

THE IMPRISONMENT OF ELEANOR COBHAM,
DUCHESS OF GLOUCESTER.

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THE trial of Eleanor Cobham, on charges of witchcraft, heresy and treason, took place in the autumn of 1441 and, as is well known, resulted in a sentence of public penance and life-imprisonment. She is only given a short notice in the *Dict. Nat. Biog.*, in the account, by the late Professor Tout, of her husband, Humphrey Duke of Gloucester, and I am not aware of any special study of her career. As there are conflicting statements with regard to the places where she was imprisoned, and Chester, Flint, Liverpool, and the Isle of Man are involved, the following notes, on that point only, may be put on record.

As soon as proceedings were initiated by the Archbishop of Canterbury, a royal letter patent issued, dated 9 August 1441 (Pat. Roll, and Rymer, *Foedera*, X, 851), confirming the direction that the Duchess was to go to Leeds Castle in Kent and ordering her to stay there pending trial. This took place in London in October and, after sentence, she did penance there on 13, 15 and 17 November. At Leeds, Eleanor had been in charge of certain members of the royal household, including Sir John Stewart (or Steward), John Stanley, Thomas Wesenham, Thomas Pulford, James Grisacre, John Wattes and John Martyn, and payments to them of two sums of £40 each are recorded for their attendance and for the ten shillings a day allowed for the support of the Duchess and the five custodians of her person (Devon, *Issues of the Exchequer*, 1837, pp. 440-1). These payments seem to cover the period to

22 January 1441-2, doubtless while she was at Leeds Castle and in London. One of several (apparently belated) payments made in July 1447 to Thomas Montgomery included charges incurred upon Eleanor Cobham from Leeds to London (*id.* 459) and probably related to her original place of imprisonment as there is no evidence that she went back again to Leeds Castle. On 19 January, evidently 1441-2, the King issued a letter (Ellis, *Orig. Letters*, 2nd ser., i, 105-7) to the Chancellor, the Bishop of Bath and Wells, reciting that he had ordained his trusty and well-beloved knight, Sir Thomas Stanley, comptroller of the household, to have the keeping of "Alianor Cobham, late called the Duchess of Gloucester," and, accompanied by certain persons of the household, to lead her into the parts of Cheshire where she should abide, and ordering the Chancellor to issue the necessary writs for assistance to the sheriffs of the shires through which she should pass. The story, up to this point, is shortly related in *An English Chronicle* [c. 1470] (Camden Soc., 1856), which refers to the committal of Eleanor to the wardship of Stanley in which she was "all her life after," but her places of imprisonment are not mentioned.

Sir Thomas Stanley, besides being comptroller of the royal household, was then holder for life of the office of constable of Chester Castle, to which he had been appointed in 1437, and this place of imprisonment was doubtless selected for that reason.

On 21 January 1441-2, the King issued a letter (in English) under the privy seal, from Staines, directed to the Clerk of the mills and fishery of Dee at Chester and all occupiers thereof. (Chester Recog. Roll, 2/115, 20-1 Henry VI, *m.* 9 (7), wrongly dated 1442-3 in *Calendar.*) After reciting the committal to the sure and safe keeping of Stanley, and that Eleanor was to have a hundred marks a year for her daily sustenance out of the revenues of the mills and fishery, the Clerk was charged, so long as she

was in Stanley's ward, to pay this to her as a preferential charge to be allowed in his accounts. Eleanor was actually received at Chester on 10 February, as a formal indenture (*id.*, m. 9 (8), rather torn) of that date attests. It was made and sealed by the following members of the royal household on the one part, namely, John Stanley, usher of the chamber, Thomas Wesenham, serjeant of the pantry, Thomas Pulford and James Grisacre, yeomen ushers, and John [Wattes or Martyn], yeoman janitor; and on the other, Sir Thomas Stanley as constable of the Castle. The former had delivered Eleanor to Stanley pursuant to the King's letters patent, for safe custody by Sir [Robert] del Booth, Kt., the sheriff of Cheshire, Sir Richard Molyneux, Kt., John de Legh of Ridge, [? Ralph] his son, Richard de Bold, John Dedwood and others (unnamed). These local custodians were in fact nearly all officials of the county palatine, though not so described in the document. Besides the sheriff, Legh was escheator, his son Ralph was the King's attorney there and a clerk of the kitchen, Bold was a vice-justice and Dedwood a vice-chamberlain. Molyneux had recently been created master-forester of West Derbyshire, Co. Lancs., and steward of the wapentake there and at Salford, besides being constable of Liverpool Castle. It seems a little surprising to find him associated with Stanley, as their local rivalry in Liverpool had nearly led to a pitched battle in its streets in 1425, but possibly the feud had been closed on the marriage, before 1432, of his heir with Stanley's daughter.

Ralph Lee, servant of the household, was paid £100 for costs and expenses incurred by the royal command in the conduct of Eleanor to Chester and her reception there (*Devon, op. cit.*, 441). She remained at Chester for a little more than a year and a half.

