

Isabella of France Resource Pack

Bio/Context

- Born: c. 1295
- Father: Philip IV, king of France
- Mother: Joan, queen of Navarre
- Siblings: 6 siblings of whom 3 died as children. Isabella's brothers included 3 kings of France:
 - Louis X (d. 1316)
 - Philip V (d. 1322)
 - Charles IV (d. 1328)
- Husband: Edward II, king of England (r. 1307-27)
- Regency: 1327-30
- Issue:
 - Edward III, king of England (r. 1327-77)
 - John, earl of Cornwall
 - Eleanor, duchess of Guelders
 - Joan, queen of Scotland
- Died: August 1358

Key events

- 25 January 1308 – Isabella married Edward II, king of England, at Boulogne. Their marriage was suggested by Pope Boniface VIII as part of peace negotiations between England and France.
- 25 February 1308 – She was crowned alongside Edward at Westminster Abbey.
- 13 November 1312 – Isabella gave birth to her eldest child, Edward (future king Edward III), at Windsor Castle.
- September 1321 – Isabella was refused entry to Leeds Castle and in response laid siege to the castle. Edward II used this as a pretext to resume war with the barons.
- 1324 – Following outbreak of war with France, Isabella's dower lands were confiscated by the king.
- March 1325 – Isabella went to Paris to negotiate peace with her brother, Charles IV.
- September 1325 – After her son, Edward, joined her in Paris, Isabella refused to return to England and instead gathered support in France from exiled nobles like Roger Mortimer against Edward II and the Despencers, his then favourites.
- Early 1326 – She arranged the betrothal of her son, Edward, to Philippa of Hainault and raised a mercenary force in Hainault with the dowry.
- Autumn 1326 – She returned to England with Mortimer and an army, gathering further support as she marched west, most critically from the city of London. Shortly thereafter Edward II and his Despenser favourites were captured.

- Early 1327 – Edward II was compelled to resign the throne in favour of his eldest son Edward who was then crowned king. Due to Edward III’s young age, Isabella and Mortimer ruled in his place, although their regime soon proved unpopular.
- September 1327 – Edward II was killed at Berkeley Castle.
- 1328 – Isabella and Mortimer made an unpopular peace treaty with Scotland.
- October 1330 – Isabella and Mortimer were arrested by Edward III and his supporters at Nottingham Castle. Mortimer was executed soon afterwards. Isabella released and her (original) English lands and revenue as queen dowager were restored to her the following year.
- 1345 – She petitioned Edward III for the liberties of Coventry.
- 23 August 1358 – Isabella died at Hertford Castle.
- November 1358 – She was buried at the London Franciscan church in Newgate along with Edward II’s heart.

Isabella was the sixth of seven children born to Philip IV, king of France, and Joan, queen of Navarre. Her older brothers, Louis, Philip and Charles would all be king of France in turn and die without living sons. Following the death of Charles in 1328, he was succeeded by his cousin, Philip de Valois. Isabella’s son, Edward, would later stake a claim through his mother as the rightful king of France, thus bringing in a dynastic element to the Hundred Years War (1337–1453).

