

Trial by combat, 1163

Painted by Harry Morley ACA (1881 - 1943), 1918

Object no. 1931. 279. 1

Location - Foot of the main staircase, Museum of Reading



The Trial by Combat of Henry de Essex. Trial by combat was a Common Law method for an aggrieved party to seek retribution for a serious crime, such as murder or treachery, for which the offender would normally lose his life and lands.

Essex, Henry II's constable and standard-bearer, was charged by Robert de Montfort with cowardice during the Battle of Coleshill in 1157. In the confusion of the battle Essex had fled thinking that the king was dead. The King was not dead but was almost defeated because of Essex's flight.

To clear his name of cowardice Essex decided to stand trial by combat. During the fight he had a vision of St. Edmund and Gilbert de Cereville. He had contested the privileges of the Abbey of St. Edmund and had wrongly cast Gilbert into chains and tortured him to death. Essex was defeated by Montfort and was thought to be dead. His body was taken to the Abbey for burial. However, he recovered and became a monk at the Abbey.

The painting shows the trial by combat on a small island in the Thames at Reading. The small island near the Abbey's North Gate is now known as De Montfort Island. The Abbey can be seen in the background. A crowd of spectators is held back by the Thames and in the foreground men watch from a boat.

Essex's vision is clearly seen in the sky between the Abbey on the left and the King's seat to the right. Essex has fallen to the ground dazzled by the vision of the two men. The victorious Montfort pauses, leaning on his sword, to regain his breath.