

THE BLACK PRINCE, THE FAIR MAID & THE CHANTRY

A Mediaeval Romance

Visitors to the crypt of Canterbury cathedral, especially those interested in architecture, sometimes enquire why the chapel below the south-east transept is known as the Chantry of the Black Prince & why its stonework differs so much from the rest of the crypt.

The background story would have sold many a tabloid newspaper had such publications existed in fourteenth century England - perhaps one might have been called the Daily Chain-Mail

The lady in the case, the Princess of Wales, mother of the heir to the throne, had a famously complicated love life. In his *Tales of English History*, Robert Lacey describes her as "The first beautiful & controversial Princess of Wales"

She was described by Jean Froissart, a leading French gossip-writer of the day, as

*"en son temps la plus belle de tout la royaulme d'Engleterre
et la plus amoureuse"*

*"in her day the most beautiful woman in all the Kingdom of England
- & the most amorous"*



*In the north aisle of the nave - said to be
Joan of Kent - compare with the picture on
the last page*

A decade or so before marrying the Prince of Wales, Joan had been contracted in marriage to two other men - simultaneously - until the Pope chose between them.

The story goes something like this.....

Edward I, King of England (& Wales & Ireland - & of Scotland in all but name) had two wives: firstly the Spanish princess, Eleanor of Castile &, secondly, Margaret a princess of France. Edward, the Black Prince, was Eleanor's great-grandson & Joan his bride was Margaret's granddaughter - see the chart below



Joan's half-uncle Edward II was deposed (& probably murdered) by his wife Queen Isabella (the she-wolf of France) who then ruled England with her lover Roger Mortimer, for a while, in the name of her son King Edward III.

Because of his loyal opposition to this usurpation of his half-brother's throne, Joan's father Edmund of Woodstock, Earl of Kent, was executed in March 1330 for "high treason"

The orphaned Joan aged 18 months was put under "house arrest" with her mother & sister at Salisbury castle &, in later years, was taken into the household of Queen Philippa, wife of Joan's half-cousin King Edward III. There her beauty caught the eye (the one exposed eye) of a young soldier, Thomas Holland, who had taken to wearing a silk eye patch after having vowed to use only one eye until he had proved his military valour in France.

In 14th Century England the King's courtiers were frequently at war in France, pursuing their monarch's claim to the throne of that country.

Since time immemorial, soldiers going to war have faced big questions: "Is it fair to marry her before I leave? What if I don't come back? Will she still want me if I do?" Surely, even then, to answer these questions with the legendary chastity-belt would have been a strange & unusual option.

Young Thomas Holland, had very different ideas - perhaps, more importantly, the 12-year-old Joan did.

In the quaint language of the historians, they dealt with the matter "by contract & cohabitation", though it transpired that, at first, there was far more of the former than the latter - quite right, you might say, when the bride was so young, but child-brides were as common in mediaeval England as they are in some communities to-day.

Following an informal wedding ceremony conducted "by the words of those present" the betrothed bridegroom left to fight in the King's wars through 6 long years.

Off the coast of Flanders, he took part in the famous battle of Sluys - the first set-piece naval battle of mediaeval Western Europe & the first of England's resounding victories at sea.

Rather mundane border control in Gascony followed & then the campaign culminating in the famous victory at Crécy, where Holland fought in the division of the King's 16 year-old son - the Prince of Wales.

Holland's position at court was based upon his status as seneschal or steward in the household of William de Montacute, (Montagu) 2nd Earl of Salisbury, but though Holland was away at the wars, his master stayed behind.

It was surely natural for the lonely teenaged "Fair Maid of Kent" (her sobriquet derived from her late father's title) to remain in the household of the noble Earl.

The Earl, in the euphemistic language of a bygone age "offered his protection." In other words, he behaved towards Joan as "courtiers" in those days often did - & sometimes still do. Disregarding any notion of chivalry, the Earl "courted" the intended bride of his absent steward & entered into a marriage contract with her. The young lady's attitude to these new arrangements can only be guessed at, but we do have some evidence.

In Salisbury's defence, it should be added that some authorities declare that Joan's contract with Holland had been kept secret, & that her guardians supported her marriage with Salisbury, but this version is unsupported by subsequent events.

Very soon after the contract with Salisbury had been consummated in a formal marriage ceremony, Holland returned, demanding fulfilment of his own prior contractual rights.

The Earl would not back down & the matter was referred to Pope Clement VI at Avignon for adjudication. Meanwhile Salisbury locked Joan away - making clear to everyone - then & now - where she stood in the matter.

The formal process requiring a full Papal Commission, was almost interminable; the ongoing hundred years war - in pursuance of King Edward's claim to the throne of France - in which Holland had lately been engaged against the King of France, will have added some piquancy to the debate; the war zone was not that far from the Papal court at Avignon.