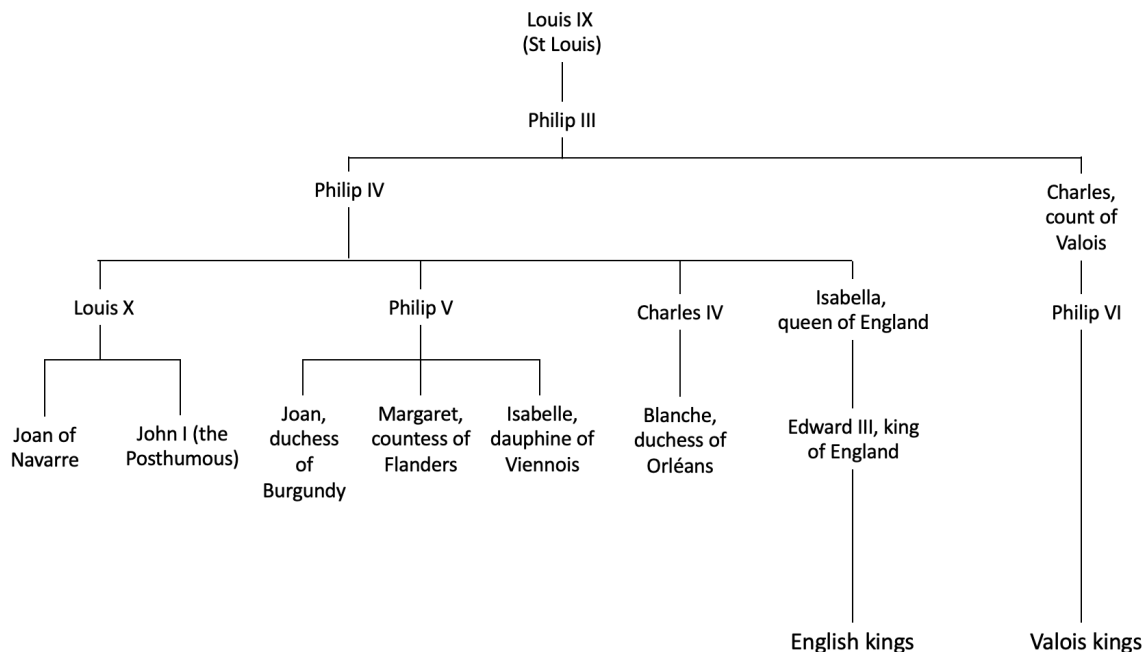


Figure 1: Isabella’s family tree

Betrothed in 1298 as part of efforts to secure peace between England and France, Isabella was about twelve years old when she married Edward II, king of England, in

Boulogne in January 1308. The couple were then crowned together at Westminster the following month.

Isabella was an active queen consort, supportive of her husband's regime (at least before 1325), albeit with an eye for her own interests. This could be seen with the 1316 election of the bishop of Durham where she pushed for her relative, Louis de Beaumont's, election over the king's preferred candidate. She was a patron of the Franciscan order and of the Poor Clares, a female religious order. She represented her husband in France in 1314 and accompanied him on military campaign in Scotland in 1319.

Most importantly, she took on a key intercessionary role between the king and his subjects. Edward II's relationship with his nobility proved strained throughout his reign, in part because of his favouritism of unpopular figures, like Piers Gaveston (who the barons beheaded in 1312) and later the two Hugh Despensers (a father and son who both helpfully had the same name). Isabella was instrumental in trying to intercede between Edward and his noble opponents, helping establish a peace treaty in early 1321. Shortly afterwards however this peace treaty was broken when Isabella was refused entry to Leeds Castle by Lady Margaret Badlesmere, the wife of one of the baronial opponents. Edward II likely used this insult as a pretext to start up a war with his barons again, culminating in the deaths of Lord Badlesmere and Thomas, earl of Lancaster.

In 1324 war broke out again between England and France and Edward confiscated Isabella's dower lands, replacing them with a yearly payment worth only half of her stolen lands. Isabella had already lost considerable influence to the king's new favourites, the Despensers. In 1325 the king sent her to France to treat for peace with her brother, Charles IV. Following the arrival of their eldest son, Edward, in Paris in September 1325 to pay homage to his uncle for Gascony, Isabella refused Edward's orders to return to England. She instead voiced her opposition and drew support from a company of English political exiles in France, including Roger Mortimer. She arranged the betrothal of her son, Edward, to Philippa of Hainault, and used this alliance to raise a mercenary force.

She and her army landed in England in September 1326 and quickly gained widespread support from the nobles and the city of London. On 15 October at Wallingford she issued a proclamation to be read throughout the kingdom against the king's 'evil counsellors' and Edward II's regime soon afterwards collapsed. Edward II and the two Despensers were quickly captured. The Despensers were executed and Edward II was forced to resign the crown to his son, Edward, who was then crowned in February 1327 as Edward III. Edward II was subsequently imprisoned in Berkeley Castle where he was murdered in September 1327.

As Edward III was only fourteen at his accession, actual rule was undertaken by a council although this was dominated by Isabella and Mortimer, who had himself made earl of March soon after. This regime quickly proved unpopular. Isabella may have been modelling her rule on Capetian queen regents like Blanche of Castile, however she also used her position to enrich herself with lands and annuities, tripling the value of her dower lands. She and Mortimer were also responsible for the unpopular Treaty of Northampton with Scotland in 1328. In October 1330, having convened parliament at Nottingham, Isabella and Mortimer were arrested at the Castle by Edward III and his

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supporters, bringing their rule to an abrupt end. Edward III thereafter assumed his personal rule.

