

## *The Round Table feast of 1344*

Richard Barber

*There came to the king the young sons of certain barons, saying, more out of lightheartedness than earnestness, 'Lord king, to spread your fame through tournaments and hastiludes, order a round table in the fashion of king Arthur's court, and the glory of it shall be recorded for all times.'*

Bohemian Chronicle<sup>1</sup>

WE ARE FORTUNATE in having what may be a first hand account of the festival at Windsor in January 1344. Edward deliberately invited not only knights, but also wealthy citizens from London. It is Adam of Murimuth, a canon of St Paul's, who describes the occasion for us; he was probably either one of the London contingent, or heard about it from a friend who had been there. What he has to say is this:

In this year the lord king ordered a most noble tournament or joust to be held in his birthplace, that is at Windsor Castle, on January 19, which he caused to be announced a suitable time in advance both abroad and in England. He sent invitations to all the ladies of the southern part of England and to the wives of the citizens of London. When the earls, barons, knights and a great number of ladies had gathered on the Sunday, January 19, the king gave a solemn feast, and the great hall of the castle was filled by the ladies, with just two knights among them, the only ones to have come from France to the occasion. At this gathering there were two queens, nine countesses, the wives of the barons, knights and citizens, whom they could not easily count, and to whom the king himself personally allocated their seats according to their rank. The prince of Wales, duke of Cornwall, earls, barons and knights ate with all the other people in tents and other places, where food and all other necessities had been prepared; everything was on a generous scale and served unstintingly. In the evening dancing and various entertainments were laid on in a magnificent fashion. For the three

<sup>1</sup> *Die Königssaaler Geschichtsquellen*, ed. Johann Loserth, in *Fontes rerum Austriacarum, Scriptores VIII*, Vienna 1875, cap.7

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days following, the king with nineteen other knights held jousts against all comers; and the king himself, not because of his kingly rank but because of his great exertions and the good fortune that he had during the three days, was held to be the best of the defenders. Of the challengers, Sir Miles Stapleton on the first day, Sir Philip Despenser on the second, and Sir John Blount on the third, were awarded the prize. On the following Thursday, after the squires had jousted, the king gave a great feast at which he announced the foundation of his Round Table, and took the oaths of certain lords, barons and knights who wished to be members of it. He fixed the day for the holding of the Round Table as the Whitsun following, and dismissed the company thanking them for all they had done. He afterwards commanded that a most noble building should be built, in which to hold the Round Table on the day assigned, and instructed masons, carpenters and other workmen to carry out the work, providing both wood and stone, and not sparing either labour or expense. This work was later stopped for various reasons.

Another version of Murimuth's chronicle, either a second version by Murimuth himself, or possibly by another hand using Murimuth as a basis, adds considerable detail about the elaborate founding ceremony for the Round Table:

This feast lasted from Sunday to Wednesday. That night, after the end of the jousts, the king had it proclaimed that no lord or lady should presume to depart, but should stay until morning, to learn the king's pleasure. When the morning of Thursday came, at about nine o'clock the king caused himself to be solemnly arrayed in his most royal and festive attire; his outer mantle was of very precious velvet and the royal crown was placed upon his head. The queen was likewise dressed in most noble fashion. The earls and barons, and the rest of the lords and ladies, prepared themselves in appropriate fashion to go with the king to the chapel in the castle of Windsor and hear mass, as he commanded them to do. When mass had been celebrated, the king left the chapel; Henry, earl of Derby, as steward of England, and William, earl of Salisbury, as marshal of England, went before him, each carrying the staff of his office in his hand, and the king himself holding the royal sceptre in his hand. There followed him the young queen, and the queen-mother, the prince of Wales, the earls, barons, knights and nobles, with the ladies and all the people flocking to see such an extraordinary spectacle, to the place appointed for the assembly. There the king and all the others at the same time stood up. The king was presented with the Bible, and laying his hand on the Gospels, swore a solemn oath that he himself at a certain time, provided that he had the necessary means, would

