

# THE FIRST ENGLISH DUCHESS: ISABEL DE BEAUMONT, DUCHESS OF LANCASTER (c.1318-c.1359)

by *Brad Verity*<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

This article covers the life of Isabel de Beaumont, wife of Henry of Grosmont, Duke of Lancaster. Her parentage and chronology, and her limited impact on the 14th century English court, are explored, with emphasis on correcting the established account of her death. It will be shown that she did not survive, but rather predeceased, her husband.

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Henry of Grosmont (c.1310-1361), Duke of Lancaster, remains one of the most renowned figures of 14th century England, dominating the military campaigns and diplomatic missions of the first thirty years of the reign of Edward III. By contrast, his wife, Isabel – the first woman in England to hold the title of duchess – hides in the background of the era, vague to the point of obscurity. As Duke Henry's modern biographer, Kenneth Fowler (1969, p.215), notes, “in their thirty years of married life she hardly appears on record at all.”

This is not so surprising when the position of English noblewomen as wives in the 14th century is considered – they were in all legal respects subordinate to their husbands, expected to manage the household, oversee the children, and be religious benefactresses. Duchess Isabel was, in that mould, very much a woman of her time, mentioned in appropriate official records (papal dispensation requests, grants that affected lands held in jointure, etc.) only when necessary. What is noteworthy, considering the vast estates of the Duchy of Lancaster and her prominent social position as wife of the third man in England (after the King and the Black Prince), is her lack of mention in contemporary chronicles. Even local monk Henry Knighton, who was based in Leicester, the chief administrative seat of Duke Henry, has not one mention of her<sup>2</sup>. It may be indicative of the duchess having a retiring personality. Unlike her colorful and dynamic sister-in-law, Eleanor of Lancaster, Lady Beaumont (later Countess of Arundel), a favourite of Edward III and Queen Philippa, who interceded with them frequently, Isabel seems to have shunned the politics of the court.

Even more telling is the complete lack of mention of Duchess Isabel following her husband's death. Widows in late medieval England were very independent, able to plead in the courts and act as sole head of their households and estates. They often had the task of arranging their husband's funeral, executing his will, securing their

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<sup>2</sup> See Martin (1995). Knighton, whose chronicle was written during the years 1337-1396, was full of praise and mention of Duke Henry, as well as his two daughters.

jointure and dower, and maintaining the position of the family (Ward, 1992). With many estates from the Lancaster inheritance settled on her jointly, plus one third of the total in dower, Duchess Isabel would have arguably been the most powerful female landholder in England as a widow. She would have surpassed even Elizabeth (de Burgh), Lady of Clare, and Joan 'The Fair Maid', Countess of Kent, in lands and influence. Instead, she completely vanishes. Not a trace of her is found in the records surrounding the partition of the Lancaster estates in July 1361, nor at any time afterwards. The reason, of course, is not obscurity, but mortality. She is not mentioned because she was not alive. She predeceased Duke Henry.

This article will examine the evidence, flimsy as it is, that led the editors of the Lancaster articles in *Complete Peerage* (CP)<sup>3</sup> to conclude that Isabel survived her husband - a conclusion that Fowler, rather surprisingly, reiterated<sup>4</sup>. The evidence that proves she died before the duke will be presented, and corrections to the chronology of Duchess Isabel and her two daughters will also be made. First, though, an exploration of the Beaumonts — Duchess Isabel's family by birth — will be helpful.

## Beaumonts – Baronial Success and Buchan Failure

Isabel de Beaumont was born and raised in England, but only one of her four grandparents could claim the same. Predating Mary, Queen of Scots by a full two centuries, Isabel was a combination of French and Scottish ancestry, along with a dash of Castilian royal blood that proved to be the key to the successful dynasty that her father founded in his adopted country.

Born about 1280, Henry de Beaumont was likely the youngest of the nine surviving children of Louis de Brienne and Agnes de Beaumont, heiress of the office of viscount of Le Mans in the county of Maine in France. Louis de Brienne, even with a father who had been King of Jerusalem and an elder sister married to the Emperor of Constantinople, was wholly reliant on the patronage of his mother's first cousin, Louis IX, King of France, to make his way in the world. Securing the Beaumont heiress as a wife provided him security and respectability, but the large family he proceeded to have with her proved daunting to establish. Luckily, Louis de Brienne had a mother who had been sister to Ferdinand III, King of Castile. When that monarch's daughter Eleanor became Queen of England in 1272 alongside her husband Edward I, things improved greatly for the de Brienne brood. Queen Eleanor brought several of her first cousin's children over to England, five to be exact, four boys and a girl, where they were known by the name of their mother's territory – de Beaumont – rather than the surname of their paternal ancestry. Two of the boys, Robert and Charles, left little impact on affairs. The other three Beaumonts - Isabella, married to baron John de Vescy and widowed in 1289, Louis, who embarked on a church career, and the youngest, Henry - had prominent roles in the tumultuous English politics of the early 14th century.

Still a child in the household of the royal children when Eleanor of Castile, queen of England, died in 1290, Henry de Beaumont grew up alongside Edward, prince of Wales, heir to the English throne, and remained a staunch royalist through most of his kinsman's reign. The three Beaumont siblings were favourites not only of Edward II, but also of his young wife Isabella of France. The middle-aged Isabella de Vescy, a lady-in-waiting for the first half of the reign, was likely a welcome maternal figure to

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<sup>3</sup> CP, 7: 409.

[See inside rear cover of the journal for standard abbreviations of frequently cited sources.]

<sup>4</sup> "...it is not known when she [Duchess Isabel] died — only that she survived him." (Fowler, 1969, p.215).

the teenaged queen. Henry served Edward II loyally, and was rewarded with a large grant of lands in Lincolnshire and Leicestershire in 1308, followed by summons to Parliament as a baron in the following year<sup>5</sup>. This, plus his marriage in 1310 to the eldest niece and co-heiress of the late earl of Buchan, led to envy among the English prelates. They lumped the Beaumonts together with Piers Gaveston, Earl of Cornwall, as foreigners in the king's household wielding undue influence over him. Henry de Beaumont and Isabella, Lady de Vescy, were ordered out of the royal households by the Ordinances of 1311, but managed to weather the ensuing storm much better than Gaveston, who was executed by the noble opposition led by the king's cousin Thomas, Earl of Lancaster, in 1312.

