

From September 2018, the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford DNB) offers biographies of 60,690 men and women who have shaped the British past, contained in 62,956 articles. 11,604 biographies include a portrait image of the subject – researched in partnership with the National Portrait Gallery, London.

This update, which adds twenty seven lives and one portrait likeness, focuses upon the early history of Britain. Extending from the twelfth to the early seventeenth century, and including in its scope royalty, politicians, soldiers, clergy, and administrators, as well as both a perpetrator and a victim of murder, it develops a number of existing themes and introduces a new one. This release was curated by Dr Henry Summerson, Oxford DNB advisory editor for the Medieval and Tudor periods.

The release's highest-ranking subjects are both women: **Isabella [Isabella Bigod] (b. ? 1195/1196, d. 1270)**, princess and countess of Norfolk a daughter of William the Lion, king of Scots, and her sister **Margaret [Margaret Marshal] (d. 1244)**, princess and countess of Pembroke. Their lives and marriages played a significant role in early thirteenth-century British politics and illustrate the close ties between the sisters' brother Alexander II, king of Scots, and leading figures in contemporary English society.

It has been a long-standing aim of the Oxford DNB to amplify its coverage of England's single greatest community. The largest group in this release is made up of eight Lord Mayors of London whose lives show the interconnections of commerce and politics, and repeatedly demonstrate the importance of the city in English affairs. These lives begin with **Walter Hervey (d. in or after 1276)**, a populist to whom the poorer citizens of London looked to for protection from their rich masters, but who also gave essential support to Henry III's efforts to recover control of his capital after the Barons' Wars. A much later figure, the merchant **Henry Barton (d. 1435)**, was appointed to a number of offices and commissions by successive kings, which did not prevent his becoming a prominent figure in the government of London, and serving twice as Mayor. Typical among his contemporaries as the founder of two almshouses in Cripplegate ward (they survived for some two centuries), he also illustrates London's role in the development of English literary culture, through his commissions of translations of two French romances. The only illustrated life in this release – that of **John Hatherley (d. 1460/1461)** – shows him to have been a merchant who exported cloth to the continent and also traded in salt, alum, and wine. The great wealth he amassed helped to bring him to prominence, but so too did the negotiating skills which he demonstrated in dealings with the king's government as well as with his fellow-citizens, and which helped him to become an alderman, one of London's MPs, and finally Mayor.

New lives of some of the Lord Mayors who held office during the Wars of the Roses (1455-1487) illustrate the critical importance of London's allegiance at times of political crisis and uncertainty. **Sir Richard Lee (d. 1471/1472)**, who had risen through the Grocers Company and successive roles in civic government, was Mayor in 1461, when his refusal to admit Queen

Margaret's forces to the city made a vital contribution to the Yorkist victory later that year, and again in 1471, when he played an active part in London's resistance to a Lancastrian siege, for which he was knighted. **Sir Ralph Verney (d. 1478)**, was a merchant who made his fortune exporting cloth to the continent and importing a wide range of goods. Mayor of London in 1465, he lent money to Edward IV and stood by him in 1471, when he, too, took part in the city's defence and was subsequently knighted. **Robert Basset (d. 1484)**, a merchant who rose to prominence in the Salters' Company, was not knighted despite having been responsible for defense of London's eastern gate in 1471, but he was still held in high regard by the citizens, who elected him Mayor in 1475.

**Sir John Shaw [Shaa] (c.1455–1503)**, a goldsmith from a well-connected family, flourished in more peaceful times. Twice one of London's MPs, he was elected mayor in 1501, four years after he was knighted for his part in resisting the 1497 Cornish rising, and became high in favour with Henry VII, who exercised authority in London through him, and whom he also served as joint master-worker of the mint. The last Lord Mayor in this release is **Sir Thomas Lowe [alias Fyfield] (c.1546–1623)**. By the late sixteenth century religion rather than politics was troubling the peace of the city. Sir Thomas's father, **Simon Lowe (c. 1522-1578)**, a merchant taylor who was twice a city MP under Queen Mary, negotiated the religious upheavals of the period with some difficulty, thanks to his Catholic sympathies. Sir Thomas, by contrast, was one of London's godly. A haberdasher who prospered greatly by exporting English cloth to the continent, especially Germany, his religious commitment did not prevent his defending London's secular interests as well, as Mayor in 1604/5, and also as an MP. He was active, too, in a military capacity, becoming colonel of a regiment in the city's militia.

Recent releases have seen the fulfilment of a long term project to complete the *Oxford DNB's* coverage of the medieval English episcopate, and to broaden that of the late medieval religious. There is still space for significant ecclesiastical lives from other parts of Britain, and the present release includes two important Welsh bishops **Peter de Leia (d. 1198)**, bishop of St David's, is principally known as the target for repeated attacks – many of them demonstrably unfair – in the writings of Gerald of Wales, his rival for episcopal preferment. A bishop of St. David's in a later century, **David Martin (d. 1328)**, became involved in the violent politics of Edward II's reign, but is chiefly notable for having commissioned *The Black Book of St David's*, a valuable source for the contemporary social, economic, and religious life of south Wales in the early fourteenth century. Intellectual life in the middle ages was principally in the hands of churchmen, one of whom, **Walter of Mileto [Melida, Melide] (fl. c.1170–c.1220)**, a scribe and Augustinian canon at St Mary's Abbey, Cirencester, is remembered for having been the clerk to his abbot, the polymathic writer Alexander Neckam, and in that capacity helping to ensure the survival of Alexander's writings. The apparently monolithic religion of the middle ages began to break up in the sixteenth century. The difficulties which that process could bring are vividly illustrated by the fortunes of **Christopher Trychay (Trykhay) (c.1491–1574)**, vicar of Morebath, on the Devon–Somerset border, for nearly fifty-five years from 1519. He has become well-known for his annual reports on the life of his parish during the whole Reformation period, from Henry VIII to Elizabeth I, which provide a detailed, and often poignant, account of the way repeated changes in religion affected a single rural parish across nearly half a century.

