

of the whole midland area the focus will largely be on the single county at its centre. It was here, after all, that events produced such an exodus of residents that the collection of a levy was abandoned at one point because of 'the few persons which remain' likely to make it worthwhile.

Guy of Warwick's premature death in 1315 – claimed by a contemporary chronicler to be a political poisoning – robbed him of the chance of assuming the kingmaker role of his celebrated successor for which his character and career might well have fitted him.⁵ Instead, a long period of political upheaval followed, initially dominated by the powerful Marcher lords and Guy's ally, Thomas earl of Lancaster, leading directly to civil war in 1321 and eventually, even though both earls were by then long dead, to the king's own downfall. At the time of his death the most powerful of the midland lay barons and of a family hitherto noted for its loyalty to the king, Guy Beauchamp, with estates spread across twenty counties, was the first earl of Warwick to assume national as well as local importance. After the Gaveston crisis he had been reconciled to the king and by 1315 was acknowledged as 'the king's counsellor'. His midland estates comprised large tracts of Worcestershire and Warwickshire, including castles, rich manors and the advowsons of a cluster of parish churches, together with many more overlordships and an impressive tally of over one hundred knights' fees – still a powerful factor in cementing loyalty to a lord even if no longer an automatic guarantee. Together with wide family links, a valuable network of allies and relationships formed the beginnings of a veritable Beauchamp affinity.⁶ (Fig. 1)

Before concentrating on the political turmoil of the years immediately following Guy of Warwick's death, it is as well to emphasize that events must be seen against the sombre background of one overriding feature of the time, the great famine and livestock epidemics of which contemporary chroniclers have left such graphic accounts.⁷ It is difficult

⁵ *Thomas Walsingham, Quondam Monachi S. Albani, Historia Anglicana*, ed. H.T. Riley, 2 vols, Rolls Series, 1863-4, i, p. 137. The earl of Warwick was forty-three, his son and heir Thomas (1313-1369) an infant of two.

⁶ K.B. McFarlane points out that the only Beauchamp disloyalty in 178 years was provoked by the incompetence of Edward II and Richard II: *The Nobility of Later Medieval England*, Oxford 1980, p. 193. For the Beauchamp estate in 1315, *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem*, v, pp. 397-413.

⁷ The best contemporary accounts of the famine in England are *Johannis de Trokelowe et Henrici de Blaneforde, Monachorum S. Albani ... Chronica et Annales*, ed. H.T. Riley, Rolls Series, 1866, pp. 80-98, 104; *Flores Historiarum*, ed. H.R. Luard, 3 vols, Rolls