

Women, Politics and Local Government in the Thirteenth Century

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In August 1263, the king wrote to his escheators on both sides of the River Trent, informing them that John de Warenne, William de Valence and Hugh Bigod had all agreed to stand as sureties for Isabella de Forz, the widowed countess of Aumale. In return for the agreement to pay her relief, Henry III awarded Isabella seisin of the extensive estates in Yorkshire, Devon, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight that comprised her inheritance from her brother Baldwin de Revières, the former earl of Devon. Isabella, the king informed his officials, was now expected to attend him ‘in person’ at the next parliament in London so that she might perform homage for her dead brother’s lands.¹ While the reference to Isabella’s relief in the fine rolls serves as a striking reminder of how the crown scrutinised and profited from the lives of its tenants-in-chief, Isabella’s own appearance in this context raises important questions about her political agency as a woman.

In the first place, the company she apparently kept at this time is intriguing - John de Warenne was earl of Surrey, William de Valence was John’s brother-in-law and the king’s unpopular Lusignan half-brother, and Hugh Bigod was John’s half-brother and a former baronial justiciar, who, like John, had returned to the royalist fold.² Just how closely was Isabella acquainted with these powerful figures at the Henrician court? How had they been persuaded to support her succession to her dead brother’s

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¹ *CFR*, 1262-3, nos 713, 714.

² On Hugh’s return to the royalist fold, see M. Morris, *The Bigod Earls of Norfolk in the Thirteenth Century* (Woodbridge, 2005), p. 90. See also J. R. Maddicott, *Simon de Montfort* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 244; S. L. Waugh, ‘Warenne, John de, sixth earl of Surrey (1231–1304)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004; online edition), available at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/28734>, accessed on 12 June 2013.

estates? Were their actions the result of lobbying on Isabella's part, were they based upon ties of friendship, neighbourhood or lordship, or were they influenced by the king himself?³

In the second place, Isabella's summons to attend parliament for the performance of her homage raises questions about what else she might have done there, had she attended.⁴ As a woman living in a patriarchal society, her access to public power was limited and it is unlikely that she participated in any formal discussions that took place.⁵ Medieval women, as the imperfect heiresses of Eve, were, after all, expected to be subordinate to men for most of their lives. Religious ideas about female imperfection were firmly upheld by the common law. When the author of *Bracton*, a thirteenth-century legal text, discussed the classification of the sexes, he observed 'Women differ from men in many respects, for their position is inferior to that of men'.⁶ Women from all social backgrounds often spent much of their lives as daughters and wives under the legal mastery of their parents, guardians and husbands. It was only in widowhood that a woman like Isabella might enjoy a measure of freedom from male tutelage.⁷

It is, however, highly likely that elite women had opportunities to engage in informal discussions behind the scenes with the other great magnates present in parliament and were familiar with the wider political issues addressed there.⁸ There was, after all, a fairly long-established tradition of aristocratic women's attendance at the royal court on occasions which coincided with assemblies and councils summoned by the king. John Maddicott has highlighted the presence of aristocratic wives

³ This was a time when Henry was anxious to foster support and tempt into his own party adherents to the baronial reformers or those whose loyalties had remained fluid: S. L. Waugh, *The Lordship of England: Royal Wardships and Marriages in English Society and Politics, 1217-1327* (Princeton, NJ, 1988), p. 257.

⁴ Isabella did not, on this occasion, answer the king's summons. On 12 May 1265, when the king was a captive in Montfortian custody, the sheriff of Hampshire was ordered to take her lands into his hands on the understanding that they would be restored to Isabella, provided she attended the next parliament on 1 June 1265: *CR 1264-8*, p. 118.

⁵ Women are not listed among those who attended parliament in J. R. Maddicott's masterly study, *The Origins of the English Parliament, 924-1327* (Oxford, 2010).

⁶ *Bracton: On The Laws and Customs of England*, ed. G. E. Woodbine, trans. S. E. Thorne (4 vols, Cambridge, MA, 1968-77), ii, p. 31.

⁷ See, for example, J. Ward, *Women in England in the Middle Ages* (London, 2006), p. 4.

⁸ For the routes to counsel and intercession open to queens, which might well have served as a model for aristocratic women, see M. Howell, *Eleanor of Provence: Queenship in Thirteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1998), ch. 11; J. C. Parsons, 'The Queen's Intercession in Thirteenth-Century England', in J. Carpenter and S.-B. MacLean (eds), *Power of the Weak: Studies on Medieval Women* (Urbana, 1995), pp. 147-77.

and daughters at ‘the festal crown-wearings’ of King Arthur in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain*, a work written in or around 1138 and heavily influenced by the social conventions of the writer’s own day.⁹ There was also a strong expectation in medieval conduct literature that aristocratic women should engage in politics. Writing in or around 1405, but drawing on the earlier, thirteenth-century example of Blanche of Castile, the mother of King Louis IX of France, Christine de Pisan advised the ‘wise princess’ to embrace, eagerly, the mantle of mediator between warring princes and barons, so that she might bring peace to her family’s dominions through her ‘good counsel’.¹⁰

The appearance within the records and chronicles of Henry III’s reign of a woman like Isabella de Forz is not altogether surprising in view of her lineage, her social connections, her wealth and her marital status – she was a widow at the time of the events recounted here. As influential and wealthy tenants-in-chief whose concerns as lords and landholders were shared by other nobles, it would be incredibly naïve to think that elite women, ladies whose families dominated English local and national affairs, were not informed about, and did not engage in, national politics at its highest levels. In recent years, the work of Margaret Howell and John Carmi Parsons has highlighted the roles of English and French queens and royal daughters in this period as agents for political influence who operated both on the public stage and in more private settings, forming networks of contacts, fostered by personal patronage, with other wellborn men and women.¹¹ In a similar fashion, Emma Cavell and Linda E. Mitchell have illuminated some of the contributions made by aristocratic women to political life on the Anglo-Welsh Marches, most notably in Cavell’s case as widows and lords who petitioned the English crown in support of their rights and those of their tenants.¹² More recently Susanna Annesley has drawn attention to a highly politicised speech made by Isabella de Forz’s contemporary,

⁹ Maddicott, *Origins of the English Parliament*, p. 91. For the passage in Geoffrey, discussed by Maddicott, see *The Historia Regum Britannie of Geoffrey of Monmouth I: Bern Burgerbibliothek, MS. 568*, ed. N. Wright (Cambridge, 1985, reprinted 2001), p. 96 (‘Aduenerant namque tot nobiles cum coniugibus et filiabus suis leto conuiuio digni.’).

¹⁰ *Christine de Pisan: The Treasure of the City of Ladies or the Book of the Three Virtues*, ed. S. Lawson, Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth, 1985), pp. 50-1.