Mortimer was accused of treason and executed soon afterwards. Isabella's lands were confiscated from her, but returned soon afterwards, albeit only at their original value. She spent the remainder of her political retirement living comfortably at Castle Rising and travelling around England. She remained influential, petitioning her son in 1345 on behalf of the citizens of Coventry. Upon her death in 1358, an inventory noted that she owned 36 manuscripts, and she was buried at the Franciscan Church in Newgate which she had patronised.

Images



Fifteenth-century manuscript illustration of Isabella returning to England with her son, Edward, in Bibliothèque nationale de France, Français MS 2663, f. 6r (source: [Gallica](#))



Fifteenth-century manuscript illustration of Isabella leading the siege of Bristol in Bibliothèque nationale de France, Français MS 2663, f. 6r (source: [Gallica](#))



Fifteenth-century manuscript illustration of Isabella standing judgement over the captured Hugh Despenser and Edmund, earl of Arundel in Bibliothèque nationale de France, Français MS 2663, f. 14v (source: [Gallica](#))

This is a contemporary depiction of Isabella at prayer in a historiated initial in her psalter (prayer-book) produced c. 1303-08. She is depicted between the arms of the kings of England and France.



'The Isabella Psalter', Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod. gall. 16, f. 94 (public domain image, credit: [Bayerische Staatsbibliothek](#)). The full psalter is digitised and available to view [online](#).

Primary source extracts

1. Justifying her rebellion against Edward II

a) *Proclamation 15 October 1326*

Extract from the proclamation sent out by Isabella, her son Edward and her brother-in-law, Edmund, earl of Kent, on 15 October 1326, justifying their uprising against Edward II.

And we, and several others, who are with us and of our company, who have long been kept far from the goodwill of our said lord the king through the false suggestions and evil dealings of the aforesaid Hugh [le Despenser] and Robert [de Baldock] and their supporters, are come to this land to raise up the state of

Holy Church and of the kingdom, and of the people of this land against the said misdeeds and grievous oppressions, and to safeguard and maintain, so far as we can, the honour and profit of the Holy Church, and of our said lord the king, and the whole kingdom as stated above.¹

2. Taking back her dower

During January 1327, while the process of deposing Edward II was ongoing, Isabella managed to secure on 10 January the return of her dower lands. This was further enhanced by Edward III granting Isabella at his coronation a life interest in further long list of estates totalling 20,000 marks, making her the wealthiest person in the realm after the king. This may have been intended to help Isabella support the king's rule, however she did gain a reputation for greed.

[a] '[10 January 1327] Restitution to Queen Isabel of the county of Cornwall [and other counties], and the castles, fortresses, towns, manors, lands, farms and divers places, lately granted to her by the king for life in dower, but afterwards resumed by him for certain causes; with the crops, stock, rents, arrears, debts and other goods.'²

[b] '[1 February 1327] Grant to queen Isabella, for life (in furtherance of a resolution of parliament that, for her services in the matter of the treaty with France and in suppressing the rebellion of the Despensers and others, the lands, etc. assigned to her by way of dower should be increased in value from 4,500l [pounds] to 20,000 marks a year)...'³

3. Coventry petition 3 January 1345

Isabella remained influential into her retirement, petitioning the king to make Coventry a municipal city and to have the right to elect their own mayor. The king subsequently agreed and Coventry became a city in 1345 – the foundation charter can be viewed online [here](#).

Grant, at the instance of Isabel, queen of England, the king's mother, tenant for life of the manor of Cheylesmore in Coventre, co. Warwick, and out of consideration for Edward, the king's eldest son, prince of Wales, duke of Cornwall and earl of Chester, to whom the said manor will come on the death of the said queen, to the men of Coventre who hold the said manor from the said queen of the following liberties... the said men, their heirs and successors, shall in future have a commonalty among themselves, with power to choose a mayor and fit bailiffs of themselves yearly, who after taking the usual oaths shall do and

¹ Anne Crawford (ed.), *Letters of the queens of England, 1100-1547* (Alan Sutton Publishing, 1994), 88–89. Available on [Archive.org](#).

² *Calendar of the patent rolls, Edward II Vol. 5: 1324-27*, ed. H. C. Maxwell Lyte (London: Mackie & Co. Ltd., 1904), 346. Available online on [HathiTrust](#).

