

A STUDY IN LOYALTY

CHAPTER VI

Two important marriages in the 14th century were responsible for starting an association of the family of Beaumont with the House of Lancaster which lasted more than a hundred years. The first of these in 1337, was that of Eleanor, 5th daughter of Henry Earl of Lancaster with the young courtier John, 2nd Baron Beaumont. The second was that of John's sister Isabel with Eleanor's brother Henry, 4th Earl of Lancaster. The family alliance was cemented by a third marriage in 1359 between their daughter and heiress Blanche, who took the Earldom of Lancaster to her husband, John of Gaunt, third son of King Edward III. From that time until the eclipse of the House of Lancaster in 1471 the Beaumonts were among the principal members of the court party and never, through good days and bad, wavered in their loyalty to the Lancastrian cause.

On March 20th, 1413, the short and troubled reign of Henry IV came to a close. Threatened first by the Scots and then by the Percys of Northumberland in alliance with the Welsh chieftain Owen Glendwyr, the security of his throne had been in peril. Though during the last five years of the reign there had been no revolts, the nobility were restive and the country disunited.

Henry V, as Prince of Wales had shown great ability in the field but no special inclination to shoulder the responsibilities of kingship, but when he came to the throne his attitude changed completely. At his accession he resolved to take what seemed the only course to achieve some sort of national unity - a resumption of the war with the traditional enemy of England across the Channel. There were pretexts in abundance. The French, who had given aid both to the Scots and the Welsh were now themselves facing a grave crisis. When in 1389 the young King Charles VI had become subject to recurrent fits of insanity, the country was thrown into turmoil through a contest for power between his brother Louis of Orleans and his uncle Philip the Bold, Duke of Burgundy whose side the English naturally favoured. The struggle became more acute when in 1404 John the Fearless, the second Duke of Burgundy died and was succeeded by his son Philip. In 1407 the Duke of Orleans was murdered in Paris by Philip's agents, after which civil war broke out. Henry V of England took advantage of this situation and laid claim to the French throne as his forbear Edward III had done many years earlier. France was invaded, and in the campaign Henry took Harfleur following the siege by a march on Calais. When the French attempted to stop him at Agincourt he inflicted a crushing defeat on them (October 25th, 1415).

By the time this happened Henry, 5th Baron Beaumont was dead, having outlived his friend and patron Henry IV by no more than three months. His son John, the 6th Baron was then a child of three, but Henry had a younger brother Thomas who appears to have accompanied the expedition. The Pipe Rolls of Henry V's reign, describing the disposition of the king's forces before the battle of Agincourt mentions the vanguard of archers under the command of Edward Duke of York (killed in the battle) with the Lords Beaumont, Willoughby and Fairhope. Other leaders, Beauchamp, de Vere and de la Pole (also killed), are mentioned in Michael Drayton's ode on the battle (The Cambro Britons and their Harpe)

"Waurwick in Bloode did wade, (de Beauchamp)
Oxford the Foe inaude, (de Vere)
And cruel slaughter made,
Still as they ran vp:
Sutfolke his axe did ply (de la Pole)
Beaumont and Willoughby
Bore them right doughtily
Ferreys and Fanhope.
On happy Cryspyn day
Fought was this Noble Fray,
Which fame did not delay
To England to carry."

Another brother, Richard served as a lancer under the Duke of Gloucester, but we may be certain that the above record refers to Thomas for, in later years he served in various offices. He was Regent of France (1422-42) while Henry VI was a minor. When he was serving under Richard Earl of Warwick in 1433, the English were besieged in Paris and to find out the strength of the enemy forces he made a sortie from the beleaguered town at the head of 600 men. They were surrounded, a third of their number were killed, and Thomas de Beaumont with eighty more was taken captive. A week later Paris capitulated.

Thomas de Beaumont seems to have spent a large part of his life in France where he was knighted and given the Lordship of Basqueville in Normandy. In 1457 he was Governor of Dover Castle but in the following year was killed in the final stage of the war, possibly fighting to keep his own estates, or in the neighbourhood of Calais, which was by that time the only part of France remaining in English hands.

Thomas de Beaumont had extensive lands in England, for he was unsuccessfully sued for land at Parkham in Devonshire, and by his marriage with Philippa, daughter and heiress of Sir Thomas Maureward of Cole Orton in Leicestershire he became possessed of estates in that county, founding a branch of the Beaumont family in whose hands they have remained until the present day.

