

SIR JAMES DE BERNERS: A FATAL FRIENDSHIP

A presentation by June Davey

The following presentation was given by June Davey on 23rd May 2025 in St Mary's Church, West Horsley as part of fund-raising efforts by the church to help raise money for the restoration of a stained-glass memorial window. The window in question features Sir James de Berners who was Lord of the Manor of West Horsley in the 14th Century and who came to an unfortunate end. His story follows....

HORSLEY HERITAGE

October 2025

SIR JAMES DE BERNERS: A FATAL FRIENDSHIP

Slide 1 Stained Glass Windows

SIR JAMES DE BERNERS

The Memorial in the north
window of St. Mary's
Chancel.



In St. Mary's Chancel, at the north end, is a 14th century memorial window to Sir James de Berners. It has three cinque foil lights with flowing tracery and a painted head. The date of the window is placed between 1362-1388. It was a custom in medieval times for a window to portray the donor in the glass. The glazed portrait shows Sir James de Berners, Lord of the Manor of West Horsley, and patron of St. Mary's Church. He is kneeling in prayer. The white glass used for the figure has a distinctive greenish-blue tint and may have come from one of the few centres of glassmaking in England at that time – Chiddingfold. The figure above James is a monkey, which was the emblem of the de Berners family. The window is marked 'Jacobus Bernerus Patronus'.

The window was chosen to be exhibited at the Royal Academy exhibition, 'The Age of Chivalry,' in 1987/88. The dates mentioned above cover the lifetime of James de Berners, who was executed in 1388. Who was James de Berners, and why did he die in this way? This talk is entitled: 'A Fatal Friendship,' and in this phrase James's fate lies.

Slide 2 Window Detail



He belonged to an old and distinguished family which was descended from Hugo de Berneriis, a follower of William the Conqueror. The family had married into the de Windsor family, who had been given West Horsley Manor by William. They owned the Manor and the Advowson (Patronage) of the church. Christina de Windsor married Sir Ralph der Berners in 1279. She survived both her husband and her son. So the Manor passed to her grandson, John, father of James. James was born in 1361 at West Horsley Manor (now West Horsley Place).

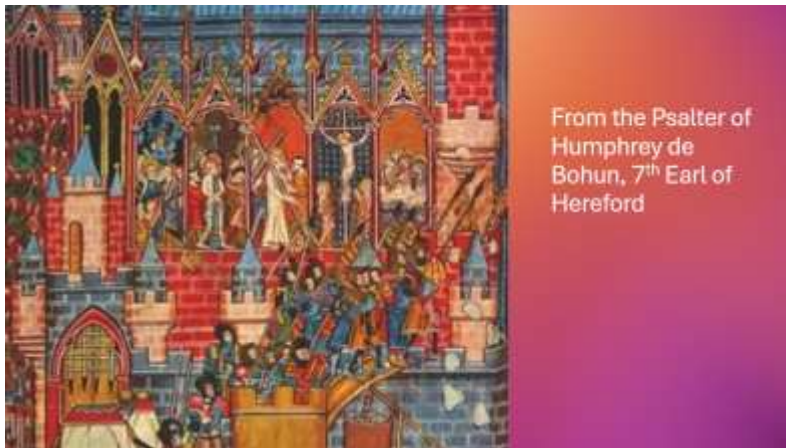
Slide 3 Humphrey, Earl of Hereford Coat of Arms



Coat of Arms of
Humphrey de
Bohun, 7th Earl of
Hereford

Sadly, John and his wife died within a short time of each other, and James and his brother John became Wards of Humphrey, Earl of Hereford, from whom the de Berners held estates in Surrey and Essex. The Earl and John both died, and James was left in the care of the Countess of Hereford. Wardship was very profitable as rents and other monies from estates were gained.

