FACT SHEET No 321

ISABELLA DE CASTILLE: WAS SHE THE 'SHE-WOLF OF FRANCE'?
by Chris Corner
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Isabella of France, sometimes described as the 'She-Wolf of France', became Queen of England at 12 years of age when she married Edward II in 1308. She was subsequently regent of England from 1327-1330.

Edward was given to forming close romantic attachments with a series of male favourites and was in such a relationship with Gascon Gaveston, Earl of Cornwall, when he married Isabella. Soon after their marriage, Isabella saw Gaveston wearing her father's gold and jewelled wedding gifts. She wrote to her father complaining of her ill-treatment. He sympathised with her plight and provided aid which resulted in Gaveston being exiled. On his eventual return to England, Gaveston incurred the hatred of the barons who captured and executed him.

Edward new favourites, the Despensers (father and son), became his chief advisors and took every opportunity to slight the Queen. Edward confiscated Isabella's land and placed her youngest children into the Despensers' custody when she refused to take an oath of loyalty to them.

Deeply insulted, Isabella persuaded Edward to send her to France, along with her eldest son, Edward, to pay homage to her brother, Charles 1V, King of France. There she plotted against her husband and took Roger Mortimer, Earl of March, newly escaped from the Tower of London, as her lover. Mortimer was clever, ruthless and hungry for power and together they raised an army of thousands and invaded England. The Despensers were ousted from power and brutally executed, while Edward II was captured and forced to abdicate. Apparently he was imprisoned, tortured and bestially murdered at Berkeley Castle on the orders of Mortimer and Isabella, although some historians dispute this.

The boy prince was declared King Edward III, with Isabella and Mortimer jointly ruling England during his minority. They fell from power when Edward III led a coup to depose Mortimer, who was taken prisoner at Nottingham Castle and beheaded at Tyburn. His mother, Isabella was put under house arrest in her own property of Castle Rising in Norfolk. It is said that she suffered from a nervous breakdown following the death of her lover.

Isabella was known as the 'She-Wolf' because of her role in the fall of her husband and the brutal revenge she took on the Despensers. However, she was also called a "Liberator and Peacemaker" because she saved the country from a weak king who had suffered tension between himself and his lords, a humiliating defeat by Robert the Bruce at Bannockburn and who reigned during many turbulent years of famine.

When you look at Isabella's stone head in the Minster what do you see? Do you see a woman who was happy with the life and power she shared with her lover, or one who because of her adultery and brutal revenge deserved the title 'She-Wolf'?