

THE FIRST FALL OF SIR JOHN MOLYNS

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During the past year an interesting mediaeval document of some importance has been added to the Society's muniments.¹ Its acquisition was made possible in the first place by the generosity of our Honorary Secretary, who himself bought it at a sale of Phillipps MSS at Sotheby's, and held it until the trustees of the Liberty Trust were able to exercise their bounty by repurchasing it and presenting it to us. It is the object of this paper to show the nature of this document and in what precise circumstances it came into being, but not to attempt a detailed analysis of its contents.

Although at the height of his career Sir John Molyns was the wealthiest and most potent magnate in Buckinghamshire, where his fairest manors lay thickly together, he did not originate in the county. His ancestors can be traced on a modest fee at Fareham in the county of Southampton, for which county, in 1301, his father Vincent de Molyns was returned as a knight, to Parliament. Friendships and connections that he there formed may have enabled him to start his son upon a course that was to lead him to great heights.

John begins to appear in the public records in the early 'twenties. Bonds in his favour were from time to time enrolled on the Close Rolls, probably to assure the conveyance of lands that he had bargained and paid for.² It is thought that at this time he was a clerk in the Chancery, in support of which view it is worth noting that after his second fall he was saved from a worse fate than that which befell him by successfully claiming benefit of clergy.

The marriage that he contracted at this time was most beneficial to his fortunes. It soon brought him into this county, and gave him a pair of rich manors most conveniently situated for a man in public life. His wife was Gille, the only daughter and heiress of John Mauduit and Margaret his wife, daughter of Robert Poges, of Stoke Poges and Ditton.³

Imbert, the father of Robert Poges, had come into England with Eleanor of Provence⁴ who was married to Henry III in 1236. He provided himself with a wife by obtaining the wardship of the heirs of Ralf Fitz-Bernard and the marriage of Joan his widow,⁵ and later he provided his son Robert with a wife and a patrimony by purchasing the wardship of Amice, daughter and heiress of Richard de Stokes and marrying the two.⁶

Robert Poges and Amice had two sons, Peter and Thomas, and two daughters, Margaret and Eleanor. Peter married a lady whose name was Elizabeth, and by her he had a son John. Thomas married but had no children. In October 1322 robbers broke into the manor house at Stoke, slew Peter Poges and

his little son, and made off with money and valuables. In July 1330 Molyns was indicted for aiding and abetting this dark deed, but a jury of Stoke Hundred acquitted him; not a shred of evidence now remains to support such a charge.⁷ The death of Thomas, in his father's lifetime,⁸ removed the surviving male heir, and when Robert Poges died, about 1328, his daughters also appear to have been dead. Margaret's half share had therefore fallen to Gille, and that of Eleanor, whose marriage has not been traced, to her two daughters, Joan the wife of Bartholomew Galien of Amersham, and Alice the wife of William de Langley.⁹ The inheritance was partitioned, but later on Molyns appears to have owned the entire manors of Stoke and Ditton with their satellites.

The fortunes of Molyns advanced rapidly. He was prominent at the side of Montagu when in November 1330 he entered Nottingham castle and brought Mortimer's rule to an end by taking him there and sending him to London to be tried for treason and to pay its terrible penalty. He became a yeoman of the chamber and an intimate of the king. In 1337 he was appointed Surveyor of the Chamber and Steward of the Chamber manors. These offices gave him frequent opportunities of getting wealth and property, and he exploited them ruthlessly. The royal bounty bestowed manor after manor upon him, and he acquired others by purchase. Apart from the modest estates in Hampshire that he acquired early in life, he had manors in the counties of Oxford, Bedford, Northampton, Wilts, Somerset, Surrey and Sussex. But it was in Buckinghamshire that his choicest properties lay. Not only had he the Poges lands, with manor houses at Stoke and Ditton, but he bought out the whole Fitz-Bernard fee, with manor houses at Ilmer and Aston Bernard (henceforward Aston Mullins) all of which he had licence to crenellate. He obtained grants of the bailiwick of Cippenham and of the manors of Wendover, Weston Turville, Brill, Ludgershall, Datchet and Fulmer, Chesham Bois, Littlecote.

Nor was he unmindful at this time of the need to lay up for himself and Gille treasures in Heaven as well. The monks of St. Mary Overy, to whom Stoke Poges church had been given, inscribed their names in the Martyrologium of their house and entitled them to the same orisons and offices as other benefactors, as well as to the precedence and rights of a patron in that church. The canons of St. Frideswide at Oxford covenanted to keep his anniversary for ever. When he obtained the manor of Cippenham he was granted the advowson and patronage of Burnham Abbey. A similar grant of the manor of Silverstone was used to establish three chantries which the abbess became responsible to maintain, one in the abbey church, one in the church at Stoke Poges and one in the chapel at Ditton, each with a priest to serve it.¹⁰ Masses were to be sung for the souls of the king and the queen, of John and Gille his wife, of Vincent and Isabel his parents and of his heirs for ever.

