

THE EARLY MORTIMERS OF WIGMORE, 1066 TO 1181

by Paul Martin Remfry¹

ABSTRACT

This paper is based on the talk given by the author at the Annual Meeting of the FMG in London on 31 October 2009. He discusses the evidence supporting the relationships of the first two Mortimer lords of Wigmore in the Welsh marches.

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There has in recent years been much interest shown in the family of Mortimer which has recently led to a new society being formed for descendants of these people and those just generally interested in their history and genealogy.² It therefore seems an appropriate time to place on the record the history of two early members of the Mortimer clan, the first two lords of Wigmore in the Welsh marches.

Over the last five hundred years it has become fashionable to name various lords and barons by their 'number'. Thus we get Ralph Mortimer I, II and III as well as a host of Roger Mortimers. Indeed this method of naming barons was used as early as the thirteenth century by the Lestranges of Knockin, but they were more extreme than most, having seven John Lestranges in a row from 1133 to 1322.³ The Mortimers of Wigmore were quite different from this, never having a father succeeded by a son of the same name. Therefore they never used any numeric designations as these would have been simply meaningless. Would you call yourself Roger II if the last person of your name had died over thirty years ago? This relatively modern trend has of course led to confusion as mistakes are easy to make. Thus in other Marcher families two William Braose are often compressed into one and somebody's William III is often the William IV of another researcher. Since looking at this modern man-made problem, I early concluded that the only answer was to mention the death date of the individual in question rather than use an ambiguous and often positively misleading numeral. Thus we would have Roger Mortimer (d.1214) in place of a nondescript Roger Mortimer II. At least using this method everyone knows for certain whom you are talking about.

The purpose of this short essay is to look at the first two Mortimer lords of Wigmore and show that they were not really four as is often stated without a single shred of contemporary evidence. The first thing we know about the Mortimers of Wigmore in England is that a Hugh Mortimer was said by Wace, a near contemporary source, to have fought at Hastings in 1066.⁴ This man has been dismissed by many historians on the simple grounds that there was no Hugh Mortimer of Wigmore. A quick glance at French chartulary sources shows that such a man is documented in Normandy before 1066 as the second son of Roger Mortimer of St Victors, the ancestor of the

¹ *Contact details:* email castles99uk@yahoo.co.uk; website www.castles99.ukprint.com

² The Mortimer History Society can be contacted at www.mortimerhistorysociety.org.uk

³ Hamon Le Strange, *Le Strange Records. A Chronicle of the Early Le Stranges of Norfolk and the March of Wales with the lines of Knockin and Blackmere continued to their Extinction A.D. 1100 to 1310* (1916).

⁴ Edgar Taylor, trans., *Master Wace, His Chronicle of the Norman Conquest from the Roman de Rou* (1837), 239.

Mortimers of Wigmore. He is not mentioned after 1066.⁵ The man who does become the first of the Mortimers of Wigmore (Ralph) is not mentioned until the Domesday book of 1086 when he held Wigmore.⁶ There can be little doubt that he, as the son of Roger Mortimer of St Victors, was a younger, probably half-brother of the well attested Hugh Mortimer who appears to have fallen at Hastings or soon afterwards. Hugh was first mentioned in the cartulary of St Trinity, Rouen,⁵ in 1050 when he witnessed a charter with his elder brother William and father Roger, the son of the bishop. It was probably in 1075, after Earl Roger of Hereford was overthrown, that Ralph Mortimer was given massive estates by King William the Conqueror which left him a major baron not only in the Welsh borders, but also in Lincolnshire, and, when his father died in or soon after 1078, Normandy.

I will not go into Ralph's career here, but will continue with disposing of his supposed death and his supposed son, the alleged 'Ralph Mortimer II'. The real Ralph Mortimer left England for Normandy in 1104, and according to one fourteenth century source, died there.⁷ This has led to the ill-conceived statement that he died that year. Orderic mentions him fighting in France around that year.⁸ Later, in 1115, he was still holding his lands in Lindsey and was probably involved in the Aumale rebellion of 1118, when his daughter Hawise was said to be a prime mover in the revolt.⁹ Stephen of Aumale and his family rebelled again in 1126/27.¹⁰ One of these rebellions seems to have lost Ralph his English lands. Similarly Philip Braose (bef.1060-1138) of Radnor and Buellt was dispossessed for treason between 1110 and 1112 due to his actions on the Norman frontier.¹¹ Mahel, the son and heir of Bernard Neufmarché (bef.1065-1121), was dispossessed of Brecon on a technicality around 1121, the land instead was granted with Bernard's daughter to Miles Gloucester (bef.1100-43), one of Henry's staunchest supporters.¹² There can be little doubt that Ralph Mortimer was dispossessed around this time by King Henry I and the lordship of Wigmore, like many other Marcher lordships, found their way into the hands of the king's lieutenant, Pain Fitz John (bef.1095-37).¹³

It is possible that Pain Fitz John held some family claim to Wigmore lordship. Pain's brother Eustace Fitz John (bef.1094-1157), together with Stephen of Aumale, held many of the Mortimer lands in the Lindsey district of Lincolnshire. Eustace's lands went on to become part of the barony of Vescy, held from the Mortimers of Wigmore. In 1187 it was said that the barony was held from "the fee of Roger Mortimer, the service of which was given to a predecessor of William [Vescy] in marriage".¹⁴

⁵ Abbaye de la Sainte-Trinité du Mont de Rouen, *Collection de Documents Inédits sur l'Histoire de France* (1840), No. XXXVI, 440-1; No. XL, 442-3; No. XCV, 468.

