

THE QUEST FOR HAWKWOOD

The Treaty of Brétigny of 1360, which brought a decade of peace in the Hundred Years' War, made many English soldiers redundant; but, rather than return home, some of them decided to seek their fortune in Italy. The most famous of these was Sir John Hawkwood (c.1320-1394), who became the leading *condottieri* of his day, fighting in almost every part of the Italian states, apart from Venice and Sicily. Consequently, there is no shortage of printed sources about him, which can be consulted in England, thanks to the labours of generations of English and Italian historians.

Most people come across Hawkwood when they see his portrait in the *Duomo* in Florence. This is a striking image, painted by Uccello during the early days of the Medici regime, to celebrate the victory he won as commander-in-chief of the Florentine republic over the 'tyrants' of Milan; but I first came across him when I drove past his castle of Montecchio Vesponi, near Cortona in Tuscany in 2002. I was by no means the first to discover this, but the guidebook told me only that 'this was the home of the Englishman Hawkwood in the 1380s'; and when the travel writer H.V.Morton found it in the 1950s, it was in ruins and its occupant was completely uninterested in its medieval English owner. When I looked for a biography, I could find only one in English, dating from 1889, which was difficult to get hold of, and even more difficult to read. There have been at least two since, but mine is the only one to feature Montecchio Vesponi in any detail.

Montecchio is a spectacular building on the eastern edge of the Val di Chiana, just North of Lake Trasimene, where Hannibal crushed the Romans in 217 BC; and it was Hawkwood's home between 1384 and 1394. The outstanding features are the central watchtower, with its commanding view of the road from Florence to Perugia, the sentry-walk on the North side of the curtain wall, and the thorn-filled moat, and there is also a roughly-made keep which could well have been built by Sir John. It is no longer a place 'of sepulchral loneliness', inhabited by rooks and bats, as described by older guide books. Indeed, it has been lovingly restored by its present owner, who made me very welcome, as did the people of Montecchio Vesponi and nearby Castiglion Fiorentino. In 2007, I climbed the watchtower and saw Sir John's battle-standard flying from the battlements when the local *palio* was held.

Cotignola is one of two small towns in Romagna, given to Hawkwood by Pope Gregory XI in 1376; and the Englishman's connection with the town is still visible. Sir John built a palace there, 'with dungeons in the manner of the strongest fortresses'; and improved the fortifications, much of which remained intact until the eighteenth century. Hawkwood's first biographer, Sir John Temple-Leader, who was a retired Whig MP, visited the place in 1889 and climbed the Hawkwood Tower (*Torre Acuto*), the last remnant of the buildings which his hero had constructed. I photographed it in 2006.

The village of Castagnaro, in the Plain of Lombardy, lies next to the River Adige, in an area which is particularly flat, green and fertile. Nowadays this is an agriculturist's paradise, planted with cereals, vines, fruit trees and cabbages; but in 1387 it was the site of Hawkwood's most famous victory, when he commanded the forces of Padua

against the army of Verona. The battlefield is still, visibly, large enough to accommodate several thousand men. Looking from the banks of the Adige across to the belltower in Castagnaro, one can easily imagine the commander deploying his English brigade, along with the army of the Carrara, as the Paduan chroniclers describe, and try to work out what part the archers played.

Visiting Italy posed all sorts of questions which would not have occurred to me if I had simply stayed in England. For example, when Hawkwood was employed by the Pisans in 1363–4, he raided all around Florence and up into the middle Arno valley, capturing the small town of Figline; and the chroniclers tells us that he captured it easily. How was this possible, when Figline is ringed with a formidable curtain wall, constructed in the 1350s? Why did Hawkwood succeed at Figline, when he failed to take San Miniato in the late 1360s, and when his English brigade, so famous for its infantry tactics, was not renowned for its siege-craft? How was he able to ford the Arno, and cross the Apennines in winter? On the other hand, it is easy to see how his engineers were able to use the River Po as an offensive weapon in 1368, when one drives along the raised banks of that river at Borgoforte.

Everywhere I went in Italy, I came across reminders of what my parents used to refer to as ‘the last war’, and the Allied campaign to liberate Italy between 1943 and 1945. A tower built by Hawkwood at San Romano on the Arno no longer exists, because Kesselring’s crack German troops mined and completely destroyed it in 1944. The Hawkwood Tower at Cotignola was likewise destroyed at the beginning of 1945 - I have seen a sad photograph of its ruins sitting in the bottom of a crater. Thankfully, it was lovingly restored in the 1970s. The fighting may have been brutal in medieval Italy, but firearms and cannon were in their infancy and war was nothing like so destructive as the modern variety has proved to be.

Stephen Cooper