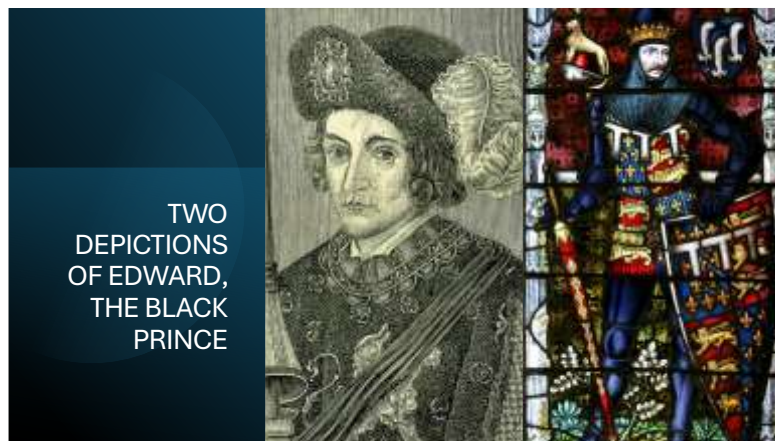
Slide 4 Bohun Psalter



From the Psalter of
Humphrey de
Bohun, 7th Earl of
Hereford

There was a battle for the inheritance and Wardship between the Countess and Edward the Black Prince, father of the future Richard II. The Black Prince, heir to the throne at the time won, and James became his Ward: he and Richard, some five years younger than James, became like brothers.

Slide 5 Edward, the Black Prince



The Black Prince died in 1376, and James, aged 15, became a Ward of Court. There was a group of young Wards of Court – the Earl of Oxford, Earl of Suffolk, Michael de la Pole, Richard de Vere, Duke of Ireland, and others who became a close coterie around Richard, who was crowned King in 1377, at the age of 10.

Slide 6 Crowning of Richard

THE CROWNING OF RICHARD II

- Richard was ten years old when he ascended to the throne.



The controlling Regency Council, later the Lords Appellant (Appalling), resented this group, as they could envisage a time when they would become the Kings Council, excluding them and their heirs. The powerful John of Gaunt and Thomas Woodstock were members of the Regency Council. Although later, Gaunt withdrew and retired to his estates. He remained loyal to Richard, and some historians believe he was involved with the Regency Council and later the Lords Appellant.

Slide 7 John of Gaunt & Thomas of Woodstock



John of Gaunt and Thomas of Woodstock. Uncles of Richard II. Members of the Regency Council/Lords Appellant.

In 1380, James was already well established as a figure of consequence at Court. He married in this year, at West Horsley Manor, Anne – or Alyse - Barew. In October, the following year, he was rewarded with a knighthood. This was the year of one of the greatest uprisings in English history, The Peasants' Revolt.

Slides 8, 9 & 10 The Peasants' Revolt



Richard rides out to meet Wat Tyler and the Peasants



Richard II meets the Peasants (1381)

- Richard demonstrated great courage in meeting twice with the Peasants' Rebellion.
- James would surely have been in company with Richard.
- This was the year when James married Anne (Alyse) Barew at West Horsley Manor. He was knighted in 1381.

Richard, aged 15, showed remarkable courage and resolve, riding out to meet the peasants. He was responsible for talking with the leaders and for the eventual disbursement of the rebellion. But only after several attempts. In the pictures of Richard, with his entourage, James would surely have been among them. The last picture shows Richard meeting the rebel army on the Thames at Greenwich.

That same year James served on an expedition to subdue French skirmishes in Brittany.

By the time James came of age, in 1382, he was a Royal Commissioner, and far more notable, a JP in Surrey. These appointments were a measure of his success and influence.

On his coming of age, he gained his inheritance, and was now assured of an annual income. As well as the Manors in Essex and West Horsley, he owned extensive farmlands across the counties of England. He did not make any more land purchases, perhaps this was because Richard's generosity rendered it unnecessary for him to extend his income. A grant in October, 1382, allowed him to hunt in the king's forests, and he was now a Knight of the Chamber. More grants and gifts from the King followed, which was no doubt grist to the mill for the Lords Appellant.

Slide 11 Richard's Marriage to Anne of Bohemia



In the year of James's inheritance, Richard married Anne of Bohemia, the daughter of Charles IV, Holy Roman Emperor. Anne and Richard went on separate honeymoons: she to East Anglia, and the King to the West Country. James would certainly have been a part of this.

Slide 12 Richards Honeymoon Party

Richard's Honeymoon Party

- Personal guard of 28 mounted men
- The Great Seal, with 36 guards
- The Lesser Seal, with 15 guards
- Several Dukes with 40 knights
- Marquesses with 35 knights
- Earls with 20 knights
- 2 Bishops each with 10 knights
- Plus: his own cooks; bed; musicians; dogs; falcons; gold plate; linen; pastry chef and poison taster.

They may be seen as 'Royal Progresses' meeting their subjects. Richard's was quite a progress:

Slide 13 King Richard

King Richard II



Slide 14 At Court

Richard at Court

- James would have been one of the surrounding courtiers.
- He became a Knight of the Chamber and a significant figure at Court.
- 1383 James became MP for Surrey, but Letters of Exemption were issued as the King needed him at Court.