Henry fought with Edward II at the battle of Bannockburn in 1314, and he and his siblings became particular targets of Lancaster, who again ordered them out of the royal households. This did not stop royal patronage, and in 1316 the clerical brother Louis de Beaumont succeeded to the powerful bishopric of Durham, thanks to the efforts of the king and Queen Isabella (Doherty, 2003, pp.61-62). Henry apparently had some skill at diplomacy, and was sent on several missions to treat with Scotland and the noble opposition party throughout Edward II's reign. The king's new favourite, Hugh le Despenser the younger, however, was trying the patience of even seasoned royalists like the Beaumonts. Henry had to take a great oath on the gospels "to live and die with the Despensers", while the king, led on by his favourite, began to blame the defeats in the north on the Beaumonts. At a council meeting in the spring of 1323, Henry ended up in a quarrel with the king and was ordered to leave the meeting, to which he replied he could think of nothing better. Though this familiarity with his royal kinsman may have been allowed in the past, times had changed, and Henry was now placed under arrest<sup>6</sup>. The Beaumonts' disillusionment in Edward II and the Despensers coincided with that of Queen Isabella. Though Henry was still trusted enough by the king that he was chosen to escort the heir to the throne, Prince Edward, to France in 1325 (Mortimer, 2003, p.142), soon afterwards the Beaumonts stood firmly in support of Isabella in her invasion and deposition of Edward II. But Henry found that the tyrannical rule of Edward II and his favourite Despenser was now replaced by the tyrannical rule of Queen Isabella and her favourite Roger Mortimer. They would betray Beaumont worse than Edward II and the Despensers ever had, by brokering a peace with Robert Bruce, Scotland's self-proclaimed king and the arch-enemy of the family of Henry's wife Alice.

By the end of the thirteenth century, there was no greater name in Scotland than that of Comyn. Holding three earldoms – Buchan, Menteith and Atholl – and the lordships of Badenoch and Strathbogie, the influence of the clan was felt in every part of the country. Alexander Comyn of Buchan, maternal grandfather of Isabel de Beaumont, was one of the most consistent supporters of England and King Edward I during the wars of the Scottish succession from 1290 to 1306. Alexander was a younger brother of John Comyn, Earl of Buchan, and was seated at the castles of Tarradale and Urquhart on the Black Isle in the Scottish Highlands. He was sheriff of Aberdeen from about 1297 to 1304, and took an English wife, Joan, the daughter of William de Latimer, 1st Lord Latimer. The fortunes of the Comyn family changed drastically on 10 February 1306, when John Comyn III of Badenoch was slain by Robert the Bruce, who then went on to be crowned King of Scotland. The Comyns, who were not in

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<sup>5</sup> The manors Edward II granted to his kinsman were part of the ancient barony of Gaunt [Gant], which had been formed by William the Conqueror for his wife's nephew Gilbert de Gant, and had lapsed to the crown. The administrative seat was Folkingham, and Henry de Beaumont converted the Castle there from wooden motte and bailey into one of stone.

<sup>6</sup> Doherty (2003) pp.78-79; CP, 2: 60.

favour of Bruce's ambitions for the throne even before the murder, quickly joined England in open opposition to him. Alexander Comyn was dead by 1308, leaving a widow and two daughters Alice and Margaret. On 22 May of that year, John Comyn, Earl of Buchan, was defeated by Bruce at the battle of Inverurie, and fled to England. All of the Comyn strongholds in Buchan – even Urquhart and Tarradale on the Black Isle – were laid to waste by Bruce and the family was exiled and wholly dependent upon the English for assistance (Young, 1997).

The earl of Buchan died childless in late 1308, and his two young nieces became co-heiresses to the entire Comyn inheritance of the Buchan branch of the family. No doubt with the support of her mother Joan and uncle Lord Latimer, Alice was married to Edward II's kinsman and household knight Sir Henry de Beaumont in about 1310. They received her share of the Comyn lands in England, as well as custody of the share of her younger sister Margaret, still a minor, by 1312<sup>7</sup>. But regaining the Scottish lands proved impossible. In 1308, Robert Bruce had ravaged all of the Comyn strongholds, manors and other holdings in the earldom of Buchan, and divided the lands among his supporters. Margaret Comyn, the younger coheiress, married John of Ross, younger brother of Hugh, Earl of Ross, who was brother-in-law of Robert Bruce. This kinship eventually led to Margaret and John of Ross adhering to Bruce and regaining her half of the Comyn lands in Buchan. But with Alice and Henry de Beaumont firmly in the camp of the English, they had to settle in 1322 for receiving the turncoat Margaret's share in the Comyn English lands, and anticipating a defeat of Bruce by the English someday.

The overthrow of Edward II by Isabella and Mortimer in 1326 renewed hope for Henry and Alice de Beaumont that England would finally prevail over Robert Bruce and the earldom of Buchan would be fully restored to them. Henry proceeded to ally himself as best he could among other former Scottish landholders now exiled in England, and purchased the wardship and marriage of David de Strathbogie, claimant to the earldom of Atholl, in January 1327<sup>8</sup>. The peace that Isabella and Mortimer made with Robert Bruce in 1328 appalled Beaumont and the other 'disinherited' lords, and they quickly joined the opposition to the queen and her lover, led by Henry, Earl of Lancaster. Civil war loomed in late 1328, but was avoided by Lancaster's capitulation in January 1329. Beaumont's castles and lands were forfeited, and he fled in exile to France, fearing the wrath of Mortimer, who took personal affront at Beaumont's betrayal. In France, Beaumont did what he could to incite opposition to Isabella and Mortimer, and, along with his sister Isabella, Lady Vescy, joined the conspiracy of Edmund of Woodstock, Earl of Kent, who had become convinced that his half-brother Edward II was still alive. Kent ended up executed for treason the following spring, and young Edward III finally seized control of government himself and had Mortimer executed in November 1330. Beaumont was able to return to England, his lands restored the following month.

Edward III tried to negotiate with the regency council of young David Bruce, king of Scotland, to have the Scottish inheritance of Beaumont's wife Alice restored, but to no avail. Beaumont then took matters into his own hands. While on a diplomatic mission to France in the winter of 1331-32, he contacted the exiled Edward Balliol, son of John Balliol, whom Edward I had set up then overthrown as King of Scotland. With David Bruce a child and Edward Balliol a grown man, there would yet be a chance to regain the Buchan earldom through usurpation. That Beaumont was able to secure Edward III's support and orchestrate the invasion of Edward Balliol in 1332 to

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<sup>7</sup> CPR 1307-1313, pp.267, 514.