In May 1337 Philip VI declared Gascony confiscate and in October Edward III retaliated by laying claim to the Crown of France. The Hundred Years' War got slowly under way. Edward set about gathering allies; many of the rulers of the Low Countries enrolled, each at his price, and eventually the Emperor himself at the hugest price of all. Grants of taxation were obtained from laity and clergy, and various other expedients were contrived in order to get the money to fulfil these rash commitments, but the fact was that it was

beyond the resources of the realm to put the king in a position to meet them. Within a few months of his going to the Low Countries the king had borrowed £100,000; by October 1339 he was in debt to the tune of £300,000 (his normal revenue was about £30,000). The great victory of Sluys was barren in its results for want of the resources to follow it up, and on land there was nothing of value to show for all this money. In September 1340 Edward was forced to conclude a truce on the basis of the *status quo ante*, for he had exhausted his credit and could no longer carry on.

Molyns had gone with the king to the Netherlands at the outset of the war, and had been of his Council there. He was evidently able and active, returning often to England to despatch business. But in 1340, apparently on his own initiative, he remained in England, adhering now to those who surrounded Archbishop Stratford, the Chancellor and head of the government at home. He feathered his nest as thickly and as fast as he could, milking the chamber manors and picking up whatever else came his way. He was able to set up a debt against the king of £329 and to secure it by obtaining a grant of the ninth in the county of Buckingham for the first year,¹¹ and another debt of £1000 similarly assured in Oxfordshire.¹²

The king's position was ignominious. He had achieved nothing. He was deeply in debt; he had pledged his crown, he had assigned his revenues for years ahead to his creditors—to the Bardi, the Peruzzi, Sir William Pole and others, including, as we have seen, Sir John Molyns, and when he left the Low Countries he was compelled to leave noblemen behind him as hostages. Not unnaturally his mood was a black one and he was eager to wreak vengeance on those who, he felt, and was doubtless prompted and encouraged to feel, had let him down to the very point of betrayal by their dilatory conduct of his affairs and their failure to keep him adequately supplied with money.

Silently and unexpectedly the king struck, and struck hard. Before the break of day of 1 December 1340 he arrived in the Thames, accompanied by his most trusted counsellors, and made for the Tower. So slackly was it guarded that he was inside it before the garrison were aware of his presence. Sir Nicholas Beche the Constable and Andrew Aubrey the Mayor of London were instantly summoned to the king and given a list of those whom he required to be taken and brought in at once. Among them were Sir William Pole, to whom of all his subjects he owed most money, and Sir John Stonore. They were all brought in during the next few hours, and lodged there in separate chambers. The next day the king ordered Sir Nicholas Beche and Sir John Molyns to be taken.

On 4 December the king rode out to St. Albans and demanded to see all the rooms there. The abbot dared not gainsay him, and he took him from room to room. One of them, however, could not be unlocked, and when the king asked the reason he was told that the valuables of Sir John Molyns were stored in it and that Sir John had the only keys in his own possession. A smith was fetched and the locks were forced; inside was *graunt avoir et graunt plenté de trésor*, of which the king took possession.

The next day Sir William Trussel, the escheator on this side Trent, and James de Kyngeston, a Chamber clerk of high seniority, were ordered to take possession of and retain all the lands, goods and chattels of Sir John Molyns, and

all sheriffs, bailiffs and other officers were bidden to lend them support.¹³ But Sir John himself was no longer lodged in the Tower; he had escaped.

Formal possession of the manors was quickly taken; such matters were of the normal routine of an escheator's duties. But the king could not deny himself the pleasure of repeating at Stoke and Ditton what he had done at St. Albans. He spent Christmas with the queen at Guildford, and immediately afterwards he went over to Ditton, where he found, so it was said, armour enough to deck out eighty men, and a great quantity of silver and plate, all bound up in little sacks which were bound up in large sacks and sunk in a deep basin of water. The king passed on to Stoke, where he and his friends spent three days in feasting and carousing, after which they returned to London. How much they had helped themselves to apart from the victuals they consumed there is no means of telling.

Our document is the account which Sir William Trussel and James de Kyngeston rendered to the auditors of the Chamber of the armour and other valuables that they had impounded in the house of the parson of Datchet, in the manors of Ditton and Stoke, in Philip Durdent's house (that is to say the Savoy at Denham), and in Notley Abbey where £300 in coin were deposited. It was originally one of nine rotulets containing inventories covering all the counties listed above. It also contains an account of sundry moneys remaining in their hands from the profits of Molyne manors in this and other counties, and an account of the expenses they have incurred in the pursuit of these matters and desire to set off.

