

CHAPTER III

THE YEARS OF UNREST

King Stephen died eighty-eight years after the Norman Conquest almost to the day, and within that time England, politically and socially, had been changed so much so that in its annals few persons of purely English extraction had appeared.

By sundry writers the Normans have been roundly condemned for their behaviour. Ralph Waldo Emerson refers to them as greedy and ferocious dragons, sons of greedy and ferocious pirates who burned, harried, violated, tortured and killed, until everything English was brought to the verge of ruin. He has bitter things to say of the "decent and dignified men now existing that boast their descent from these filthy thieves, who showed a far juster conviction of their own merits by assuming for their types the swine, goat, jackal, leopard, wolf and snake which they severally resembled."

The facts do not bear out this scathing and largely untrue comment written more than a century ago, a comment which in a book such as this calls for rebuttal.

In the first place, William's claim could hardly be described as baseless when we consider that in that age it was not uncommon for strangers to take possession of other countries as Canute did, for William was no stranger. He knew England, and his great-aunt was the mother of Edward the Confessor who was himself in spirit more Norman than English. There were then no binding laws governing succession to a throne as the election of Harold by the Witenagemot shows. Indeed, in 1189 not a single living eldest son of an English king ascended the throne. Considering this, William had as good a claim as anybody. Neither can his followers with justice be dismissed as any more greedy and ferocious than others of their day. One wonders what might have happened in England under Harold, or if Tostig and Hardrada had won the battle of Stamford Bridge. They too had their share of greedy and ferocious rivals within England itself.

Motives are always mixed, and if William was spurred on by the lust for power, he was no less moved by another motive, the burning desire to achieve social order. This he had not been able to do in Normandy because of the continual private wars between the great landowners, among whom he was the chief but by no means the complete master. They had, it is true, bound themselves to him but with reservations. In some cases only a fraction of their knights were in duty bound to serve William; the rest were used in the interests of their immediate lords, as in the case of Robert of Montfort-sur-Risle, a neighbour of the Beaumonts who, out of 44 knights, was expected to send only seven as his feudal duty. This fact in large measure accounts for the restlessness and unpredictability of the Norman baronage.

In England William had the chance to do what he could never have done in Normandy, for every man owed his possessions and his status to him. Hence he was able to impose the oath of Salisbury, to establish a true feudal army, and finally to set all disputes to rights by the Great Survey of 1086-7. This last was a remarkable achievement for those days, and no survey in such detail was attempted in England for more than seven hundred years, not in fact until after the Tithe Act of 1836.

Not that the period after the conquest was free from disorder, but, taken as a whole the Norman influence was beneficent; it was a decided advance on what had gone before. It gave a more stable government, a higher standard of culture and learning through more intimate contact with the Continent, it inaugurated a great building era when parish churches, abbeys and castles multiplied throughout the country forming new nuclei of population who relied on lord and priest for bodily protection and spiritual comfort. This was not therefore a purely Norman process, for the bulk of the population, though temporarily submerged, was English. With the process of time, and through Norman agency the latent energies and talents of the English people were released, and the two related peoples were fused into one nation after the reforms of William I and Henry I had been carried to completion by the restless genius of Henry Plantagenet.

Roger de Newburgh, 2nd Earl of Warwick was one of five brothers. The second, Henry, according to an inscription in Berkeley Church, Somerset, settled down in Dorset and probably inherited the Dorset and Devon estates. The third, Robert, was heir to the Norman lands. His unfortunate connection in 1118 with the rebellion against Henry I had been forgotten, and Henry I made him Chief Justice of Normandy. He was, says the chronicler Roger de Torigny, well fitted for such a post, for he was an eloquent man, more ready with his speech than with his lance. In 1159 he took holy orders in the Abbey of Bec where he died the following year. Of the fourth, Geoffrey, we know little. The fifth was Rothode (or Rotrou), Bishop of Evreux. At least three of these brothers, Roger, Robert and Rothode went on the Second Crusade.

Roger, the unfortunate Earl of Warwick had been the victim of his own political folly in adhering to Stephen when everything pointed to the victory of Henry. He was a good man, devout and pious who deserved a better end to his life. Warwick remembered him for the leper hospital which he founded and endowed, for the collegiate church of Our Lady at Warwick and for the House of the Templars beyond the bridge. In Stephen's reign he founded a priory, dedicated to St. Kenned at Llangennith, Glamorgan, which he attached as a cell to the Abbey of St. Taurinus in his brother's diocese of Evreux.