⁶ *Domesday Book*, fo.180b.

⁷ E M Thompson, ed. & trans., *Chronicon Aadae de Usk AD.1377-1421*, (1904), 22.

⁸ M Chibnall, ed. & trans., *Ordericus Vitalis, Historia Ecclesiastica*, 6 (1969-80), 57.

⁹ C W Foster & T Longley eds., *The Lincolnshire Domesday and the Lindsey Survey* (1924), 243-51; M Chibnall, *Ordericus Vitalis, op.cit.* 6, 279-80.

¹⁰ M Chibnall, *Ordericus Vitalis, op.cit.* 6, 369.

¹¹ Dorothy Whitelock, David C Douglas & Susie I Tucker, eds., *Anglo Saxon Chronicle: A Revised Translation*, E (1961), 182; Henry Richards Luard, ed., 'Annales Monasterii de Waverleia', *Annales Monastici*, 2 (1864-9), 214.

¹² J S Brewer, J F Dimock & G F Warner, eds., *Giraldus Cambrensis, Opera*, 6 (1861-91), 29.

¹³ For the dealings of Pain see P M Remfry, *Grosmont Castle* (2008), 8-10.

¹⁴ Hubert Hall, ed., *Liber Rubeus de Scaccario, Red Book of the Exchequer* (1896), 68.

William Vesey (bef.1140-83) was the son of Eustace Fitz John. It is therefore almost certain that this claim to the Lindsey lands came through the marriage of John Fitz Richard, the father of Pain and Eustace, to a daughter of Ralph Mortimer. If this assumption is correct it would suggest that Ralph Mortimer had two children by his first wife Miliscenda. She was remembered in 1102 or 1103 in a joint charter by Stephen of Aumale, his wife Hawise, and her father, Ralph Mortimer.¹⁵ Miliscenda had died before March 1088 by which time Ralph was married to Mabile.¹⁶ Stephen of Aumale's wife, Hawise Mortimer, was born before 1085 as she would appear to have been married to Stephen before 1103 at the latest. If this suggestion is correct she probably had an elder sister who was born before 1080 and was mother via John 'Monoculus' Fitz Richard (bef.1076-1101+) of Eustace, Pain and William Fitz John (bef.1101-63). Thus when King Henry granted Wigmore lordship to Pain Fitz John he was granting it to a grandson of the previous lord from Domesday, Ralph Mortimer. Pain is recorded as losing Cymaron castle in 1134 and no doubt also much of the Middle March by the time of his death in 1137.¹⁷ Certainly by 1140 much of central Wales appears to have been held by the native dynasty of Rhwng Gwy a Hafren under the shadowy Madog ab Idrneth.¹⁸

Madog ab Idrneth died in 1140 and probably around the same time Hugh Mortimer (bef.1117-81), the son of Ralph Mortimer, was restored to Wigmore by King Stephen. As has been noted, the idea has grown up in recent times that there were as many as two Ralph Mortimers and two Hugh Mortimers between 1075 and 1181 on the simple, but illogical grounds that Normans could not live into a reasonable old age. However all contemporary documentation as well as the fifteenth century Mortimer genealogy show categorically that there were only two men. Certainly the Hugh Mortimer who died in 1181 'in his old age' made a charter in 1162 which named his father as Ralph.¹⁹ Therefore there could not have been two successive Hugh Mortimers as no Hugh Mortimer is recorded as dying between 1162 and 1181. If a lord of Wigmore had died in that period, evidence for this would certainly have appeared in the pipe rolls which are complete for this period and show that the debts of Hugh did not change. There is a further fact that the Hugh Mortimer who died in 1181 was recorded as having two sons, the eldest of whom was of age from 1173 at the latest.²⁰ These were Roger Mortimer (d.1214) and Hugh Mortimer of Chelmarsh who died in 1202. These men were obviously the children of a marriage that had taken place before 1153, of which more shall be said below. There simply is no contemporary evidence to divide the forty odd year career of this Hugh Mortimer into two.

As we have seen, the Domesday Ralph Mortimer had two wives (see Fig 1), which goes a long way to explaining the longevity of his son Hugh Mortimer (d.1181) as lord of Wigmore. Ralph may have been still alive in Normandy in 1137 when he was at

¹⁵ J H Round, ed., *Calendar of Documents preserved in France illustrative of the History of GB and Ireland (from 918 to 1206)* (1899), No. 1264.

