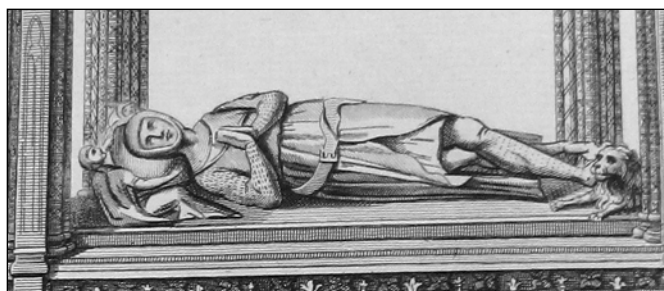


The Duchy of Lancaster: its origins as the Honor of Leicester and its Demesne Manor of Desford

Caroline Wessel

Our new monarch is King Charles III, and on ascending the throne he also became Duke of Lancaster. How did this come about? In 1399 when John of Gaunt, the last Duke of Lancaster, died, Gaunt's son became King Henry IV. So, the Duchy merged with the Crown, and the monarch has been Duke of Lancaster ever since. The dukes of Lancaster were initially earls of Leicester, based at Leicester Castle, whilst Leicestershire has a particularly close link with the Duchy, through a Leicestershire village which has a meadow that is the oldest piece of land in England continuously owned by the Duchy since 1265. For in that year, Simon de Montfort, the last of the Norman earls of Leicester, was killed at the Battle of Evesham by Royalist forces, who felt threatened by his recently elected democratic parliament. As a result, King Henry III awarded de Montfort's lands in the Honor of Leicester to his second surviving son, Edmund Crouchback (1245-1296) with a base at Leicester Castle, and two years later in 1267 bestowed on him the title of Earl of Leicester.



Tomb of Edmund Crouchback, second son of King Henry III, and 1st Earl of Lancaster and 1st Earl of Leicester, Westminster Abbey. (Source: Sepulchral Monuments in Great Britain, Richard Gough, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Edmund_crouchback.jpg Attribution: Richard Gough, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.)

Edmund rapidly acquired much landed wealth nationwide, especially in the county of Lancaster. Thus in 1276 the King granted him the Honor of Lancaster and the title of Earl of Leicester and Lancaster. In 1284 Crouchback's mother, Eleanor of Provence, gave him the Manor of Savoy in London, where later the 2nd Duke built an extravagantly grandiose palace. It is now the site of the Savoy Hotel and the nearby King's Savoy Chapel is still linked to the Duchy. Edmund had a reputation as a ruthless and ferocious warrior and in 1271 took part in the Ninth Crusade to Palestine, his nick-name 'Crouchback' probably referring to the Crusader 'crouch/cross' on his back, rather than to a spinal deformity. He set up or supported various religious foundations, including Grace Dieu Priory

in Leicestershire. Edmund frequently acted as an ambassador abroad and by 1296 was leading the army against the French King Philip IV, who had tricked the English monarch out of his lands in Gascony in south-west France. But whilst there, Edmund died in Bayonne in June 1296.

He and his wife, Blanche of Artois, had three sons and on Edmund's death in 1296 the eldest one, Thomas (1278-1322), became 2nd Earl of Leicester. He was also Earl of Derby and Lancaster and through marriage to Alice de Lacey, the wealthiest heiress in the country, he also acquired the lands and earldoms of Lincoln and Salisbury. This made him the richest and most powerful noble in England, though he was described by one contemporary as 'a coarse, selfish and violent man'. Thomas fervently upheld the principles of Parliamentary oversight of kingly authority, believing that a king who failed to rule justly could be deposed. During the conflict between his cousin King Edward II and his nobles, Thomas, keen to promote reforms, became strongly opposed to the King. He also opposed the King's alleged homosexual relationships. Later, under the powerful pro-Edward Despenser brothers, Thomas was arrested and in 1322 he was convicted of treason. Being of Royal blood he was executed rather than hung, drawn and quartered and his lands and title were confiscated. The spots of blood scattered on the wings of the wyvern crest on the present-day Leicester city coat-of-arms refer to Thomas's execution.

Leicester Coat - of - Arms with the wyvern crest on top, the red Lancastrian lions at the side and Elizabeth I's motto beneath. (Source: The Arms of the City of Leicester, City of Leicester Libraries and Publicity department, undated.)