¹¹ See, for example, Howell, *Eleanor of Provence*, especially pp. 56, 79, 107-8, 198, 281-2; J. C. Parsons, ‘Mothers, Daughters, Marriage, Power: Some Plantagenet Evidence, 1150-1500’, in J. C. Parsons (ed.), *Medieval Queenship* (Sutton, 1994), pp. 63-78; J. C. Parsons, *Eleanor of Castile: Queen and Society in Thirteenth-Century England* (Basingstoke, 1995), esp. ch. 2.

¹² E. Cavell, ‘Aristocratic Widows and the Medieval Welsh Frontier: The Shropshire Evidence’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 17 (2007), 57-82, at 70-1; L. E. Mitchell, *Portraits of Medieval Women: Family, Marriage and Politics in England, 1225-1350* (Basingstoke, 2003).

the widowed countess of Arundel, in an audience with Henry III in the English king's private chamber at Westminster in 1252.¹³ The exchange of words between the countess and the king was recorded by the St Albans chronicler, Matthew Paris, and the incident noted on the fine rolls. During the course of their meeting, Isabella took Henry to task, in no uncertain terms, for extorting money from his subjects, denying them justice and acting as 'a shameless transgressor of ... [their] liberties'.¹⁴ According to Paris, the countess even went so far as to admonish the king for disregarding Magna Carta: "Where are the liberties of England so often committed to writing, so often granted, so often redeemed? I, although a woman, and all of us, your natural and faithful subjects, appeal against you before the tribunal of the [most] formidable Judge [God]".¹⁵ Henry, for his part, was eventually silenced by the countess's words, but failed to mend his ways.¹⁶ What is interesting here is the countess of Arundel's apparent willingness to represent, albeit as a self-nominee, the wider political community, that is, those men, presumably the earls and barons, who counselled the king and who had attended the October parliament of that year which had recently been disbanded.¹⁷

Perhaps the most surprising, most remarkable and most direct way, though, that some women engaged with royal government was as local office holders, in an age when women were usually prevented from serving as royal officials on the grounds of gender. A handful of women served as sheriffs, the crown's chief local agents in the counties in the thirteenth century. My own research has considered the appointments of two widowed heiresses - Lady Nicholaa de la Haye and Ela Longespée, countess of Salisbury - as sheriffs of Lincolnshire and Wiltshire during the minority and personal rule of Henry III,¹⁸ while Douglas Jansen has examined the careers of Isabella de Clifford and Idonea de Leyburn, two sisters and co-heiresses to the barony of Westmorland, who served as joint sheriffs of Westmorland under Edward I.¹⁹ A survey of the fine rolls and other records of the royal Chancery,

¹³ S. Annesley, 'Isabella Countess of Arundel's Confrontation with King Henry III', *Fine of the Month* (August 2009), available at <http://www.finerollshenry3.org.uk/content/month/fm-08-2009.html>, accessed on 20 June 2011.

¹⁴ *Matthaei Parisiensis Chronica Majora*, ed. H. R. Luard (7 vols, London, 1872-83), v, pp. 336-7, esp. p. 337.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ At this parliament, the prelates pressured the king to observe Magna Carta: *ibid.*, v, pp. 324-8, esp. p. 327.

¹⁸ See L. J. Wilkinson, 'Women as Sheriffs in Early Thirteenth-Century England', in A. Jobson (ed.), *English Government in the Thirteenth Century* (Woodbridge, 2004), pp. 111-24.

¹⁹ See D. C. Jansen, 'Women and Public Authority in the Thirteenth Century', in T. M. Vann (ed.), *Queens, Regents and Potentates, Women of Power 1* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 91-105.

Exchequer and judiciary for the thirteenth century also reveals a small, but significant, number of other noblewomen who acted as royal officials in their own right as constables of royal castles and foresters. It is the activities and experiences of these women, and what they reveal about the opportunities that existed for women to exercise public authority over local communities, that form the main foci for this paper.

Women as castellans

The women who held local office during the reign of King Henry III usually possessed a hereditary or ‘quasi-hereditary’ right to the position in question (the term ‘quasi-hereditary’ is used here to cover offices that tended to pass from one generation to another within a family, but over which the crown retained the overall right to confirm or veto appointments). In fact, hereditary or ‘quasi-hereditary’ offices seem to have offered women the most accessible routes into local government in thirteenth-century England. This was often the case with constablings that had been held by the same family over successive generations. A claim to the constablings of Lincoln Castle, for example, was connected to the holders of the barony of Brattleby for most of the twelfth century. Lady Nicholaa de la Haye, the eldest daughter and co-heiress of Richard de la Haye (d. c. 1169), successfully transmitted this claim to her second husband, Gerard de Camville (d. 1215), and retained the castle for most of her widowhood.²⁰ On her death in 1230, Lady Nicholaa’s claim eventually passed, via marriage, into the hands of the earls and subsequent countess-heiresses of Lincoln in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. By the first half of the fourteenth century, this claim was held by Alice de Lacy, widow of Thomas, earl of Lancaster, and *suo jure* countess of Lincoln, who transmitted it to her second husband, Ebulo Lestrangle.²¹ It was only in quite exceptional circumstances that a wealthy widow, usually one who controlled substantial estates in the same locality, was awarded the custody of a royal castle not closely associated with her natal or marital kin.²² After the Barons’ Wars of the 1260s, Isabella d’Aubigny, countess of Arundel, whom we have met already and who had evidently patched up her

²⁰ See L. J. Wilkinson, *Women in Thirteenth-Century Lincolnshire* (Woodbridge, 2007), pp. 14-24.

²¹ *CChR, 1327-41*, p. 213. For a brief summary of the history of the constablings of Lincoln Castle in this period, see J. F. Hill, *Medieval Lincoln* (Cambridge, 1948; reprinted Stamford, 1990), pp. 87-91, 262. See also C. Coulson, *Castles in Medieval Society: Fortresses in England, France, and Ireland in the Central Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 367-71.

²² For an example of a widow, Isabella de Mortimer, who in 1280 was awarded custody by the crown of Oswestry Castle, which had formerly been held by her husband, see Cavell, ‘Aristocratic Widows’, 72-3.

earlier quarrel with Henry III, served, for a brief spell, at the king's pleasure, as constable of the royal castle of Portchester in Hampshire. She presided over repairs to the buildings there, before this castle was transferred in the winter of 1270 to a new castellan, William Belet.²³ In a similar way, Amice, countess of Devon, was appointed as constable of Hadleigh Castle in Essex between February/March 1269 and August 1270, receiving orders to repair the mills, granges and other buildings pertaining to that fortress. In this case, it is not entirely clear whether Countess Amice effectively discharged the duties attached to her new office. In July 1270, just a month before the king decided to transfer the castle, together with all 'the weapons, victuals' and other things there, to a new custodian, the sheriff of Essex was urgently ordered to repair the mills and buildings at Hadleigh 'without fail'.²⁴ Perhaps Amice had been neglectful of her duties.

