

Expenses sheets still open to scrutiny after 700 years

THE oldest preserved expenses claim in this country is that submitted by the envoys of King Edward I on their way through Viking Scotland to meet the Maid of Norway, who died 700 years ago this autumn.

Still preserved in the public records office, the partly destroyed but still legible manuscript charts the journey of the English courtiers by ship and horseback towards their meeting with the seven-year-old child.

Their intention was to escort her from Kirkwall to London for her intended marriage to the son of the English king — "the Hammer of the Scots". The marriage would have led to a NATO alliance long before its time, the union of the crowns of Norway, Scotland and England, around 1300.

But the sickly little Margareta died on passage from Bergen, and the envoys were turned back at Wick on being told the news.

According to information gleaned by the Dornoch Heritage Society from the 1870 publication of J. Stevenson's "Documents illustrative of the History of Scotland, 1286-1306", translated from Latin by their historian, Mrs Bridget MacKenzie, the English "agents" detailed their expenses between September 15 and November 21, 1290:

- September 28, Friday, at Cromarty 22 pence;
- September 29, Saturday, at Dornoch 12 pence;
- September 30, Sabbath, at Skelbo (not readable);

- October 1, Monday, speaking to Scots (not readable);
- October 2, Tuesday, at Helmsdale 18 pence;
- They travelled to a place called "Hospital", probably near Latheron in Caithness, and next day on to Wick, where they were turned back.

After overnighting again at Hospital and Helmsdale, their next claim was:

- October 8, Skelbo, hire of ferry and horses 13 pence;
- This was to cross the waters of Loch Fleet on their journey to spend the next night at Nigg in Easter Ross, bearing south the sad tidings of the death of the Maid of Norway — and the end of hopes of a North Sea peace pact for almost 700 years.

Scotland's other 'triple queen' celebrates seventh centenary

SINCE no portraits or seals bearing her image have come down to us, no-one knows what Margareta Eriksdóttir looked like but it is not hard to picture the frail, motherless, little seven-year-old girl as she glimpsed for the last time the rough waters she travelled between her home in Norway and her unknown realm in Scotland.

She was never to set foot in the land of which she had nominally been queen since the age of three, for Orkney where she died at the end of September 1290 was still Norwegian. And it is not even certain that she actually landed in the Northern Isles in her last days. Tradition has it that she died in Kirkwall but she could just as well have still been on board ship just off the Orkney coast.

At any rate it must have been some comfort to the dying, doubtless confused child to have heard voices in a familiar language when she passed away, as history records, "between the hands

and in the presence of the best men who had followed her from Norway".

Following the custom of medieval royal entourages she would also have had her women attendants but the whole awful journey — during the furious equinoctial gales that still plague the notoriously rough seas of the area — coming on top of the natural bewilderment of a small child venturing to a highly political role in strange land and a possible arranged marriage with the equally unknown English king's son, a year even younger than herself, must have been intimidating from its family forebodings to its tragic end.

It is the lack of an archaeological record that adds to rather than detracts from the sadly brief story of Margareta, Maid of Norway. Her fate sparked off one of

Mary Beith looks at the tragic tale of the Maid of Norway

the most momentous periods in Scottish history, yet we do not even have so much as a tiny comb to remember her by.

On our part we have not bothered to erect one small monument in her memory, even though her tragedy has touched a chord in popular sentiment. Scotland's history pivots continually on "might have been" and "might have happened", a memorial to the Maid would also be something of a concrete memorial to many other furies of the past, and to the numerous other unwitting people, both low and high born, caught up in the political power games of the few.

Few hard facts are known

about the Maid's life. Her mother, also Margareta, who was the daughter of Alexander III of Scotland and the wife of Erik Magnusson, King of Norway, died on 9 April, 1283, either in giving birth to the Maid, her only child, or shortly afterwards. In 1286 Alexander was fatally thrown from his horse at Kinghorn in Fife and as his only direct heir the three-year-old Margareta found herself a most extraordinary centre of attention.

Professor Gordon Donaldson, who has kindly sent me a typescript copy of a chapter he has written on the Maid for a forthcoming book, astutely reminds us that in 1287 "there was much commemoration of the fourth centenary of the

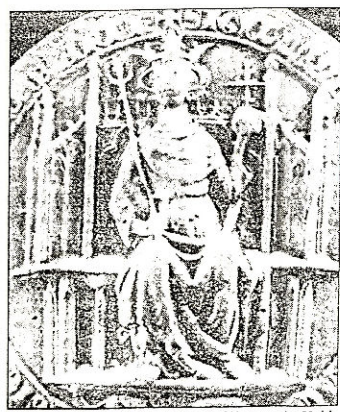
death of Mary Stewart, who was Queen of Scots by birth, Queen of France by marriage and, many thought, rightful Queen of England.

"The year 1290 (marks) the seventh centenary of the death of another princess, known in Scottish history as 'the Maid of Norway'. She was Queen of Scots by birth, a marriage was planned which would have made her Queen of England, and she might have been a candidate for succession to her father as Queen of Norway."

It is strange to ponder how the fates of both these potential triple queens were to have such far-reaching consequences for their realm. As early as 7 October, 1290 when her death was still a rumour, William Fraser, Bishop of St Andrews, was writing to Edward I of England asking for his intervention "for the

consolation of the Scottish people and to save the shedding of blood" as Robert Bruce, grandfather of Robert I, had gathered troops at Perth and "the Earls of Mar and Atholl are already collecting their army". The rest we know, though perhaps there's a case for thinking twice here about the meddling of clerics in politics. Without the invitation to Edward the scene may have been equally as bloody but at least, perhaps, of far shorter duration.

A conference to commemorate the Maid's death is being held by the Societies of Antiquaries of Scotland, London and Newcastle-Upon-Tyne in Berwick-upon-Tweed this weekend and as there are still places available inquiries may be made to the Societies of Antiquaries of Scotland at the Royal Museum in Queen Street, Edinburgh. Tel 031-225 7534, Ext 328.



Detail from the seal of King Eric II of Norway, he Maid