

The Mysterious Death of Edward II: Edited Transcript

This week we have a special episode, a murder mystery if you like. Our job is to make a once and for all final decision about the death of Edward II. Did he die in 1327 in England, or did he die much later?

The traditional story, of course that everyone knows and indeed which I knew up until I started doing the History of England was that Edward II had an accident with a red hot poker. However, there has for a long, long time been another version of events, which essentially says that Edward was not killed, but instead was secretly kept alive by Edward III and Mortimer, went to live abroad before finally dying many years later.

Now normally, this is the sort of thing one would dismiss as fodder for the credulous and pathological conspiracy theorists, but then the historian Ian Mortimer picked it up, and makes a pretty good case.

So here's what we are going to do. I am going to do my very best to present both arguments, and as much of the evidence as I can muster and manage. Then you lot, or as many of you lot as are interested, will vote for which one you believe most. You will be able to vote in two ways – by posting a comment on the website www.thehistoryofengland.com – or on the History of England facebook group page where I'll put one of those quizzy things. How does that sound?

Let's start by establishing a basic chronology.

Edward's as we know had been removed by Mortimer from Kenilworth, much to Lancaster's fury, and placed in Berkeley castle in March 1327.

There are 2 people principally responsible for the king from April to the time of his death. The first is Thomas de Berkeley, the owner of the castle, and a son in law of Roger Mortimer. One of the things worth noting as a motivation for a murder of Edward was the constant plots to release him – and Thomas was partly responsible for stopping those, on one occasion finding the king after he'd actually been sprung.

The indenture that gave Berkeley his brief was shared with another man, John Maltravers. Maltravers was a long time henchman of Mortimer.

According to the official story then, a chap called William Ockley, a trusted household knight of Mortimer's arrived at Berkeley in September, sent by Mortimer because he'd heard of more plots to free the king.

Edward was supposed to have then died of natural causes on 21st September. News of his death was carried to Edward III and reached him on 23rd September, carried by a chap called Thomas Gurney. The death was then announced publically on 28th September. Edward was embalmed at Berkeley, by a local woman, and we have the expenses for her work and kit, in the month after his death.

One of the arguments in favour of the official story is that a number of people saw the body, especially after on 21st October it was handed over to the Abbot of St Peters in Gloucester. The key chap is a bloke called William Beaucaire, who watched the corpse from 21st September all the way until the burial. Once the corpse reached Gloucester on 21st October, there are loads of people who watch the corpse, but for the first month, really it's just William. But there are two arguments here in favour of the official story – someone was with the body the whole time, and a load of people saw the corpse after it had been taken to Gloucester. Then there is a funeral at Gloucester, with a magnificent tomb for Edward II in the finest royal tradition.

So Mortimer has a couple of points to make. Firstly that Beaucaire's role as a loyal Mortimer servant could have been to keep the corpse away from people until it had been sorted. That the tradition of embalming medieval corpses was that they were covered with something called cerecloth, which is a shroud made of waxed cloth. Maybe the corpse was only seen wrapped up, and therefore not possible to see his features? He supports this with a couple of interesting points; firstly, when Richard II died, apparently it is specifically stated that the cerecloth had to be cut away from his face to be able to identify him. And secondly, The Earl of Kent who had apparently been at the funeral, believed later that Edward could be alive – which suggests that he hadn't been able to make a positive identification at the funeral.

The manner of Edward's death varies according to the chroniclers, and actually we need to make a few points about the chronicles. The first point to make is that none of them say anything about a suggestion that Edward II had been spirited away - all the 14th century chronicles are pretty clear that Edward had died in 1327. Which of course is why it's the official history. Ian Mortimer makes the point that the vast majority of chroniclers lived in monasteries and were dependant on other chroniclers and travellers for their news. So many chronicles are based on others – the trick is to find the original.

There is considerable debate about how Edward died. Some just said he died. One of the best contemporary observers was a chap called Adam Murimuth, and he had connections with the south west, being based at Exeter. He states that Edward was suffocated by Thomas Gurney and John Maltravers – and doesn't mention William Ockley. He has nothing to say about bottoms or red hot poker. His testimony supports the point that the body was seen but it's a strange line. He says:

'Many Abbots, priors, knights, burgesses of Bristol and Gloucester were summoned to see his corpse intact, and this they saw superficially'

What does this mean - specifically? Just that no-one was allowed to hang about, which would have been unsurprising if so many wanted to see it? Or something else?