<sup>8</sup> CFR 1319-1327, p.431.

claim the Scottish throne is a testament to his skills in diplomacy and to the high regard in which the seasoned nobleman and soldier was held. Balliol was crowned king of Scotland, creating a conflict over the throne that lasted for a good ten years, not officially concluding until Balliol formally renounced his claim to Edward III in 1356. The apex for Beaumont occurred with the decisive victory of the English at the battle of Halidon Hill in July 1333, after which Balliol assumed control of the Scottish government, and appointed Beaumont to his council. On 22 January 1334, Henry was officially created Earl of Buchan in right of his wife. He repaired and strengthened the Comyn castle of Dundarg, from where **“he lorded it over the whole of Buchan”** (Rodgers, 1999). It was to be a short-lived triumph. Forces loyal to David Bruce laid siege to the new earl and countess of Buchan in late 1334 at Dundarg, with continual bombardment by an effective siege engine. Beaumont surrendered on 23 December, and was held for a high ransom, toward which Edward III contributed (Nicholson, 1965).

Henry and Alice Beaumont left Scotland in the spring of 1335, having promised to retire to England and bring about peace. Beaumont immediately joined the English campaign that summer, but Balliol's support among the Scots grew increasingly weaker, and neither Beaumont nor his wife ever again held control over any of the Buchan lands in Scotland. They had to content themselves with the (not insignificant) Beaumont barony centred in Lincolnshire and Leicestershire, and though they continued to be styled in English records as earl and countess of Buchan, it was an empty honour. Henry died in 1340, and Alice nine years afterwards, neither one living to see their daughter far surpass them in rank and title to become the first English duchess.

## Marriage and Motherhood

Isabel de Beaumont was the second daughter of Henry de Beaumont and Alice Comyn, likely born in 1316 or 1318. Establishing a birth order for the large brood of Beaumont children is no easy task. There are reasonably definitive birthdates for only two of them. Eldest son and heir John de Beaumont was returned as age **“22 years on Christmas Day last”** in the Leicestershire inquisition that followed the death of his father in the spring of 1340<sup>9</sup>, placing his birth in December 1317. In 1349, his younger brother Thomas was returned as **“aged 24 years and more at the feast of St. Andrew last”** in the Leicestershire inquisition taken after the death of their mother Alice<sup>10</sup>, placing his birth in 1324. Modern genealogists ascribe eight additional children to the couple – another son Richard and seven daughters, Katherine, Isabel, Joan, Elizabeth, Alice, Beatrice and Agnes<sup>11</sup>. There is no mention of Richard in the inquisitions taken after Henry de Beaumont's death, though mention was made of provision for younger son Thomas<sup>12</sup>. If a son Richard existed, he either died young, or was born after Thomas. Of the daughters, Alice exists only as a name, and Beatrice is said to have married Charles I (de Trie), comte de Dammartin<sup>13</sup>. The birth order of the remaining

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<sup>9</sup> CIPM, 1336-1346, p.189.

<sup>10</sup> CIPM, 1347-1351, pp.316-317.

<sup>11</sup> Mosley (1999). I am grateful to John Ravillious of the soc.genealogy.medieval newsgroup, for providing a comprehensive list of the Beaumont children.

<sup>12</sup> He was given the manor of Bolton Percy in Yorkshire.

<sup>13</sup> Pere Anselme (1730) gives Charles de Trie, who succeeded his father as comte de Dammartin in 1337, only one wife, Jeanne d'Amboise, by whom he had two daughters. If he did marry a

daughters can be established through the chronology of their marriages and childbearing.

Alice Comyn was born about 1297<sup>14</sup>. Beaumont, more than fifteen years her senior, would not have consummated his marriage immediately and risked her life through a too-early pregnancy, so her childbearing would have begun about 1314-5. Katherine de Beaumont, who married her father's ward David de Strathbogie sometime between 1327 and 1330 and gave birth to their son in 1332<sup>15</sup>, had to have been the firstborn child. John and Isabel were the next children, though which preceded the other is uncertain. Joan de Beaumont, who married Fulk, 3rd Lord FitzWarin, and had his son in 1340, was likely older than her brother Thomas. Elizabeth, who died in 1400, sixty years after her father, and was married to Nicholas, Lord Audley, by 1342<sup>16</sup>, was certainly younger than Joan and Thomas. Agnes de Beaumont, who married Thomas de Lucy, lord of Cockermonth, in 1343, was the youngest child.

Though all of the Beaumont daughters married peers, Isabel made the grandest match by far. Sadly, no record survives of the marriage contracts of the double Lancaster/Beaumont alliances. The teenaged heir to the earldom of Lancaster was one of the most eligible bachelors in England in the late 1320s. That Isabel, a non-heiress, younger daughter of a newly-made baron, was his chosen bride is a reflection of the high esteem in which her father was held by Henry, earl of Lancaster. Indeed, the Beaumont marriages were the first ones that Lancaster negotiated with a fellow peer for any of his children - his daughters had been previously married to wards of the crown<sup>17</sup>. It seems Isabel brought no property with her to the Lancasters, so her marriage portion was likely money. The match was political, more than anything else, with Lancaster and Beaumont both the most influential (and vocal) opponents to the regime of Queen Isabella and Roger Mortimer in the late 1320s. The union of their respective heirs to daughters of each other was a powerful and public statement, especially with Mortimer simultaneously arranging advantageous marriages for his large brood of daughters to the noble houses of the realm (Mortimer, 2003, pp.320-324). The negotiation of the double Lancaster alliance was completed before Beaumont fled to France in January 1329.

According to Kenneth Fowler, who studied the surviving household records of Henry, Earl of Lancaster, in the National Archives, Isabel was married to Henry of Grosmont by 24 June 1330. Though he was about age twenty that year, she was certainly younger than age fifteen (her brother John was only age thirteen when he married Eleanor of Lancaster that autumn). The marriages may have occurred, despite the young ages of the Beaumont siblings, as a political precaution, since their father was in exile in France and all of his lands forfeited to the crown. Due to her youth, Isabel

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daughter of Henry de Beaumont named Beatrice, they had no issue, and she died before the 1350s, when he was married to Jeanne. He died in 1394.

<sup>14</sup> She was still a minor in July 1310 (see CPR, 1307-1313, p.267), and was "reputed to be of full age" in December 1312 (CPR, 1307-1313, p.514). As the grants involved lands of her inheritance and not legal proceedings, the full age referred to was 14, not 21 years.

<sup>15</sup> CP, 1: 307-308.

<sup>16</sup> CPR, 1340-1343, p.422.