When in 1154 Henry II came to the throne of England he did not forget the great services rendered to him by Robert, second Earl of Leicester. With men like Ranulf Glanville and William Marshal, Robert helped the king to build a system of government unequalled for efficiency in any other country, and was responsible for justice from the beginning of the reign. When Henry left England for France in 1158 in an attempt to increase his continental dominions Robert, as Chief Justice, was left in charge of the realm and was made Vice-Regent, an office which he held until the king's return in 1163. In 1160 he witnessed the abortive articles of peace with France, one of the terms of which was the promised marriage of Henry's eldest son with Margaret the French king's daughter. But the greatest problem of his life concerned the relationship of the king with Thomas a Becket.

Between Earl Robert and Thomas there existed an intimate friendship,

both of them filling some of the highest offices of state. It was partly due to Robert's persuasion that Thomas was promoted to the Chancellorship in 1155, an office for which he was eminently fitted. Only after Thomas became Archbishop of Canterbury did their interests clash, for Robert took the king's side in his attempt to bring clerics guilty of crimes in to the royal courts. His personal concern for Thomas's welfare caused him to join the small party of bishops, earls and knights Templar who persuaded him to make a public profession of obedience on January 25th, 1164. But the very next day Thomas, when confronted by the document of which the final draft is known as the Constitution of Clarendon, refused point-blank to add his seal. The signature of Robert of Leicester to the sixteen clauses defining the relations of Church and State in England headed those of the laymen.

The quarrel went on all through the year, Henry hoping by repeated indignities heaped on the Archbishop to break his will. It was on Robert's suggestion that Becket be called to a Council at Northampton which was to begin on October 6th. Nearly a week was taken up in fruitless meetings and consultations.

On Tuesday, October 13th, Becket appeared before the Council, defiant as ever, in great state, carrying a crucifix in his hand and attended by a large number of his retainers. The king on hearing of the manner of his approach withdrew from the Council Chamber to an adjoining room while Becket seated himself with apparent unconcern. The king appealed to the barons for assistance, and asked that speedy justice should be done.

They sentenced Becket to imprisonment and the king then deputed a few of the barons headed by Robert, Earl of Leicester, to tell the Archbishop that unless he changed his arrogant and disrespectful behaviour and yielded to the king's pleasure, the Council would take proceedings against him for treason and perjury. When Robert commenced to read the sentence he began with the usual Norman formula, "Oyez ci le jugement rendu contre vous." - Listen to the sentence pronounced against you.

The Archbishop interrupted him. "Earl," said he, "I forbid you in the name of Almighty God, to give judgment here against me, your spiritual father. I decline the jurisdiction of the king and the barons, and I appeal to God and my lord the Pope under whose protection I depart hence. I cite you before him." He then rose and walked slowly out in great state, and passed through the crowd, leaving the barons so much disconcerted by his boldness that none had the courage to stop him. A murmur then arose on all sides. "Thou false traitor! The perjurer! Whither is he going? Why is he suffered to go in peace? Remain, thou traitor, and hear thy judgment." As Becket left the hall, he turned round and said "The sacredness of my order forbids me, or I could reply with arms to such as call me traitor and perjurer."

Knowing his danger and fearing the wrath of the king, Becket now went into hiding. In November, 1164 he made his way in disguise to Sandwich where he embarked in a small boat for Gravelines, and from there went to the monastery of St. Bertin at St. Omer. The king seized his property and his relatives were either killed or despoiled. Henry appealed to the French king to give him up but with no success.

This was Robert's last effective action in the case of Becket. When the last scene was enacted in the cathedral at Canterbury he had been dead two years. During the last fifteen years of his life he had worn the habit of a canon regular of the Abbey of St. Mary which he had rebuilt in 1143 for the Austin Canons, but he must have had a dispensation to continue his secular work. This abbey, the last resting-place of Cardinal

Wolsey in 1530, was only one of his many benefactions. These included a house for Benedictine nuns at Nuneaton (1133), a Cistercian abbey at Garendon near Leicester (1133), a Benedictine priory at Luffield, Northants and St. John's Hospital, Brackley. His gifts to other abbeys and priories were numerous.