In the course of time John, the 6th Baron Beaumont grew up to be as fervent a supporter of his Lancastrian king as his uncle had been. They were probably well acquainted, for John served in France under the Earl of Bedford in 1429, furnishing twenty men at arms and eighty-eight archers for the campaigns.

During this year the English were meeting with reverses at the hands of Joan of Arc who in July conducted the reluctant Charles VII to Reims for his coronation in the cathedral there. In the following spring, however, her fortunes were on the wane and she was captured at Compeigne by the Burgundians who handed her over to the English.

John, Earl of Bedford now decided to bring the young English King Henry VI to France, and Baron Beaumont, now a young man of twenty, accompanied him. On St. George's Day they landed at Calais and proceeded to Rouen. Here they remained during the long drawn out trial of Joan of Arc, and John probably witnessed her death at the stake. Then followed the futile journey to Paris where the Earl of Bedford hoped that by having Henry crowned King of France he might cower the Parisians into obedience. It was all in vain and, fearing to trust the king's safety to the hostile French, he sent him back to England, probably accompanied by John, Baron Beaumont.

One honour followed another. In 1426 John had been created a knight of the Bath, in 1432 he was appointed a 'Trier of Petitions' and in 1434 was made Earl of Boling (Boulogne) and a Privy Counsellor by a charter granted at Canterbury. In 1435 he was again campaigning in France and in the following year was sent to the relief of Calais where he earned a reputation for valour. In the following year he married Elizabeth, heiress of Sir William Phips and widow of Lord Bardolph, and on this occasion, in recognition of his bravery in the late campaign, he was created Lord Bardolph. In 1437 his son William was born and in this connection his friendship with the king is recorded in an interesting grant of liberties:

"King Henry the Sixth was so affectionate unto him, that he granted unto him and to William, Lord Bardolph, his some and heirs apparent 27th Henry 6th, that within their own territories, lordship and jurisdictions, they should make returns of all writtes and should have and receive all fines, forfeitures and amercements and their tenants to be free of all suites of court, He also granted unto them, wreche of the seas, free warren and court leetes, and also power and authority to cause coroners and clerkes of the markets, within their own dominions and liberties, and further granted them license to have a peculiar prison and gaole for malefactors at Folkingham and Whitwik in the countie of Leicester and Woregely in the countie of Norfolk."

This was but a small accompaniment to the greatest grant of all, that of the first Viscounty ever to be created in England. The office of vice-comes, the deputy or vicar of a count, had been one of service under the Frankish kings, and survived as viscount in Norman times. The title of Viscountesse had been held by John's ancestor Agnes de Beaumont who had married Louis of Brienne. This may have suggested to the king that the title be made one of nobility, and that the new rank should be given precedence over all barons, and sons of peers. The title was granted by letters patent given at Reading on 12th February 1440 with a yearly fee of twenty marks (£13-13-4) from the County of Lincoln. In 1441 John was still further honoured by being made the 155th knight of the Garter.

During this time the situation in France was going from bad to worse. Paris was lost and the English were driven back on Calais. Opinion in England was now bitterly divided on the question of continuing the war and in 1439 Cardinal Beaufort, great-uncle of the king and one of the most influential men in England had already made one attempt to come to terms with France. On the other side, in favour of intensifying the war was Humphrey Duke of Gloucester the king's Uncle who accused the Cardinal of giving way to the enemy.

The quarrel became more bitter when in 1442 the French invaded the last strip of land the English held in Guienne and the Duke of Somerset, Beaufort's nephew was sent to recover it. The expedition was a complete failure.

The court party became more and more convinced that a negotiated peace was the only solution, and in 1444 a marriage was arranged between the king and the sixteen-year old princess Margaret of Anjou in the hope that this would put an end to hostilities for good, especially since the English agreed to give up the French province of Maine as part of the terms of the marriage settlement. The anti-court party were infuriated,

but Suffolk and Beaufort persisted. At that time the Viscount Beaumont was Constable of England and when it was decided to arrest the Duke of Gloucester, the leader of the dissidents and charge him with high treason it was his duty to make the arrest. This was done in February 1447 at Bury St. Edmunds. Three days later Humphrey was found dead in his bed, probably from natural causes, for we are told that he 'deide for sorow'. Most people believed, however, that he had been murdered by hirelings of Beaufort and Suffolk, and the King's cause became more and more unpopular. Through all these troubles Viscount Beaumont still rode the tide of success. As Constable he was charged with the arrest of Owen Tudor who had married King Henry's widowed mother Catherine of France without royal consent. During the truce (1446) he was ambassador to France and Warden of the Channel Islands which were the private property of the King: in 1450 he was Chamberlain of England and went in 1451 as a Commissioner to treat for peace with Scotland.