<sup>17</sup> Lancaster's eldest daughter Blanche was married in 1316 to Thomas Wake, a ward of the crown in the household of Lancaster's niece Queen Isabella. In February 1327, Lancaster was granted the marriages of William de Burgh, heir to the earldom of Ulster, and of John de Mowbray, heir to the lordship of Axholme, whom he married to his daughters Maude and Joan, respectively. Lancaster would go on to negotiate one final marriage - that of his youngest child Mary with the son and heir of Henry de Percy, lord of Alnwick.

lived apart from her new husband, their paths crossing only occasionally that first year – at Tutbury Castle in Staffordshire in June, and at Leicester Castle in September. Her chief companion was Eleanor, the betrothed of her brother John de Beaumont, a girl likely to be close in age to Isabel<sup>18</sup>. A grant from the Pope dated July 1331, that allowed Henry of Grosmont and “Isabella de Bellomonte his wife”<sup>19</sup> to receive plenary remission at the hour of death, implies that they had the same confessor at the time. Her husband, newly knighted and busy on the council of his father (who had gone blind) and representing him in Parliament, was embarking on what would be an illustrious diplomatic and military career, and there is record that Isabel spent some time with him at Grosmont Castle in March 1332. In September 1333, the earl of Lancaster granted his son the South Wales castles of Grosmont, Skenfrith and Kidwelly, as well as many other lands in the area, and young Henry styled himself lord of Kidwelly. By that point, Isabel was in her mid-teens, with consummation and co-habitation beginning in earnest.

By the time she became countess of Derby in March 1337 due to her husband's creation as earl, Isabel was a young woman and most definitely a full-time wife. A fact emphasized when her father-in-law late that summer settled a group of Chaworth manors on both her and her husband and their heirs in tail (Somerville, 1953, p.38). Since her husband's mother had died long before their marriage and her father-in-law never remarried (Richardson, 2004), Isabel was the senior lady of the Lancaster household and as such had great responsibilities. Sadly, none of her or her husband's household records appear to have survived. We do know that Isabel maintained and promoted her own clerks, for she petitioned to the Pope on behalf of two of them in 1344<sup>20</sup>. She accompanied her husband on some of his continental missions – to the Low Countries in 1341, and to Gascony in 1345-47 (Fowler, 1969, pp.215-216). It was there that she became countess of Lancaster, when the blind Earl Henry died in the autumn of 1345 and her husband succeeded. By that point, Isabel was also fulfilling the most important role for a medieval noblewoman – that of mother of heirs. She had two young daughters. Their birthdates have been confused by many historians and genealogists, with a range spanning a dozen years, 1335-1347. No chronicler recorded their birth dates and places, but various inquisitions in which they were returned as heirs help provide a framework for establishing their ages with some certainty.

The elder daughter Maude first appears in record in late 1344, when her marriage was being arranged to Ralph, the young son and heir of Ralph de Stafford, baron (later 1st Earl) of Stafford<sup>21</sup>. This proved to be a short-lived, non-consummated marriage of children. In the November 1347 Northamptonshire inquisition following the death of Hugh de Audely, Earl of Gloucester (maternal grandfather of Maude's

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<sup>18</sup> Fowler (1969) pp.26-28, 256 n.14-16. No exact birthdates survive for any of the seven children of Henry, earl of Lancaster, though their birth order can be assembled with a reasonable degree of certainty. Blanche was the eldest, married in 1316. Isabel of Lancaster was likely professed a nun at Amesbury by 1317 (see Underhill, 1999, p.18), and thus the next born child. The third daughter Maude was married in 1327, and fourth daughter Joan in 1328. Eleanor the fifth daughter in 1330, and Mary the youngest child, in 1334. There is a question as to where to place only son Henry, born about 1310. All that can be said with any certainty is that he was younger than Blanche and Isabel, and older than Eleanor and Mary.

<sup>19</sup> CPapR 1305-1342, p.343.

<sup>20</sup> John Kynmasforde and Richard de Welles (see CPapR: Petitions, 1342-1419, p.47).

<sup>21</sup> CP, 7: 410. The marriage took place at Leicester on 30 Nov. 1344 - see Knighton, *Chronica*, p.30: “Ad festum sancti Andreae fuerunt hastiludia apud Leycestriam per Henricum comitem Derbeyae pro maritagio filiae suae Matildae quam duxit in uxorem.” (Martin, 1995).

husband), young Ralph de Stafford was found to be deceased and Maude, "aged 6 years,"<sup>22</sup> was returned as the heir to the properties settled on them jointly. In the 1361 inquisitions following the death of her father, Maude's age varied from 26 to 18, but the Derbyshire and Staffordshire inquisitions were quite specific, returning her as "aged 21 on the feast of St. Ambrose last"<sup>23</sup>. This would place her birth on 4 April 1340. Appropriately enough, the first child of Isabel's brother and sister-in-law, John de Beaumont and Eleanor of Lancaster, was born just about the same time<sup>24</sup>.

Most modern sources have Blanche of Lancaster, Isabel's younger daughter, born in 1345. Complete Peerage and Kenneth Fowler place her birth in 1347. But the same Derbyshire and Staffordshire inquisitions following the death of Duke Henry in 1361, state specifically that Blanche was "aged 19 years at the feast of the Annunciation last," which gives her a birth date of 25 March 1342. This makes her exactly two years younger than her husband John of Gaunt, and the age of 17 at her marriage in 1359, and 18 at the birth of her first child Philippa in 1360. John of Gaunt's register states that Blanche was age 24 when she died (which was in 1368, not 1369)<sup>25</sup>, but this would place her birth in 1344, when her parents were in Gascony. A birth on non-English soil caused some legal difficulty when it came to inheritance and would likely have been noted in the inquisitions after her father's death<sup>26</sup>. Placing her birth in 1347 makes her age 12 at marriage and age 13 giving birth to her first child, which is too young. The 1342 birth date, in addition to being the most specific, also makes the most sense chronologically.

There may have been other children who died young. Antiquarian Robert Atkyns, writing in the early 18th century, relates a colourful tale about Henry of Grosmont and his manor of Kempford in Gloucestershire:

He resided some time at Kempford, but his beloved child and only son came to an unfortunate end by drowning in this place, for which reason he left it; and his horse, at his departure, happening to cast a shoe, the inhabitants nailed it to the church door, where it doth at this day preserve his memory.<sup>27</sup>

The local account has one independent fact to support it. When John Leland visited the church of Newarke College in Leicester on the eve of the Reformation, he noted that next to the tomb of Henry, Earl of Lancaster, was the tomb of two boys (Toulmin-Smith, 1906-10). Since Henry of Grosmont was the earl's only son, and the

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<sup>22</sup> CIPM, 1347-1351, p.54.

