

THE STORY OF GEOFFREY DE MANDEVILLE

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Most Barnet people, if they have heard of Geoffrey de Mandeville at all, will think of him as 'The Red-Cloaked Knight', our local spectre who is said to haunt Hadley Woods and East Barnet,*1 complete with headless hound. They may also have heard the legend that Camlet Moat, now quiet and secluded in Trent Park, is the site of Geoffrey's medieval castle.*2 Some people, if they have read certain local history books, might even have come across the theory that Geoffrey de Mandeville was the original Robin Hood! *3

All this aside, Geoffrey de Mandeville the Second is without doubt our most illustrious and romantic early medieval personality, and this study is a brief survey of his career, the circumstances of his death in 1144, and his local connections.

We do not know when or where Geoffrey was born, or when he married the Lady of Rohese de Vere. We do know something of his family background. however, which on examination shows that Geoffrey cannot have had an easy time in his early life. Geoffrey de Mandeville the first came to England with William the Conqueror, and became a powerful landowner, being granted an immense fief centring on Essex, and land in ten other counties. He was also Sheriff of London, Middlesex, Essex and perhaps Hertfordshire. Unfortunately for our Geoffrey, however, William de Mandeville, his father, had the misfortune to be Keeper of the Tower of London when an important political prisoner escaped. King Henry I, much displeased, blamed Geoffrey's father for the escape, and deprived him of the three great Mandeville estates of Sawbridgeworth (Herts), Great Waltham and Saffron Walden (Essex). These manors accounted for almost one third of all the de Mandeville lands in England, and their loss almost eclipsed the family, lowering its prestige considerably.

Therefore, we can see that Geoffrey was certainly not a particularly powerful baron at the beginning of King Stephen's reign in 1135, as earlier historians would have us believe. In fact, Geoffrey inherited from his father vast debts to the crown, much depleted lands and the power he could hope to wield in the new reign was limited by his father's misfortune.*4

The story of how Geoffrey de Mandeville overcame all these obstacles to become the most powerful baron in England is dramatic, but extremely complex, as it is intimately connected with the events of the so-called 'anarchy' - the civil war between King Stephen and the Empress Matilda. Briefly, Matilda was Henry I's daughter (and thus the Conqueror's granddaughter) named by Henry as his rightful successor, but unfortunately for her, the Conqueror's grandson Stephen seized power and made himself King before Matilda even had a chance to set foot in England. It was during the ensuing conflict between Stephen and Matilda that the de Mandeville star rose once more. Geoffrey's great biographer, J.H.Round would have us believe that Geoffrey was a notorious turncoat during the war, changing sides at every opportunity to gain lands and titles as the

price of his allegiance. Round based this opinion of Geoffrey on four charters, issued one after another by Stephen and Matilda, each one in turn trying to outdo the other with generous gifts for Geoffrey to buy his support. *5

In the 1960's, however, Geoffrey de Mandeville's character was re-habilitated somewhat by R C H Davis, who redated these charters to show that in fact Geoffrey changed sides only twice - from Stephen Matilda in June 1141, and then back again to Stephen by Christmas 1141. In Geoffrey's defence for having deserted the King, it must be pointed out that Stephen was at that point being held captive by the opposition, and his cause must have seemed lost to Geoffrey, who reverted to his original loyalties at the first possible opportunity. *6

The civil war of 1140-41 enabled Geoffrey to regain all the Mandeville family losses. In 1139-40, Stephen created him The first Earl of Essex, and in 1141, Geoffrey regained the vital lost manors of Sawbridgeworth and Great Waltham. (Recent research suggests that he regained Walden at some earlier date). *7 Also in this year, Matilda granted him custody of the Tower of London, and made him Sheriff of Essex, Hertfordshire, London and Middlesex. In fact, Geoffrey emerged from the 'anarchy' in triumph. After forty years the Mandeville family was once more a force to be reckoned with. But Geoffrey did not enjoy his triumph for long. King Stephen, regarding the most powerful baron in the land with jaundiced eye, was soon planning his downfall. Stephen could ill afford a subject whose power and influence rivalled that of the king himself. Once Stephen had finally made up his mind to rid himself of that subject, Geoffrey's fall was sudden and dramatic.