After Robert's death things did not go well with England. Henry in proceeding against Becket incurred the displeasure of the Pope, and a succession of campaigns, some of them unsuccessful, had alienated the sympathy of many barons both in England and Normandy. His domestic affairs were complicated by quarrels with his wife and with his over-ambitious sons. In 1170 he had arranged for the coronation of his eldest living son Henry in spite of the remonstrances of Becket, but Prince Henry, instead of being grateful openly voiced his desire to be a real king, wielding royal power. The king at first considered putting him in confinement but finally decided to dismiss many of the young prince's headstrong friends. Then one morning he found that his son had fled to the French court and that it was impossible to recapture him. Here, proclaiming that he was the rightful king, young Henry distributed great estates in England (which he did not yet own) to those who were willing to follow him.

One of these men was Robert, son of Robert the second Earl of Leicester. He was named Blanchevains because of his very white hands and, unlike his famous father, he was a man of very hot temper and often inclined to act hastily without weighing the consequences. In order to raise funds for this rebellion he mortgaged his estates, and, accompanied by William de Tankerville, went to Paris. This was the signal for a general rebellion of Henry's sons against him. The plot was complete. Aquitaine was for Richard who was abetted by Henry's estranged wife Eleanor; the people of Brittany rose for Geoffrey, and Henry in Paris was backed by a strong French army. It was the last feudal rebellion of the old type organised by barons who sought to free themselves from royal restraints. With an army of twenty thousand men, largely mercenaries, and in a series of successful actions the king drove off the French who had no stomach for a long campaign.

Robert of Leicester escaped to England and took refuge in the town of Leicester whose fortifications were strengthened. The king with Richard de Lacy and Reginald Earl of Cornwall followed them and laid siege to the town, capturing and burning it in July, 1173. After the pillage of the borough Robert fled to his castle at Breteuil in Normandy. The king speedily followed him, seized his Norman castles and burnt his stronghold at Breteuil on September 25th. Robert again escaped and soon afterwards landed at Walton, Suffolk, bringing with him a strong band of Flemish mercenaries. He was received by Hugh Bigod, Earl of Norfolk at his castle at Framlingham. Meanwhile, William King of Scotland had invaded England and a large force had to be sent to repel him but hardly had they overrun Lothian than they were compelled to withdraw, to make peace with Scotland and march south to meet the new threat from Suffolk.

The Earl of Leicester first attacked Walton Castle, but, making no progress he raised the siege and marched on Norwich which he took and plundered. He then besieged Ralph de Broc in his castle at Haughley, capturing and burning it in October. From there he set off for Leicester with four or five thousand men but was intercepted at Farnham near Bury St. Edmunds. In the ensuing fight the Earl was utterly routed and he and his wife were captured. The Countess, in

One member of the Beaumont family who did not join in this rebellion was William, third Earl of Warwick. Probably remembering the unhappy fate of his father at the end of Stephen's reign, he kept out of

a time. Though Robert afterwards appeared in attendance at court he was never really close to the king, and in 1183 he was again imprisoned for

den of thieves and robbers." razed to the ground, the king saying "it was a nest of the devil and a castle at Paci in Normandy and Mountsorrel in Leicestershire which was at Northampton his estates were restored to him with the exception of the In January 1177 Robert was fully pardoned, and at a Council held

resist the king's power." at Leicester were demolished "that its lord might no longer be able to of land. In 1175 the castle at Groby and the chief defences of the castle payment of a heavy fine and the confiscation of some six thousand acres in September, and Robert and his Countess were granted their liberty on meet it, again taking the Earl and Countess with him. Peace was concluded another attack on Normandy and Henry had to hurry across the Channel to fined at the same time £300. In the following month the French made This took place on July 31st 1174, the inhabitants of the town being

