

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Anne May, Sir Thomas Erpingham (1357-1428) – Hero or Thug?

Anne May gave a fascinating account of the life of Sir Thomas Erpingham, a 14th Century knight with strong links to Norwich and Norfolk, at the June meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall. At the start, she posed the question as to whether he was a 'hero' or a 'thug.'

Thomas was born in 1357. His father, Sir John Erpingham, owned a manor at Erpingham. It is not a surprise that Thomas was sent to the household of the Black Prince, at the age of 11 to begin training for a military career as his father and grandfather had fought at Crécy in 1346. The Black Prince was a powerful patron as he was the eldest son of King Edward III. Thomas served the Black Prince and the House of Lancaster faithfully. In 1370 Thomas inherited the manors of Erpingham and Wicksmere on the death of his father. He gained the reputation of being a brave, loyal soldier. When the Black Prince died in 1376, Thomas transferred his allegiance to the Prince's brother, John of Gaunt. He soon acquired the manor of Gillingham, near Beccles.

In the service of John of Gaunt, Thomas 'harried' the Scots and was involved in the sacking of the monasteries at Kelso and Melrose in 1385. He also accompanied his patron on his disastrous attempt to seize the crown of Castile in 1386. As John of Gaunt aged, Thomas began to accompany Henry Bolingbroke, John's son, on military adventures in Europe. This culminated in a visit to Palestine in 1392-3. In 1398 Bolingbroke incurred the displeasure of the King, Richard II, when he arranged to fight a duel with the Duke of Norfolk. The King condemned the possibility of bloodshed and exiled both before the duel could take place. Thomas decided to accompany Bolingbroke in his ten year exile. Within a year, Bolingbroke returned to England, and deposed and imprisoned Richard II. He claimed the throne and was crowned, Henry IV. Sir Thomas Erpingham gained significantly from his loyalty to the new King. He acquired a number of lucrative posts, including Constable of Dover Castle and Warden of the Cinque Ports. Later he became Steward of the Royal Household. Thomas served the King loyally until Henry IV died in 1413. Thomas became very wealthy. He bought a house in Norwich and used his influence to gain a charter for the city which allowed it to have a sheriff and a mayor.

By the time of the accession of Henry V to the throne in 1413, Thomas was about 56 years old, quite elderly for the period, but he remained in royal service and accompanied the King on an expedition to France in 1415. The initial English force of about 11,000 men became depleted by dysentery during the siege of Harfleur. After taking the city, Henry V decided to march to Calais as gesture of defiance to large French forces which were gathering to his south. The march was very difficult for the starving English army. Eventually, the French forced them into battle at Agincourt. Thomas was the commander of the English archers who inflicted heavy casualties and ultimate defeat on the French. After returning home, Thomas retired and focussed his attention upon Norwich and Norfolk. He contributed to the rebuilding of St Andrew's Hall which had been destroyed by fire in 1413. His coat of arms is displayed on the church. In 1420 he initiated the building of the Erpingham Gate, and entrance to Norwich Cathedral. This bears the only known image of Thomas, a kneeling statue high on the gate, although this is thought to have been added in the 18th Century. He died in 1428 and is buried in Norwich Cathedral near the altar. He left money to endow a number of Norfolk churches.

Anne concluded her talk by considering her initial question of hero or thug. Our concept of 'knight' is largely a Victorian creation of a brave, just, loyal and generous person. In reality, knights were probably violent people intent on accumulating honour and wealth. Thomas appears just to have been a man of his time.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on Wednesday 25 July at The Village Hall, Rickinghall. Linda Sexton will give a talk about the Ipswich Riot of 1863. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net.

Gerry Gurhy