Other chroniclers begin this tradition of the red hot poker. Here is the description in the chronicle called the *Brut*:

Roger Mortimer sent orders as to how and in what manner the king should be killed. And later when the aforesaid Thomas and John [that's Thomas Gurney and John Maltravers] had seen the letter and the order, they were friendly towards king Edward of Caernarfon at supper time, so the king knew nothing of their treachery. And when that night the king had gone to bed and was asleep the

traitors...went quietly into his chamber and laid a table on his stomach and with other men's help pressed him down. At this he awoke, and in fear of his life turned himself upside down. The tyrants, false traitors, then took a horn and put it into his fundament as deep as they could, and took a spit of burning copper, and put the horn into his body, and oftentimes rolled therewith his bowels, and so they killed their lord, and nothing was perceived [as to the manner of his death].

This idea of the red hot poker then gets picked up by other chroniclers such as Higden. You have to think, though, that if Edward did die in 1327, the story of the pillows is so much more likely. After all, you are far more likely not to leave a mark that way, and there's a strong suspicion that it gets added later as a kind of comment or divine irony on the suspicion that he was homosexual.

The other work worth mentioning is Geoffrey Le Baker. He really bigs a whole load of things up. He claims to have had access to independent witnesses, and therefore to first hand accounts. According to his narrative the whole manner of Edward's treatment was different – right from the beginning he was threatened with death. He was taken from Kenilworth to Corfe, then to Bristol where he was tortured, left without heat to try and cause madness; he was made to walk, shaved with ditchwater, crowned with hay, left in rooms with rotted flesh. Only when it was seen that Edward was too butch and healthy to die by such means then killed him with the help of cushions and red hot pokers. All of which makes for a great story, but the suspicion is that it's all in an attempt to mirror the passion of Christ, and draw a parallel of the saintliness of Edward. His target is Isabella - to his mind she is a Jezebel, who should be punished for her adultery with Mortimer, and not allowed to live and die in luxury – as she was.

The point about all of this is to throw a certain amount of doubt about how much the chroniclers knew about the events at Berkeley castle in 1327. You can choose to believe them or some of them; but they are at very least open to interpretation and challenge, and it's difficult to reject other theories about Edward's death purely on their evidence.

So then let's look at two more bits of evidence – the trial of the earl of Kent and the quite remarkable letter of the Fieschi.

The trial of the Earl of Kent first, and is quickly told. Basically, Kent says that he has evidence, via a Dominican friar, that Edward was still alive and living at Corfe castle. He proceeded to start to put a plan together to get his half brother out of prison. Mortimer then produces incriminating evidence in court, and Kent is executed. There are broadly two readings of all of this then.

- 1) This confirms the conspiracy theory, Edward II had indeed escaped murder at Berkeley castle, and been taken to Corfe. There Kent had discovered his existence, and rather naively tried to rescue him. Mortimer boldly challenged him, knowing that Edward II would have to back him, or admit that he'd known all along that his father was still alive. To believe this, you have to believe that Mortimer had an absolutely iron nerve - he didn't try to do as had been done for other traitors and not let the man speak, he was risking exposure, or rebellion from Edward III. Some kind of secret murder might have been safer.
- 2) Kent was either mistaken or tricked. One theory is that the Dominican friar was an agent of Mortimer's, who set Kent up. To believe this, you have to think that Kent was something of a

gullible fool. Alternatively I guess you could believe that the whole thing was a set up – that Mortimer wanted Kent out of the way as a source of opposition.

Then the infamous Fieschi letter. This was discovered in 1855, and the evidence seems to be that it is not a forgery, which would of course have been a convenient way out of the problem. The full text of the letter, and various links to other sources by the way, is available on the post at www.thehistoryofengland.com.

The letter was written by Manuelel de Fieschi, and papal notary and Bishop who died in 1348. But the point is this is not a potty fly by night, but a man in a sober, important religious and administrative position.

The letter gives a detailed and largely accurate account of the alternative story. Edward was warned that bad men were coming to kill him by a servant, who helped him escape, killing a porter on the way. The bad men, including Gurney, put the body of the porter in a box, which was duly the one buried at Gloucester. He found refuge at Corfe castle, where he lived for 2 ½ years until Kent was executed. Realising the danger, Edward then went on the run as a pilgrim – going to Ireland, then Normandy, staying with the pope for a couple of weeks and around, including Cologne, until he rocked up to a monastery in Italy where he finally died.