Thomas's brother, Henry (1281-1345), the second son of Edmund Crouchback and grandson of King Henry III, succeeded, though initially with no title and lands, but the Earldom of Leicester was returned to him in 1324. Henry was one of the principal people behind the deposition of King Edward II and in 1326 he joined the Queen and her lover, Roger Mortimer, against the King. The Earl was sent in pursuit of the monarch, captured him and guarded him in prison. In 1327 King Edward II was locked up in Berkeley Castle, where he apparently abdicated.

Henry Lancaster was appointed head of the Regency Council for his young cousin, the new fifteen-year-old King Edward III, and his lands and the title of 3rd Earl of Lancaster were restored to him. However, about 1330 Henry became blind, so he spent the last fifteen years of his life at Leicester Castle, where he founded the Trinity Hospital for the Poor and Infirm next to the Castle bailey and when he died in 1345, he was buried in its chapel. Trinity Hospital continued as almshouses until 1994, when more modern accommodation for the elderly was built nearby. But the Duchy still appoints the Trinity Chaplain and has paid an annual stipend of £246 to the Hospital ever since its foundation in 1331.

Henry Lancaster's son, the celebrated diplomat and soldier Henry Grosmont (1310-1361), became the next Earl of Leicester and Lancaster and was one of King Edward III's most trusted captains during the Hundred Years War against France (1337-1453). In 1348 he was rewarded as a founding member and second Knight of the Order of the Garter - the first being the King's heir, the Black Prince. In 1351 Henry was created Duke of Lancaster (the second dukedom in England) and the high rank of Count Palatine (of the Palace), thereby making Lancashire a self-governing County Palatinate. He thus became the wealthiest and most powerful peer of the realm. He was also an intelligent and reflective man. He taught himself to write and composed *Livre de seyntz medicines*, a highly devotional treatise, and was a founder of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge.

Grosmont's greatest success was as a brilliant soldier. In the Hundred Years War he achieved fifteen military missions, led six of them, acted as the King's lieutenant seven times and took part in twelve truce conferences. A contemporary chronicler wrote that Henry was 'one of the best warriors in the world'

THE LANCASTER COAT-OF-ARMS

The coat-of-arms of the dukes of Lancaster was the Plantagenet Royal Arms, as they were direct descendants of the Plantagenet King Henry III. But for the Lancasters it was differenced by a label of three points - the conventional heraldic emblem for a first son (except for monarchs, whose children may all use the label).



The Plantagenet blazon (heraldic description) is 'gules 3 lions passant guardant in pale or armed and langued azure'. This translates as - on a red background three gold walking lions with blue tongues and claws, looking forward and arranged vertically. The label with three points is blue, each point bearing three gold fleur-de-lis, taken from the French Royal Arms for Blanche of Artois, the wife of Edmund Crouchback.

The Duchy of Lancaster shield is by kind permission of the Council of the Duchy of Lancaster.

and regarding his campaign in south west France he was later described as a 'superb and innovative tactician ... rising to the level of genius'. Henry was imprisoned by the French for large sums of ransom money a number of times, and on occasions had to also raise ransoms on behalf of the King. He achieved huge wealth himself through acquiring French ransoms, one alone amounting to an incredible £50,000 (in 2017 equivalent to £37,451,005).



Reconstructed arches of the lost collegiate church of the Annunciation of our Lady of the Newarke at Leicester, which was founded in 1354 by Henry Plantagenet, first Duke of Lancaster and fourth Lancastrian Earl of Leicester, now incorporated into the heritage centre of De Montfort University. (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Newarke_church_arches_DMU_heritage_centre,_Leicester.JPG Photograph credit - RobinLeicester, 2015. Reproduced under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license.)

To house a holy relic at Leicester Castle, Henry Grosmont built Leicester's Collegiate Church of the Annunciation of Our Lady of the Newarke. This soon became a place of pilgrimage. Demolished shortly after the Reformation, just two arches of it remain and are now in de Montfort University's Heritage Centre.