³ *Calendar of the patent rolls, Edward III Vol. 1: 1327-30*, ed. H. C. Maxwell Lyte (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1891), 66. Available online on [HathiTrust](#).

keep all that pertains to their offices in the said town ... there shall be a prison in the said town on the land of the king's mother for punishing malefactors taken there, of which prison and of the prisoners therein the mayor and bailiffs shall have the custody.⁴

4. Development of the 'she-wolf' image: 14th-century critics

a) Geoffrey le Baker

Geoffrey le Baker was a fourteenth-century chronicler writing some time after events, who was especially critical of Isabella (and Mortimer and their ally, Bishop Orleton), offering a much more sympathetic account of Edward II. He supposed that Isabella had acted out of vengeance for the Despensers taking her lands and frequently describes her in his text as a 'virago' and 'Jezebel'. This particular portrayal shows some of the early development of Isabella's later 'she-wolf' reputation.

[p. 16] In addition to this, the Despensers very quickly aroused the feminine anger of the queen against themselves. She was very ready to commit any crime against them, when they lessened the household of the royal consort through their greedy decisions and orders, fixed within precise limits [p. 17] the amount of money she was allowed, and said she would be living upon smaller supplies of food than before ... the queen blazed up in anger not only against the Despensers but also against her husband, who in his decisions was copying them more than herself. Her lament was that she, who was of the royal blood of France, or, more than that, the daughter of a king and the only sister of three successive kings in Louis, Philip and then Charles, now found herself married to a king who was a miser. The promise had been that she would be queen, but she had become no better than a maidservant, receiving her wages from the Despensers, whom she hated with a more than perfect hatred.

[...]

[p. 20] The queen had now spent a year plotting her revenge, and finally on the advice of her lovers she prepared to drink its cup. At the end of the year she went to the lands of Hainault and without any discussion with the nobles of England she married off her son, who was loved and feared by the whole world. She joined him in marriage to Philippa, the daughter of the count of Hainault. The marriage may have taken place without any consultation, but it was blessed in the future by the successful production of many noble children, as will be revealed when it happens. The queen collected from Hainault and Germany an army of soldiers who were told that they would be paid their wages out of the dowries from the new bride. The knights in command of the army were John, the

⁴ *Calendar of the Charter Rolls preserved in the Public Record Office*, ed. H. C. Maxwell Lyte (London: The Hereford Times Limited, 1916), 5:36. Available on [HathiTrust](https://www.hathiitrust.org/).

brother of the count of Hainault, and Roger Mortimer, who by this time was the most secret and the most influential person in the queen's private household.⁵

b) An anonymous and more sympathetic writer's take on events.

A contemporary writer who wrote a Latin life of Edward II (*Vitae Edwardi Secundi*) and who was writing about the time when Isabella left for France in 1325 and before Edward II's deposition was much more sympathetic of the queen's situation.

The King of England saw that nothing was to be achieved through these ambassadors, and determined to send the queen, who might perhaps bring the matter to the desired conclusion. For since she was related by blood to each king she might the more effectually procure peace.

The queen departed very joyfully, happy with a twofold joy; pleased to visit her native land and her relatives, delighted to leave the company of some whom she did not like. Small wonder if she does not like Hugh [Despenser], through whom her uncle [Thomas earl of Lancaster] perished, by whom she was deprived of her servants and all her rents; consequently she will not (so many think) return until Hugh Despenser is wholly removed from the king's side.⁶

⁵ David Preest and Richard Barber (eds), *The Chronicle of Geoffrey Le Baker* (Boydell & Brewer, 2012), 16-17, 20. Available on [JSTOR](#).

⁶ *The Life of Edward the Second, by the So-called Monk of Malmesbury*, edited by N. Denholm-Young (Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1957), 134-35. Available on [Archive.org](#).

Interpretations

Isabella's reputation has changed considerably over the centuries. Earlier historians and writers regarded Isabella as a duplicitous 'she-wolf', a violent anomaly who murdered her husband with her lover, and attempted to rule through her young son. This interpretation of Isabella can be traced back to the fourteenth century but was further popularised in works of historical fiction such as Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II* play. Earlier historical studies of Isabella have tended to focus on Isabella's actions in 1325–30 and ignore both her role as queen before 1325 and her (albeit diminished) political role after she and Mortimer were deposed. More recent assessments have sought to interpret Isabella's actions within the longer view of Edward II's and Edward III's reigns, often emphasising Isabella's important role in maintaining working relations between Edward II and his barons.⁷