The responsibilities that some widows assumed as castellans grew directly out of their roles within marriage.²⁵ Noble wives often made a significant contribution to the governance of their families' lands in the central and later Middle Ages, and sometimes assumed more wide-ranging responsibilities in their husbands' absences.²⁶ Ladies of the greater and lesser aristocracy routinely assisted their husbands in the management of substantial households and in widowhood they also often took direct personal control of their own domestic establishments and estates, answering to the crown for military and other services owing from their lands.²⁷ The castle was still very much an aristocratic

²³ Isabella held the castle at the king's pleasure from 1267 to 1270, and received a grant of 16 marks per annum for the duration of her keepership from the issues of the castle: *CLibR*, 1260-67, p. 290; *CLibR*, 1267-72, no. 1922; *CPR*, 1266-72, pp. 204, 496; *CFR*, 1270-1, nos 57-8; L. L. Gee, *Women, Art and Patronage from Henry III to Edward III, 1216-1377* (Woodbridge, 2002) pp. 15, 90 (where other later examples of female castellans are given); Cavell, 'Aristocratic Widows', 74. Isabella held extensive estates in dower in the neighbouring county of Sussex and elsewhere: *CR*, 1242-7, pp. 112, 116-17.

²⁴ *CFR*, 1268-9, nos 163, 201-2; *CFR*, 1269-70, nos 1155-6; *CLibR*, 1267-72, nos 691, 1580.

²⁵ See also Charles Coulson's discussion of 'female castellans' and 'ladies of fortresses', which includes some interesting late medieval examples, in his *Castles in Medieval Society*, pp. 297-338, esp. at pp. 297-9 and pp. 305-7, and pp. 366-82.

²⁶ For the role of noblewomen in estate administration, see, for example, R. E. Archer, "'How ladies... who live on their manors ought to manage their households and estates'": Women as Landholders and Administrators in the Later Middle Ages', in P. J. P. Goldberg (ed.), *Woman is a Worthy Wight: Women in English Society c. 1200-1500* (Stroud, 1992), pp. 149-81; J. C. Ward, *English Noblewomen in the Later Middle Ages* (London, 1992), ch. 6.

²⁷ See, for example, L. J. Wilkinson, 'The "Rules" of Robert Grosseteste Reconsidered: The Lady as Estate and Household Administrator in Thirteenth-Century England', in C. Beattie et al. (eds), *The Medieval Household in Christian Europe, c. 850-c. 1550: Managing Power, Wealth and the Body* (Turnhout, 2003), pp. 293-306.

home and centre of lordship in the thirteenth century.²⁸ In spite of the increasingly palatial features and concessions to comfort that castle architecture was beginning to display, these structures still possessed important military and administrative functions. Castles might offer a place of safe-keeping for a noble family's treasure and plate.²⁹ They might also house armouries and prisons.³⁰ Their halls often provided meeting places for honorial or other local courts.³¹ Even though 'the peripatetic pattern of life of the king and great barons [...] called for frequent moves from one castle or manor to another',³² each private castle held by an aristocratic family required constant upkeep and repairs, as well as the maintenance of an armed garrison, in ways not dissimilar to royal castles. As the wives of male castellans, some women were called upon to assist their husbands in their official duties as an extension of their domestic responsibilities. It might be acceptable for a lady to play an active, if defensive, role in siege warfare in an emergency, should the need arise.³³ In May 1267, for example, William de Valence dispatched a letter to his wife Joan, whom he addressed as 'his dear consort and friend', informing her that he was sending Sir Robert de Immer to defend Winchester Castle. Once installed at Winchester, Sir Robert was placed directly under her command.³⁴ While Sir Robert dealt with the minutiae of the day-to-day affairs of the garrison, Joan presumably fulfilled more of a supervisory role as her husband's representative.

It might also be permissible for a noblewoman to pursue her own military initiatives, provided that it served in her family's interests. The author of the *History of the Dukes of Normandy* celebrated the achievements of Matilda, wife of William de Braose, in maintaining the war against the Welsh in the Marches.³⁵ A dramatic story preserved in the life of Archbishop Geoffrey of York by Gerald of

²⁸ See, for example, M. W. Labarge, *Mistress, Maids and Men: Baronial Life in the Thirteenth Century* (London, first published 1965, repr. 2003), ch. 1; C. M. Woolgar, *The Great Household in Late Medieval England* (New Haven, NJ, 1999).

²⁹ R. A. Brown, *English Medieval Castles* (London, 1954), p. 188.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 188-9.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 187-8. See also N. Denholm-Young, *Seignorial Administration in England* (Oxford, 1937), p. 92.

³² Labarge, *Mistress, Maids and Men*, p. 21.

³³ The involvement of women in sieges was a long-running motif in historical writing. See, for example, P. Stafford, *Queens, Concubines and Dowagers: The King's Wife in the Early Middle Ages* (Athens, GA, 1983), pp. 117-20; M. Chibnall, 'Women in Orderic Vitalis', *The Haskins Society Journal*, ii (1990), 105-21, at 114.

³⁴ *Royal and Other Historical Letters illustrative of the Reign of Henry III*, ed. W. W. Shirley (2 vols, London, 1862-6), ii, p. 371 no. dclvii.

³⁵ *Histoire des ducs de Normandie et des rois d'Angleterre*, ed. F. Michel (La Société de l'histoire de France, 1840), p. 111.

Wales describes how Richeut, the sister of William de Longchamp, the royal chancellor, had charge of the royal castle of Dover (Kent) during her husband's absence in 1191.³⁶ Acting on the orders of her brother, the chancellor, this lady castellan (*dominam suam castellanam*) deployed men from the castle to apprehend the archbishop upon his arrival in England.³⁷ Richeut dispatched messengers, who successfully boarded Geoffrey's boat and attempted to bring the archbishop under armed escort to Dover Castle. Geoffrey only just managed to escape to Dover Priory on a horse that was waiting for him on the beach. Richeut's men followed him to the priory.³⁸ When asked by Geoffrey if she had authorized the attack, Richeut replied that she had acted on her brother's instructions and would burn Dover Castle and the town of London if William commanded it.³⁹ When Geoffrey refused to take an oath of fealty to the king and the chancellor, the church was besieged for several days. The archbishop excommunicated Richeut, whereupon the soldiers seized the church. A little while later, Richeut's husband, Matthew de Clere, arrived in Dover, but similarly failed to persuade Geoffrey to swear an oath. The archbishop was subsequently arrested by a group of mercenaries and carried off by force to Dover Castle.⁴⁰ In spite of the controversy surrounding Richeut's treatment of the archbishop, it is noteworthy that this writer did not criticize her for acting in an unwomanly fashion, but portrayed her actions as an extension of her role as Longchamp's sister and Matthew's wife.