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begin a Round Table, in the same manner and condition as Arthur, formerly king of England, established it, namely to the number of 300 knights, and would cherish it and maintain it according to his power, always adding to the number of knights. The earls of Derby, Salisbury, Warwick, Arundel, Pembroke, and Suffolk, the other barons and very many praiseworthy knights of probity and renown likewise made an oath to observe, sustain, and promote the Round Table with all its appendages. When this was done, trumpets and drums sounded together, and the guests hastened to a feast, where richness of fare, variety of dishes, and overflowing abundance of drinks were all to be found, to their unutterable delight and inestimable comfort. No murmurs spoilt their enjoyment and no cares troubled their cheerfulness. The occasion finished in the same manner that it had begun. When, on this fifth day, the royal feast was ended, everyone returned to their own affairs.<sup>2</sup>

The spectacular nature of the occasion was duly relayed to Edward's arch-enemy, Philip of France, and a continuation of the official chronicle of the French court gives us the reaction to it. This may have been written by a herald, possibly from St Omer, and ends in 1348, so it is almost contemporary with the event:

Once the King of England had arrived in his country, as stated above, he proclaimed a very big joust at one of his castles called Windsor. Knights came there from all countries in order to gain renown. There he had planned to re-establish the Round Table and the adventures of chivalry, which had not been seen since the days of King Arthur. Yet in his heart he was thinking something quite different, which he did not show on the outside, for all this time he was readying a great fleet, and a establishing a large garrison in one of his ports, called Portsmouth. In the midst of these actions, news came to him that Charles, duke of Brittany, had invaded the land of Brittany; and therefore the aforementioned feast was put off, and he once again sent the Earl of Northampton to Brittany to aid the countess of Montfort.<sup>3</sup>

For the French, this chivalric gathering was simply a smokescreen for Edward's active preparation for the renewal of war, though in fact it was not until March that any active steps were taken towards a new campaign.

Most of the other chroniclers who report the event do so much more briefly, and give us only a few additional details. The English version of the *Brut* chronicle,

<sup>2</sup> Murimuth's chronicle exists in three versions: for full texts and translations, see Appendix C.

<sup>3</sup> BN MS Fr. 693, f.254; see Appendix C for text. I am grateful to Professor Clifford Rogers for providing both text and translation.

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which like Murimuth had London connections, claims that 'of divers lands beyond the sea, were many strangers'. Edward's letter of protection issued before the feasts and addressed to his officials throughout the kingdom make no mention of overseas participants, referring only to knights and others 'of whatever region or place', but it does seem from the evidence of the *Brut* and St Omer chronicles that there was a large contingent of visitors from the Continent. Thomas Walsingham, writing at St Albans forty years later, a monastery which kept a kind of official royal chronicle in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, does not actually mention either the feast or the institution of the knightly order. He writes:

#### *A Round Table begun in both kingdoms*

*The Round Table in England*      In the year of grace 1344, which is the eighteenth year of Edward's reign, king Edward summoned many workers to Windsor Castle and began to build a house which was called 'The Round Table'. Its size from the centre to the circumference, the radius, was 100 feet, and its diameter was therefore two hundred feet. The weekly expenses were at first a hundred pounds, but afterwards because of news which the king received from France, this was cut back to nine pounds because he needed a great deal of money for other business.

*The Round Table in France*      At the same time, Philip of Valois, king of France, spurred on by what the king of England had done, began to build a round table in his own country, in order to attract the knights of Germany and Italy, in case they set out for the table of the king of England.