So what of Leicester Castle? It was increasingly the strong and highly organised administrative base for the earls/dukes of Lancaster, where its Manor Court was held and its accounts meticulously audited. With its luxurious living quarters, it was also at times the residence of the Duke and his courtiers and was occasionally visited by Royalty. It had its own prison, and the criminals might be hanged on the Duke's gallows at the Castle. The various parts of the Castle can be identified from its extant fourteenth-century accounts. There was a magnificent six aisled and bayed Great Hall (still surviving), the Long, the Flat, the Wardrobe and Dancing Chambers, the Chapel and the Hall of Pleas, and other apartments named due to their positions. The chief domestic buildings were the kitchen, bakehouse, pantry, larder, buttery, scullery, spicery, saucery and cellar. Within the castle enclosure were stables,

loialte que nous avons en noz tres chiers et tres bien amez chevaler monsire Robert Swillington ... nostre chamberleyn'. Robert used his family coat-of-arms, but added two gold buck's heads, strongly asserting himself as the all-powerful Master Forester. Sir Robert was of particular significance to Desford as, besides having luxurious accommodation near the Castle, he also built his own residence called 'New Hall' in the Hunting Forest close to Desford.

In 1381 Gaunt imposed a new and very unpopular national Poll Tax, resulting in the Peasants' Revolt. The rebels ransacked his London Savoy Palace, and despite the Duke's immediate orders to carry his Leicester treasures to safety, they angrily arrived in the town, breaking into Leicester Castle, where they destroyed or looted its valuable riches before they could be moved away to safety.

John of Gaunt married three times, secondly to Constance of Castile, and finally to his mistress, Katherine Swynford, thereby legitimising their offspring. Katherine's brother-in-law, the poet Geoffrey Chaucer, became a close friend. John of Gaunt, 2nd Duke of Lancaster, died at Leicester Castle in 1399. His eldest son by Blanche became King Henry IV, so the Duchy merged with the Crown and every monarch since then has been Duke of Lancaster.

The lowest rank of Duchy official was the *Reeve*. Appointed for a one-year term, he was ultimately responsible for the day-to-day management of a Demesne Manor such as Desford. He had to supervise every aspect of its economy, including agricultural operations, acquisition and disposal of stock and grain, cultivation of vines, planting of hedges and collection of rents. He would sell timber, rent out the mill, collect toll dues from carts passing through the manor, note the income from pannage [fee for pigs feeding on acorns in the forest] and building licence fees. He also had to collect the King's rents and fines on every death, birth, house transaction or petty crime. On behalf of the Castle Steward he oversaw the proceedings of the Manor Court and bailed or fined those falling short. When at Michaelmas the manorial year ended, trained scribes would circulate all the Manors of the Honor, to compile and write up the Reeve's accounts.

The Reeve also had to ensure the proper upkeep of the Manor House itself, the good repair of its farm buildings and agricultural implements. It is clear that the Duchy had a physical presence in Desford, for an early Inquisition stated that the Demesne Manor comprised 'a chief messuage with a garden' worth 4s. a year, 222 acres of land in demesne worth an annual £4 11s. 6d. and 20 acres of meadow producing £1 6s. 8d. Villeins held 16 bovates of land valued at £5 8s. 0d., cottars paid a yearly rent of £1 5s. 6d, and the income from 103 acres of waste land was £3 0s. 6d. Fifty hens rendered

4s. 2d. each year, pannage produced an annual 10s. and a sore sparrow hawk [bird of prey less than one year old] was worth just 2s. A watermill brought in £2 6s. 8d. a year, the pasture of the park earned £1 and in 1361 the perquisites [cf. modern day 'perks'] of the Manor Court were estimated as 3s.

Further evidence for a Duchy stronghold in Desford is found amongst its medieval field names. For one was entitled Castle Hill Close and a large village house now known as The Grange was until the early twentieth century always referred to as Castle Hill House. This must have been a reference to the Lancastrian 'messuage', that previously stood on the site. Clearly the village had close geographical and feudal connections with Leicester Castle throughout the Middle Ages, including the glorious era of John of Gaunt.

The Desford Reeve was a prominent member of the community, chosen from landowners, farmers or senior craftsmen who lived in the bigger houses. In the village, eighteen became known as 'Reeves Houses' and anyone living there was obliged to serve, even if a woman was head of the household. Duchy records show that in the fourteenth century the Reeve received £3 (in 2017 equivalent to £1,761) a year for his services, with an occasional allowance of rent or grazing rights. On behalf of the Honor, the Reeve had to serve at the village Manor Court, held in a large barn behind one of the big houses.

