

[p. 189] SOME DEPICTIONS OF THE ARMS OF HENRY DESPENSER,
BISHOP OF NORWICH

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Henry Despenser¹ (c. 1341-1406), Bishop of Norwich (1370-1406), was the youngest son of Sir Edward Despenser and his wife, Anne (d. 1367), daughter of William, Lord Ferrers of Groby. His father, who was killed at the siege of Vannes in 1342, was the second son of Hugh Despenser the Younger, Edward II's infamous favourite. As a youngest son, Henry was destined for the church, becoming ordained in 1362. However, his cloth notwithstanding, like most others of his family, he spent his early years as a soldier and, with his oldest brother, Edward, Lord Despenser, undertook military service for Pope Urban V against the city of Milan in 1369. He became Bishop of Norwich, by papal provision, in 1370, but, even after this, he continued to practise martial pursuits. During the so-called Peasants' Revolt in 1381, he took the lead in suppressing the rebels in Norfolk, culminating in his violent defeat of them at the battle of North Walsham in June of that year.² Two years later, in 1383, he led a 'crusade' in Flanders, ostensibly on behalf of the Roman Pope, Urban VI, against the adherents of his rival, Clement VII, the antipope, an ill-fated expedition for which Despenser was subsequently impeached in parliament.³ Then, in 1385, he was a member of the large army which Richard II took to Scotland to counter the threat of invasion by a Franco-Scottish force under the command of Jean de Vienne, the Admiral of France.⁴ He was also embroiled in long drawn-out disputes with the borough of Lynn, one result of which was a clash in the streets of Lynn between his men and the inhabitants, in 1377.⁵

Although Despenser was Bishop of Norwich for thirty-six years and featured prominently in the archives of central government and in the writings of contemporary chroniclers, the records of him as bishop within his diocese are few and far between. Indeed, the celebrated Princeton historian, Rushton Coulborn, ruefully noted 'the non-existence at Norwich of any records of the episcopate of Henry Despenser ... except an Institution Book', adding that 'we regret in particular the loss of all the bishop's records of the crusade [of 1383]'.⁶ Coulborn, however, overlooked several surviving instruments executed by Despenser as bishop, dating from between 1373 and 1403,⁷ while three illuminated manuscripts, almost certainly commissioned in Norwich by him and originally in his private library, are now in the British Library.⁸ All contain some fine illuminations of his arms as bishop, examples of which are given in *figs. 1-3*.

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Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

The arms of Bishop Henry Despenser: *Fig. 1*. in an illuminated initial Q, also showing decoration at the head of the folio (BL, Add. MS 34114, fo. 106); *Fig. 2*. in an illuminated initial Q (BL, Add. MS 34114, fo. 164); *Fig. 3*. in an illuminated initial R (BL, Arundel MS 74, fo. 1).

Since Henry Despenser was a youngest son⁹, one might have expected that he would have differenced his family arms with a brisure for cadency, but he did not do this, instead differencing the Despenser coat with a bordure derived from the arms of the diocese of Norwich, which are Azure, three mitres Or.¹⁰ On the question of possible differencing for cadency, Francis Blomefield commented that ‘he bare on a *penon*, when he warred against the *Anti-Pope*, his paternal arms in a bordure *gul.* as the difference of the youngest of the Spencers [p. 191] And sometimes the bordure is charged with *bezants*, and sometimes with mitres *arg.*’ However, this statement needs to be viewed with extreme caution, as Blomefield also wrongly blazoned the main Despenser coat as ‘quarterly *arg.* and *az.* on each of the *azure* quarters a fret *or*, over the *argent* a bend *gul.*’¹¹ The arms which Henry Despenser bore as Bishop of Norwich were, in fact, Quarterly, 1st and 4th, Argent, 2nd and 3rd Gules, a fret Or, over all, a bendlet Sable, within a bordure Azure, semée of mitres Or.



Fig.4. Secretum seal of Henry Despenser (Society of Antiquaries, London, C. 22).



Fig. 5. Episcopal seal of Henry Despenser (Society of Antiquaries, London, C. 22).

NB: these two illustrations are not to scale.

These are the arms which also appear on Despenser’s very fine *secretum* seal¹² (fig. 4), which has been described in detail by Tony Sims:

The private seal of Bishop Henry Despenser (1369 [sic]-1406) carries his shield à couché (on the side) under a large mantled helm surmounted by a mitre supporting the crest of a silver griffin of ample size. On the dexter side of the seal are the arms of the see, which was its first use on a seal; and on the sinister, uniquely, the arms of his mother, Anne, daughter of William lord Ferrers of Groby, gules, seven mascles voided, or.¹³

The seal is 37 mm. in diameter and its legend reads SIGILLUM : HENRICI : DESPENSER : NORWYCENS’ : EPISCOPI (‘the seal of Henry Despenser, Bishop of Norwich’).