In the nineteenth century **Agnes Strickland** (along with her sister, Elizabeth) wrote a series of historical biographies of English queens, shining light on an area which tended to be overlooked in contrast to countless biographies on kings. Strickland, however, was notably critical of Isabella, interpreting many of her actions as a result of her innate cruelty and jealousy of the king's preference for his favourites, reinforcing the long-established 'she-wolf' image. The following passage is how she describes efforts to overthrow Isabella and Mortimer's rule in 1330:

'Isabella's cruelty, her hypocrisy, and the unnatural manner in which she rendered the interests of the young king, her son, subservient to the aggrandizement of her ferocious paramour Mortimer, excited the indignation of all classes, and a strong party was organized, under the auspices of the Plantagenet princes [Edward III's uncles], to deliver England from the tyranny of this modern Semiramis [a legendary figure associated with lustfulness who was based on a historical Assyrian queen].'⁸

Sophia Menache provided a revisionist account of Isabella's queenship in a 1984 article in *Journal in Medieval History*, arguing for the need of a 'more scientific and less emotional analysis of her activities'.⁹ In particular, she drew attention to Isabella's earlier activities as a queen, showing where she sought to keep the peace between Edward II and his barons and acted as a crucial diplomatic link between the kings of England and France. She also highlighted the sympathetic and positive portrayals of the queen by contemporary writers, particularly French chroniclers, in contrast to the assessments of later historians, although she did note where these writers deliberately

⁷ A good overview for Isabella's post-humous reputation is M.R. Evans, 'From "She-Wolf" to "Badass": Remembering Isabella of France in Modern Culture', in *Memorialising Premodern Monarchs*, ed. Gabrielle Storey (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 291–312.

⁸ Agnes Strickland, *Lives of the queens of England, from the Norman conquest* (Printed for subscribers by G. Barrie & son, 1902), 2:206. Available to read via [HathiTrust](#).

⁹ Sophia Menache, 'Isabelle of France, queen of England—a reconsideration', *Journal of Medieval History* 10, no. 2 (1984): 122.

sought to downplay the queen's actions to make her conform to expectations of queenship. Menache marked the turning point from praise to silence and then to criticism in depictions of Isabella to her downfall in 1330, supposing this was part of Edward III's efforts to distance himself from the deposition of his father.

'In contemporary sources Isabelle emerges as a political personage, one who had the ability to gain a position of power at the heart of English politics. This aspect of her personality did not conform to the conventional of medieval English queens. And speaking of conventions, Isabelle appears to have been the antithesis of most of them. Whether or not involved in the murder of her husband, she deposed him and lived openly with her lover. This hints at the many enigmas surrounding Isabelle's attractiveness. In fact, her contemporaries tended to overlook these aspects of the queen's personality, stressing only those which suited the norms of the age.'¹⁰

In a more recent reassessment of Isabella, **Michael Evans** has argued against a tendency to regard Isabella as 'exceptional', especially if only judging her queenship based on her actions in 1325–27. He also offered a more positive interpretation of Isabella's regency in 1327–30, arguing that criticism of it may have been shaped to cast Isabella and Mortimer in the roles of bad advisors. Evans noted the wisdom of some of Isabella's decisions, such as in securing a lasting peace with Scotland despite the unpopularity of this move. Evans also cautioned against modern interpretations of Isabella, particularly those in popular history books, which present Isabella as a sympathetic victim or remould the 'she-wolf' label to mean a 'badass', pointing out the reductionist nature of such labels.

Despite the understandable attention given to Isabella's overthrow of her husband and role as *de facto* ruler thereafter, it would be wrong to consider Isabella entirely an exception as queen. As a consort she fulfilled the traditional roles of royal deputy, intercessor, and patron and appears to have been a loyal supporter of her husband until 1325 through the factional conflicts of his reign. Likewise, she played a conventional role as dowager after 1330. Even her role as a ruler in 1327–1330 fits the Capetian model of a dowager queen's regency for a minor son (even if this was partly a legal fiction). Only her coup against Edward II was exceptional—the only occasion since the Conquest that a queen had played a leading role in the removal and death of a king.¹¹

¹⁰ Menache, 'Isabelle of France', 117.

¹¹ Michael Evans, 'Isabella of France: She-Wolf and Rebel Queen?', in *Later Plantagenet and the Wars of the Roses Consorts*, ed. A. Norrie, C. Harris, J. Laynesmith, D. R. Messer, and E. Woodacre (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 47.

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