In September, 1143, Stephen held court at St Albans, and to his court flocked the most powerful landowners in England, including Geoffrey de Mandeville, the most influential of them all. While attending Stephen's Court, where he should have been safe according to the customs of medieval hospitality, Geoffrey was suddenly arrested on a charge of high treason, and forced to surrender his castles to the king. It was with either this or face the death penalty and, not surprisingly, Geoffrey chose his life. His

impotent fury can be imagined, and as Nesta Pain remarks, "It was like the release of a mad dog".*8 Having lost everything he had gained at a stroke, and probably smarting at the gross injustice he felt he had suffered at the hands of the King, Geoffrey collected his followers and retreated into the Fens to brood upon revenge. In need of a headquarters, Geoffrey descended on Ramsey Abbey (Cams.) evicted all the monks and set about fortifying the holy place, and becoming the architypal robber baron.

With Ramsey Abbey as his base, Geoffrey and his companions began a series of terrorist attacks on surrounding church properties, stealing any treasure deposited there for safekeeping, burning and looting towns and villages as he went. When Geoffrey had exhausted the possibilities of the church, he turned to the common people, seizing and holding them to ransom. The chronicles of the time tell us that these unfortunate individuals were tortured mercilessly until their families came forward with the required cash. The chronicles also tell us that during all this activity, the walls of Ramsey Abbey were seen to run with blood in protest against the sacriligious use to which the Abbey was being put.*9 As a result of his attacks on the church, Geoffrey was placed under ban of excommunication, a ban which could only be lifted by the Pope.

It is interesting to speculate at this point the whereabouts of Geoffrey's family at this time. We know that his son Ernulf was with him at Ramsey, as he was disinherited and exiled later for his part in his father's excesses. It is unlikely that Geoffrey's wife and son, another Geoffrey, were also present, as no subsequent action was taken against them. They had presumably been sent to a place of safety by Geoffrey - perhaps to Walden Abbey.

Eventually, Stephen could no longer ignore Geoffrey's defiance, and marched against him, cutting off his communications by boxing him in the Fens by means of fortified stations, one of which was Burwell Castle.

On a hot summer's day in 1144, while Geoffrey was reconnoitring the defences of Burwell, he made the mistake of removing his helmet to get a little air. A common soldier within Burwell castle spotted this foolish action

and let fly an arrow, which wounded Geoffrey in the head. At first, Geoffrey made light of the wound, but retreated to Mildenhall where it soon became apparent that he was dying.

While Geoffrey lay on his deathbed, the story goes that a company of Knights Templars arrived and, finding the Earl penitent, threw over him the mantle of their Order, complete with red cross. They then removed his body to the 'Old Temple' in Holborn. Here, because Geoffrey had died excommunicated, they enclosed his corpse in a lead coffin and hung it from a tree in their orchard so that it would not pollute the ground. An alternative story would have us believe that the Templars threw the body into a pit outside the Temple, where it was exposed to the taunts of the Londoners for twenty or more years. Eventually, we are told, the Prior of Walden obtained absolution for Geoffrey from the Pope in 1163 and hurried to the Temple in London to collect his patron's body for burial, whereupon the Templars, hearing of his approach, immediately buried Geoffrey at the new Temple Church. *10 His supposed effigy may still be seen there.

Geoffrey's deathbed encounter with the Templars provokes some interesting questions. First of all, actual Templar knights were few and far between. Local preceptories seldom boasted even one knight, so we wonder from where a number of Templar knights should suddenly spring. We should probably assume that they came from the London headquarters rather than 'just happening by' as the story would have us believe. In which case, did the Templars attend Geoffrey on their own initiative, or did Geoffrey request their presence?

The next question which arises is why the Templars should concern themselves with Geoffrey at all. He was obviously of some importance to the Order for knights to attend his deathbed. One answer could be that Geoffrey was an 'associate brother' of the Temple. These brothers paid a yearly fee, and in return enjoyed privileges not far short of those of the Templar knights themselves. The lay brothers, moreover, often assumed the mantle of the Order on their deathbeds, as Geoffrey did, for the salvation of their souls.

But there could be no salvation for Geoffrey because, of course, he died excommunicate, and even the Templars could not bury him with impunity. Indeed, in 1175 and again in 1207, prompted by Geoffrey's burial, Pope Alexander III issued strong statements against the burial of excommunicated persons in Templar cemeteries in England.*11 So we can see that the Templars certainly risked Papal displeasure in burying Geoffrey and, indeed, were strongly criticised for doing so.