<sup>23</sup> CIPM, 1361-1364, pp.92-107. Maud was 26 years and more in the Oxford, Southampton, Wiltshire, Berkshire and Devon inquisitions, 23 years in the Dorset one, 22 years and more in Leicester and Warwick, 22 years in Lancaster, 21 years in Surrey and Middlesex, 20 years and more in Lincoln, 20 years in Rutland, and 18 years in Northampton. Her sister Blanche was found to be 21 years and more in Oxford, Southampton, Wiltshire, Berkshire and Devon, 19 years and more in Leicester and Warwick, 19 years in Surrey and Middlesex, 18 years and more in Dorset, York, Northumberland and Lincoln, 18 years in Lancaster, 17 years and more in Rutland, and 16 years and more in Northampton. Huntingdon, Gloucester, Hereford and the March of Wales merely said both sisters were of full age.

<sup>24</sup> In various inquisitions taken after the death of Isabel's brother John, Lord Beaumont, in the summer of 1342, his son and heir Henry was said to be aged 2. But the inquisition from Lincolnshire, where the chief administrative seat of the Beaumonts was located, said the boy was "aged 2½ years and more", so born in late 1339 (see CIPM, 1336-1346, pp.252-253).

<sup>25</sup> Goodman (1992); Armitage-Smith (1911) p.70.

<sup>26</sup> For the problems faced by Henry, Lord Beaumont, due to his birth overseas in the Low Countries, see CIPM, 1347-1351, p.316; CPR, 1340-1343, pp.72-73; CPR, 1350-1354, p.63.

<sup>27</sup> Atkyns (1712).

church became the family burial vault after the 1345 death of the earl, it is likely that these two boys were sons of Henry and Isabel. Even if they had died prior to 1345 and were buried elsewhere, their remains may have been translated to the church once the Lancaster patronage was established. That Kempsford was one of the manors granted by Henry and Isabel to the new College in 1355 also lends support to the story.

However many children Isabel did have, only her two daughters Maude and Blanche survived into the 1350s, the final decade of Isabel's life, where she received a lofty title in the beginning and trailed off to complete silence at its close.

## Duchess and Death

On 6 March 1351, Edward III rewarded Henry of Grosmont, his most intimate and trusted counsellor, with the title of Duke of Lancaster. Henry was only the second man in England to be given that honour, the first being the king's eldest son Edward the Black Prince, who had been created Duke of Cornwall in 1337. To add substance to the new title, Lancashire was made into a county palatine along the lines of Chester. This gave Henry his own chancery, his own justices for pleas of the crown and all other pleas touching the common law, and allowed him to appoint his own sheriff (Somerville, 1953, pp.40-45). As a result, since the Black Prince was still unmarried, Isabel became the first woman in England ever to hold the title of duchess, and this made her the second lady in the land, after the queen. For the remainder of her life, Isabel continued to be the only woman in England with the title of duchess, and yet there is not one mention of her by chroniclers of the period.

Later that year, Edward III, attempting to gain a political foothold in the Low Countries, decided to use Isabel's elder daughter Maude of Lancaster to seal negotiations. Margaret, dowager empress of Bavaria, the elder sister of England's Queen Philippa, had renounced her claims to Holland, Zeeland and Friesland to her second son William, and was in a quarrel with him over Hainault. She had hoped to retain it, but her son seized control. The duke of Lancaster was involved in negotiations to reconcile mother and son in the spring of 1351, which failed, and Margaret was forced to flee the Low Countries for England that summer. Edward III then decided it prudent to support his wife's nephew, and offered him the hand of Lancaster's daughter Maude. Late in 1351, William and his retinue came to England to confirm his possession of Holland and Zeeland and his mother Margaret's possession of Hainault, and to collect his bride. The duke of Lancaster had set out on an expedition to Prussia, so when Maude was married to William in early 1352 in the King's chapel at Westminster, the king and queen presided<sup>28</sup>. No mention is made whether or not the duchess of Lancaster was present. Shortly afterward, William returned to the Low Countries with twelve-year-old Maude. The girl only saw her father once more, in the Low Countries for the Christmas of 1353. It's not known if Isabel ever saw her elder daughter again.

In the mid-1350s, Duke Henry concentrated on what would be his greatest philanthropic effort, transforming the hospital his father had founded in the Newarke at Leicester in 1331, into a college of secular canons in honour of the annunciation of St. Mary. It is concerning this endeavour that Isabel is last mentioned in the royal

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<sup>28</sup> Knighton, *Chronica*, p.69: "Dum igitur dux Lancastriae tenderet versus Spruciam, dux Selandiae Willelmus venit in Angliam, et de consilio reginae desponsavit Matildam seniore filiam ducis Lancastriae cum magna nobilitate honoris in capella regis apud Westmonasterium et duxit eam secum in Selandiam." (Martin, 1995; Fowler, 1969, pp.117-121).

Chancery Rolls. On 24 March 1356, the king granted permission for Henry and Isabel to alienate their joint manor of Hannington in Wiltshire to the new college<sup>29</sup>. It would be in the church of the college that both Henry and his duchess would be laid to rest. For the duke, we have record of his date of death and of his funeral, but for Isabel, ever in the shadow of her husband, there is nothing, so a narrowing of the timeframe for her death is required.

The year 1359 is the last mention of Isabel in any contemporary record. Her younger daughter Blanche was married to John of Gaunt, earl of Richmond, the third surviving son of Edward III, on 19 May that year at Reading. There were tournaments that the royal family participated in to celebrate the nuptials<sup>30</sup>, but as usual no mention of whether or not Duchess Isabel attended, though evidence exists that her husband did<sup>31</sup>. That same spring, two indulgences were granted by Pope Innocent VI, which possibly shed some light as to the state of Isabel's health that year. Among a grouping of a half dozen papal petitions submitted by the duke of Lancaster in 1359, are two that deal with his family:

The same [Duke of Lancaster]. Whereas his principal chaplain had a papal indult to hear the confessions of himself, his wife, children and household, he prays for an extension of the same to cases reserved to bishops.

The same. Whereas the principal chaplain had papal licence to hear the confessions of the duke, Isabella his wife, and their then children and household, he [the Duke] prays that it may extend to persons in the same relation to him, present and future.<sup>32</sup>

The Pope granted the petitions on 30 May 1359.