It's a real poser, this letter. It's pretty clear that it can't be just dismissed – great minds have puzzled over it. The choices are really that:

- 1) Fieschi was fooled by an imposter, who knew enough about events to be convincing. He told the story to Fieschi, who related it in good faith to Edward III. To believe this option you have to believe that this imposter knew an awful lot about the events of Edward's death, more than any of the chroniclers as it happens.
- 3) It is some politically motivated hoax. Fieschi was Genoese, and at the time Genoa was trying to win independence from Milan. Maybe the idea was to get some money out of Edward – and indeed Edward did pay off a claim for damages made by Genoa at this time, to the tune of £8,000. So, the traditionalist argument might go that it's a hoax, the story of Edward's survival isn't true – but that the Genoese were trying to embarrass Edward, and get him to pay them off.
- 4) It's true – Edward survived.

There are a few more things to cover off before I can summarise and submit this to the vote. The biggest things are the trials and fates of the men supposedly responsible for Edward's death. After Mortimer's death in 1330, 4 men were tried specifically for Edward's death by Edward III. They were Roger Mortimer – we know about him. Then there were Thomas Berkeley, Thomas Gurney and William Ockley

The story of Thomas Berkeley

This is very odd. Berkeley was denied the chance to put his case, apart from being given the chance to strongly deny it, and make a potentially rather remarkable assertion. This was that, quote:

'He never knew about his death until the present parliament'.

His death refers to Edward II, the present parliament was in 1330. Yes, 1330. What on earth did he mean – had he taken leave of his senses? Come on man get a grip, the whole world had been talking about Edward's death since 1327. There are two explanations. The simplest is that the transcription is slightly wrong, that what he meant was that he hadn't heard about Edward's *murder* until 1330. It's possible, but a bit unlikely – after all he was in the direct firing line and he'd have to have been pretty bovine not to take an interest; though of course it does fall conveniently into the passive resistance line – 'weren't me guv', dunno what you're talking about'. Alternatively, the conspiracists argue, this is coded language - Berkeley is saying all he knew about is that Edward II was alive because he'd escaped. Berkeley also falls back on the Ronald Reagan defence, by claiming that he'd been away and ill on 21st and so ill he couldn't remember anything. Which is all a bit unbelievable, and his household accounts appear to show he was at Berkeley. It's all very inconsistent, but the key point is that Edward III believed his was not part of the murder plot, he was acquitted and lived a long and happy life in active service for the crown. So as far as Berkeley is concerned you have to make a decision;

- 1) was he in on the conspiracy to let Edward escape? Edward knew this – and so let him off?
- 2) Was he just a rather inefficient, and failed to see what was going on under his nose? Edward was very suspicious, but eventually decided that he was just a bit inefficient.

The story of John Maltravers

Then there's John Maltravers., Mortimer's henchman, and the bloke most chroniclers and historians tend to tar with the brush of murder. His story is also a bit weird to be honest. Actually, he's only accused helping the death of the Earl of Kent, by falsely misleading him that Edward II was alive. He is called to parliament in 1330 with Berkeley, but finds there's something good on telly that night and doesn't go, and flees the country. OK, so sure as eggs is eggs he's guilty then. But after that it all gets a bit weird. A message goes from Maltravers to Edward III saying he's got information regarding his father's death; Edward starts using him in 1339, 12 years after the death, as an agent in Flanders. In addition it could well be that Maltravers was not there in September – but in fact was at Corfe, since there is some evidence that Berkeley and Maltravers would look after Edward on alternate months. So, Maltravers eventually dies in his bed in England. With Maltravers, then I think you have a choice:

- 1) if you think he's guilty of complicity in the death you have to believe that Edward kind of decided that for whatever reason he wanted to draw a line under his father's death, and by 1339 he's prepared to let bygones be bygones.

Or

- 2) That Edward had learnt that his father had in fact escaped, and therefore Maltravers wasn't guilty.

The story of William Ockley

William Ockley was a clearly highly trusted member of Mortimer's wife's household. He was apparently sent by Mortimer to Berkeley, because Mortimer had heard of a plot to free Edward II, and sent him to make sure it didn't happen. Ockley was accused of the murder, but disappeared in 1330 and was never heard of again. And so the accusation of murder successfully stuck to him, officially at least.

The Story of Thomas Gurney

Thomas Gurney was again an adherent of Mortimer's and probably had some personal animosity towards Edward II, having been imprisoned by him; but we shouldn't make too much of this – he was pardoned. He is the man who was sent to tell Edward II of the king's death. After his accusation he also fled the country, but unlike Ockley he was captured by William Tweng. By the time he was caught he was clearly in a bad way; and although brought back to England, he was dead on arrival. Interestingly, though, Tweng had clearly tried to keep him alive, having physicians sent from England to help. Edward really wanted to question him. Does this suggest that actually Edward didn't know anything about his father being alive? Or that he simply wanted Gurney to be punished for imprisoning his father?

