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HANGED
DRAWN
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CSI 1326_{AD}



A local history of **Hugh Despenser**
and his most violent execution

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Who was Hugh Despenser the Younger?

He was the eldest son of Hugh Despenser (the elder) who was a trusted advisor of King Edward I and at this time Hugh probably got to know his son, Edward, who would become King Edward II.

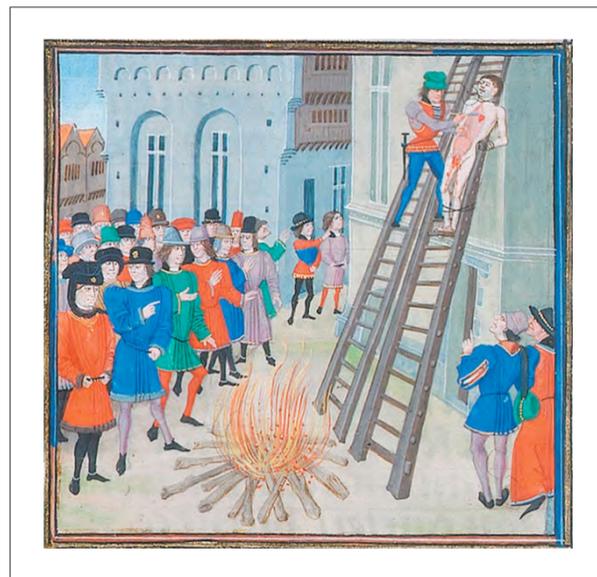
Hugh the Younger married the eldest granddaughter of King Edward I – he had lands and position, but he was not satisfied, he was bent on acquiring more and more wealth and not by fair means, he had many enemies. Despite this, he was knighted and became a favourite of King Edward II.

His greed escalated with that of his father, by seizing as much land as they could and because of the King's affection, he could seemingly get away with it.

They annoyed too many nobles and men of power and were banished to France, but Hugh and his father succeeded in edging back to England - the Despensers gained power over the country's Government in sight of the King - their enemies grew and included Queen Isabella. Their power and presence was now out of control. Isabella managed to rally an army, which included noblemen who had suffered from the Despenser's wrath.

In retreat, Hugh's father was captured and executed. Hugh was captured and imprisoned in Hereford, where he attempted to starve himself to death – to avoid public execution. There, he was tried and convicted of treason. The most extreme punishment was drawing, hanging and quartering, each facet of the punishment being to punish each count of treachery. It was a spectacularly horrific and public form of execution and was reserved for the worst crimes.

Despenser was **drawn** or dragged to the place of execution by four horses on a hurdle, a high form of public humiliation, then **hanged** until nearly dead.



Froissart's depiction of the execution of Hugh Despenser the Younger

He was **emasculated**, for heresy and what was said to be an 'unnatural' association with King Edward II, his severed genitalia being hurled into a fire before his eyes.

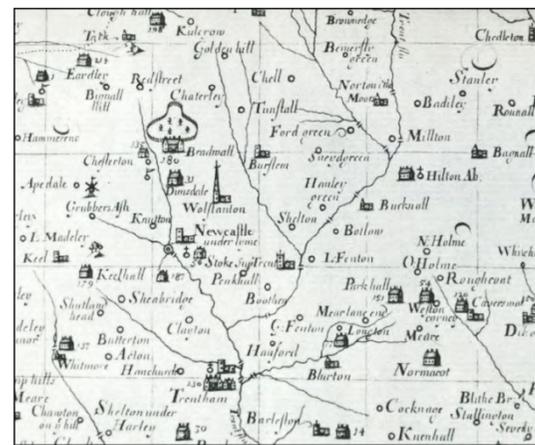
Barely alive, he was then **eviscerated**, again his entrails being cast into the fire, all when he would have still been conscious. Death was delivered as his heart was cut out with a blade. Some accounts say that he let out a 'ghastly inhuman howl'.

Finally, Despenser was **beheaded**, his head was sent to London and placed on London Bridge. His body was hacked into four parts and scattered throughout the land.

It is thought, that after Hugh's death, various body parts were retrieved and buried by a relative at Hulton Abbey, Stoke-on-Trent, which stood on land owned by Hugh's brother-in-law, Hugh Audley.

Since their discovery, experts in the fields of archaeology, biological anthropology and forensic science have studied the remains. The find is particularly important as it has been proved to be the first known case of a skeleton displaying trauma associated with the practice of quartering in medieval England.

Aerial view of Hulton Abbey just off Leek Road



Plot's map of North Staffordshire c:1670

“ *The distribution and nature of the lesions is not consistent with battle trauma or evisceration during 'division' of the body, but fits with the historical accounts surrounding the execution of Despenser. The date of the remains, from the founding of the Abbey (AD 1219) to the end of the 95 per cent confidence interval provided by the 14C dates (AD 1385), fits with the period of his death and his age and sex is consistent with the osteological evidence. Probably most seductive in the identification of this body is the account of the remains buried at Tewkesbury Abbey, as these are precisely the skeletal elements missing from HA16. However, such historical equations can never be completely proved.*

Despenser is said to have been buried at Tewkesbury and the matter must remain open unless and until the remains in the vault at Tewkesbury become available for analysis. Meanwhile we can say with more confidence that this was the skeleton of an execution victim, and the death of Hugh Despenser provides an analogy for the pathology observed. **”**

Dr Mary Lewis,
Senior Lecturer in
Biological Anthropology,
University of Reading.

And now... The Science bit

Skeletal material deteriorates with handling and can risk damaging important archaeological specimens. As a learning resource, access to human remains is often limited to the institution in which they are held.

Dr John Cassella, Professor of Forensic Science Education and Roger Brown, Senior Lecturer in Photography at Staffordshire University, embarked on a pioneering project to produce a digitised resource from the rare skeletal material recovered from Hulton Abbey in Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire, thus preserving at a national level, delicate and friable human remains.

Staffordshire University, Forensic Science Department has established links with the University of Reading Archaeology Department for access to the Hulton Abbey skeletal material. This project is of particular interest to the educational world as it ensures the digital photographic preservation, for use in forensic science and biomedical/biological science teaching at Staffordshire University, a resource for the whole forensic science community and further afield. Digital cataloguing also allows for future comparative examination of skeletal material, allowing specimens of academic importance to be utilised by undergraduates, postgraduates and academics at all levels, without the risk of damage due to handling.

These high quality images can now be used for research in biological anthropology, palaeopathology and forensic anthropology, but it also has historical applications as well as providing teaching aids in photographic studies, computing and e-learning technologies. These resources may be actively used for forensic science and for archaeology or indeed as a general introduction to osteology in a more innovative way – the advantages and applications are many.

To learn more, visit www.centreofscience.com
Mary Lewis [www.reading.ac.uk/archaeology/research/projects/arch-ML-hugh despenser.aspx](http://www.reading.ac.uk/archaeology/research/projects/arch-ML-hugh%20despenser.aspx)



Cervical Vertebra C3 - showing chop-marks across the bone, showing that he was beheaded with a sharp implement.

Femur Head - sharp and jagged lines, indicating chop and cut marks on the head of the femur.