To Henry, duke, and Isabella, duchess of Lancaster. Extension for ten years of the indult granted by Clement VI. That their chaplains or other fit priests should hear confessions, to cases reserved to bishops.

To the same duke Henry. Extension of the indult granted him by Clement VI. That his chaplains should give him and Isabella his wife plenary remission at the hour of death, to another wife, if he takes one after the death of Isabella.<sup>33</sup>

From this, it can be gathered that Duchess Isabel was still alive in the spring of 1359, though it is interesting that nothing in the petitions from Henry says so directly. However, the Pope and his chancery address her in the subsequent grants, and it would seem that if she had been dead by then, such a clerical error would not have occurred. What also is compelling is the duke planning for the possibility of another wife after Isabel. As these papal indulgences were expensive and bureaucratic, the duke could simply have planned for any outcome so that he would not have to petition and pay again. But indulgences were granted in cycles of ten years and money was not an object for one of the wealthiest men in England, so it may well be that Isabel was ill in 1359, and the duke did not expect her to live another ten years. A long-term, debilitating illness could be the reason why Isabel, the sole duchess in

<sup>29</sup> CPR, 1354-1358, p.405.

<sup>30</sup> Tait (1914, p.131): "...quartodecimo kalendas Junii dominus Johannes, comes de Richmond', filius regis Angliae, dominam Blanchiam, filiam domini Henrici ducis Lancastriae, dicti Johannis [consanguineam], cum dispensatione domini papae apud Redingum duxit in uxorem honorabiliter valde; etenim, itinerando a dicta villa usque Londonias, ipse cum militibus suis omnibus sibi occurrere volentibus et in campis et villis hastiludia tenebat."

<sup>31</sup> Fowler (1969) pp.197, 290 n.4. The duke accompanied his daughter Blanche to Leicester shortly before the wedding.

<sup>32</sup> CPapR: Petitions, 1342-1419, p.341.

<sup>33</sup> CPapR, 1342-1362, p.607.

England, made no impact at court or society during the 1350s. For example, the duke was in frequent contact throughout that decade with Elizabeth, Lady of Clare, but there is no mention in that lady's household accounts of any contact or visits with his wife<sup>34</sup>.

Duke Henry took part in the Reims campaign of Edward III, and was on the continent from the autumn of 1359 to November 1360. At the beginning of March 1361, he returned to Leicester Castle, his favourite residence, seriously ill from a new outbreak of the plague, and dictated his will on the 15th of that month. He died there a week later on Tuesday, 23 March, and two days following Edward III granted custody of the duke's lands to John of Gaunt. The duke was buried in the church of Newarke College just outside Leicester Castle on 14 April 1361, with the king, queen and the rest of the royal family in attendance<sup>35</sup>. The duke's will survives in the archbishop's register (PCC Islip 172), and 18th-century historian John G Nichols (1780) included a transcription of it in his compilation *Royal Wills*. He determined that the duke asked in his will that his wife Isabel attend his funeral, and subsequent editors of medieval genealogical works (*Testamenta Vetusta*, *Complete Peerage*) have followed suit and assumed that she survived him. The relevant passage from the duke's will taken from the archbishop's register, reads:

Et volons q' n're seign'r le Roy & ma dame le Reyne soient garniz de n're ent'rement et mons'r le Prince & mes seign's ses freres & ma dame Isabel & nos seors et nos freres lo'r seign's et les autres grauntz de n're saunk.<sup>36</sup>

Nichols mistakenly interpreted '**ma dame Isabel**' as referring to the duke's wife. But '**ma dame**' literally translates to 'my lady' and was not the phrase employed by 14th century noblemen to reference their wives. '**Ma compaigne**' and '**ma treschere compaigne**' are the phrases used in other wills and documents of the time<sup>37</sup>. That '**ma dame**' was used at the time as a term of respect for a woman of the nobility is evidenced in the passage above when the duke refers to Queen Philippa as '**ma dame le Reyne**'. The '**dame Isabel**' mentioned in the will was undoubtedly Isabel, the adult, still unmarried, eldest daughter of Edward III, since her name immediately follows that of the Black Prince and her other brothers. Henry of Grosmont was at Woodstock in 1332 when Edward III's daughter Isabel was born, and may have been a godparent to the lady<sup>38</sup>. Duchess Isabella may well have been one of Isabel's godmothers, given that at least one of the godparents usually bore the same Christian name as the child, and that Isabella spent some time with Henry at Grosmont in March 1332 (see above, p.313).

Further facts support that Duchess Isabel predeceased her husband. There is no mention of dower or lands held in jointure in any of the inquisitions taken after the duke's death. As we know, Isabel was specifically granted some of the Chaworth manors jointly with her husband in 1337, and she would have had full right to them

<sup>34</sup> Underhill, (1999) pp.109-110. In her will, dated September 1355, Elizabeth de Clare leaves the duke of Lancaster her piece of the true cross. There is no bequest to, nor mention of, Isabel.

<sup>35</sup> Fowler, (1969) pp.216-218.

<sup>36</sup> I am very grateful to Chris Phillips for transcribing the passage from the copy of the will made at the Lambeth Palace Library.

<sup>37</sup> Humphrey de Bohun, Earl of Hereford and Essex (d.1322), Hugh de Courtenay, Earl of Devon (d.1377), and John of Gaunt (d.1399) all use '**compaigne**' rather than '**dame**' in their wills. It is also '**compaigne**' that is used throughout the Register of John of Gaunt whenever his wife is referenced.

<sup>38</sup> Fowler (1969) p.28. Apparently no record has survived that provides the identities of Isabel of Woodstock's godparents.

after his death, in addition to the traditional right to one-third of all of her husband's remaining property as dower. On 6 July 1361, the lands held in dower or otherwise for life of the inheritance of Duke Henry were partitioned between his two daughters<sup>39</sup>. The entry shows there were no lands held in dower, merely some estates held for life by various tenants of the duke, so Isabel was definitely dead by that date.

Could Isabel have been alive when her husband died, then followed him to the grave at some point before July, a victim of the plague as he was? There are a number of indications that make this highly unlikely. Among the ten executors the duke appointed was his eldest sister Blanche, Lady Wake of Liddel. It was customary for a wife to be made an executor if she was living when her husband died. A mere two days after the duke died, the king granted custody of the Lancaster inheritance to John of Gaunt. Provision for Isabel had she still been living would have been made at that point. Vast estates in over twenty counties were involved, and the partition needed to be made with dower taken into account. Also, if Isabel had died within days of her husband, it would be natural for her to have been buried with him in a joint funeral ceremony. An entry in the Black Prince's Register dated 31 March 1361, a week after the duke's death, refers to the plan for the duke "to be buried at *Leycestre on Wednesday, 14 April*"<sup>40</sup>, with no mention of a double burial. Local Leicester chronicler Henry Knighton describes the burial of the duke, and how his two daughters claimed their inheritance, with no mention of the duchess also having died<sup>41</sup>. Chronicler John of Reading provides a list of notables that died in 1361 from the new outbreak of plague, and includes the duke but not the duchess<sup>42</sup>.

