

Corbizon and John Middlemore, cannot have easily accommodated the interests of the prominent Thomas Blankfront of Alvechurch, who owned the water-mill, and another landholder, John Hastings, of the particularly fractious Warwickshire family. At Kineton the same rebels, Blankfront and Hastings, along with another, Nicholas Segrave, may have co-existed fairly amicably, but the hundred bailiffs who exploited the rich Feldon pastures included political opponents like Robert Atwood and John Andrew. Similarly, when in the north of the county, as already noted, the domineering John Somery of Dudley and Weoley was given custody by the king of Sutton Coldfield, he acquired as neighbours the militant outsider John Wylington at Wiggins Hill, the Lancastrian retainers Hugh Cuilly and Peter Lymesey who possessed a cluster of manors at Curdworth, Shustoke, Minworth, Dunton, Lea Marston and Colehill, and the Marmions at their family fortress uncomfortably close at Tamworth – and all this in a district already considered by the royalist Ralph Bassett at Drayton as his own (Fig.2).

The ramifications of such a situation are endless, but clearly the county had an in-built tendency towards instability and confrontation. Of course, it is impossible to disentangle distrust of a weak king from genuine fears prompted by economic insecurity or the normal gentry urge towards self-aggrandizement; but in so far as it is possible to generalize about a time of short-term opportunism rather than idealism – a tendency clearly encouraged by the famine – Warwickshire's loyalty to the king appears extremely suspect. The omens were certainly not good, all the more so as the county had almost continuous Lancastrian representation in Parliament in these years, providing the basis for an almost permanent obstruction of central or local government, while the sheriffdom was scarcely better, some of the same names recurring in both capacities. In the jargon of the day, it was to be largely 'contrariant' country (along with Worcestershire, Leicestershire and Staffordshire but unlike, say, Oxfordshire), needing little excuse effectively to paralyse a central government already under severe strain.²¹

It is not difficult, therefore, to recognize in early fourteenth-century Warwickshire the potential for disruption by over-mighty barons patronised by the great magnates, the thrust of personal ambition and

²¹ Maddicott, *Thomas of Lancaster*, p. 64. Sheriffs are listed in Public Record Office (PRO) (now National Archives), *Lists and Indexes*, ix, 1963, p. 144 and (with minor discrepancies) by Dugdale, *Antiquities*, p. 1150.