

The supposed Mortimer family motto

It is increasingly said that the medieval Mortimer family of Wigmore had a motto, 'Not we from kings but kings from us'. For example, on the castleswales.com website one may read 'Reflecting this powerful position in the land is the motto of the House of Mortimer. "Not we from kings but kings from us", says it all.' Similarly, a page on the website of the British Film Council (<http://film.britishcouncil.org/not-we-from-kings>) is entitled 'not we from kings', referring to a 2011 film made about Roger Mortimer, 1st earl of March. But there is a problem here. The Mortimer family of Wigmore did not have a motto. No document mentions one. No extant seal impression uses one. Reference works such as *Fairbairn's Book of Crests* and Burke's *General Armoury* do not assign any motto to a branch of the medieval family. One is left wondering.

The first time I ever heard of there being a motto for the medieval Mortimer family was when someone drew my attention to the line painted on the side of a house, Upper Bryn. In Richard Haslam's *Pomys* volume of the series, 'Pevsner Architectural Guides: The Buildings of Wales' (1979), p. 147, this is described as

A square-framed C17 timber house with a date 1660 and the Mortimer motto ('Not from kings but kings from us') in large renewed letters on the front. This and the porch are jettied. Two doorways with decorated heads.

I do not know what Haslam's source was. However, I note that one E. R. Morris wrote in an article, 'G. R. Wythen Baxter, Upper Bryn, Newtown 1814-1854', *Montgomeryshire Collections*, 59 (1965-6), pp. 92-101, that

The Upper Bryn is situated in the township of Hendidley in the parish of Llanllwchaearn. It is one of the many half-timbered houses in the county and bears, on its front, the inscription – 'Not we from kings but kings from us' – the proud motto of Anne Mortimer, but which seems meaningless in the context of Baxter family history. Be this as it may, the Baxter family owned and lived at The Bryn for many generations.

I presume that the Anne Mortimer to whom Morris was referring was the last of the Mortimers of Wigmore, who married Richard, earl of Cambridge. But it is difficult to see any context in which she might have claimed such a motto. She predeceased her husband, dying in or shortly after 1411, probably in childbirth. If she claimed the motto after her marriage, then why was it her claim and not his? Her brother, Edmund Mortimer, the fifth earl of March outlived her, but there is no reference (as far as I know) to him claiming such a motto. Indeed, given his involvement in the Southampton plot of 1415, in which he came close to losing his life for treason – and for which Anne Mortimer's husband was executed – it would have been a crass phrase to bandy about.

I very much doubt any Mortimer ever used such a motto.

For a start, consider the date of the inscription mentioned above, 1660. The Baxters, who lived at Upper Bryn, would have been unlikely to have written this line on their house a year earlier, before the Restoration of the monarchy. Dated thus, it is more likely to be a reference to the Restoration itself. As the Baxters had been at Upper Bryn for some time, it might relate to some service they had offered either to the last Stuart monarch or his successor. Either way, the

building of the house and the use of the motto postdate the last Mortimer by 135 years. It may well be a sign of loyalty to the Stuarts, this being occasionally mentioned as a Stuart motto (see below), and thus a sign of loyalty to the royalist cause, which was widely championed in 1660.

It should be noted that in the earlier report by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales, *An Inventory of the Ancient Monuments in wales and Monmouthshire* (1913), p. 120, the reference to this house makes no mention of the Mortimers. The entry reads:

Bryn House. A once handsome and extensive half-timbered residence, now divided into tenements. The eastern front bears the inscription 'Not we from kings but kings from us. R.B.' and the date, 1660. The residence of the family of Baxter, of which Richard Baxter, the Puritan divine, is said to have been a member.

And this is borne out by an image of the relevant part of the house itself about this time, which shows the initials, R. B. and the date above the motto:



Second, people should be aware that most families did not have mottoes before 1400. Edward III, Richard II and Henry IV and others of the court adopted personal mottoes from time to time, and William of Wykeham famously used the motto 'Manners maketh man' at the end of the fourteenth century, but the idea of every family having a motto was a much later one, long after the death of the last Mortimer in 1425. In Burke's *General Armoury*, the only Mortimer family given a motto is the seventeenth-century Scottish family of Auchinbadie, in Scotland.

Third, the motto 'Not we from kings but kings from us' would appear to have a Scottish origin in the Stewart family. Charles Taylor, writing in *The Literary Panorama and National Register, volume 2* (1815), p. 463, states that "'Not from kings but kings from us" is the lofty pretension of one of our northern nobles'. Writing in the *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, vol. 7 (Belfast, 1901), p. 13 the Reverend George Hill referred to an eighteenth century gentleman of Irish extraction, John Stuart of Kilmahamoge, using this motto. And in a family history compiled in 1862, Henrietta Hickey, the daughter of John Steuart of Steuart's Lodge, County Carlow, declared that her family motto was the 'Not we from kings but kings from us.' Her father's grandfather was described as a younger son of the third earl of Galloway (transcribed at http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~irlcar2/Letter_20.htm; downloaded 12 May 2015). The earl of Galloway's family motto was actually *Virescit vulnere virtus* (valour increased from a wound); however, John Stuart may have chosen to look further back for his quip: the

Stuarts/Stewarts had originally been stewards of the Scottish kings and had risen to become the royal family. Hence they indeed lived up to the motto.

None of this is conclusive but it does present a very strong case against the medieval Mortimers' motto being 'Not we from kings but kings from us'. The circumstantial evidence is against it and there is no evidence for it. It rather looks as though someone has wrongly attributed it to the Mortimers, and the desire for them to have borne a motto of some sort has led to this one being associated with them. And, of course, once it is out there on the Internet, it is idly repeated over and over again, until it becomes ubiquitous and, through sheer repetition, accepted as fact.

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