On the day of the Court the church bell would ring to summon those who needed to do business and twelve prominent village men would serve as the Jury, or Homage. When all were assembled in the barn the Jury were sworn in and those who wished to surrender or be admitted to a property were given a document to draw up. This was later copied on to parchment in duplicate, one part for the Duchy Court Roll and the other for the tenant, who therefore held the property by copy of the Court Roll, so was a 'copyholder'. Naturally the Court Baron proceedings were wound up with a hearty feast in a local inn and a toast to the health of the Duke of Lancaster was drunk - although, according to Duchy Records, in 1872 afterwards there was a confrontation. For Mrs Lane, wife of the Old Wheel publican, who had provided the lavish Court Dinner, lodged a complaint stating that the Reeve would not pay her for it - the outcome was not recorded!

One of the rewards for being a Desford Reeve was the use of the Reeve Meadow, which, with its lush grass by the Rothley Brook, produced the very best hay in the parish. The week after the Reeve Piece was mown, the jolly village Meadow Mowing was held, with wrestling and games - and the Reeve had to purchase the prizes.



The Reeve Piece, Desford.

Desford's Reeve Piece holds a particularly important place in the long history of the Duchy because, as its website declares, it is 'the oldest piece of land to be held continuously in the ownership of the Duchy of Lancaster'. In 1965 a group of top Duchy officials planted a tree there (apparently accompanied by several bottles of champagne!) to mark the 700th anniversary of its founding and later a commemorative plaque was placed there. In 2023 the farmer cultivating Desford's Reeve Piece is still a direct tenant of the Duchy of Lancaster and the whole of Desford Manor was administered by the Duchy until 1925.



Plaque commemorating the 700th anniversary of the founding of the Duchy of Lancaster, Desford, Leicestershire.

At the present time the Duchy of Lancaster remains a private estate owned by His Majesty the King as Duke of Lancaster and is administered on his behalf by the Chancellor and Council of the Duchy. Its rural estates consist of 18,481 hectares of land, comprising commercial, agricultural and residential properties as well as portfolios of financial investments.

In 2022, as part of the Desford Heritage Festival, permission was asked from the Duchy to display its heraldic shield on the Festival's 'Walk of Fame'. The Duchy subsequently agreed to consider funding the re-location of the anniversary plaque, that had become totally submerged in thick undergrowth. A warm letter was received from the Duchy's CEO and an

article about the Reeve Piece featured in its official newsletter. The author of this article then wrote an informative booklet entitled *Desford and the Duchy of Lancaster*. A copy was sent to the new Duke of Lancaster, King Charles III, to which Buckingham Palace replied by sending the monarch's warmest best wishes to the people of Desford. Desford is justly proud of its record of having the oldest piece of land continuously owned by the Duchy for 758 years.



Desford's first Heritage Festival in 2022 created a Walk of Fame through the village including this board to Sir Robert de Swillington, Master Forester for the Duchy of Lancaster and Chief Councillor to John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster.

Key Sources:

- Sydney Armitage-Smith, *John of Gaunt's Register Part I*, (Camden Society, 1911), pp.1371-75.
Betty Dickson, *The Manor Court: a special day in Desford*, (DDLHS, 1980s).
Levi Fox and Percy Russell, *Leicester Forest*, (Edgar Backus Leicester, 1948).
Levi Fox, *The Administration of the Honor of Leicester in the 14th Century*. (Edgar Backus, 1940).
Levi Fox, 'Ministers' Accounts' in *Transactions LAHS*, vol. 20 Pt. I, (1938).
Jean Froissart, ed. G. C. Macaulay, *The Chronicles of Froissart*, (Macmillan, 1895).
William Kelly, *Royal Progresses and Visits to Leicester*, (Samuel Clarke, 1884).
Anya Seton, *Katherine*, (Houghton Mifflin, 1954).
Sir Robert Somerville, Duchy Clerk & Keeper of Records, *History of the Duchy of Lancaster 1265-1603*, (Chancellor/Council of the Duchy of Lancaster, 1953).
James Thompson, *An Account of Leicester Castle*, (Crossley & Clarke, 1859).
C. Wessel, *Desford Personalities of the Past*, (The Author, 2021).
Duchy of Lancaster website <https://www.duchyoflancaster.co.uk/>