On 26 October 1443 a royal order (Pat. Roll, and Rymer, *Foedera*, XI, 45) issued to the constable of Chester Castle,

or deputy, to conduct Eleanor, whom he had in custody, to Kenilworth Castle and deliver her by indenture to the constable there, horses, food and transport to be provided. On 5 December she was committed to Ralph Lord Sudeley, the constable, and in May 1444 he was paid £33 6s. 8d. for the cost of twelve persons in attendance upon the Duchess, namely, a priest, three gentlemen, a maid, five valets and two boys (Devon, *op. cit.*, 447-8). Apparently she remained at Kenilworth until 1446, when the records of the Privy Council show a royal order that letters, under the privy seal, should be directed to Sir Thomas Stanley, to carry her by land and by water to the Isle of Man and there rule her in accordance with the King's command (Nicolas, *Acts of Privy Council*, vi, 51, also *Manx Soc.*, vol. ix, 19).

It is at this point that difficulties arise ; and the question is whether Eleanor ever did go to the Isle of Man. *The Complete Peerage* (2nd ed., vol. v, 736 ; also vol. iii, 354 n.) is in no doubt and states definitely, but without quoting authority (which Mr. Doubleday, one of the editors and joint writer of the article referred to, tells me they undoubtedly had), that she died a prisoner, in 1454, in Peel Castle. I believe the guide-books refer to a crypt at this Castle where she is said to have been confined. Thwaites, *The Isle of Man*, 1863, p. 287, states that Eleanor was imprisoned at Peel Castle till her death, "a period of 14 years," and that she was confined in a vault which he describes. He mentions traditions of her ghost visiting the scene and some attempts to escape, but gives no authority for what he states. Waldron, in his *Description of the Isle of Man* (Manx Soc., 1865), p. 14, and Radcliffe, *The Isle of Man*, 1925, p. 173, both mention the imprisonment as a fact. Spencer Walpole, *The Land of Home Rule*, 1893, pp. 109-10, states that there is some little doubt whether the Duchess of Gloucester was ever taken to the Island, and no actual evidence that the order of 1446

was ever carried out. He refers to most of the authorities which I have mentioned, and states that the "Mauthe Dhoo," or black dog, alleged to haunt Peel Castle, was supposed to be Eleanor's spectre. J. G. Cumming, *The Isle of Man*, pp. 192-3, gives her confinement and death at Peel as "generally allowed," with the story of her ghost.¹ But in the course of a correspondence in 1885 (*Manchester City News Notes and Queries*, vi, 66, 69, 71), several writers stated that this was all a myth and that Eleanor never set foot in the Island. The three references made to such imprisonment there by Shakespeare² (where Sir Thomas Stanley is called wrongly, Sir John), and those by Christopher Middleton (*The Legend of Humphrey Duke of Gloucester*, 1610), Scott (*Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft*, 1830, p. 200) and others, were scouted as inventions. The *Dict. Nat. Biog.* is cautious. Eleanor "is said" to have been imprisoned in Peel Castle until her death. Charles Knight appears to have stated somewhere that Calais was the first prison and then the Isle of Man. Professor Oman (*The Political Hist. of England*, iv, 333) gives Chester, the Isle of Man, and finally in "Wales" as the places of imprisonment. Sir James Ramsay (*Lancaster and York*, ii, 35 n.) gives Chester, Kenilworth and the Isle of Man. Professor Vickers, in his *Humphrey Duke of Gloucester*, p. 274, states that in

¹ I owe these last two references to Professor W. Garmon Jones

² Henry VI, Pt. 2, Act II:

SCENE III. *King.* You, madam, for you are more nobly born,

Despoiled of your honour in your life,

Shall, after three days' open penance done,

Live in your country here in banishment.

With Sir John Stanley, in the Isle of Man.

SCENE IV. *Sheriff.* An't please your grace, here my commission stays,

And Sir John Stanley is appointed now

To take her with him to the Isle of Man. . . .

Duchess. Stanley, I prithee, go and take me hence;

I care not whither, for I beg no favour,

Only convey me where thou art commanded.

Stanley. Why, madam, that is to the Isle of Man;

There to be used according to your state.

July 1446 Stanley was ordered to take Eleanor to the Isle of Man and "in the following year we find her a prisoner somewhere in Wales, probably in Flint Castle, where she died after eighteen [*sic*] long years' imprisonment." His main authorities, besides the order of the Privy Council, are three: (1) The *Chronicles* of Fabyan (d. 1513), ed. Ellis, 1811, where, at p. 614, under year 1440, Eleanor is said to have been condemned to dwell as an outlaw in the Isle of Man under the ward of Stanley; (2) *Three Fifteenth-Century Chronicles*, ed. Gairdner (Camden Soc., 1880), where, at p. 149, the Duke, shortly before his death in 1447, is stated to have approached the King on behalf of Eleanor *in Wallia inclusa et incarcerata*; and (3) *Chronicle* of Henry VI, in *Incerti Scriptoris Chronicon Angliæ*, ed. Giles, 1848, where, at p. 31, after relating the trial of Eleanor, the record continues *praefata Alinora, post terminum sedecim annorum, in castello de Flint, sub astricta custodia domini Thomae Stanlawe [sic], hujus fallacis seculi finem adimplevit.*