The continuation of an aristocratic wife's responsibilities to supervise a castle garrison in a time of war into widowhood is demonstrated rather well by another, later example from Dover. Following the deaths of her husband, Simon de Montfort, earl of Leicester, and her son, Henry,

³⁶ For William de Longchamp and his family, see R. V. Turner, 'Longchamp, William de (d. 1197)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004; online edition May 2007), available at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/16980>, accessed 28 May 2013.

³⁷ *Giraldi Cambrensis opera*, eds J. S. Brewer, J. F. Dimock and G. F. Warner (7 vols, London, 1861-77), iv, p. 388.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, iv, pp. 388-9.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, iv, p. 389.

⁴⁰ Matthew and Richeut were both also excommunicated for their actions by St Hugh of Lincoln: *ibid.*, iv, p. 390. Ralph of Diceto described Richeut as 'the sister of the bishop of Ely who held the castle in custody (*soror Eliensis episcopi quae castellum custodiebat*): *Radulfi de Diceto Decani Lundoniensis Opera Historica*, ed. W. Stubbs (2 vols, London, 1876), ii, 96-7. A later, brief account of these events is preserved in the writings of the thirteenth-century St Albans chronicler, Roger of Wendover, who recounted how the bishop of Ely's sister had charge of the royal castle of Dover in 1191, and assisted the sheriff of Kent in the capture of King John's half-brother, Geoffrey, the newly ordained archbishop of York: *Chronica Rogeri de Wendover liber qui dicitur Flores Historiarum*, ed. H. G. Hewlett (3 vols, London, 1886-9), i, 193.

constable of Dover, at the Battle of Evesham on 4 August 1265, Eleanor de Montfort, Henry III's younger sister, led the defence of this fortress. Thanks to the survival in the British Library of a substantial fragment of Eleanor's household roll for 1265 (British Library Additional MS 8877), we can chart in close detail the arrangements made by Eleanor to combat the renewed royalist threat. Eleanor and her household had resided at Dover since her flight across southern England at the beginning of June, following the Lord Edward's escape from Montfortian custody. Considerate of the fact that she was technically a guest in her son Henry's castle at Dover and, perhaps in preparation for a siege, Eleanor's officials had kept meticulous records of provisions, including two tuns of red wine (worth 66s. 8d.), taken from his stores upon her arrival.⁴¹ Not altogether surprisingly, Eleanor's own officials also made extensive use of local ports and markets to redress a shortfall in provisions: oats, corn and wine were purchased at Sandwich, 13½ miles away, and a variety of fish was bought at Hythe, 14½ miles from Dover. Eleanor's representatives hired boats to convey essential items such as firewood, peat and salt to the stronghold.⁴² Eleanor was not, though, entirely without resources of her own within Kent. She held in dower from her first marriage the manors of Sutton, Kemsing and Brabourne. Brabourne, situated 17-18 miles from Dover, was her closest property and it was here that Eleanor regularly utilized the services of her manorial reeve to transport cheese, grain, oxen and sheep to the castle.⁴³ In addition to augmenting the castle's supplies, Eleanor also sought to foster local support for Earl Simon's increasingly fragile regime. She turned her residence at Dover Castle into an exercise in public relations, extending her hospitality towards the Montfortian sympathizers of the Cinque Ports. From her household roll, we know that she entertained the burgesses of Sandwich in mid-June,⁴⁴ and the burgesses of both Winchelsea and Sandwich again later that summer, along with other prominent local Kent and Sussex landholders.⁴⁵

⁴¹ *Manners and Household Expenses of England in the Thirteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*, ed. T. H. Turner (London, 1841), pp. 49, 58-9. For further discussion of Eleanor's role in 1265 and her residence at a succession of castles, including Dover, see L. J. Wilkinson, *Eleanor de Montfort: A Rebel Countess in Medieval England* (London, 2012), ch. 8.

⁴² *Manners*, pp. 52, 59, 61, 62, 63. Some items were purchased in Dover itself: *ibid.*, pp. 49, 58, 61-2. See also Wilkinson, *Eleanor de Montfort*, p. 117.

⁴³ See, for example, *Manners*, pp. 53, 54, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62; Wilkinson, *Eleanor de Montfort*, p. 117.

⁴⁴ *Manners*, p. 50.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 62 (the burgesses of both Sandwich and Winchelsea), 77-8 (the burgesses of Winchelsea); Wilkinson, *Eleanor de Montfort*, pp. 119-21.

Nevertheless, as the war closed in upon her husband and sons in the face of revived royalist fortunes, Eleanor's position at Dover became more precarious as the summer progressed, so precarious, in fact, that it became necessary at the beginning of August to move livestock from Brabourne to Dover by night (rather than by day), presumably for improved security.⁴⁶ Earl Simon's death at Evesham also placed Eleanor firmly in the spotlight. It was a reflection of the extensive responsibilities that she had assumed during her marriage and of the strategic importance of Dover Castle (Henry III invested £7,500 on improvements to this stronghold alone; more money than he spent on any other castle during his reign) that Eleanor and her garrison continued to form a focal point for Montfortian resistance in the south east.⁴⁷ Further preparations for Dover's defence are suggested by the payment of two masons and two servants for making a furnace during the latter part of August 1265.⁴⁸ In the altered political climate and with the royalists closing in, Eleanor and her garrison found it increasingly difficult to secure supplies, especially from Brabourne. Entries in Eleanor's accounts for 23, 24, 25 and 26 August refer instead to oxen consumed at Dover which had been obtained 'by booty', presumably from raids on the neighbouring countryside.⁴⁹ The types of wine served to different members of her household – the knights and her lesser servants – now began to be carefully rationed and graded by type (the knights enjoyed Gascon wine and the remainder of Eleanor's household 'bastard' wine).⁵⁰ In September, Eleanor took steps to smuggle two of her surviving sons – Richard and Amaury – overseas, from Dover to France, together with 11,000 marks in cash which had formerly belonged to Earl Simon.⁵¹ Eleanor's hold on Dover Castle was no longer impregnable; one chronicler recorded an attempt by royalist captives within the castle to bribe their guards and overwhelm the garrison.⁵² With the pressure

⁴⁶ *Manners*, p. 65.

⁴⁷ N. J. G. Pounds, *The Medieval Castle in England and Wales* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 82.

⁴⁸ *Manners*, p. 67; Wilkinson, *Eleanor de Montfort*, p. 124.

⁴⁹ *Manners*, pp. 83-4; H. W. Blaauw and C. H. Pearson, *The Barons' War including the Battles of Lewes and Evesham* (London, 1871), p. 328 n. 3; Wilkinson, *Eleanor de Montfort*, p. 124.

⁵⁰ *Manners*, pp. 81-5.

⁵¹ *CR, 1264-8*, p. 136; Wilkinson, *Eleanor de Montfort*, p. 125.