Slide 15 Richard : Wilton Diptych – Bowing to the Virgin, with Edmund the Martyr, Edward the Confessor and John the Baptist



Richard kept an extravagant court: which eventually contributed to his downfall. He liked to appear in different velvet attire each day, and for his courtiers to be elegantly clad.

Slide 16 At Court



He actually wore makeup, which he concocted from fruit juice, pollen and bees wax! Richard would have been a superb actor. I think Shakespeare captured this aspect of his character.

Slides 17 & 18 Walsingham



• WALSINGHAM PRIORY

The following year, 1383, in the summer, James was invited to accompany the King and Queen on a pilgrimage to Walsingham to pay homage to the Virgin Mary in the Holy House. A courtier described the events which followed. A violent thunderstorm struck the party at Ely, and James was actually struck by lightning, which left him ‘blind and half-crazed.’

Slide 19 Parliamentary MP’s Memorial in 2018 of James’s Accident.

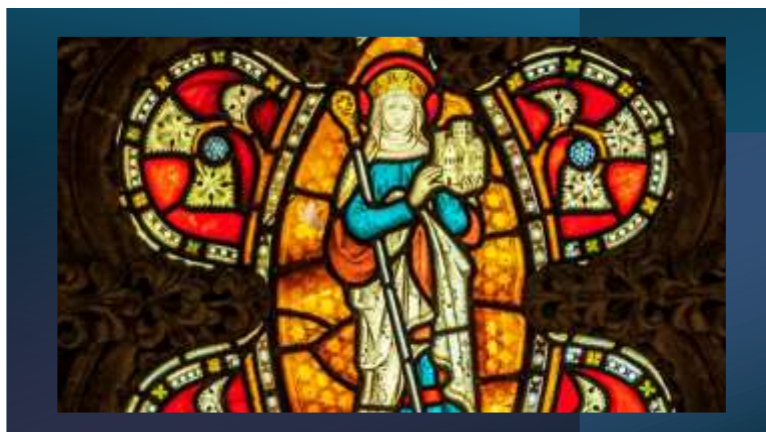


Sir James de Berners

• In November 2018, Sir James was remembered as the Medieval MP who had been struck by lightning.

The document describes the concern of the King, ‘who was on terms of greatest intimacy with James.’ Richard ordered the clergy to gather and pray for James’s recovery, at the shrine of Ethelreda the Virgin, at Ely.

Slide 20 St. Ethelred Stained Glass Window & Altar



Slide 21 St. Ethelred Stained Glass Altar



THE ALTAR OF ST.
ETHELDREDA.
ELY.

On being brought to the altar, James was miraculously cured, but only after he had experienced a terrifying vision of his soul in judgement.

Slide 22 John of Gaunt in Scotland

James was in service with John of Gaunt in Scotland in 1383. He was elected to Parliament on his return to England. .



He seemed to make a complete recovery, as he spent the next months in Scotland with John of Gaunt. Richard ordered Masses to be said all over the land: he was overjoyed with James's recovery.

Slide 23 Medieval Parliament

Richard and Parliament



In October, 1383, James Berners was elected to Parliament as MP for Surrey, but received Letters of Exemption on the grounds that his presence as a member of the King's Court was required. This underlines the depth of attachment between James and the King, especially after the Walsingham incident. Because of his position at Court James often used his influence on behalf of relatives and others. In May, 1385, his cousin Emme atte Mersshe was admitted, on Richard II's nomination, to St. Mary's Convent in Windsor. This was a foundation endowed by previous members of the de Berners family. He also obtained a Royal Pardon for Sir Thomas Sackville, who was accused of the murder of one of John of Gaunt's servants.

Slide 24 The Expedition to Scotland in 1385



In 1385, he was involved in Richard II's ill fated Scottish expedition. This was to prevent the border raids which the Scots were carrying out. But the Scots scorched the earth and cut off food supplies and the English had to withdraw. In October of that year, James he received further gifts from the King.

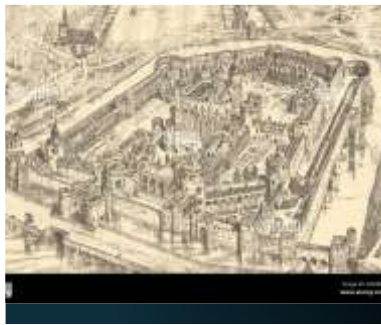
Slide 25 The Lords Appellant



In 1386, he was once again elected to Parliament, and this time Richard did not intervene. He was now quite prepared to see his friend as an MP. There was growing hostility at all social levels, towards the Regency Council and its politics, but even more resentment towards the King and his extravagant Court. As a Member for Surrey, James was a neighbour to many of the disgruntled landowners. There were some stormy Parliamentary sessions which aroused Richard's fears. The lord's Appellant saw their opportunity and stirred up opposition. James gave evidence at one of the sessions on behalf of the King.