Meanwhile, we can imagine the atmosphere - & the gossip - in England's Royal court - with the Black death raging through England at the time, the scandal must have been a welcome change of topic

On 3rd May 1348 Salisbury was ordered by the Pope to release Joan from her "protective custody"

Almost a year later, on St George's Day 1349, though the Black Death was still rampant in England, King Edward held a great tournament at Windsor to mark the inauguration of his Order of the Garter, which became England's premier order of chivalry. (see separate note)

Joan's two husbands were both made founder members & they fought on opposing sides - Salisbury was one of the King's knights & Holland rode in the Black Prince's troop. Their unresolved dispute must have added piquancy to the occasion

On 13th November in that year the Papal Commission (headed by Cardinal Adhémar) declared that Sir Thomas Holland had won the day - or rather the lady - the Salisbury marriage was annulled.

Aged 21, nine years after her first marriage contract with Holland, Joan would have been more than ready for normal married life.

Three years later, Joan's brother died. Since he was childless, their father's Earldom of Kent (& their mother's Barony of Liddell) passed to Joan in her own right. After a delay of 8 years, the style & title of Earl of Kent was eventually granted to Joan's husband, Sir Thomas Holland, just months before he died.

Thus as daughter, sister & wife of successive Earls of Kent it is no surprise that she is still known as "the Fair Maid" of our county. This appellation is unique in England's history - there has never been another.

Joan's precipitate determination to marry again, barely months into her widowhood, may be explained by her concern for her children's protection - she & Thomas had produced 6.

Beautiful Joan was now aged 32 - middle-aged in 14th century England, but her dark eyes, perfect features & long auburn hair were famous &, as gossiping columnists might put it to-day, she had certainly "been around".



Arms of the Black Prince on the vault of his Chantry

Her new "love-interest" will have set tongues wagging. Prince Edward, a dashing & victorious soldier, was heir to the throne, the second English prince to bear the title Prince of Wales, & England's most eligible bachelor. Two years younger than Joan, he had grown up with her at court; his pet name for her, recorded in his private papers, when he was just 18, was "Jeannette".

A marriage contract was signed & dispensation sought from Pope Innocent VI at Avignon. This was required because of their close kinship (half-cousins once removed) & Edward's role as godfather to the sons of his intended bride. Moreover, Salisbury was still alive.

These complications had serious implications for the legitimacy of the children of the heir of the throne - as pointed out unkindly by a French chronicler of the time, the nickname "Maid of Kent" rang somewhat hollow when applied to this mother of six. Though apparently fond of Edward & Joan, the King & Queen were not in favour of the marriage.

Working much faster than his predecessor had done with Joan's previous marital complications, Pope Innocent VI, conscious of Prince Edward's claim to sovereignty over all France (including Avignon) granted a speedy dispensation & the happy pair were wed in October 1361 - within 10 months of the death of her previous husband.

Expressing his gratitude for the Papal favour (& penance for having anticipated the dispensation by entering into a marriage contract in advance of this decision) the Prince made arrangements for the rededication & remodelling of a side chapel at Canterbury cathedral - the south east transept in the crypt.



*Green Man on the Chantry vault
- symbol of fertility*

The make-over in the latest architectural style to which the chapel was subjected, makes a strong contrast to its equivalent on the opposite side of the building. The ponderous Norman style of the unchanged north-east transept, coupled with lack of sunlight, make it seem darker & smaller. Nearly 650 years later, the difference remains striking.

The chapel was re-named the chantry of the Black Prince & its twin altars (formerly dedicated to saints Audoen (or Ouen) & Paulinus) were re-dedicated respectively to the Virgin Mary & the Holy Trinity - having been born on Trinity Sunday, Edward made the Trinity a particular focus of his piety.

Provision was made for two chaplains who would celebrate mass at the chapel's twin altars to thank Almighty God & the Pope his earthly representative for the favour of granting permission for Joan and her Edward to marry. They were to pray also for the souls of the Prince's immediate forbears. A joint annual stipend of 40 marks was provided (£26 13s 4d or, in modern money, £26.66) - 8¾d per day for each chaplain - a generous sum when 1d per day was normal elsewhere.

Funds were also set aside for the chaplains' housing. The site of their house can still be identified by two buildings, whose names refer to the Chantry, standing at the north end of what is known today as King Street.

The following summer, King Edward III invested the new bridegroom with the title of Prince of Aquitaine & Gascony. In Bordeaux, capital of that region, Joan & Edward maintained court for 8 years while Edward pursued his life of unremitting war. Mostly of course he was battling against the French, but in 1366 he became embroiled in a campaign to reinstate Pedro, King of Castile upon the throne which had been usurped by Pedro's illegitimate half-brother Henry Trastamare. Edward returned to Bordeaux victorious but much poorer in pocket & much weakened in health.