⁵² *Historical Works of Gervase of Canterbury*, ed. W. Stubbs (2 vols, London, 1879-80), ii, p. 243; M. W. Labarge, *Simon de Montfort* (London, 1962), p. 262; Wilkinson, *Eleanor de Montfort*, p. 125.

mounting, Eleanor negotiated her surrender and departure for exile in France on 28 October 1265.⁵³ The career of Eleanor de Montfort, with its vicissitudes, provides a timely example of how military roles might be thrust upon aristocratic women during times of political turmoil.

Women as foresters

The fortunes of female foresters, like those of female castellans, illuminate some of the challenges faced by women who exercised – or who possessed a claim to exercise - local office directly. The archaic nature of forest administration in thirteenth-century England, an administration that continued to allow for the existence of hereditary keepers (or wardens) of areas of royal forest, and foresters in fee (hereditary foresters subordinate to keepers), provided some women with additional opportunities to wield political power as agents of the crown.⁵⁴ It was here that a small number of ladies were able to find a niche by serving as conduits within baronial and knightly families for the transfer of forest offices from one generation to another, and by acting as custodians for their sons. They also, on occasion, served directly as keepers and foresters in fee in their own right, responding personally to royal writs, answering for revenues at the Exchequer and managing what were sometimes substantial tracts of territory in the king's name.

In the thirteenth century, the keeping of forests and foresterships in fee appear to have passed down through the female line relatively frequently, in accordance with the passage of lands governed by inheritance customs that favoured patrilineal primogeniture. In the fine rolls from Henry III's reign, there are examples of mothers who transmitted their claims to hold offices to their sons. On 13 June 1234, the constable of Windsor Castle was ordered to ensure that Lawrence son of Matilda, who had recently paid the king a relief of 40s., should be placed in seisin of Bagshot bailiwick in Windsor Forest. This bailiwick, so the entry on the roll recorded, had passed down to him 'by hereditary right' from his mother, Matilda.⁵⁵ In other records, Lawrence was styled Lawrence Kokerel.⁵⁶ Lawrence's

⁵³ Labarge, *Simon de Montfort*, p. 262; Wilkinson, *Eleanor de Montfort*, p. 125. See also 'Annales de Waverleia', in *Annales monastici*, ed. H. R. Luard (5 vols, London, 1864-9), ii, p. 367; *Chronica Johannis de Oxenedes*, ed. H. Ellis (London, 1859), p. 230; *Chronica monasterii S. Albani, Willelmi Rishanger*, ed. H. T. Riley (London, 1865), p. 38.

⁵⁴ On keepers or wardens, and foresters in fee, see *Select Pleas of the Forest*, ed. G. J. Turner (Selden Society, xiii, 1901), pp. xvi-xix, xxiii-xxiv.

⁵⁵ *CFR, 1233-4*, no. 224.

decision, or the decision of the clerk who drew up the entry on the fine rolls, to identify him as ‘son of Matilda’ presumably reflected the importance of his matrilineal connections as the basis for his title to this property. There are also cases of foresterships that descended from fathers to daughters. In fact, it was not unknown for multiple co-heiresses to inherit them when there was more than one daughter in the same generation. On 6 July 1221, the sheriff of Northumberland was instructed to award Alice, Margaret, Juliana, Isabella and Constantina, the five sisters and co-heiresses of Philip of Oldcotes seisin of their brother’s lands in Northumberland, together with the king’s coronership and forestership in the same county. Philip was a northern knight who had served as a trusted royal agent under John, and who had also held the office of sheriff of Northumberland between 1212 and 1220.⁵⁷ At the time of Philip’s death, all his sisters, with the exception of Alice, were married. It, therefore, seems likely that their husbands, or perhaps one of their husbands, initially assumed the offices attached to their wives’ inheritances. In July 1221, it was Daniel fitzNicholas, constable of Newcastle upon Tyne,⁵⁸ and the husband of Constantina, who, along with his wife, was attorned by Constantina’s sisters and their husbands, and who represented all the co-heiresses in their dealings with the crown.⁵⁹ It was Daniel and Constantina who, upon agreeing to render the 80-mark fine demanded from all the co-heiresses by the king, received a formal grant of Philip’s properties and offices on the sisters’ behalf.⁶⁰ It is, however, interesting to note that in a later case involving the four daughters and co-heiresses of Richard de Kingesl’, who all stood to inherit a share of the forestership (*forestaria*) of Delamere Forest in 1245, the king approved a system of rotation, whereby each daughter, beginning with the eldest first, took it in turns on a yearly basis to receive the income from the office and divide that income between her sisters.⁶¹

⁵⁶ *CR*, 1234-7, pp. 394, 507; C. A. F. Meekings, ‘A Roll of Judicial Writs’, *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, xxxii (1959), 209-21, at 215.

⁵⁷ *CFR*, 1220-21, nos 226, 227. See also P. A. Brand, ‘Oldcotes v. d’Arcy’, in *Medieval Legal Records edited in Memory of C. A. F. Meekings*, ed. R. F. Hunnisett and J.B. Post (London, 1978), pp. 64-113, at p. 64; J. C. Holt, *The Northerners* (Oxford, 1961, reprinted 1992), pp. 244-6.

⁵⁸ *Rotuli litterarum clausarum in Turri Londoniensi asservati*, ed. T. D. Hardy (London, 1833-4), i, p. 459b; Brand, ‘Oldcotes’, p. 65.

⁵⁹ *CFR*, 1220-21, no. 226.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*; *CPR*, 1216-25, p. 296.

⁶¹ *CR*, 1242-7, p. 336; C. R. Young, *The Royal Forests of Medieval England* (Leicester, 1979), p. 84.

Not all co-heiresses were successful in asserting their claims to foresterships; the rights of younger sisters might sometimes be overlooked in favour of the elder, especially when it suited crown interests and/or the rights of a powerful brother-in-law to manipulate inheritance customs to their own advantage. When, on 10 May 1204, King John granted Richard de Lucy, lord of Egremont, Ada his wife and the heirs of Ada's body the forestership of Cumberland, on the same terms that it had been held by Ada's father, Hugh de Morville, it was clearly stipulated that the forestership was not to be divided and shared with Joan, Ada's sister, and her heirs.⁶² After Richard's death, Ada remarried and took as her new husband Thomas of Moulton, another northern landholder,⁶³ who had agreed to pay 1000 marks to the crown in late July 1213 for the custody of Richard's daughters and their lands.⁶⁴ Upon her remarriage, Ada then successfully transmitted the forestership of Cumberland to her second husband.⁶⁵

The benefits and advantages that might accrue to a husband who married the heiress of an office holder are demonstrated by yet another case documented on the fine rolls. It was through marriage to Isabella, the sister and heiress of Thomas of Birkin, that Robert of Everingham secured possession not only of all his dead brother-in-law's estates, but also of the keeping of 'the bailiwick of the king's forest of Sherwood as Thomas had on the day he died'.⁶⁶ Robert attended the royal court in November 1230, having agreed to pay a 200-mark fine, so that he might perform homage on his wife's behalf for her inheritance.⁶⁷ Although, as David Crook has shown, Isabella's right to the keepership of

⁶² *Rotuli chartarum in Turri Londinensi asservati, vol. I, pars I, 1199-1216*, ed. T. D. Hardy (London, 1837), p. 132.