Edward III meets his father or an imposter at Cologne in 1338

In 1338, Edward II has a strange meeting at Koblenz with a man claiming to be his father, a man called William the Welshman. The reporting of all of this is remarkably flat – no big statements that the guy was clearly an imposter and so on. The guy was not punished; he was accompanied by priests and had apparently come from Lombardy – so maybe supported by the Fieschi letter that this is where Edward was hanging out. The King was clearly interested enough to have met him. So, one story goes that this was indeed Edward II; his son knew full well that he was alive, and a joyful reunion took place, or possibly along the lines of 'look son give me back my throne or I'll stop your pocket money' Or alternatively, Edward III was curious, and not inclined to be vengeful. Edward II had once met an imposter claiming to be him, met a looney, and had initially had the grace not to have him punished or executed – though then he was in fact talked into it by Isabella so he was hung.

Isabella and the heart of Edward II

Then there's the case of Isabella and her heart. One of the things that happens much later is that Isabella asks for the heart of Edward II to be buried with her. Now you have to ask, if this was in fact the heart of some smelly, proletarian porter would she really have done that? So to believe the whole story, you have to believe that after Edward II's death, which would have been some time after 1338, his body was brought back to England and snuck into the official tomb in Gloucester cathedral. Surely possible, surely also high risk.

The summing up

So, here's my attempt to sum everything up. And once again, I am going to apologies for presenting only a fraction of all the arguments and evidences.

So, option one is the contention is that **Edward II was not murdered at Berkeley castle**, but instead escaped and died somewhere in Italy after 1338.

Under this version of events, Edward was warned by a servant that death was on its way. He and the servant escaped, killing a porter, and fled to take refuge in Corfe castle. Mortimer found out about this and decides to keep it that way, because it means that he will not have to suffer constant plots to release Edward II and put him back on the throne. Berkeley is clearly in on the act, because he hints at it during his trial; and has no other credible excuse. So the Porter's body is substituted for Edward's by William Beayclaire, William Ockley and Thomas Gurney. The corpse is covered in a cerecloth, and no one is allowed to see below the cloth – people are allowed to view the body but only superficially. All the other evidence points the same way; Maltravers and Berkeley are not prosecuted, which must be because Edward III knows his father is not dead. The Earl of Kent finds out – and why else would he claim that Edward is alive unless there's truth in it – previously he's been loyal to the Mortimer regime. The Fieschi letter is genuine, because it is remarkable accurate about many verifiable events of the, and Edward III meets his father at Cologne. After

At some point between 1338 and 1358 Edward II dies and his body replaced in the tomb at Gloucester Cathedral – so when Isabella gets the heart it is by then the real heart of Edward.

Option 2 is that the traditional story is correct. **Edward II was murdered on Mortimer's orders**, brought to Berkeley castle by William Ockley. He was probably murdered by being smothered rather than the bottom thing, but in the end he was just as dead. Berkeley didn't mean anything by it at the trial – he was clearly lying, but basically just because he was trying to say I know nothing about it guv, it wasn't me. Maltravers and Berkeley are let off not because they know Edward II is still alive, but because Edward III thinks they are just either inefficient, or were not there. The true culprits, William Ockley and Thomas Gurney, are indeed hunted down as far as they can be. The earl of Kent is a credulous fool – the Dominican Friar was one of a long line of fantasists who claimed dead kings were alive, or even put up to it by Mortimer. The Fieschi letter is a made up piece of gossip and rumour – Fieschi himself clearly believes it, but the imposter he spoke to was indeed just that – an imposter, albeit well informed. Isabella clearly thought Edward was dead and in Gloucester cathedral, since she asked for the heart; and surely, who would have gone to all the trouble and risk of discovery of smuggling the king's body back to England from Italy and secretly putting in it the Gloucester tomb, just so that Isabella could ask for the heart?

And anyway the whole conspiracy theory is nutty; what did Mortimer really stand to gain by all these shenanigans? He already had control over Isabella and Edward – as events prove, this fiction would give it no more control, and indeed events were to prove when Edward re-asserts himself and takes control the of throne.

So, there we are – the pro’s and cons. Now it’s your turn – your chance to decide this historical conundrum. To vote, go to www.thehistoryofengland.com and add a comment to episode 94a with your opinion. You search for the History of England Facebook group, where you will find a question where you can log your answer.