Finally, there is the matter of Isabel's tomb. She appears to have been buried next to her husband, but in a separate tomb, which would indicate her death did not occur close in time to that of her husband. Leland, the only eyewitness to the tombs who left a descriptive record, states:

*The college chirch is not very great, but it is exceding fair. There lyith on the north side of the high altare Henry Erle of Lancaster, without a crounet, and 2. Men childern under the arche next on to his hedde.*

*On the south side lyith Henry the first Duke of Lancaster: and yn the next arch to his hedde lyith a lady, by likelihod his wife.*<sup>43</sup>

Leland goes on to describe the tombs of Constance of Castile (the second wife of John of Gaunt), and Mary de Bohun, Countess of Derby (the first wife of Henry IV), so the lady's tomb was not for either of those Lancastrian wives. It is thus a valid assumption that the tomb belonged to Isabel<sup>44</sup>. Unfortunately for this puzzle, the duke does not mention in his will that he wished to be buried next to his wife (or opposite his father), only that he wished to be buried on the south side of the high

<sup>39</sup> CPR, 1361-1364, p.50.

<sup>40</sup> Public Record Office (1930-33).

<sup>41</sup> Knighton, *Chronica*, pp.115-116 (see Martin, 1995)

<sup>42</sup> Tait (1914) pp.150, 292. Among the individuals listed were the abbots of Bury St. Edmunds and Reading, the duke of Lancaster, Reginald Cobham, John Mowbray, and Mary and Margaret, daughters of Edward III.

<sup>43</sup> Toulmin-Smith (1906-10).

<sup>44</sup> The only candidate who would warrant a tomb so prominent to that of Duke Henry is his elder daughter Maude. From lack of mention otherwise in the inquisitions taken after her 1362 death, it appears that she died in England rather than the Low Countries (see CIPM, 1361-1364, pp.231-236). But she was buried in the Abbey of Rijnsburg in Holland, the traditional burial place of that land's counts.

altar. Since he and Isabel had been so instrumental in the patronage of the college it is likely they had planned for the location and design of their tombs long before their deaths, and had decided to be buried separate, but adjacent.

With the evidence at hand, the conclusion follows that Isabel died either in the latter half of 1359 or at some point in 1360, most likely while her husband was overseas on the Reims campaign. Whether she lived to see the birth of her first grandchild, Philippa of Lancaster (later queen of Portugal), that year, cannot be determined. By the time the duke died in March 1361, whatever affairs that stemmed from his wife's death had been settled, and the partition of the vast Lancaster inheritance proceeded without the complication of a widow and her dower.

## Lasting Legacy

The mark Isabel left on history as the first duchess in England is minimal. Denied the chance of wielding independent political and administrative influence as a powerful widow, Isabel's immediate legacy would be the impact she had made on the family members who survived her. The best that can be said of her marriage to Henry is that it was a standard arranged union of the time. Geoffrey Chaucer and Jean Froissart used poems and chronicle to romanticize the marriage of Isabel's younger daughter Blanche as an ideal one of courtly love. In contrast, Isabel appears as a wife not in sonnets and verses, but in dry administrative records of the papal and English royal chanceries. Indeed, there are indications that her marriage was not a great success on the personal level. Henry of Grosmont, in addition to being a crusader, diplomat, religious benefactor, and tournament champion, was an author as well. In 1354, he wrote a devotional work, the *Livre de Seyntz Medicines*<sup>45</sup>, an allegory through which he took stock of himself, revealed the wounds of his soul, and suggested remedies. As a reflection of his personal feelings, it is noteworthy that within the work, Henry "declared that although he loved the scent of fine ladies, he preferred to kiss the low-born, because they were more responsive" (Given-Wilson and Curteis, 1984). It was common for noblemen to take mistresses, and Henry may have done so though, unlike his uncle Thomas, Earl of Lancaster, and his son-in-law John of Gaunt, he did not father any acknowledged bastards. It seems it was not Isabel who stirred her husband to passionate verse. Their marriage was functional, not inspirational.

The marriage of her older daughter Maude, on the other hand, was disastrous on the personal level. In 1356, at age sixteen, she gave birth to her only child, a daughter who died shortly afterwards. By that point her husband William of Bavaria, ten years her senior, began to show signs of insanity. A year later, the situation was so desperate that Maude called for her husband's younger brother Albrecht to take over as regent. Count William was confined to the Hague in 1358, then later removed to the castle of Quesnoy, where he remained for 31 years until his death. Maude must have been only too happy to return to England and claim her share of the Lancaster inheritance. She received all of the lands south of the Trent as well as the earldom of Leicester, a title she shared with her absentee husband. Styling herself countess of Hainault, Zealand and Leicester, lady of Frisia, Monmouth, Beaufort and Nogent, Maude began the administration of her vast estates, only to be cut short by death in the spring of 1362. It was later rumoured that her brother-in-law John of Gaunt had her poisoned so that he could enjoy the full Lancaster inheritance, but the plague was the likelier culprit. Maude was only twenty-two at her death (Somerville, 1953, p.50).

With two members of Isabel's immediate family following her to the grave so soon after her own death, only younger daughter Blanche remained to carry on the culture

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<sup>45</sup> See Fowler (1969) pp.193-196.

and traditions of the Lancasters. She proved more than up to the task. Described as tall and blond<sup>46</sup>, and gentle and modest, Blanche spent some time at the royal court before her marriage, inspiring as much admiration within the royal family as she did in poetic courtiers. In November 1362, with the inheritance reunited due to Maude's death, John of Gaunt was created duke of Lancaster, the third man in England to hold the title of duke. Blanche thus followed her mother in the title of duchess of Lancaster, and served as a pleasing alternative to the ill-reputed Joan of Kent, princess of Wales and duchess of Cornwall, whom the Black Prince had taken to wife the previous year. The new duchess successfully combined the chivalric courtly pursuits of her father with the traditional, unprepossessing wife and mother role Isabel had assumed. Sadly, she was only to do so for a short while. Blanche died on 12 September 1368, probably as a result of childbirth (Goodman, 1992), and was genuinely mourned by her husband and the entire court.