which were the castles of the Earl." castle of Leicester and the castles of Groby and Mount Sorrel seeing the strait in which their lord was, yielded up the the castles were surrendered to him. Then the Constables that the Earl of Leicester should neither eat nor drink till relics, and in the presence of the Constables, swore thereon, intercession for their lord, but the king called for the Holy many strong and fair castles - came to the king to make of Leicester, Anketil Mallory and William le Dive - who had kept him strictly in ward. Then the Constables of the Earl England and he brought with him the Earl of Leicester and King. And in this year - 1174 - King Henry returned to Earl; but the Earl and the Countess remained prisoners to the men at arms defied the king and maintained the quarrel of the one Anketil Mallory, and he and his knights and squires and surrendered, for the Earl had left therein a constable thereof, "But for all that the Castle of Leicester was not beyond the seas and shut up in a fortress in Normandy. wife, for she was a prisoner also, should be conveyed rejoiced thereat and commanded that the Earl and the Earl's became prisoner to the king, and King Henry was greatly made war on King Henry, but he was overcome in battle and returned in wrath to his own land and with a great following soldiers of the king. Then the Earl who was beyond the seas, thereon and the knights and soldiers of the Earl defied the of Leicester was so strong that it resisted all attacks Eleanor and her children against King Henry. But the Castle take vengeance on the Earl, who had conspired with Queen soldiers of King Henry the Second sacked and burnt it, to " . . . the town of Leicester was sorely tried for the

Chronicles: attacked Leicester. The story is told in detail in the Leicester stolen by her captors, she flung into the pond. The king's forces now At the time she was wearing a very valuable ring which, to save it being her haste to escape, fell into a muddy pond from which she was rescued.

trouble by supporting the king. He was thus able to live throughout these tumultuous times. In regal splendour at his castle in Warwick and was lord of some 102 knights' fees. He was a great benefactor to religious houses, building a new church there for the Templars and granting them the manor of Sherborne and lands in Warwick. He died in 1184 in the Holy Land and was succeeded by his younger brother Walteran who died twenty years later.

When in 1189 Henry II died, the fortunes of Robert of Leicester took a turn for the better, for Richard I, remembering Robert's services in the rebellion of 1173, took him into favour, restoring everything that his father had taken away including the lands at Leicester and Mountsorrel. When Richard was crowned Robert stood by his side as Seneschal (High Steward) of England and carried before the new king a golden sword of state. In 1190 he set off on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, died at sea on August 31st and was buried the next day at Duras in Greece. King Richard is said to have remarked at his death that every hair on his head was worth a knight.

Robert had three sons. The youngest, William of Breteuil died of leprosy before his father; the middle son Roger became Bishop of St. Andrews and was made Chancellor by William the Lion.

The eldest, Robert is the most famous of the three and was known as Fitzparnell after his mother, the saintly Petronilla, daughter of Hugh de Grantmesnil. As a proof of her piety she is said to have woven a rope of her own long hair to suspend a sanctuary lamp in Leicester Abbey. When Richard I became king of England, the Third Crusade had already been planned and Robert was one of the nobles who went to Palestine. He was at Messina when he heard of his father's death, and shortly afterwards King Richard invested him with the Earldom of Leicester. He was by Richard's side throughout the campaign and took part in the siege of Acre. He and the Bishop of Salisbury led the English through the breach that had been made in the walls, in June 1191, but were not able to make good their advance. The city was not surrendered until the 12th July. With Richard he later landed at Jaffa and advanced towards Jerusalem where, after climbing the pass of Beth Horan the crusading host caught their first and last sight of the Holy City.

In one of his exploits near Ramleh Robert led a small party against a large force of Saracens who fled at their onset, but when they saw later how small the Christian force was and how far it was from its supports, they turned their horses and surrounded the English. So imminent was the danger that the Earl and his companions charged through the mass of the enemy and had nearly extricated themselves when another small force of Saracens came up and attacked their rear. The fight became desperate, each knight having a dozen or more to face; the Earl was dismounted and completely surrounded, then driven into a river and nearly overwhelmed when Henry FitzNicholas and Robert de Newburgh, descended from a younger son of the Earl of Warwick came to his assistance. Robert, seeing that the Earl was nearly overcome by the heat, fatigue and his wounds, sprang from his charger and placed the Earl on it. By this means they were able to rejoin those in the rear who were following on foot. These he led forward; they charged the Saracens and broke their line killing a great number and capturing many more. The Earl won the admiration of all who saw the engagement for he was small of stature, and they marvelled that such a little man as he was could perform so many brave deeds.