⁶³ Ada married Thomas without royal licence. For a fine roll entry in which Ada appears as Thomas's wife, concerning her outstanding debt to the crown for her fine to marry in John's reign, see *CFR, 1217-18*, no. 221. For Thomas, see C. L. Kingsford, 'Moulton, Sir Thomas of (d. 1240)', rev. R. V. Turner, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004; online edition Jan. 2008), available at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/19521>, accessed 30 May 2013.

⁶⁴ *Rotuli de oblatiis et finibus in Turri Londinensi asservati, tempore regis Johannis*, ed. T. D. Hardy (London, 1835), pp. 482-3. On 11 July 1213, a little while after Richard's death, Ada agreed to pay the king £500 so that she might have her inheritance, dower and marriage portion and not be distrained to marry: *ibid.*, pp. 474-5.

⁶⁵ In February 1227, upon his agreement to pay a fine, Thomas secured a royal confirmation of the earlier charter addressed to his wife and her first husband: *CFR, 1226-7*, no. 111; *CChR, 1226-57*, p. 18.

⁶⁶ *CFR, 1230-1*, no. 37.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, nos 37, 38.

Sherwood was challenged as part of a wider campaign targeted at hereditary foresters in 1237, Robert and his wife successfully defended and maintained Isabella's rights.⁶⁸

During Robert and Isabella's marriage, it was Robert who fulfilled the formal duties attached to the office of keeper of the forest and who executed the royal mandates that he received in this capacity.⁶⁹ It was only after Robert's death in 1246, when Isabella's status was transformed, in the eyes of the law, from that of a wife under her husband's *potestas* to that of a widow, a *femme sole*, that she successfully secured possession of her inheritance, centred upon the Nottinghamshire castle and barony of Laxton. It was also then that the king instructed Robert de Ros, chief justice of the king's forests north of the Trent, to surrender the keepership of Sherwood Forest to Isabella.⁷⁰ Thereafter, in widowhood, Isabella, executed the duties associated with this office. Indeed, a striking feature of the royal letters directed to her in this capacity, transcripts of which appear on the close rolls, was that they were addressed to her, rather than to a male deputy. The order to Robert de Ros was issued on 10 July 1246. When, just three days later, the king made two separate gifts of oaks from Sherwood to William de Grey and the prior of Torksey, it was Isabella who was instructed to see that William and the prior received their timber.⁷¹ It was also Isabella who was instructed later that year to ensure that Walter Biset and Richard de Grey received royal gifts of deer from Sherwood.⁷²

Intriguingly, the last letter close known to have been addressed to Isabella was an order issued on 17 October 1248, some four years before her death in 1252, which concerned a gift of four bucks and six does to Richard de Grey.⁷³ By October 1251, if not before, Isabella's son and heir, Adam of Everingham, was in receipt of instructions from the king which were addressed to him as 'forester of Sherwood'.⁷⁴ Perhaps Isabella's tenure of office during the early years of her widowhood had, in part, been intended, from her point of view, to serve the dual purposes of safeguarding her inheritance for her son and preparing him for the responsibilities that went with the keeping of Sherwood Forest. It

⁶⁸ D. Crook, 'Dynastic Conflict in Thirteenth-Century Laxton', in B. K. U. Weiler et al. (eds), *Thirteenth Century England XI: Proceedings of the Gregynog Conference, 2005* (Woodbridge, 2007), pp. 193-214, at p. 208.

⁶⁹ See, for example, *CR, 1242-7*, pp. 16, 49, 90, 110, 131, 149, 152.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 438.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 439, 440.

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 452, 487-8.

⁷³ *CR, 1247-51*, p. 92.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 521. For an earlier mandate on the close rolls, dated 8 June 1251, which was addressed to Adam and related to affairs in Sherwood, see: *ibid.*, p. 455.

might, perhaps, be more appropriate to view her term in office as a temporary custodianship until Adam was able and willing to take over. On Isabella's death in 1252, an inquisition post mortem found that Sir Adam of Everingham, her son and heir, was of full age, and that 'the keeping of the forest of Sherwood pertained by hereditary right to the aforesaid Isabella'.⁷⁵

Whatever the case, it is significant that Isabella was not, in fact, the first woman in her family to serve as a keeper of the forest. A precedent had been set, earlier in the thirteenth century, by her widowed kinswoman Matilda de Caux, who had secured the keepership of the Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire forests in hereditary right. In Matilda's case, however, there was an eighteen-year struggle to secure recognition as keeper of the forest, first with King John and, later, during the early years of Henry III's minority, with Philip Marc, the local sheriff. As a result, it was only from 1220 until her death in 1224 that Matilda truly held office, and her persistence to press home her claims at the royal court finally paid off.⁷⁶

The high value that female keepers of the royal forest and foresters in fee placed upon their office is conveyed by the experiences of another woman, Agnes de Amundeville, and her son Ralph.⁷⁷ On 12 July 1238, John Biset, the chief justice of the forests south of the Trent, was ordered to restore to Agnes, who possessed a hereditary claim to a bailiwick in Feckenham Forest, seisin of that bailiwick, provided that she was able to find twelve persons to act as sureties and on the express condition that she would not transmit her bailiwick to any of her sons.⁷⁸ A later entry on the fine rolls reveals why the crown was unusually reluctant to see the bailiwick pass on to the next generation. In March 1239, Agnes agreed to pay the king an annual fine of one mark so that she might have seisin of her bailiwick. As the record of the fine enrolled by the Chancery clerk noted, Agnes had asserted her right to the bailiwick after the king had removed Ralph, her son and heir, from office for a trespass involving the king's venison there. In the aftermath of her son's transgression, Agnes now sought to reassert her

⁷⁵ TNA: PRO C 132/13/10(2).

⁷⁶ D. Crook, 'Maud de Caux and the Custody of the Forests of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire', *Fine of the Month* (January 2006), available at <http://www.finerollshenry3.org.uk/content/month/fm-01-2006.html>, accessed on 17 June 2011. The area of forest which Isabella administered was smaller than that which Matilda had looked after. In 1225 and 1227, for example, the forest in Nottinghamshire was restricted to what was known as Sherwood Forest: Crook, 'Dynastic Conflict', p. 208.