In 1457 he accompanied the King and Queen on a visit to the Borough of Coventry. In St. Mary's Hall below the north window there is a piece of Flemish tapestry 30ft by 10ft divided into six compartments in two tiers, which commemorates the visit. The first left hand compartment shows the King, with Cardinal Beaufort behind him, both kneeling, while Viscount Beaumont stands in the foreground to the left, and the background is filled up with sixteen barons and ladies. The Viscount is robed in a cloak of gold cloth, with a light blue tunic beneath it, and an embossed gypciere () hangs from his girdle while just behind him stands a small dog. In the Pentecostal feast which the King observed on this visit the Viscount bore the King's train in procession.

Such pleasing scenes were no indication of the true state of the country. Gloucester after all had been right, for war had broken out again in 1449 when on a flimsy pretext Charles VII of France had invaded Brittany which was lost with the whole of Normandy in 1450. By 1453 the last English army in Gascony had been annihilated and nothing was left of the vast Plantagenet empire except Calais. By this time a new leader of the opposition to the court party had arisen in Richard, Duke of York who in 1452 had taken up arms against Somerset. When in 1453 King Henry lost his reason, York was named protector by the House of Lords. Then when Henry recovered and York saw his power disappear he took up arms. At St. Albans the first battle of the Wars of the Roses was fought and with the death of Somerset in battle York enjoyed another short-lived spell of power, until Henry recovered from a second period of insanity and tried in 1458 to reconcile the two parties. The truce did not last long and in 1459 Viscount Beaumont was sent by Queen Margaret with Lord Audley to seize the person of the Earl of Salisbury, York's brother-in-law. Viscount Beaumont and Henry Holand, Duke of Exeter were in command of some sixteen thousand men, but were defeated by Salisbury at Blore Heath in Staffordshire. (23rd September 1459). Meanwhile York, seeing that the Queen was preparing for open war, decided to strike first, but was baffled when some of his best leaders refused to join him in an act of rebellion. He met the Lancastrians at Ludlow but, seeing his forces outnumbered, left the field and fled to Ireland.

York's act of rebellion turned popular opinion towards the side of the Queen. A manuscript at Trinity College entitled "Verses on the State by a Lancastrian" (1458) includes Viscount Beaumont among the Queen's principal supporters.

"Thys good shype hate ankers thre,
 Of better mettel ther may non be,
 In strenthe ye shyp be londe and se,
 When he wolle stop hys tyde.
 The fu(r)st anker, hole and sounde,
 He is named ye Lord Beaumont,
 Wellys and Ryveres, Trouthe yn them found,
 In worshypp them hem gyde."

The Queen, vindictive and headstrong, made ill use of her good fortune for the harsh measures taken at the Parliament at Coventry and the executions of Yorkist leaders which accompanied them brought bitter hatred and ended all hopes of peace. When therefore the Earls of Salisbury, Warwick and York's son Edward Earl of March quitted their exile in France and landed in the south of England they found a ready welcome and were joined by large numbers of supporters including the citizens of London. Within a fortnight of their landing they met the Lancastrians at Northampton and inflicted on them a crushing defeat, in which Viscount Beaumont "sticking close to King Henry the Sixth" was killed beside the King's tent in Hardingstone meadow on the east side of the London Road between de la Pre Abbey and the river Nene". A poem on the battle, written by a Yorkist very shortly after it happened refers scathingly to other members of the Court party.

"Talbot ontrew was ye oon dogges name,
 Bauling Beaumont anodre I understonde,
 Ye thrid also was made ful tame,
 He was called Bolde Egremonde."

Northampton was the first episode in the great blood-letting known as the Wars of the Roses which deprived England of almost all its old nobility. On the 'three ankers' of the royal cause referred to in the first verse, John Talbot, Earl of Shrewsbury was killed there, Leo, Lord Welles at Towton in the following year while Richard Widville, the father-in-law of Edward IV was beheaded in 1469. The Percys of Northumberland including Thomas Lord Egremont were as strongly Lancastrian as the Beaumonts, the second earl being killed at St. Albans, in 1455 and the third at Towton.

John, 6th Baron Beaumont was buried at Newark where in his memory his widow erected a market cross, probably a renewal of a cross which had been there before. The cross, sometimes erroneously called a Queen Eleanor cross still exists having been as the inscriptions record "repaired and ornamented 1778 at the expense of Charles Mellish Esq., Recorder," and again "This cross erected in the reign of Edward the Fourth, was repaired and beautified from the town estate A.D. MDCCCI."