¹⁶ J J Vernier, ed., *Chartes de L'Abbaye de Jumieges* (1916), 1, No.37, 116-8.

¹⁷ The fall of Cans castle is mentioned in *Ordericus Vitalis* (Chibnall, *op.cit.* 6, 369). That this was Cymaron is argued in P M Remfry, *The Mortimers of Wigmore Castle, Part 1, 1066 to 1181* (1995). For the death of Pain on 10 July 1136 see K R Potter & R H C Davis, eds. & trans., *Gesta Stephani* (1976), 16; and B Thorpe, ed., *Florentii Wigorniensis Monachi Chronicon ex Chronicis* (1848-9) 2, 98.

¹⁸ T Jones, ed. & trans., *Brut y Tywysogyon*, Red Book of Hergest version (1955), 116; T Jones, ed. & trans., *Brut y Tywysogyon*, Peniarth Ms. 20 version, (1952), 52.

¹⁹ Charles Robillard de Beaurepaire, ed., "Recueil de chartes concernant L'Abbaye de St Victors en Caux," *Société de l'Histoire de Normandie*, serie 5, Melanges Documents (1898), 370-76.

²⁰ *Pipe Roll* (20 Henry II), 26.

least 77 years old.²¹ His son Hugh Mortimer (d.1181) was obviously from his second marriage and lived to be at least 64. These are hardly exceptional ages. Hugh's son Roger Mortimer (d.1214) made at least 61 and no one has deemed it correct to divide him into a father and son of the same name. It should also be noticed that Hugh Mortimer (d.1181) did not marry until he was at least thirty, and then he married a widow, Matilda Le Meschin (bef.1121-bef.1180), whose own husband, Philip Belmeis, had only died around 1148.²² The Roger Mortimer (d.1214) who succeeded Hugh was born before 1153, so the likelihood is that he was the son of this union.

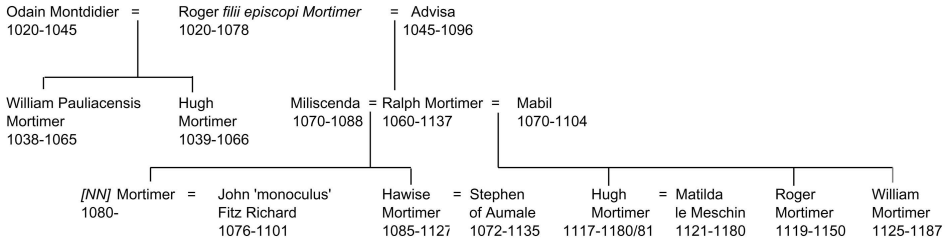


Fig 1. Descendants of Roger Mortimer, son of the bishop

There is then the Roger Mortimer (bef.1119-50/62) who is intruded into the main Mortimer of Wigmore line during the Anarchy solely on the grounds that he led King Stephen's troops in the south-west of England in 1139.²³ This Roger did exist and was the younger brother of Hugh (bef.1117-81). Indeed Hugh even made a charter for the soul of his dead brother.²⁴ There is also the interesting document in which Hugh names his ancestors.²⁵ Here it was stated that the grantor was Hugh Mortimer, the son of Ralph Mortimer the son of Roger Mortimer and that all three men had granted estates to St Victors. We know from other surviving records that the first Roger Mortimer (bef.1020-78+) had raised St Victors into an abbey so here in a nutshell we have the first two lords of Wigmore and their progenitor. The imaginary Ralph Mortimer II and Hugh Mortimer II can therefore fade back into the non-historic past that they had been called forth from. Obviously there is not one shred of contemporary evidence to justify the modern misconception of rewriting the original Mortimer genealogy which correctly identifies the early Mortimers and appears to have been written between 1398 and 1402.²⁶

²¹ The terminology of one grant in a confirmation of 1137 suggests that the lordship of St Valery en Caux was held by both Ralph and his father, although in another grant only Hugh is mentioned; Robillard de Beaurepaire, *op.cit.*, *St Victors*, 363-9.

²² Philip was still alive in May 1145 when he helped found Lilleshall abbey. W Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum* VI, 262, No.3. R W Eyton, *Antiquities of Shropshire*, II (1854ff), 205.

²³ William of Malmesbury *Historia Novella* II, 553. Roger was apparently still alive in 1150, *C Chart R III*, 233-4.

²⁴ W Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum* IV, 399.

²⁵ Robillard de Beaurepaire, *op.cit.*, *St Victors*, 370-76.

²⁶ The Mortimer genealogy is now held in America as Chicago University Ms. CS439, although it is printed without reference to the various hands that wrote it in *Monasticon* VI, 348-55. The work is competently examined in M E Giffen, "The Wigmore Manuscript and the Mortimer Family" (PhD diss., Chicago Illinois, 1939).

Further information

Full details of this genealogy with all the sources are given in Remfry, P M, *Wigmore Castle, 1066 to 1181*, and a much fuller account of the Mortimer family is to be found in Remfry, P M, *The History and Castles of Radnorshire* (2008).

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