Relatively few other chroniclers mention the event; only those close to the court would have regarded it as special, more than just another lavish court spectacle. Sir Thomas Gray, whose *Scalacronica* presents a knight's view of history rather than the more usual monastic or civic versions, described the feast, but the original is lost, and we only have a brief sixteenth century summary of this part of his text. Jean Froissart, the chronicler of chivalry par excellence, was writing long after the event, like Walsingham, and succeeds in confusing the Round Table feast and the foundation of the Order of the Garter four years later, possibly because he was relying on what he was told by knights from the English court, whose accounts may have been contradictory or may have confused him. He writes as follows:

At that time, king Edward of England wished and decided to restore and rebuild the great castle of Windsor, which king Arthur founded and built in times gone by, and where the Round Table was first begun and established. And the king made an order of knights consisting of himself and his children and the most valiant men of the land. They

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were to be forty in all and were called the *Knights of the Blue Garter*, and their feast each year was to be on St George's day. And to begin that festival, the English king assembled the earls, barons and knights from the whole country, and told them his intention and his great desire to establish the feast, to which they cheerfully agreed. And forty knights were elected there, known and reputed to be the most valiant of all. And they swore an oath of mutual allegiance with the king to hold the feast and to follow the ordinances that had been agreed. And the king founded the chapel of saint George in the castle of Windsor and established and put there canons to serve God, and gave them rents, and provided for them well. And so that the feast should be known in all parts, the English king sent his heralds to publish and announce it in France, Sicily, Burgundy, Flanders, Brabant, Germany and everywhere as far as Lombardy. And he gave fifteen days of safe conduct after the festival to all knights and squires who wished to come. And this festival was to be a joust of 40 knights as defenders with forty squires and it was to be on the next saint George's day, in the year 1344, in the castle of Windsor. And the queen of England was to be there accompanied by three hundred ladies and damsels as her attendants, all noble and gentle women and dressed in similar clothes.

Froissart tells a good story, but it is clear that he has little to contribute to our knowledge of what actually happened in January 1344. His statement that heralds were sent far and wide across Europe seems to agree with Walsingham's information that Philip of Valois established a rival table to lure away Italian and German knights from Edward's feast, the *Brut* chronicler's comment that many strangers came to Windsor, and the St Omer chronicle's account. This great chivalric feast was evidently an international affair.

A much more valuable source of information is the royal accounts. There is relatively little in the records about the preparation for this great gathering, but two telling details do emerge from the archives. Edward had pawned his great crown, second crown and queen Philippa's crown in 1339 when he was desperate for money to pay his allies in Flanders. Such transactions were not uncommon, as jewellery was a form of ready cash or security, but to pawn the great crown as well as two others indicates the seriousness of his situation. In 1343 negotiations had begun for its redemption from the archbishop of Treves and the duke of Guelders, although the principal finance had actually been provided by Vivelin Rufus, a Jew from Strasbourg. It seems to have cost around £8000 to redeem them all.<sup>4</sup> At the end of 1343 the great crown was still in pawn, but by January 16 of the new year, Edward

<sup>4</sup> Stella Newton, *Fashion in the Age of the Black Prince*, Woodbridge & Totowa, NJ, 1980, 18-20. The pawning seems to have been symbolic rather than related to the value of the crown. A list of crowns and circlets in BL, Additional MS 60584, f.58v., shows the maximum value of any one of the crowns in Edward's possession in 1336 to have been £75.

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had his second crown back, just in time to wear it at the festivities at Windsor, and he paid the negotiators handsomely for their efforts.

It also seems that the preparations for the festival were made in a hurry, as if the decision to hold the festival had been made on the spur of the moment. Major tournaments usually involved lavish expenditure on costumes designed for the occasion, as well as gifts of robes. However, special costumes are not mentioned in the accounts, and any gifts of robes were probably included in the traditional Christmas hand-out of robes to courtiers a week or two earlier. We do learn that Edward wore two very expensive suits of red velvet, an exotic import, one long and one short, and consisting of six garments in all. An ermine cloak, for which 369 skins were used, and a smaller mantle of 68 skins, may also have been made for the occasion. At the same time as the suits, 118 tunics for the king's squires, men-at-arms and minstrels were made. The accountants note that seven furriers worked 'at great speed' for three days to complete these.

Despite the haste, these sound like clothes designed to present an image of majesty rather than the theatrical splendours of earlier tournament clothes, embroidered with mottoes and elaborate pictorial designs. Edward was no longer playing the knight errant – he had once fought incognito in an earlier tournament under the command of one of his own knights – but was staking his claim to be regarded as a chivalric monarch on a par with Arthur himself.