He was succeeded by his son William, born at Grimsthorpe Park, Edenham, Lincolnshire during the happier days when court life was something to be enjoyed and not a ceaseless round of campaigning and danger. The account of his baptism gives us some idea of mediaeval gentility at such ceremonies. Of his godfathers, one was an abbot, another a knight, and his godmother had been one of the executors of the will of Henry V. A pair of gold basins and ewers was carried from the Mayor's house to the church for the godparents to wash their hands after the ceremony, John Trusse brought two carpets to spread round the font. After the baptism his godmother raised him from the font, showing that he had been immersed, and Henry Lavington carried a lighted torch before the child as the party walked back from the church to Grimsthorpe Park.

William, who inherited from his mother the vast estates of the Barolfs was also to have his share of danger. In December 1460 he was appointed J.P. for the County of Leicester. Meanwhile the war was being carried on with the greatest ferocity. The king had been taken by the Yorkist faction at Northampton, then in 1460 the Duke of York himself and his second son Lord Rutland were both killed at Wakefield. In February 1461 in spite of a defeat at Mortimer's Cross, Queen Margaret won the second battle of St. Albans and recaptured the king whom the Duke of Warwick left on the field as he fled. She was only prevented from marching on London by her own troops who were too intent on plunder to wish to follow up a victory, and the citizens were stirred by the arrival of the young and popular Edward, Duke of York whom they greeted with cheers and cries of "Long live the king!"

Having consolidated his position in London Edward marched swiftly north following the retreating Lancastrians whom he completely defeated at Towton near Tadcaster in Yorkshire, a great battle with 60,000 men on each side and with slaughter unequalled since Evesham two hundred years before. Here three of the Beaumonts fought on the side of Queen Margaret and Lancaster. Two of these, both killed, were John and Henry of Cole Orton, sons of Thomas de Beaumont, Lord of Basqueville (see above, p.). William the 7th Baron was more fortunate. He was taken prisoner, but how he escaped execution when others, including the Earls of Devon and Wiltshire and 42 knights were executed and many less important prisoners were hanged, is not known. He and his two dead cousins were among the 133 persons against whom was passed an Act of Attainder declaring them to be "open and notorious traitors, rebels and enemies," and their estates confiscated. Most of the manors belonging to Viscount Beaumont and those of John Beaumont were given as a reward to the Yorkist Sir William Hastings, and William's lands at Thorpe Langton to Robert Palmer. The preamble to the Act, which mentions them by name, reads:

"Who on Sunday called commonly Palme Sunday, the XXIX of Marche, the first yere of his Reigne in a field Bitwene the townes of Shirbourne in Elmet and Tadcaster in the Shire of York, called Saxton, felde and Towton and Scotts, the Kynge's enemies falsely and traitorously against their felth and ligeance, there were against the same Kyng Edward, their rightwys true and natural liege lord purposing there to have destroyed hym, and deposed hym of his royal estate, coroune and dignite: and then and there to that entent, falsely and traitorously moved bataille against his seid estate, shedyng therein the blood of a great nombre of his subgetts: in which bataille it pleased Almighty God to geve unto hym of the mysterie of his myght and grace, the victorie of his ennemyes and rebelles and to subdue and avoide the effect of their fals and traitorous porpose!"

William, Viscount Beaumont lived to give further service to his true king. What part he took in the complicated political movement of the next decade is not known, except that when the Earl of Warwick quarrelled with Edward IV on the question of the royal marriage with Elizabeth Widville, and restored Henry VI, William joined him taking part on Easter Day 1471 at the disastrous battle of Barnet where Warwick was defeated and slain.

The cause of Lancaster was lost. Edward followed up his victory by a second at Tewkesbury in which Edward, son of Henry VI and Margaret and the only surviving heir of the House of Lancaster was either slain on the field or murdered after the battle. On the day after Edward's triumphant return to London Henry VI was murdered in the Tower of London. It was given out that he had died "of pure displeasure and melancholy."

For Viscount Beaumont the day was even then not lost. John de Vere, Earl of Oxford, with a few ships given to him by the king of France, landed at St. Oysyth near Colchester in May, 1472, but had to retire before superior forces under the Earl of Essex. For many months he cruised off Thanet and in the English Channel. Then in October, 1473, accompanied by Viscount Beaumont he captured St. Michael's Mount which he used as a base for raids into Cornwall. These two Lancastrians held the Mount for nearly six months until many of their men, tempted by promises of pardon and reward, deserted. Though they had food to last them some time, their losses in manpower forced them to surrender in February, 1474. The entire garrison was pardoned with the exception of the two leaders who were imprisoned in the Castle of Ham in Picardy.