Robert left Palestine with the king on October 25th 1192. Their most convenient route home was held by Philip of France with whom

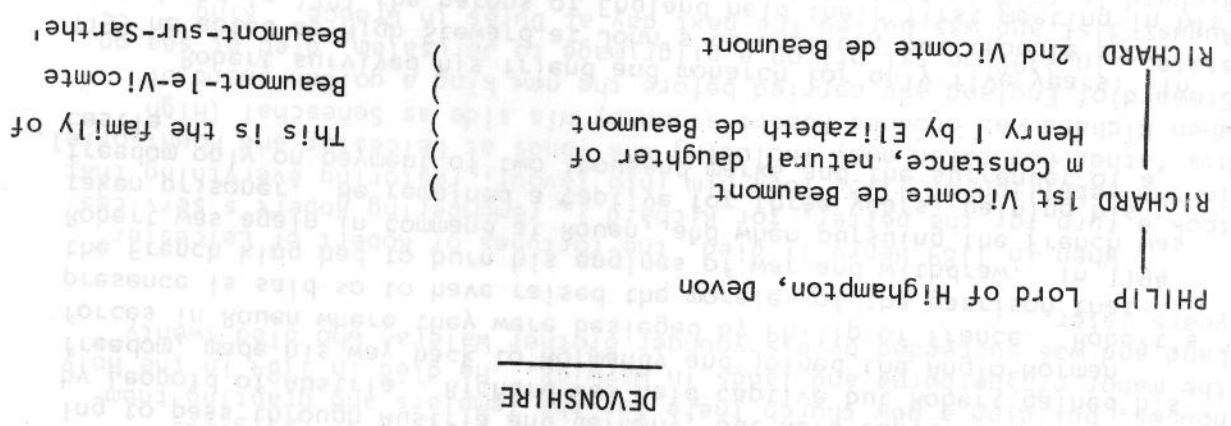
Richard had quarrelled, so they sailed north along the Adriatic Sea hoping to pass through Austria and Germany, but were captured at Vienna by Leopold of Austria. Richard was held captive but Robert gained his freedom, made his way back to Normandy and joined the Anglo-Norman forces in Rouen where they were besieged by Philip of France. Robert's presence is said so to have raised the morale of the garrison that the French king had to burn his engines of war and withdraw. In 1194 Robert was again in command at Rouen, and when pursuing the French was taken prisoner. He remained a captive for three years, gaining his freedom only on payment of two thousand marks and the surrender of a castle.

Robert survived his friend and monarch for only five years. In 1199 he acted as High Steward at John's coronation, but trouble soon ensued and in 1201 the barons of England held their first meeting in his castle at Leicester to discuss their grievances. In spite of his association with the barons he still remained in favour with John, was granted the whole of Richmondshire (north Yorkshire) except for the castles of Richmond and Bowes, and in 1204 he was sent as ambassador to treat for peace with Philip Augustus of France.

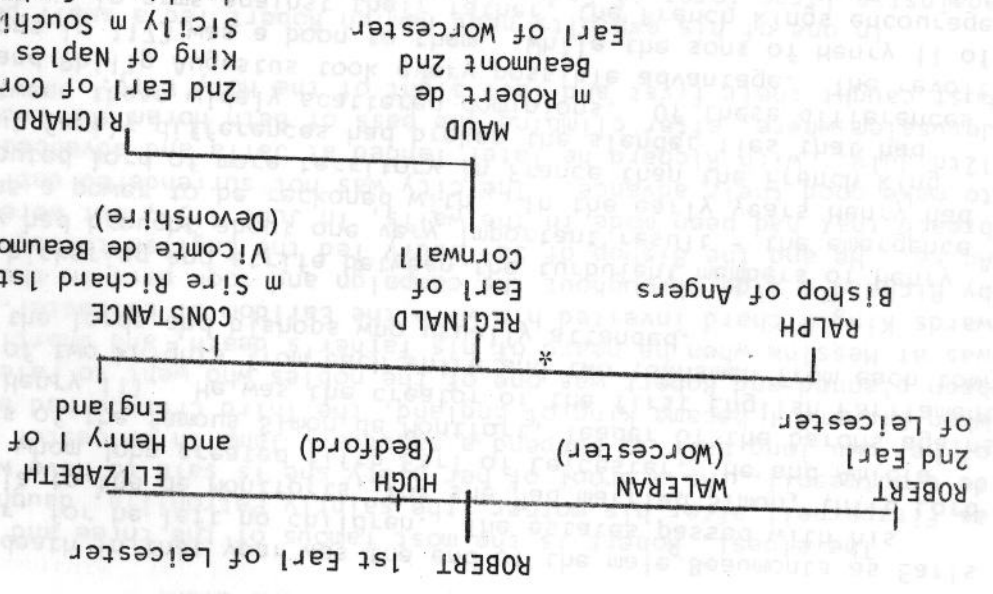
His death in that year was the end of the male Beaumonts as Earls of Leicester, for he left no children. The estates passed with his sister Amicia to the de Montforts, for she had married Simon, third Lord of Montfort whom John created fifth Earl of Leicester. He and Amicia were parents of the famous Simon de Montfort, leader of the barons against John's son Henry III. He was the creator of the first English Parliament consisting of two knights from each shire and two townsmen from each town as well as the lords and bishops who usually attended.