[p. 192] The same arms are also depicted on Despenser’s vesica episcopal seal¹⁴ (fig. 5), which was described by Walter de Gray Birch as:

Pointed oval: in a finely carved Gothic niche, with canopy and tabernacle work at sides, the Bishop, full length, lifting up the r. h. in benediction, in the l. h. a pastoral staff. On the canopy overhead, a small niche contains the Trinity. On the tabernacle work at each side, a shield of arms: l., SEE OF NORWICH; r., DESPENCER.¹⁵

[p. 193] The episcopal seal measures 89 mm. x 55 mm. and is circumscribed with the legend: SIGILLUM : HENRICI : DEI : GRACIA : EPISCOPI : NORWIC' ('the seal of Henry, by the Grace of God, Bishop of Norwich'). The Despenser arms noted by de Gray Birch are those enclosed within the bordure of mitres.



Fig. 6. Banner with Henry Despenser's arms on the Despenser Retable, Norwich Cathedral.

Surprisingly, for someone as famous as Henry Despenser, his place of burial is today unknown, although John Le Neve and Francis Blomefield both stated that his tomb was

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Fig. 7. Shield with Henry Despenser's arms at St Andrew's church, Norwich.

in Norwich Cathedral, Blomefield specifically noting that 'He was buried in the cathedral, before the high-altar, on the south side of the founder's tomb, on whose gravestone [an] inscription was engraved on brass plates, which are all now lost'.¹⁶

Nevertheless, while the site of his tomb is unknown, he is commemorated in the diocese by the survival of his arms in various places. Within the cathedral itself, a banner of his arms is depicted on the Despenser Retable (*fig. 6*) in St Luke's Chapel, while a fine carving of his shield of arms survives on the exterior of the east wall of the chancel of nearby St Andrew's church in Norwich (*fig. 7*). Further afield, in St Margaret's church, King's Lynn, is a misericord with an image of Despenser flanked by the arms of the diocese and his personal arms (*fig. 8*).



Fig. 8. Misericord in St Margaret's minster church, King's Lynn, showing Henry Despenser flanked by the arms of the see of Norwich and his personal arms.

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Notes

¹ For further biographical details, see R.G. Davies, 'Despenser, Henry (*d.* 1406)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [hereafter, *ODNB*], Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/75511>]; R. Allington-Smith, *Henry Despenser, the Fighting Bishop. A New View of an Extraordinary Medieval Prelate* (Dereham, 2003); A.E. Oliver, 'Battling Bishops. Late Fourteenth-Century Episcopal Masculinity Admired and Decried', *Medieval East Anglia*, ed. C. Harper-Bill (Woodbridge, 2005), pp. 272-86. A short biographical account also appears in 'Henry Despenser. Let us Remember him on 23 August, the 600th Anniversary of his Death', *The Norfolk Standard*, ii, part 14 (May 2006), 280-3, which also has, on p. 280, a coloured emblazonment of his arms, painted by Andrew Jamieson.

² For general background information, see J. Barker, *England, Arise: The People, the King and the Great Revolt of 1381* (London, 2014), pp. 327-54; E.B. Fryde, *The Great Revolt of 1381* (Historical Association, General Series, 100, London, 1981); C. Oman, *The Great Revolt of 1381* (Oxford, 1906), pp. 90-6.

³ For background information, see N. Housley, 'The Bishop of Norwich's Crusade', *History Today*, xxxiii, no. 5 (1 May 1983), 15-20; J.J.N. Palmer, *England, France and Christendom, 1377-99* (London, 1972), pp. 44-50; J. Sumption, *The Hundred Years War, vol. iii: Divided Houses* (London, 2009), pp. 456-510. For a local element in the crusade, see J.R. Alban, 'Sir Ralph Shelton's Indenture for Military Service on the Bishop of Norwich's Crusade, 1383' *Norfolk Archaeology*, xlvii, part iv (2017), 465-78.

⁴ See J. R. Alban, 'Norfolk in the Invasion Crisis of 1385-6', *The Annual. The Bulletin of the Norfolk Archaeological and Historical Research Group*, xxi (2012), 41-51; G. Templeman, 'Two French Attempts to Invade England during the Hundred Years' War', *Studies in French Language, Literature and History presented to R.L.G. Ritchie*, ed. F. MacKenzie, R. C. Knight, and J. M. Milner (Cambridge, 1949), pp. 225-38; Sumption, *Divided Houses*, pp. 535-57. An older work, but one containing remarkable detail on the campaign

from the French and Scottish viewpoint, is H.P.A. Terrier de Loray, *Jean de Vienne, Amiral de France, 1341-96* (Paris, 1878), pp. 179-206 and lxxxviii-cxlvii.