Eventually the House of York came to an end at the battle of Bosworth (1485) where Henry Tudor seized the throne from Richard III. William Viscount Beaumont was fifty-three when the battle was fought and seems to have taken no part in it, though his old friend and fellow-campaigner John de Vere, Earl of Oxford had landed with Henry and was by that time Captain-General of his army. The first act of the new king was to reverse the attainer passed on Beaumont, Oxford and all those Lancastrians who had fought at Towton, and in 1485 William took his place in Henry VII's first Parliament.

The last years of his life were clouded. About the year 1496 he lost his reason. His old friend the Earl of Oxford was appointed his guardian and he spent the rest of his life on the Earl's estate at the little port of Wivenhoe on the Colne in Essex where he died in December 1507 at the age of 70. Born in the days when an empire was in decay, he lived through years of civil war and peril to himself, to see a new world and a stable England.

His memorial brass in the church at Wivenhoe is probably the finest military brass of the "mail skirt" period of armour now in existence. Under a triple canopy his head rests on his helm supported by mantling, crest and wreath. Between the legs is his badge, the elephant and castle indicative of his descent from John of Brienne and John's second wife Berengaria of Castile. Beneath his feet is the broom cod of the Plantagenets, the royal family to which Eleanor, the wife of the second Baron Beaumont belonged. His shield bears in the upper dexter quarter the Beaumont arms, in the lower dexter the arms of Phelps, in the upper sinister Comyn and in the lower sinister Bardolf. The inscription on a fillet surrounding the figure, now nearly all lost, once read:

"Here in the erthe undyr thys marbell rests the bonyz of the noble Lorde Wylliam Beaumont, knyght, Vycunt Beaumont and Lorde Bardolphe, whyche Wylliam after the naturale course of all erthely creaturis decessyd the XIXth day of Decemb in the yere of Christ's incarnation MCCCCVII. Whose soule Jhu of his infinite mercy receive into joy."

Here too is the brass of his second wife Elizabeth, daughter and so-heiress of Sir Richard Scrope who, after William's death married his guardian John, Earl of Oxford and died in 1537.

With William's death the great days of the Beaumont Viscounts ended, for he had no sons, and his estates were left to his nieces, the daughters of his sister Joane who had married Lord Lovell of Tiltmarsh, both she and her husband dying before him. This explains why the Beaumont arms are to be found on the Lovell tomb in Minster Lovell Church, Oxfordshire. The Lovell family too, were strongly Lancastrian and Joane's son Francis, Viscount Lovell was attainted in 1485 and killed at the battle of Stoke near Newark in 1487 when the rebellion of Lambert Simnel was put down. His sister married Sir Bryan Stapleton, the estates passing in 1707 by another marriage to Nicholas Errington whose grandson took the name of Stapleton. Thomas Stapleton, who died in 1821 claimed the Beaumont barony but failed to substantiate his claim, and it was not made good until 1840 when Miles Thomas Stapleton became the 8th Baron Beaumont. He was one of the last of the English duellists, having fought on Wimbledon Common with Lorenzo Moore and received a bullet in the chest which was never extracted. His son the 9th Baron (1848-92) fought in Zululand and was present at the battle of Ulundi. His grand-daughter Mona Josephine Stapleton, Baroness Beaumont in her own right, married Fitzalan Howard, Baron Howard of Glossop. She died in 1971 and her heir is her son Miles Fitzalan Howard, Baron Beaumont, G.O.C. London Div. now Duke of Norfolk.

The more recent history of the family goes to show that loyalty was not peculiar to those members of it who lived in the Middle Ages.

NOTES

- 1 N.H. Nicholas. Agincourt p.5.
- 2 Stubbs. Constitutional History III, 128
- 3 Stubbs III. 136
- 4 Mary Dormer Harris.
Life in an Old English Town
- 5 E.5.10, in Archaeologia XXIX, 329
- 6 W. Burton. Leicestershire p.34
- 7 Archaeologia XXIX 335
- 8 Ancient Stone Crosses
A. Rimmer and C. Brown Annals of Newark
on Trent
- 9 Stubbs III, 196
- 10 Scottfield. The Life and Reign of Edward IV. p. 89

THE LANCASTER CONNECTIONS OF THE FAMILY OF DE BEAUMONT