Another answer to the question of why the Templars took so much trouble over Geoffrey could be that Geoffrey had made donations and gifts of land to the Order, as did most great landowners of the time. Strangely, I can find no record of any such grant.*12 We do, however, see Geoffrey witnessing a couple of charters to the Templars, one being issued in 1142 by King Stephen, granting land at Temple Dinsley (Herts) to the brothers of the Temple and Hugh of Argentein.*13 Interestingly enough, this Hugh of Argentein, whose family owned the manor of Great Wymondly (Herts.) is thought to have been the Master of the Temple in England at this time. It may be, given the Temple's intimate feudal and local connections in Hertfordshire in Stephen's reign, that Geoffrey de Mandeville and Hugh of Argentein had feudal links, which could be another explanation for Templar interest in the Earl of Essex, who we must remember, was also the Sheriff of Hertfordshire.

We have briefly surveyed Geoffrey's career and downfall. What, then, of his local connections?

Geoffrey de Mandeville played a most important part in the history of the district as he was, as we mentioned above, Sheriff of Hertfordshire and Middlesex and therefore had great influence on the development of the lands around Barnet. Geoffrey was Lord of the Manor of Enfield, and was responsible for fixing the boundaries of Enfield Chase, his own park, in 1140 or thereabouts. The site of the original manor house of Enfield is uncertain, some historians believing it to have been situated at Camlet Moat. Later historians prefer the site of the moated space in Southbury Road, Enfield, once known as 'Oldbury'.

Geoffrey also had connections with Monken Hadley. Again

around 1140 *14 Geoffrey founded the priory (later abbey) of Walden, and included in its endowments (sources of income), the churches and tithes of Enfield, South Mimms and the Hermitage at Hadley. Little is known of this original Hermitage. Even its location is uncertain - it may lie on the site of the present church of Monken Hadley, but without archaeological investigation this cannot be taken for granted. The two structures may even have co-existed for a time.^{15*} Old Fold may have been the manor house attached to Hadley, as it has been argued that Geoffrey detached a section of land around Old Fold which belonged to South Mimms, in order to form an endowment for the Hermitage. This action, which is tied up with the creation of the boundaries of Enfield Chase, apparently severed Hadley from South Mimms, the latter thus becoming an independent manor in 1140.¹⁶

It was probably in the following year that Geoffrey built the motte and bailey castle at South Mimms. The excavation of this castle has been discussed fully by Dr Kent and the reader is referred to Bulletin No.15 for further details of this fascinating site.

Now that we have surveyed Geoffrey's career, death and local connections *17 it is perhaps understandable that the people of the Barnet district do not wish to allow his ghost to rest. Geoffrey de Mandeville, first Earl of Essex, was a larger-than-life personality, whose exploits and tragic end need no embellishment by the storyteller. It is not surprising that he remains South Hertfordshire's greatest folk hero.

* NOTES:

1. Why Geoffrey should haunt East Barnet eludes me, as the area was owned by the Abbey of St Albans at the time.
2. "Tales of Old Hertfordshire", Doris Jones-Baker, 1987.
3. "Old Park in the Manor of Enfield", Douglas Haigh.
4. "The Misfortunes of the Mandevilles" C.W. Hollister, in History, London 1973, Vol.58, No.192, pg.20 et seq.

5. "Geoffrey de Mandeville: A Study of the Anarchy", J.H. Round, 1892.
6. "Geoffrey de Mandeville Reconsidered", R.C.H. Davis, English Historical Review, 1964, No.79.
7. "Saffron Walden to A.D.1300", S.R. Bassett, CBA 1982, pg.15.
8. "Empress Matilda", Nesta Pain, 1978, pg.130 et seq.
9. Chronicles of Ramsey Abbey (See Round, Pg.217).
10. Round, pg.226.
11. "The Murdered Magicians", Peter Partner, 1987.
12. The record of the Templars in the twelfth century are incomplete, so it is possible that records of Geoffrey's donations to the Temple (if any) have been lost.
13. "Records of the Templars in the Twelfth Century", Ed. Beatrice A. Less, 1935, pg.212-13.
14. "Saffron Walden A.D.1300", pg.21 and pg.31, n58. The Chelmsford Archaeological Trust has recently completed excavations of Walden Priory and Abbey, and its results are eagerly awaited.
15. "Monken Hadley Church and Village", W.H. Gelder, pg.8.
16. "The Story of Potters Bar and South Mimms", Ed. K. Rutherford-Davis, Pg. 28-9.
17. For the full discussion of the incidence of the name "Mandeville" in the Barnet area, see Bulletin No.17 "Dancers Hill and the Manor of Mandeville", H.M.Baker 1973.

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