Although religion was of great importance in the medieval and early modern centuries, as recent releases have demonstrated, the present one marks the beginning of a shift in emphasis, one

intended to enhance *ODNB*'s coverage of secular life during the same periods, with more articles on nobles and gentry, on soldiers and on administrators. Several of them also had important links with the Continent. Thus **Sir Mathias [Maci] Bezill (d. 1268)**, a courtier and soldier who was born in Touraine, France, found preferment as Constable of Gloucester castle and Sheriff of Gloucester through his good relations with Henry III and his queen. Besieged and incarcerated in the wave of anti-alien feeling of 1263, Bezill was later appointed constable of Dover Castle and founded a family that assimilated into English landed society. **Sir Peter de Champvent [Chavent] (d. 1303)**, another courtier and soldier, was a native of Savoy. He too served Henry III as Constable of Gloucester castle, and then became sheriff of Gloucestershire, but at the height of his career returned for several years to his homeland, before coming back to England, where he became successively steward and chamberlain to Edward I, as well as acquiring substantial estates. Bezill and Champvent were on the whole respected royal servants, but others among Henry III's courtiers were heartily disliked, not least for the misconduct of their own retainers. Among the latter was **William de Bussey (d. 1264)**, who flourished under the protection of the king's Lusignan half-brothers, and became greatly hated for his arrogance and brutality, qualities which in turn helped to bring about a revolution against Henry's government in 1258.

An altogether more respectable figure was Bussey's near-contemporary **William of Haverhill (d. 1252)**, who after many years of service in the king's wardrobe became treasurer of England in 1240. Conscientious and efficient, he was praised by the chronicler Mathew Paris for having 'spent many years of his life in diligent service to the king'. **Thomas Sibthorpe (d. 1351)** was probably a man of similar qualities. A chancery clerk who later became a tax-collector, assize justice and JP in the north midlands, and the founder of a lavishly-endowed chantry, he would probably have attracted only modest attention from historians, had it not been for his violent death, murdered by the warden of his chantry and two others – the fact that he was also a royal servant provided the king's lawyers with grounds for extending the scope of the law of treason. Even more of a worker 'behind the scenes' was **William Bedell (d. 1518)**, who spent over twenty years managing estates for Henry VII's mother, Lady Margaret Beaufort, and then served as treasurer to Cardinal Thomas Wolsey. Probably well-known to the young Henry VIII, only his sudden death may have prevented Bedell's obtaining advancement under that king.

Among the soldiers included in this release are several who took part in the Hundred Years' War (1337-1453), notably **Sir Thomas Cok (1307/1308, d. 1352/1353)**, who spent most of his career in the service of his patron Henry of Grosmont, duke of Lancaster. Cok served in numerous military campaigns and held important offices in the French wars, including that of seneschal of Aquitaine; he also acted as a diplomat, for instance in an embassy which negotiated a brief Anglo-French truce in 1350. A comparable if less prominent figure, who served the same patrons as Cok and in the same conflicts, was **Simon [Simkyn] Simeon (d. 1387)**, who accompanied Duke Henry on campaign and in diplomatic missions, and also served him, and later his son, John of Gaunt, at home, becoming steward of the Duchy of Lancaster estates in Lincolnshire. A very different kind of cross-Channel enterprise is illustrated by the life of **Alexander Bonneville [alias Richard the Englishman] (d. 1336)**, who having abjured the realm of England for felony there, became instead the leader of a band of robbers in France, where he was eventually executed, but not before his 'brief but energetic involvement in criminal activity' had included theft, burglary, and the notorious murder of a royal messenger.

Cok, Simeon and Bonneville were in different ways all Englishmen active overseas. But the kings of England also ruled what were sometimes substantial parts of France, where they could hardly have maintained their government without the cooperation of native nobles, churchmen and administrators. Among these were three members of the Gascon nobility, all from the same family. **Guilhem-Sans [III] de Pommiers (c.1315x20–1367)** served with military distinction in the early decades of the Hundred Years War and as a result became very wealthy. With him is included his younger brother **Hélias de Pommiers (fl. 1336–1371)** who enjoyed a similarly successful career in the service of Henry of Grosmont, and also became a rich man. But when the fortunes of war turned against the English in the 1370s, deciding where one's loyalties, and interests, lay became increasingly difficult. **Guilhem-Sans [IV] de Pommiers**, one of the sons of **Guilhem-Sans [III]**, was persuaded to transfer his loyalties to the French side, but was detected and paid the penalty, when he was executed for treason at Bordeaux in 1377.

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