The bickering and strife between the turbulent members of Henry III's family had brought about one very important result - the emergence of France as a power to be reckoned with. In the early years Henry had been undisputed lord of more territory in France than the French king himself, but family differences had broken the slender ties that had existed between these widely scattered dominions. Of these differences Louis VII and Philip Augustus took every possible advantage. The revolt of the Barons in 1173 was a boon to them. While the sons of Henry II of England were up in arms against their father, the French kings encouraged and abetted them but when the sons themselves became kings, the French kings became implacable enemies and they increased their own authority over their dominions by copying the reforms Henry's genius had introduced in England. This weakening of England and strengthening of France resulted in the loss of Normandy by John. Many barons had then to think carefully where their best interests lay, in England or in France.

An excellent example of this is to be found in the family of de Beaumont. Robert, second Earl of Worcester died in 1181. His eldest son Robert who had joined John in his attempt to seize the throne while Richard I was away on the Crusade, lost his Norman estates in 1204 and they were added to the lands of the French crown. Henceforward this branch of the family was primarily English. William, Robert's son inherited the English estates and became fourth Earl of Worcester. On the other hand Peter, second son of Robert the second Earl, succeeded to the French estates and the earldom of Melent. In 1207, three years after the battle of Bouvines he abandoned John, handing over his castle to the King of France. Almost fifty years later (1255) his son and heir Raoul de Melent gave up his estates at Beaumont and Brionne to Louis IX, paying £600 and rendering the service of two knights in exchange for the lordship of Courseulles. This branch of the family were



THE DESCENDANTS OF ELIZABETH OF LEICESTER



Elizabeth later married (a) Gilbert Strongbow (de Clare), Earl of Pembroke (b) Hervey de Montmorency, Constable of Ireland

* Richard earl of Cornwall married Souhier, daughter of Raymond Berenger, Comte of Provence and Bortix daughter of Thomas, Comte of Savoy. King Henry III of England married Souhier's sister Eleanor. Thereby Reginald Earl of Cornwall was brother-in-law of King Henry III.

now feudal dependants of the French crown and no longer used the surname of Beaumont. The ties between England and its overseas dependencies were torn apart. No efforts at reconquest would ever again permanently unite them. With the deaths of Robert Blanchemains and William the Fourth Earl of Worcester the two earldoms were no longer in the direct male line of the Beaumont family.

During the Norman period there were various members of the family in Devonshire where Robert, first Earl of Leicester possessed the manor of Ascirewell, now known as Shirwell. It is believed to have passed to his youngest son Hugh. In the days of Henry II some of these estates belonged to Thomas de Beaumont, Lord of Sherwell and Colston who had lands at Cockington and Ashford in Devon. In 1249 a certain John de Beaumont accompanied St. Louis on the seventh Crusade.

The Devonshire branch of the family which can be traced goes back to Philip of Highampton who held various estates in the county. He probably also held lands in France, for his son Richard is named as the first Vicomte de Beaumont and Lord of Montrevaux, an estate some twenty-five miles east of Nantes. This Sire Richard de Beaumont appeared in a fourteenth century list of knights who accompanied Duke Robert of Normandy in the first Crusade. The list was formerly preserved in the Cathedral Library at Bayeux but was destroyed during the French Revolution. Richard may have been made a Vicomte when he married Constance, the natural daughter of Henry I. This marriage has a history which connects Richard with the Beaumonts of Leicester.