⁷⁷ For the bailiwicks and foresters in fee of Feckenham Forest in the thirteenth century, see *Records of Feckenham Forest, Worcestershire, c. 1236-1377*, ed. J. Birrell (Worcestershire Historical Society, new series 21, 2006), map 1, pp. xv-xvi.

⁷⁸ *CR*, 1237-42, p. 74.

family's hereditary rights over Feckenham, and, apparently, to safeguard it for her lineage. The king advised John Biset that if Richard, Agnes's younger son, was able to find twelve free and law-worthy men who were willing to 'mainpern for him that he will keep the aforesaid bailiwick well and faithfully for Agnes', then Richard was to be admitted to office in his mother's stead.⁷⁹ Thus, it was set down that Agnes would be a temporary custodian for her younger son. The king's willingness to entertain Richard, though, as an alternative candidate, is intriguing and betrays, perhaps, his preference for male, over female, office holders, as well as a mother's reluctance to exercise the duties connected with that office in person. It is, nevertheless, worth noting a later entry on the fine rolls, dated 24 April 1239, whereby Henry informed Biset that if Agnes could find no pledges for the rent that she owed him, the bailiwick would be liable to forfeiture if the rent remained unpaid at the Exchequer at Michaelmas.⁸⁰

The difficulties that Matilda de Caux and Agnes de Amundeville encountered in making good their claims to office, whether they were acting on their own behalf or upon that of a son, were not altogether unusual. Another woman who was successful in securing royal recognition of her hereditary right to a forest keepership was Avice, widow of Michael de Columbars. In 1207, Michael had, in return for 200 marks, purchased from the crown the right to Avice's marriage and her inheritance, including the forestership of Chute, formerly held by Avice's father, Elias Croc.⁸¹ Elias came from a long line of men who had accounted to the crown 'for several small forests in Wiltshire' since at least the reign of Henry I.⁸² Charles Young suggested that the Crocs were, perhaps, the descendants of 'Croc

⁷⁹ *CFR*, 1238-9, no. 127. For Ralph being deprived of his bailiwick, see *CR*, 1237-42, p. 26. For Ralph's transgression, see also *Curia Regis Rolls, 1237-42* (London, 1979), no. 149C. For other misdemeanours by him, whereby he was alleged to have taken 'money for making assarts and purprestures', he gave, sold and allowed timber to be taken from the woods of his bailiwick without the king's special permission, and 'took cheminage unjustly', see *Records of Feckenham Forest*, pp. 11, 14, 16.

⁸⁰ In the meantime, the king restated his earlier order that Agnes should enjoy seisin of the property with the condition that it might be kept by her younger son: *CFR*, 1238-9, no. 154 (24 April 1239). Richard was serving as forester in fee when an inquisition was made in 1242/6: *Records of Feckenham Forest*, p. 19.

⁸¹ *Rotuli de oblatiis et finibus*, p. 409. See also 'Parishes: Tidworth, South', *A History of the County of Hampshire: Volume 4* (1911), pp. 391-4, available at [http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=56838&strquery=Ellis Croc](http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=56838&strquery=Ellis+Croc), accessed on 20 June 2011. See also *The Great Roll of the Pipe for the Fourth Year of the Reign of King Henry III (Michaelmas 1220)*, ed. B. E. Harris (Pipe Roll Society, new series xlvii, 1981-3), p. 126, which refers to Michael de Columbars 'who has the daughter and heir' of Elias Croc.

⁸² Young, *The Royal Forests*, p. 15.

the huntsman', a forester who received a charter from William Rufus.⁸³ Although Michael de Columbars served as keeper during his marriage to Avice, after his death his widow asserted her right to this office.⁸⁴ Avice's tenure of Chute was not, however, entirely without controversy. During the Wiltshire eyre of 1249, for example, she was summoned to answer Nicholas Kipping for a debt of £35 14s. that she owed him. In the event, Avice acknowledged the debt and agreed with him staggered terms of repayment.⁸⁵ She also became embroiled in a jurisdictional dispute with the Esturmy family, hereditary keepers of the neighbouring forest of Savernake, over their common boundary with Chute.⁸⁶ Avice resorted to the royal courts to establish her right. The case can be traced within the fine rolls. In November 1238, an entry on the rolls noted that Avice had given the king three palfreys for a writ *coram Rege* against Geoffrey Esturmy in order to ascertain by what warrant he held the bailiwick of Hippenscombe.⁸⁷ In September 1239, another entry recorded that Avice, having endured a dispute with Geoffrey, had been granted special permission to pay 'the 15 m. by which she made fine with ... [the crown] for [having] the bailiwick of Hippenscombe' in four instalments, rather than one.⁸⁸ Geoffrey was not, however, the only member of the Esturmy family who caused problems for Avice over Hippenscombe. In 1259, another settlement was reached, this time between Henry Esturmy and Avice, over a moiety of the disputed area of jurisdiction.⁸⁹ When Avice finally died a little later that year, she left as her heir her adult son, Matthew, who stood to inherit from his mother a respectable portfolio of rights. According to her inquisition *post mortem*, Avice held properties in Hampshire that included a virgate of land pertaining to the forestership of Finkley, together with the bailiwicks of Finkley and Doiley.⁹⁰ In the neighbouring county of Wiltshire, she held the manor of Chute as a tenant of the abbot

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ A letter patent of 11 April 1235 noted that Avice had performed homage for her bailiwick: *CPR, 1232-47*, p. 100.

⁸⁵ *Civil Pleas of the Wiltshire Eyre, 1249*, ed. M. T. Clanchy (Wiltshire Record Society, xxvi, 1971), no. 1. Avice was also involved in litigation with the abbot of Hyde in the 1240s, as she had been in the 1220s during her husband's lifetime. See, for example, *Curia Regis Rolls, 1242-3*, ed. P. A. Brand (Woodbridge and London, 1999), nos 345, 389; *A Calendar of the Feet of Fines relating to the County of Wiltshire, 1195-1272*, ed. E. A. Fry (Devizes, 1930), p. 16 no. 40, p. 34 no. 69.

⁸⁶ On the Esturmy keepers of Savernake Forest in Henry III's reign, see C. S. C. Brudenell-Bruce, *The Wardens of Savernake Forest* (Plymouth, 1949), chs iv and v.

⁸⁷ *CFR, 1238-9*, no. 12.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 349.

⁸⁹ *Calendar of the Feet of Fines, Wiltshire*, p. 53 no. 24. See also Brudenell-Bruce, *Wardens of Savernake Forest*, p. 50.