⁵ H.J. Hillen, *History of the Borough of King's Lynn* (2 vols, Norwich, 1907), i. 128-31; Allington-Smith, *Henry Despenser*, pp. 83-5.

⁶ A.P.R. Coulborn, 'The Economic and Political Preliminaries of the Crusade of Henry Despenser, Bishop of Norwich, in 1383' (PhD thesis, University of London, 1931), p. xiii. The institution register is Norfolk Record Office (hereafter, NRO), DCN/Reg 3, book 6.

⁷ NRO, DCN 43/79-84; King's Lynn Borough Archives, KL/C 50/346. Coulborn did his research in the cathedral itself in the 1920s, at a time when the Norwich diocesan archives were uncatalogued, so it was easy to have missed the additional items. Explaining the paucity of primary sources, he noted that 'Mr [Frederick] Johnson [the archivist at Norwich Castle] remarked that he had once been told that the records of Henry Despenser's episcopate had at some time or other been sent to Rome. He thought the period of the occurrence was the 15th century' (Coulborn, 'The Economic and Political Preliminaries of the Crusade', p. xiv). The Vatican Secret Archives have confirmed that they have no record of such a transfer of documents (communication from Dr Marco Grilli, *Segretario della Prefettura, Archivio Segreto Vaticano*, 6 July 2016), so the story is apocryphal.

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⁸ They are British Library (hereafter, BL), Additional (hereafter, Add.) MS 34114 (containing *L'Ordene de Chevalerie* and various poems, in French), dating from c. 1400; Arundel MS 74 (containing Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, the *Libellus de Muliere Forti* and the *Epistola Cuthberti de Obitu Bedae*), possibly commissioned between c.1375 and 1406; and Cotton MS Claudius E. VIII (Matthew Paris, *Flores Historiarum*), dating from c. 1400. See the notes on them by A.H.R. Martindale in *Medieval Art in East Anglia, 1300-1520*, ed. P. Lasko and N.J. Morgan (Norwich, 1973), pp. 32-3.

⁹ *ODNB* says that he was the youngest of four sons, while Allington-Smith (pp. viii, 2) states that he was the youngest in a family of five brothers and a sister.

¹⁰ For other fourteenth-century examples of the practice of prelates differencing their arms with insignia of office, rather than impaling their personal arms with those of their see, as later became the norm, see C. Boutell, *English Heraldry* (7th edn, London, 1902), pp. 189-90. As well as containing examples of Henry Despenser's arms, as described above, BL, Add. MS 34114 and Cotton MS Claudius E. VIII have other versions of the arms which omit the bordure and, instead, variously display in chief in the first quarter a cross patée Gules, a cross patée Sable, or a martlet Sable (see Martindale, in *Medieval Art in East Anglia*, p. 32, who remarks that 'The significance of these changes, which were presumably used by Despenser's relatives, has yet to be determined').

¹¹ F. Blomefield, *An Essay towards a Topographical History of the County of Norfolk* (11 vols, London, 1805-10), iii. 525.

¹² Society of Antiquaries, London, seal cast C. 22.

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¹³ T. Sims, 'Aspects of Heraldry and Patronage', *Norwich Cathedral. Church, City and Diocese, 1096-1996*, ed. I. Atherton, E. Fernie, C. Harper-Bill and A. Hassell Smith (London, 1996), p. 453. The engraved drawing of the seal accompanying Sims's article, from C. Boutell, *English Heraldry*, originally appeared in 'Private or Secret Seal of Henry Despenser', in *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries*, 2nd series, x (1884), 103-4 and also featured in the Society of Antiquaries' heraldry exhibition of 1894 (*Illustrated Catalogue of the Heraldic Exhibition, Burlington House, 1894* (London, 1896), p. 23).

¹⁴ Society of Antiquaries, seal cast C. 22. An original impression of this seal is appended to Despenser's grant of 8 November 1389 to the parishioners of St Margaret's, Lynn (NRO, DCN 43/82).

¹⁵ W. de Gray Birch, *Catalogue of Seals in the Department of Manuscripts in the British Museum* (6 vols, London, 1887-1900), i. 315.

¹⁶ J. Le Neve, *Fasti Ecclesiae Anglicanae*, continuation by T. Duffus Hardy (3 vols, Oxford, 1854), ii. 465; Blomefield, *Norfolk*, iii. 524. The text of the lost epitaph was recorded by the fifteenth-century chronicler, John Capgrave, the Prior of the Austin Friary at Lynn (*Johannis Capgrave Liber de Illustribus Henricis*, ed. F.C. Hingeston (RS, London, 1858), p. 174).