

of Coventry, John Sotemay of Warwick and Thomas Blount, later steward of the king's household, had already served the king well in a variety of capacities. A few were high-profile servants of the Despensers, like the lawyer-soldier, Richard Foxcote, and the extraordinary gentleman-cum-professional brawler already mentioned, Malcolm Musard, lord of Saintbury; some, among them William Lucy of Charlecote, former Member of Parliament and peace-keeper, had preferred a somewhat lower profile.

Inevitably, their mandate was carried out in a spirit of opportunistic reprisal rather than pacification. The corruptibility of sheriffs, justices and crown officials had long been notorious, and had frequently prompted inquests in the recent past. Ignoring this, these undoubtedly highly competent administrators succumbed *en masse* to the obvious temptations of power, so that to the law's delays, in Hamlet's terms, was now added the insolence of office. By 1323 the king could no longer ignore the barrage of accusations against his officials and ordered three high justices, John Stonor, Robert Malberthorp and Robert Aylestone, to investigate charges, channelled through sworn jurors of hundreds and towns like Stratford, Kenilworth, Henley and Warwick, of 'malfeasances in dealing with cattle and divers other goods and chattels in the castles, manors, lands and tenements in the counties of Warwick and Leicester forfeited in the late rebellion'. The findings revealed much more than this: that with tensions still high everywhere, real or imagined rebel sympathizers had been harassed and whole communities, from sizeable towns like Tamworth in the north to hamlets like Whatcote and Idlicote in the south, become victims of serious fraud and theft. Foremost among the 'great offences' were cases where tax assessors accepted bribes to under-rate colleagues, or even exempt them entirely; at Tamworth William Badcock confessed to having been assessed at 2s.6d. rather than 8s.5d. while more than half a dozen other affluent neighbours had escaped completely. Bribery was lucrative and widespread: used to avoid confiscation of property; to escape imprisonment at Warwick or, once within its walls, to negotiate with the gaolkeeper, Philip Codleigh, for release; to ensure payment of personal expenses, as at Stratford, or of funds then used to entertain a co-operative lord, as at Long Itchington and Leamington Hastings; to avoid military service, as at Tysoe, where 'several powerful men were not called in the king's service'. Charges of illegal detention, sometimes by brute force, sometimes by fabricated evidence to give a veneer of legality, were common, as when the former