the charges , insisting that enough men had assembled at Ypres , that he had chosen his commanders well and that he had not refused to obey the king 's orders . After de la Pole declared the bishop 's replies to be insufficient , Despenser requested another hearing to defend himself still further , which was granted . In this hearing Despenser proceeded to blame his own commanders for forcing him to retreat from Ypres and then evacuate the garrisons . All his arguments were refuted and he was blamed for the failure of the expedition . His temporalities were confiscated and he was ordered to repay any costs taken from money gained from the French .

Despenser 's fall from grace did not last long . Following Scottish incursions into England , it was decided that the 18 @-@ year @-@ old King Richard should lead an army into Scotland , marking the start of his military career . In 1385 every magnate of consequence , including Despenser , joined the immense host that advanced north with the king ,

" finding a country totally waste , where there was nothing to plunder , and little that could even be destroyed , excepting here and there a tower , whose massive walls defied all means of destruction then known , or a cluster of miserable huts " (Sir Walter Scott , Scotland , vol . 1) .

The English army reached Edinburgh , which was sacked , but then retreated back to England , despite John of Gaunt 's wish to go on to Fife . The Scottish campaign was one of the last times that Despenser marched with an army .

Henry le Despenser continued to be controversial after his fighting career was over , mainly because of the vigorous methods he used to maintain control over the laity in his diocese and his own cathedral church . He defended the orthodoxy of the church against Lollardy as passionately as he defended his episcopal rights and privileges .

For over a decade Despenser was involved in disputes with the chapter of Norwich Cathedral and with other religious communities in his diocese , mainly concerning the bishop 's right to intervene in their internal affairs . In 1384 the monks appealed successfully to Pope Boniface IX against Despenser , but in 1385 matters were still not resolved , for that year the pope ordered William Courtenay the Archbishop of Canterbury to assist in mediating between the parties . On Richard II 's instruction , the bishop and the convent instead appeared before Archbishop Courtenay and a royal council , but Courtenay 's death in July 1386 prevented a resolution of the dispute from being

finalised until 1398 , when a royal commission decided in favour of Despenser . Pope Boniface annulled the decisions of the commission in 1401 , after the convent appealed to him , but the papal sentences were ignored by Despenser . Eventually the monks came to terms with the bishop and accepted a loss of their autonomy .

= = = Fighting Lollardy = = =

Since 1381 , there had been a growing fear of Lollardy among the English political elite . The Lollards had first appeared in the 1370s and had briefly found favour with the upper classes , but in 1382 power was given for the authorities to detain heretics and examine them in a Church court . During the second half of his reign Richard II became steadily more determined to maintain religious orthodoxy and acted increasingly harshly to suppress the Lollards . His successor Henry IV went even further , introducing the death penalty for heresy and for possession of a bible .

Despenser took active steps to maintain orthodoxy in his own diocese . The chronicler Thomas Walsingham praised Henry 's actions against the Lollards and contrasted him with his fellow bishops :

" He swore , moreover , and did not repent of what he said , that if anyone belonging to that perverse sect should presume to preach in his diocese , they should be taken to the fire or beheaded . Consequently , having understood this , no one belonging to that tendency had any desire to embrace martyrdom , with the result that , up to now , the faith and true religion have remained unaffected within the bounds of his episcopal authority . " (Walsingham , *Historia Anglicana*) .

Henry however appears not to have dealt too savagely in dealing with heretics . On 1 May 1399 , William Sawtrey , a Norfolk curate and a Lollard , was examined before him . Sawtrey recanted his heresies in public and apparently received no serious punishment , but after moving to London , Sawtrey 's heretical preaching attracted the attention of Archbishop Thomas Arundel and he was summoned to appear before a convocation at St. Paul 's . Despenser did not attend but sent a written memorandum on 23 February . Following his trial Sawtrey was condemned as a relapsed heretic and was burned in chains at Smithfield in 1401 .

= = = Final years = = =

Upon the death of John of Gaunt on 3 February 1399 , his son Henry Bolingbroke became the Duke of Lancaster , but Richard II moved quickly to strip him of his patrimony . Bolingbroke resolved to return to England from Paris to claim the restoration of his family estates and in July 1399 he disembarked at Ravenspur . Henry le Despenser reacted to these events by standing loyally by Richard . On 2 July he commissioned three vicars @-@ general to deputise for him whilst he was absent from the diocese and by 10 July he had reached St. Albans with reinforcements for the Duke of York 's army . There he joined up with York and they travelled to join the king as he returned from Ireland , whilst Bolingbroke moved south towards Bristol to intercept Richard 's supporters . Despenser was with York at Berkeley Castle when he came to terms with Bolingbroke at the end of July , but the bishop refused to submit and was arrested and briefly imprisoned . On 30 September Bolingbroke was proclaimed king in London , an event that Despenser may have witnessed . The bishop attended the first parliament of the new reign on 6 October 1399 , in which it was agreed that King Richard should be imprisoned . After this time Despenser 's influence in his diocese seems to have diminished , power having shifted to Sir Thomas Erpingham .

Henry was implicated in the abortive ? Epiphany Rising ' of January 1400 , during which his nephew Thomas , Earl of Gloucester played a key part and was subsequently executed . Thomas had been created Earl of Gloucester by Richard II , but in 1399 was accused of being involved in the death of the son of the Duke of Gloucester and as a result lost his earldom . He joined in the conspiracy of the earls of Rutland , Kent and Huntingdon and was with their army at Cirencester , when they were attacked by the townsmen , who burnt Thomas le Despenser 's lodgings . Thomas fled , boarding a ship , but the captain forced him to Bristol , where on 13 January he was released to the mob and

beheaded at the high cross .

In the aftermath of the rebellion Henry le Despenser appointed John Derlington , the archdeacon of Norwich , as his vicar @-@ general on 5 February 1400 and then submitted himself to the custody of Archbishop Arundel who accompanied him to Parliament on 20 January 1401 . There his enemy Sir Thomas Erpingham falsely accused him of being involved in the plot . He was finally reconciled to Henry IV when the king granted him a pardon in 1401 .

Despenser died on 23 August 1406 and was buried in Norwich Cathedral before the high altar . A brass inscription dedicated to him was placed there , but has since been destroyed .

= = Ancestry = =