The majority of the items enumerated were pieces of armour, for jousting or for battle. There were also hunting dogs, horses, carts and an invalid chair, probably that of Robert Poges who had lived on into his eighties.¹⁴ Besides the moneys found at Notley, £100 in coin came to light at Stoke or Ditton and was sent up to the Tower at once. Victuals had been sent to the king while he was at Guildford, and after the visit of the Court little was left. Venison, however, and game continued to be sent to the king in London.

In their details these accounts must await further and expert treatment, and they must be read in conjunction with the manorial accounts which are preserved apparently entire in the Public Records.¹⁵ As the years go by, we can watch some of the problems that the exploitation of these huge properties gave rise to. Taxes must not be levied on these manors; all those whose business it would ordinarily have been to do so must be enjoined not to. To the manor of Ditton belonged the right of outfangthief; Henry Inde, hanged for felony in Berkshire had held of that manor, so the sheriff must be followed up and made to disgorge any chattels that the felon had possessed when he died.¹⁶ Sir John's London house in Athelyngstrete next Baynard Castle has been taken in hand irregularly and must be recovered.¹⁷

Where Sir John was during these years we cannot tell. His disgrace continued for nearly four years, and the Chancery clerks always referred to his lands as being in the king's hand by reason of his rebellion and disobedience. But on 20 June 1344 a new and gentler formula is used, and the manors are said to be in hand 'for divers causes'.¹⁸ In August 1345 Letters Patent were issued for the purpose of ordering the return to Sir John of all his chattels ex-

cept those that the king had appropriated,¹⁹ and a month later all his manors and lands were restored to him.²⁰

REFERENCES

General. For the various details of the career of Molyns and his acquisitions of property I have followed the entries in the *Calendar of Patent Rolls* and the *Calendar of Close Rolls* (here cited as *Cal. Pat.* and *Cal. Cl.*).

A sumptuous cartulary from the collections of the Somerset Archaeological Society is deposited in the Somerset Record Office (DD/SAS SX132). It is beautifully penned, and contains 290 folios each 19" × 12½", of which the first 129 refer to the Bucks lands. It was compiled for Sir William Molyns later in the 14th century. Dugdale perused it, and made judicious use of it in his *Baronage*.

For the best modern summary, see Tout, *Chapters in Mediaeval Administrative History*, iii, pp. 89 and 118-42.

For the events of December 1340 I have adopted the narrative as related by the *French Chronicle of London*, Camden Society 1844. Its judgement of political affairs is naive, but there is no reason to doubt that the day to day events it relates in fact occurred.

¹ Phillips MS No. 36224, purchased at Sotheby's sale on 29 June, 1965. Now no. 1/72 in the Society's muniments.

² *Cal. Cl.* 1323-7, pp. 158, 159, 174, 324.

³ For the settlement made by John Mauduit and Margaret on John de Molyns and Gille see *Cal. Pat.* 1324-7, p. 164 (August 1325).

⁴ *Book of Fees*, p. 1373.

⁵ *Excerpta e Rotulis Finium*, Vol. I, p. 332 (1240).

⁶ This is the inference from *Hundred Rolls*, i, p. 34, which records Imbert as having the custody of the fee in 1254.

⁷ Gaol Delivery Roll, Just. 3, 6/1.

⁸ Assize Roll, Just. 1/1372, m. 6d. Alice the wife of Richard de Waleden and sometime the wife of Thomas is suing for her dower. (16 July 1330).

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *Cal. Cl.* 1341-3, p. 158. The Foundation charter is in the cartulary.

¹¹ *Cal. Cl.* 1339-41, p. 528.

¹² *ibid.* He was paid out by 30 October.

¹³ *Calendar of Fine Rolls*, V, p. 197 (5 December 1340).

¹⁴ Robert Poges was of age by 1269 (*V. C. H. Bucks III*, p. 305). The latest date for his birth would thus be 1247-8. Joan was still Imbert's wife in 1247 (*Book of Fees*, p. 1404). He was therefore the son of Imbert and Joan, sometime the wife of Ralf Fitz-Bernard who died 1239. Imbert obtained the Fitz-Bernard wardship in 1240, and it was presumably at that date that he married Joan. Robert was not necessarily the eldest child. If he was, then 1241 would probably have been the date of his birth. Anyhow, in 1328 he must have been between 81 and 87.

¹⁵ P.R.O. Rentals and Surveys, SC6, 1120/9, 10, 11, 12.

¹⁶ *Cal. Cl.* 1341-3, p. 48.

¹⁷ SC6 1120/10.

¹⁸ *Cal. Cl.* 1343-6, p. 583.

¹⁹ *Cal. Pat.* 1343-5, p. 543.

²⁰ *ibid.*