In 1371, broken-hearted following the death of their elder son (young prince Edward) at the age of 7, Joan & Edward with their surviving son Prince Richard of Bordeaux, returned to England. Edward resigned the principality of Aquitaine & Gascony during the next year. Shattered in health & fortune, he never recovered. Born on Trinity Sunday in 1330, he died on Trinity Sunday in 1376

His wish was to be buried near his chantry in the crypt of the cathedral in the Lady chapel immediately below the High Altar, but these instructions were overruled & nearly 4 months after his death, at Michaelmas - his widow's 48th birthday, he was laid to rest "upstairs" in the Trinity chapel - a position of honour beside the shrine of Thomas Becket - under a canopy decorated with the Trinity symbol.

Almost precisely a year later Prince Edward was followed to the grave by his father & the throne passed down two generations to Prince Richard of Bordeaux. Said to have inherited his mother's beauty & her pleasure-loving temperament & lately invested with his father's titles: Prince of Wales, Duke of Cornwall & Earl of Chester, the lad became, at the age of 10, England's King Richard II

The Dowager Princess of Wales, a kind of de facto Queen Mother, Joan was bereft of her remaining child; who was held fast in the hands of her various brothers-in-law, notably John of Gaunt, who strove with his brothers to rule England in their nephew Richard's name.

In her remaining years, Joan suffered diminishing power & increasing sadness. In 1381, whilst King Richard struggled to free himself from the power & influence of his uncles, the Peasants' revolt erupted; like an invading army, hordes of rebels converged upon London.

According to one account, the Princess, returning to London from a pilgrimage round the shrines of Kent, was overtaken by the rebels who subjected her & her party to ribald behaviour (including kissing the Princess) but let her go.

Joan then ensconced herself with the Royal party in the Tower of London. Though the rebels had reached London, the elderly & overweight princess (described by the chronicler Thomas of Walsingham as "devoted to pleasure & so fat from eating that she could scarcely walk") was perhaps unwilling or unable to travel further. She probably considered herself safe within the walls of the royal fortress, but she was wrong.

Taking refuge with her were Sir Robert Hales, Treasurer of England (collector of the hated poll tax of a shilling from every adult) & Simon Theobald or Tybald of Sudbury, the unpopular Archbishop of Canterbury, who, as England's Chancellor & ally of John of Gaunt, was long regarded by the rebels as the source of much of their woes. The rebels gained access to the Tower without much difficulty; perhaps the guards were sympathetic to the rebel cause. The archbishop & the treasurer were dragged out for public beheading on Tower Hill.

In contrast, the elderly Princess, suffered only humiliation - & great fear. One authority tells us "matrem regis ad oscula abant" - perhaps an echo of the incident on the road described above. The Tower was ransacked - the king's bed was overturned & the princess's torn to pieces, frightening her so much that she fainted. Allowed to leave via the Watergate, she fled with her household to the storehouse near St Paul's known as the King's Wardrobe.

Joan's 14 year old son King Richard showed courage by confronting the rebels at Smithfield, where in his presence, their leader Wat Tyler was stabbed fatally by the Lord Mayor of London.

Severe though her horror at these events must have been, the peasants' rough chivalry surely tells us that Joan was popular with the common people.

This was perhaps due in part to her support for the Lollard initiators of the Reformation in England led by John Wycliffe, resulting in a Bull in 1377 from Pope Clement XI warning King Richard & the aristocracy of England against the espousal of heresy.

Joan's diplomatic skills were used more than once to heal quarrels between her son King Richard & his uncle John of Gaunt - quarrels which, some years after Joan's death, ended with the deposition of Richard by Gaunt's son who became King Henry IV.

Joan's courage was shown again when, towards the end of her life, she pleaded for four days with King Richard to spare the life of his half-brother John Holland, who was condemned to death for murdering Lord Stafford, a favourite of the Queen.

Before Richard relented & granted Holland a pardon, the strain of 4 days continuous confrontation had broken their mother's heart, she died at Wallingford in August 1385 & was buried beside the tomb of her first husband in her chapel at the church of the Grey Friars Minor at Stamford (destroyed at the Dissolution)

Probably nowadays the place where she is remembered most often is in the chapel which commemorates her second marriage - to Edward, the Black Prince, whose panegyrist described her thus:

*Une dame de grant pris
qe belle fuist, plesante et sage*

*A lady of great price
who was beautiful, pleasant & wise*

RIP



*In the Chantry - said to be Joan of Kent
– compare with the picture on the front*

PS Upstairs, far away from the sound of hymns & prayers in the language of his enemies, the Prince might rest more easily were it not for the occupant of a neighbouring tomb: on the opposite side of Becket's sanctuary, lies Edward's cousin, King Henry IV, who usurped the throne & murdered King Richard II - Prince Edward's younger son

*Michael H Peters
Michaelmas 2009
anniversary of the birth of Joan & the burial of Edward*