The great spiritual legacy of Henry and Isabel - the College of the Annunciation of St. Mary in the Newarke, Leicester - endured for nearly two centuries, and at first it appeared it would survive the Reformation of the Tudor era. Henry VIII was unwilling to destroy a religious house so closely associated with his Lancastrian ancestors. But Edward VI and his council were not so inclined. The college was suppressed under the Act for the Dissolution of Chantries, and ceased to exist. The church and many of the other buildings fell into decay, and were eventually demolished, bringing an end to the 14th century tombs of Henry, Isabel and the other Lancasters. By 1600, in a twist that undoubtedly would have pleased Isabel, the Beaumonts of Grace Dieu, descendants of her brother John, were granted much of the site, and retained a footing in it well into the next century. Today no trace of the medieval buildings remain except a few arches preserved in the basement of the building that now occupies the site, the Leicester College of Art and Technology<sup>47</sup>. That the site is once again a college is another appropriate twist of fate that would meet with the approval of Isabel.

Of all the ladies who married into the Lancastrian dynasty in the 14th century<sup>48</sup>, Isabel de Beaumont was one of only two who was not an heiress and the only one who did not bring any property with her. She was a younger daughter of a French-born, royal-household-dependent father and a Scottish-born, exiled-heiress-to-war-ravaged-lands mother. Her marriage was hatched out of political urgency, her lofty title and position was entirely the result of her husband's career and abilities. Remaining in his shadow and not drawing any undue attention may have been a tactic the first English duchess purposefully chose. In the 1350s it would have been clear to her that she was the link between the foreign-born, land-lacking previous generation of her parents, and the roles her daughters in the next generation would perform as wives and mothers of royalty. That Blanche, the next duchess of Lancaster, transitioned into the immediate royal family with such success may have been due in no small part to the example her mother had set. The lasting legacy provided to history by Isabel de Beaumont is something every woman in the society of her time understood well and valued highly - bloodline. Her grandson and granddaughter would go on to wear the crowns of England and Portugal, and through them, the Beaumont and Comyn blood was carried to every European royal house existing today.

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<sup>46</sup> Henry of Grosmont was also tall and blond. There is no physical description of Isabel or Maude.

<sup>47</sup> VCH Leicestershire, Vol.II (1954), pp.48-51; Vol.IV (1958), pp.346-347.

<sup>48</sup> Alice de Lacy, Maud de Chaworth, Isabel, Constance of Castile, Mary de Bohun and Katherine Swynford.

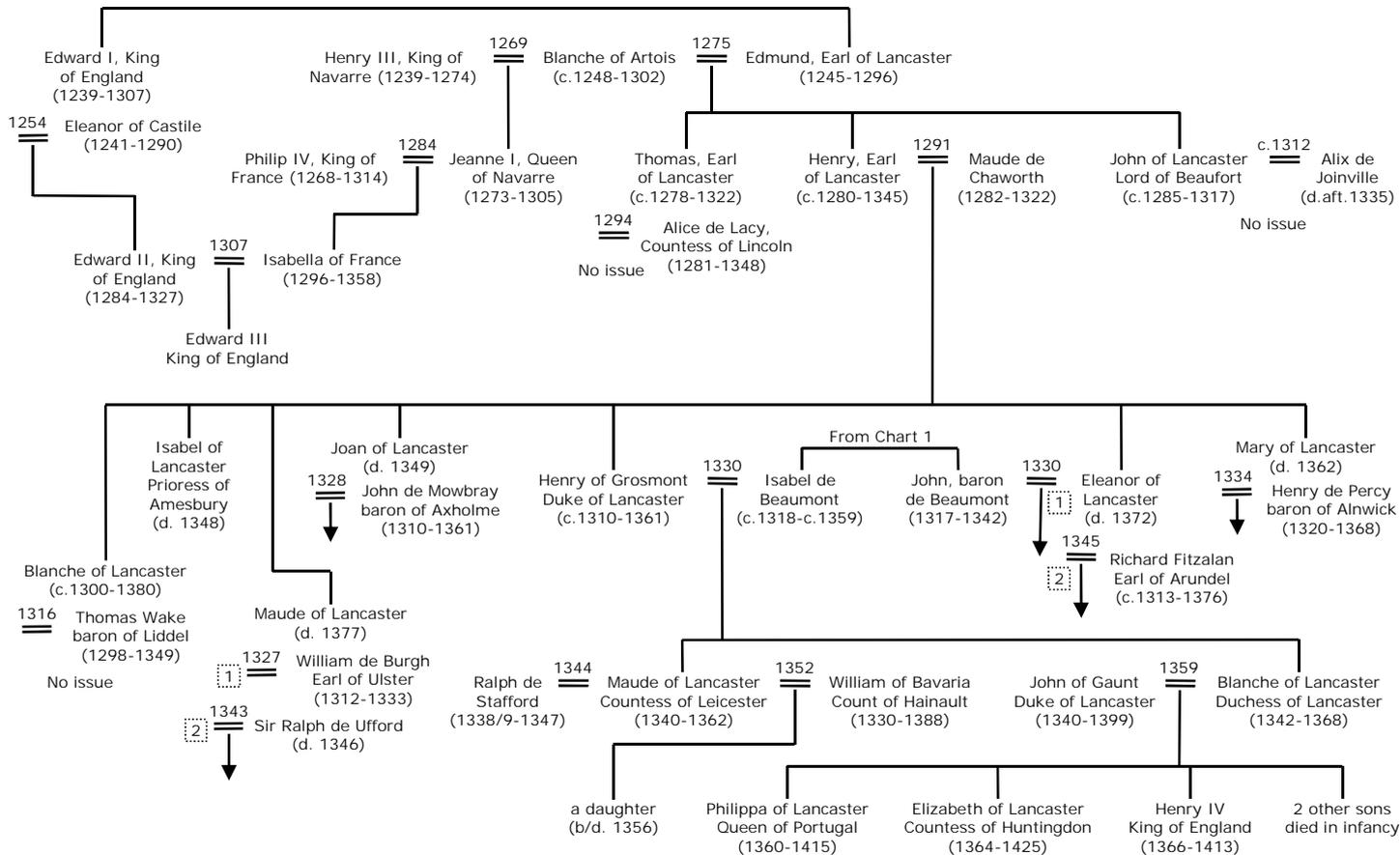
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**Fig 2. Pedigree of the Dukes and Earls of Lancaster**