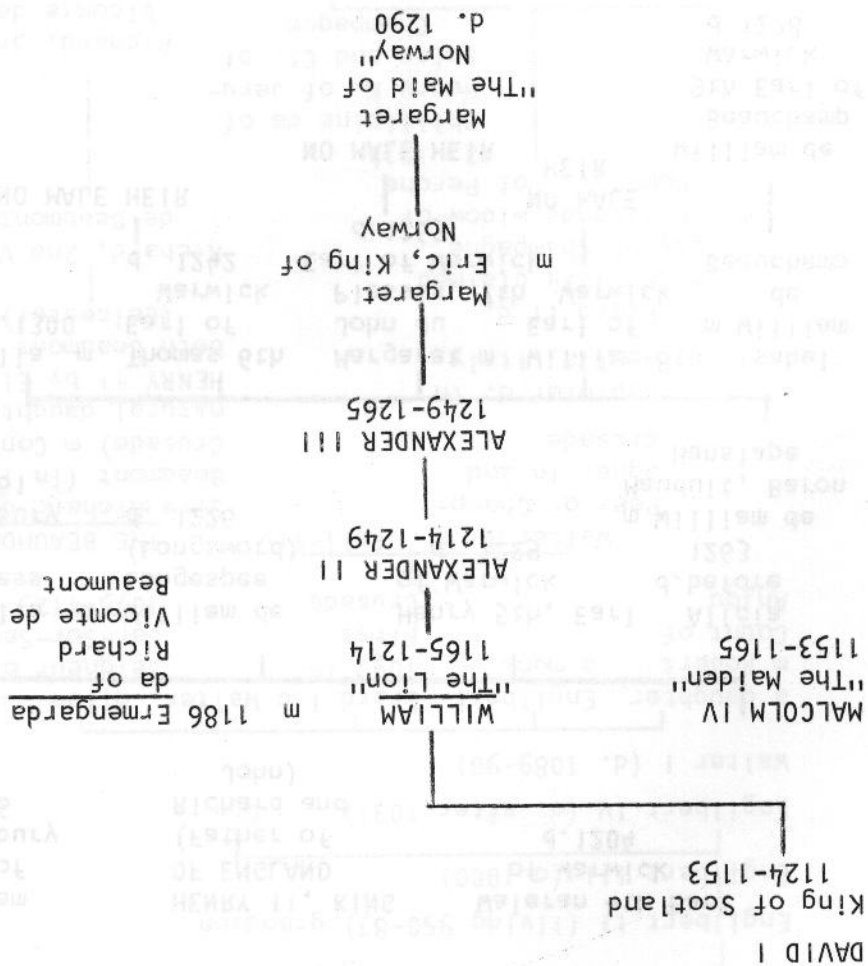
The eldest daughter of Robert first Earl of Leicester was Elizabeth. She became the mistress of Henry I and had by him at least three children. The eldest, Ralph, became Bishop of Angers; the second, Reginald was created Earl of Cornwall. He had a daughter Maud who married Robert de Beaumont, second Earl of Worcester (p.19). The third child of Elizabeth was the daughter Constance who married Richard de Belimonte. Thus, two daughters, descendants of Elizabeth de Beaumont married into other branches of the family and also made members of these branches descendants of Norman royalty and related to the Plantagenets.

Richard de Beaumont's eldest surviving son, the second Vicomte, seems to have taken little part in political life. At Ilstington, several miles from Newton Abbott some of the bench-ends in the church were carved with his arms, and in one of the windows of the church at Wolborough they were quartered with those of Courtenay. His son, the third Vicomte, born at Yolsion, died before 1249.