But the Lords Appellant were determined to break the influence of the group surrounding Richard. The Earl of Suffolk was sent into exile; Michael de la Pole and Richard de Vere were accused of treason. James de Berners certainly had influence at Court but it is difficult to see why he was singled out for the death penalty. Of the Articles presented to Parliament, none were personal or specific to James. The allegation that 'he had interfered to prevent the working of the Council' was dropped through lack of evidence. The accusation that he had exploited the king's youthfulness and inexperience was also unfounded.

Slides 26 & 27 Tower Hill Executions



MEDIEVAL
TOWER OF
LONDON

EXECUTION ON TOWER HILL



The Lords Appellant aim was to destroy the young king's close circle. There was great sympathy towards James, who was condemned to death on 12th May, 1388, in spite of Richard's struggles to prevent this. He, Sir John Salisbury and others, including the Mayor of London, were executed on Tower Hill. The Lords Appellant also executed the young King's tutor, Sir Simon Burley. He was buried – at Richard's insistence – in the Chapel of St. John, Westminster.

Slide 28 James's Tomb

Tomb of Sir James, St. John the Baptist's
Chapel, Westminster Abbey



All James's estates were confiscated, and of all the women widowed by the Lords Appellant, only Anne de Berners was left with no means of support. Richard II, whose power had been severely curtailed, nevertheless intervened, showing great concern, and giving her permission to remain in West Horsley Manor. She was allowed to keep possession after her remarriage to John Bryan.

The king continued to support Anne and her children, and made provision for the anniversary of James's death to be observed at the Abbey of St. Mary Grace, London. This was the year Richard II attained his majority, and deeply affected by the executions, he turned on the Lords Appellant, telling them from now he would rule his kingdom. He did this pretty affectively for eight years.

Slide 29 The Treatise Cover



Treatyse on
fysshynge with
an Angle

Back to the de Berners family, James's heir, his son, Richard de Berners, inherited the estate, and his daughter Margery married into the Bouchier family who owned West Horsley Manor until the 1532. Genealogy often only identified sons by name at that time, but according to historical sources close to the period, there was a daughter, Juliana. She is famed as the author of 'A Treatise on Hunting, Hawking and Angling,' printed first in the 'Boke of St. Albans,' in 1486. She is described there as the Prioress of Sopwell Abbey, near St. Albans. This was a Benedictine Priory with nuns from notable families. Sadly, the Abbey records from 1430 -1480 have been lost, and this would have been Juliana's period at the Priory.

Slide 30 Anglynge image



John Bale, who produced a book on English writers of the medieval period, and William Burton, a Leicester historian, both writing close to her lifetime, describe her as the daughter of Sir James de Berners of West Horsley Manor. Raphael Holinshed and Gervase Markham writing a hundred years later give information on Juliana, and at the beginning of the 1800s, Joshua Hazelwood and Manning and Bray identify her and link her with WHP.

Later writers of the Victorian period and early 20th century found the idea of a woman writing about such sports in the Middle Ages difficult, but in the medieval 'Books of the Hours, there are pictures of them taking part.

Juliana's detailed and expert work is full of collective nouns, such as 'a gaggle of geese,' 'a braying of hunts, and even 'a superfluity of nuns.' She is even credited by some with 'an unkindness of ravens.

It is satisfying to think that Sir James had such a feisty daughter!

Slide 31 Church Tower



THE SPIRE, ST. MARY'S CHURCH

Slide 32 West Porch



ST. MARY'S WEST PORCH

It was James de Berners who placed the spire on the tower of the Church, and added the wonderful west porch, which would have been the entrance to the building in medieval times.

His execution was tragic, and there is another historical figure, whose head is buried in the St. Nicholas chapel, who also lost his head tragically. Sir Walter Raleigh wrote this poem the night before his executions, and it is a fitting tribute to him, and James de Berners.



About June Davey:

June Davey is a historian who lives in West Horsley. She has formerly worked in museums around the world and been involved in local conservation projects. She joined the Horsley Heritage team at its inception in early 2024.