⁹⁰ TNA: PRO C 132/22/12(2).

of Hyde, in addition to the forest of Chute, which was held from the king in chief, and a moiety of the forestership of the bailiwick of Hippenscombe towards the south, pertaining to Chute.⁹¹

The evidence for Avice's time in office yields some valuable information about the daily responsibilities that those women who served as keepers of the royal forest were expected to assume. We have to remember that, as keepers, these women came into direct contact with the crown. In the words of G. J. Turner, they were 'the executive officers of the king in his forests', to whom 'writs relating to the administration of forest business ... were ... addressed'.⁹² As with Isabella of Everingham, from the moment that Avice assumed control of the forestership, it was Avice, rather than a male deputy or deputies, who became the recipient of frequent royal directives for the execution of specific duties associated with her office. It was, for example, Avice, who, on 26 May 1238 was ordered to receive John le Fol and Philip de Candover, whom the king had sent to course in Chute Forest and take seven harts there. As keeper, she was expected to see that the venison taken by the king's huntsmen was salted and carried to the royal castle at Windsor, so that it entered the castle stores there.⁹³ It was also Avice who, on 5 December 1238, was instructed to receive another royal huntsman, William fitzWalkelin so that he might take another ten hinds from her bailiwick. Once again, Avice was to see that the venison was salted and dispatched, this time to Winchester, where the king planned to spend Christmas.⁹⁴ In addition to providing venison for the royal household's consumption, Avice was also instructed, on occasion, to administer gifts of deer on the king's behalf. On 9 December 1237, for example, she was directed to ensure that the hunters of Simon de Montfort, then a claimant to the earldom of Leicester and a trusted counsellor of the king, were permitted to take four hinds that Henry had given him in Chute Forest.⁹⁵

Venison was not the only resource within Chute Forest. Avice's bailiwick was also used to furnish the crown and recipients of royal favour with wood. When, in August 1238, the constable of the

⁹¹ TNA: PRO C 132/22/12(4).

⁹² *Select Pleas of the Forest*, p. xix.

⁹³ *CLibR*, 1226-40, p. 334.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 354.

⁹⁵ *CR*, 1237-42, p. 11. See also *ibid.*, p. 22. As Jean Birrell's research into procuring, preparing and serving venison has shown, this was an exclusive and highly valued meat, a meat that only graced the tables of the crown and the aristocracy, and a meat that might only be acquired by hunting: J. Birrell, 'Procuring, Preparing and Serving Venison in Late Medieval England', in C. M. Woolgar, D. Serjeantson and T. Waldron (eds), *Food in Medieval England* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 176-88, at p. 176.

royal castle of Marlborough was overseeing repairs to the king's houses at Ludgershall, it was Avice who was commanded to ensure that the constable enjoyed reasonable estover from Chute by a view of foresters and verderers there.⁹⁶ The reference, in this case, to a view by foresters and verderers serves as a useful reminder that, in addition to delivering presents of venison and wood, Avice was expected to supervise the local forest administration, attend its various courts and ensure that local officials detected and dealt with any persons who committed minor offences within her bailiwick. The work of female foresters, like that of their male counterparts, was carefully regulated by the crown through a system of regular inspections. Every three years or so, for instance, twelve knights known as regarders sought answers to the chapters of the regard, a series of questions designed to ascertain and protect the king's rights, and identify any infringements of those rights within the forest.⁹⁷ A list of twelve chapters of the regard from Henry III's reign is preserved on the dorse of the patent roll for 1228-9, covering a whole range of issues, including (i) herbage in the king's demesne within the forest, (ii) hawks' and falcons' eyries, (iii) mines and forges, (iv) harbours for exporting timber, (v) honey, (vi) assarts, (vii and viii) different types of purprestures, (ix) wastes, (x) holding views of the king's woods, (xi) holding views of purprestures, assarts and wastes, and (xii) identifying individuals with bows, arrows, crossbows, braches and greyhounds that might injure the king's deer.⁹⁸ The regard helped to keep the activities of the foresters in check, and its findings were reported to the next forest eyre. A roll preserved within the National Archives records the findings of one such visit by a forest regard to Chute Forest and to Avice's bailiwick in Doiley, Finkley and Freemantle.⁹⁹ Within this roll, Avice was listed among those who coursed with dogs and greyhounds for hares and foxes.¹⁰⁰

Women who were hereditary keepers of royal forests often enjoyed certain rights and privileges of their own which differed from one area of jurisdiction to another. In return for the payment of fixed rents at the Exchequer, keepers were potentially able to exploit various sources of income within their bailiwicks.¹⁰¹ An impression of the privileges that Isabella of Everingham enjoyed

⁹⁶CR, 1237-42, pp. 85-6.

⁹⁷ *Select Pleas of the Forest*, pp. lxxv-lxxvii. On the early history of the forest regard, see E. M. Amt, 'The Forest Regard of 1155', *The Haskins Society Journal*, ii (1990), 189-95.

⁹⁸ *Select Pleas of the Forest*, pp. lxxvi-lxxvii.

⁹⁹ TNA: PRO E 32/157, m. 7.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Young, *The Royal Forests*, p. 78.

within Sherwood Forest can be gleaned from a later inquisition into those enjoyed by her descendant, Robert of Everingham, during the reign of King Edward I. In addition to ‘the right to hunt the hare, the fox, the squirrel and the cat in the forest’, Robert also possessed ‘the right to the bark and crops of oaks which the lord king had given from his demesne woods by his writ’, as well as ‘the right to have after-pannage’, ‘the right to have the lawing of dogs not lawed’ (3s. every three years ‘from every dog not lawed’), and to demand payment for the transportation of millstones through the forest (a sum which the local jurors claimed brought Robert 20s. a year).¹⁰² Robert was also exempted from performing the services owed to the crown for the ten knights’ fees that he held from the king in chief ‘on account of his custody of the forest and in return for finding his foresters at his own cost’.¹⁰³ The duties performed by male and female keepers of the forest alike were not without their rewards.

The appearance of female office holders, some of whom were in an Amazonian mould, clearly challenges traditional perceptions of the restricted involvement of women in medieval government and warfare. Admittedly, we should be cautious of overstating the prominence of women within the crown’s administrative machinery. The chief offices within the royal forest, for example, the justices of the forests north and south of the Trent, were all men, and ‘men of substance’ at that.¹⁰⁴ In practice, though, hereditary and ‘quasi-hereditary’ offices offered women a ‘way in’ to local office in a world where women were not otherwise permitted to serve as royal justices, local jurors or government servants. This was usually as an extension of the responsibilities that they already enjoyed as local lords, managing their own private administrations and estate officials during widowhood, the final and most well documented stage of the female life cycle. It was, undoubtedly, the experience of such aristocratic ladies, their knowledge of the localities in which they resided and, one suspects, their ability to command local loyalties that made the king, on occasion, prepared to overlook the weaknesses of their sex and appoint them as his agents, with mixed degrees of resulting success.

¹⁰² *Select Pleas of the Forest*, pp. 66-7.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 67

¹⁰⁴ Young, *The Royal Forests*, pp. 76-7. Lesser forest officials, i.e. those whose task it actually was to police the forest on the ground, were also men.