

economic insecurity, or the bitterness of individual rivalries. Here as elsewhere the power wielded by aristocratic followers was almost total. Wealthy knights, entrusted by the crown with important legal and administrative duties as sheriffs, commissioners, justices and escheators, were at the same time being supported by magnates whom they often served as indentured retainers and from whom they regularly received annuities and gifts. Many had extensive judicial powers in cases of theft, assault and rape and could arrest and hang felons. Locally, their capacity to influence events and misuse power was almost limitless. Not surprisingly, it seemed to contemporary chroniclers that the conflict against the king was essentially one which pitted one set of household retainers against another.²² Their authority was well-nigh unchallengeable. William Trussell, for example, the king's sheriff at the time of Guy of Warwick's death, was also one of Thomas of Lancaster's staunchest allies in Warwickshire and Leicestershire. He could give orders to local mayors, demand compliance accompanied by threats, exact payment for a variety of dubious personal expenses and still receive generous gifts to keep him good-humoured. His power grew still further as events unfolded, culminating eventually in a central role in Edward's deposition, as depicted by Marlowe. Opposed to him in north Warwickshire was John Somery, lord of Dudley and Weoley. He acquired Sutton Coldfield on Guy's death and, as already noted, was regarded by the chief justice William Bereford as little better than a tyrant:

*...he had taken upon himself so great authority in Staffordshire that no man could have law or reason...and domineered there more than a king; as also that it was no abiding for any man in those parts except he well bribed the said John for protection, or yielded him much assistance towards the building of his castle; and that the said John did use to beset men's houses for to murder them, as also extorted large sums of money from them.*²³

²² Baldwin, 'Household administration', p. 91; Waugh, 'Profits of violence'; G.A. Holmes, *The Later Middle Ages, 1275-1485*, London 1974, p. 110; Holmes, *Estates of the Higher Nobility*, p. 72; A. Harding, *The Law Courts of Medieval England*, London 1973. A celebrated later statute condemned retainers as 'maintainers, instigators, barretors, procurers and embracers of quarrels' (SR, ii, p. 75); cf. N.B. Lewis, 'The organization of indentured retainers in fourteenth century England', *TRHS*, 4th series, xxvii, 1945.

²³ For Trussell, *VCH, Warwickshire*, iii, p. 60; *CFR*, iii, pp. 102-3; W. Dugdale, *The Baronage of England*, 2 vols, London 1675-6, ii, p. 143; *The Records of the Borough of Leicester*, I, ed. M. Bateman, London 1899, pp. 328-30 (in Marlowe's play he relieves the king of his crown in the deposition scene, *Plays*, pp. 278-9). For Somery, *Inquisitions Post Mortem for the County of Worcester*, ed. J.W.W. Bund, 2 vols,