For Flint castle¹ or in Wales as the place of imprisonment and death, there seems to be little support other than the above. This *Chronicle* is considered by historians to be trustworthy and more or less contemporary. We do find that John Glegge, who had been appointed janitor for life of this Castle on 16 February 1445-6, had to be re-appointed on 20 December 1452, and to surrender the grant of 1446 as invalid because it did not mention acting by deputy. This he had done since its date, at his own expense, being unable to attend to the office owing to being appointed to attend upon the safe custody of Eleanor Cobham (*Calendar Cheshire Recog. Rolls*, 37 Report, Dep. Keeper, p. 307). If she was imprisoned in this Castle, it seems unlikely that the janitor would

¹ Professor J. E. Lloyd suggests that it is possible that Stanley was constable of Flint Castle, but no evidence of this is given in Taylor's *Flint*, or in the *Recog. Rolls* of Chester, on which similar appointments were entered.

have to depute his duties as such, unless whole-time attendance upon the duchess prevented their performance, and it may be noted that the date from which Glegge had appointed a deputy at Flint (1446) coincides with that of the royal order to move her to the Isle of Man, which might mean that he had gone there as one of her custodians.

The Curator of the Manx Museum and Library tells me he thinks it is "generally agreed" that Eleanor was never in the Island and that there is no corroboration of the statement that she was. On the other hand, there is the decision of the Privy Council to issue an order to take her there (though such order may not have been given), the local traditions and the definite statement in the authoritative *Complete Peerage* as to date and place of death.¹

To conclude, a curious statement is made in the *Annales* of William of Worcester, under date "1440 19 Hen. 6" (*Letters and Papers . . . during Hen. VI*, ed. Stevenson (Rolls Series), vol. ii, pt. ii, 762-3). After referring to the arrest of Eleanor, her assignment to the Castle of Leeds and her penance in London, the chronicle proceeds *tunc fuit assignata per mandatum regis ad castellum de Let-Poole sub custodia domini Thomae Stanley militis*. J. G. [ough] N. [ichols] boldly stated that "there can be no question that 'Let-Poole' is a misreading for 'Lerpole' or Liverpool, as that place is well known to have belonged to the Stanleys. . . . The Duchess of Gloucester may have been first committed to the Castle of Liverpool and afterwards removed for greater security to the Isle of Man" (*N. & Q.*, 3rd ser., i, 504). This is plausible, but I do not think there is any such certainty. No order for removal to Liverpool seems known. The Stanleys were far from owning the place. If any family can be said to

¹ Enquiry for corroboration of this statement, made both in *Notes and Queries* and the *Times Literary Supplement*, produced no replies.

have done so then, it was Molyneux of Sefton. Actually Sir Richard Molyneux was constable of the Castle there from 1441, and it seems unlikely that Stanley would be ordered to take Eleanor to his rival's fortress. It is just possible that the reference is not to the Castle but to the Tower of Liverpool which the Stanleys had recently fortified. It stood by the side of the river and was their occasional residence and place of embarkation for their Isle of Man.¹ On the other hand, the suggestion of "Lerpoole" for "Let-Poole" is pure conjecture, and is not borne out by an examination of the original manuscript, which is Arundel MS. 48 (College of Arms), at fo. 126. This reveals that there is something not shown by the printed version. After the words *ad castellum de*, the words *la Po* had been written but struck out, and then *Let Poole* written. I suggest that what the scribe intended to write was *ad castellum de La Peele* (meaning Peel Castle). "e" and "o" are easily confused in writing of this date. It is clearly not a case for a dogmatic assertion that *Let Poole* was a mistake for Lerpoole. This ignores the use of the capital "P" both in *la Po* and in *Let Poole*, which certainly does not suggest an intention to write *Lerpoole* or any other form of *Liverpool*. In the printed version a hyphen is placed between *Let* and *Poole*, but there is none in the manuscript as reported to me. I think the "t" of *Let* is superfluous and probably was inserted by mistake.

My conclusions so far, as to the various places of alleged imprisonment, are as follows :

1. Chester and 2, Kenilworth—fully proved.
3. Isle of Man ; not proven, though the tradition is so strong that it has weight.
4. Flint Castle ; some contemporary evidence but not proved entirely to my satisfaction.

¹ *Trans.*, 81, 41.

5. Liverpool. As an assigned place of imprisonment, not proven, but it is possible that *if* Eleanor did go to the Isle of Man, she may have stayed a few days in the Tower of Liverpool, waiting for a favourable wind to be taken to the Isle of Man.¹

¹ Since I wrote these notes, Mr. G. W. Mathews, F.S.A., drew my attention to a booklet, *Ancient Liverpool*, by Mr. Joseph S. Pearce, published this year, where at p. 26 the writer states that Eleanor Cobham was lodged in the *Tower of Liverpool*, where Sir Thomas Stanley found her to be a difficult and dangerous prisoner, according to local tradition. Mr. Pearce seemed disinclined to quote his authority when I approached him. X

I notice also that Stonehouse in his *Pictorial Liverpool* (1844), p. 28, states that on the way to the Isle of Man Eleanor was confined for some time in the *Castle of Liverpool*.