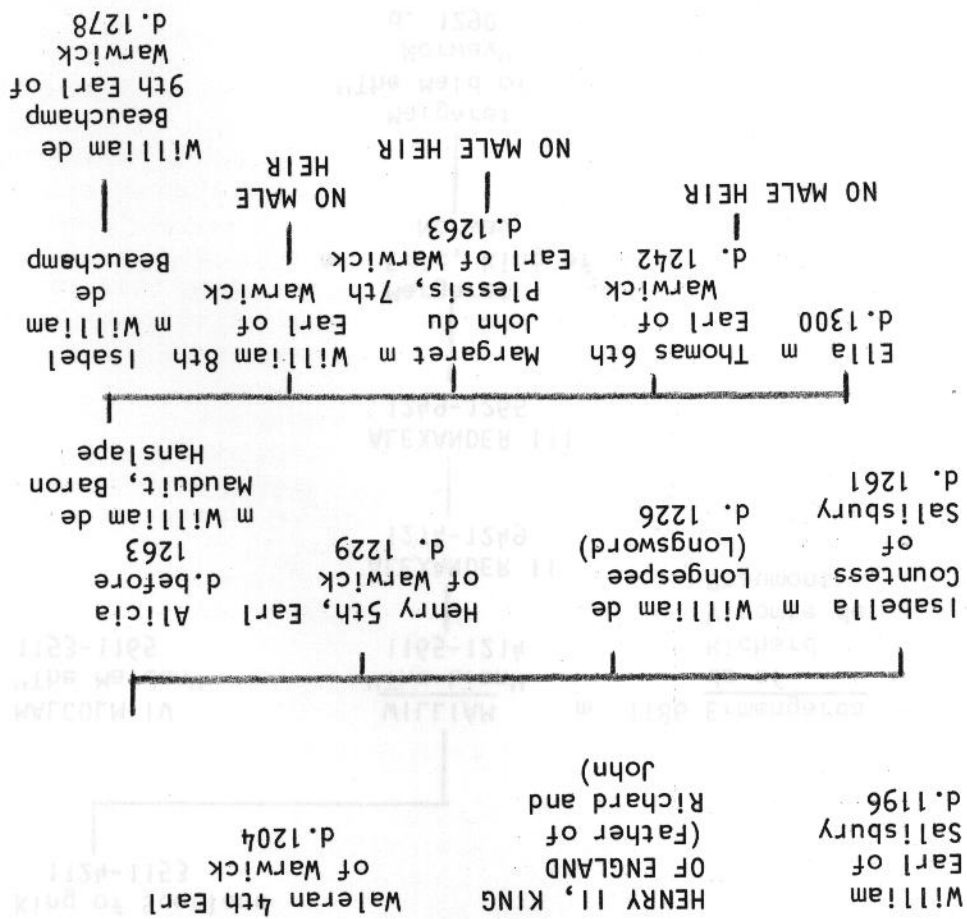
Richard, the second Vicomte also had two daughters. The elder, Constance, married into the family of de Toeni, the ancient enemies of the Beaumonts in Normandy during the reign of William the Conqueror. The second daughter Ermengarda married in September, 1186 William the Lion, King of Scotland, a cousin of Henry II. The wedding took place at the royal palace of Woodstock, and for four successive days the festivities were kept up with the utmost magnificence. Ermengarda thus became the ancestress of two Scottish kings, and her great-granddaughter was Queen of Norway. This Scottish line became extinct when the young Maid of Norway died in the Orkney Islands while on her way from Norway to Scotland to become Queen. Edward I of England had made an agreement with the Scots by which she was to marry his eldest son Edward. By this means he hoped that Scotland and England would one day be united. If the Maid of Norway had lived, three centuries of war between England and Scotland might possibly have been avoided. Thus ended the first century and a half (1066-1216) of the power and influence of the family of Beaumont.

Leicester and Worcester had passed. More great days still remained to Warwick, while in other branches of the family new and important figures were to arise.

THE BEAUMONTS AND THE SCOTTISH CROWN



THE LAST BEAUMONTS OF WARWICK



CASTILE and PLANTAGENET



1. Discussed in Douglas. 283ff
2. Dugdale. Baronage I. 69
3. W. Napier Reeve. The Chronicles of Leicester
4. Liber Niger Scaccarii (T. Hearne 1774)
5. Thorsby Leicester p.316
6. Benedictine Abbays II. 81
7. Bohn. Chronicles of the Crusades. 299
8. Joinville. Histoire de St. Louis. 103-124
9. Du Moulin. Seigneurs de Normandie J.C. Dansey. The Crusades p. IV
10. C. Worthy. Devon Parishes. II. 10
11. Davenport. Oxfordshire Annals p. 9

NOTES