Geoffrey de Mandeville, Earl of Essex (d. 1144), rebel, was the son of William de Mandeville, constable of the Tower, and the grandson of Geoffrey de Mandeville, a companion of the Conqueror, who obtained a considerable fief at that time in England, largely composed of the forfeited estates of Ansgar the Staller or Master of the King's Horse.

Geoffrey de Mandeville first appears in the Pipe Roll of 1130, when he had recently succeeded his father. With the exception of his presence at King Stephen's Easter court in 1136, we hear nothing of him till 1140, when he accompanied Stephen against Ely, and subsequently, according to William of Newburgh, took advantage of his position as constable of the Tower to detain Constance of France in that fortress, after her betrothal to Eustace, the son of Stephen, who bitterly resented the outrage. He must, however, have succeeded in obtaining from the king before the latter's capture at Lincoln (2 Feb. 1141) the charter creating him Earl of Essex, which is still preserved among the Cottonian Charters, and which is probably the earliest creation-charter now extant.
From this point his power and his importance rapidly increased, chiefly owing to his control of the Tower. He also exercised great influence in Essex, where lay his chief estates and his strongholds of Pleshy and Saffron Walden. On the arrival of the Empress Maud in London (June 1141), he was won over to her side by an important charter confirming him in the earldom of Essex, creating him hereditary sheriff, justice, and escheator of Essex, and granting him estates, knights' fees, and privileges. He deserted her cause, however, on her expulsion from London, seized her adherent the bishop, and was won over by Stephen's queen, Matilda of Boulogne, to assist her in the siege of Winchester. Shortly after the liberation of the king, Geoffrey obtained from him, as the price of his support, a charter (Christmas 1141) pardoning his treason, and trebling the grants made to him by the empress. He now became sheriff and justice of Hertfordshire and of London and Middlesex, as well as of Essex, thus monopolising all administration and judicial power within these three counties. Early in the following year he was dispatched by Stephen against Ely to disperse the bishop's knights, a task which he accomplished with vigour. His influence was now so great that the author of the 'Gesta Stephani' describes him as surpassing all the nobles of the land in wealth and importance, acting everywhere as king, and more eagerly listened to and obeyed than the king himself. Another contemporary writer speaks of him as the foremost man in England. His ambition, however, was still unsatisfied, and he aspired by a fresh treason to play the part of king-maker. He accordingly began to intrigue with the empress, who was preparing to make a fresh effort on behalf of her cause. Meeting her at Oxford some time before the end of June (1142), he extorted from her in a new charter concessions even more extravagant than those he had wrung from Stephen. He also obtained from her at the same time a charter in favour of his brother-in-law, Aubrey de Vere (afterwards Earl of Oxford), another Essex magnate. But the ill-success of her cause was unfavourable to his scheme, and he remained, outwardly at least, in allegiance to the king. His treasonable intentions, however, could not be kept secret, and Stephen, who already dreaded his power, was warned that he would lose his crown unless he mastered the earl. It was not, however, till the following year (1143) that he decided, or felt himself strong enough, to do this. At St. Albans, probably about the end of September, Geoffrey, who was attending his court, was openly accused of treason by some of his jealous rivals, and, on treating the charge with cynical contempt, was suddenly arrested by the king after a sharp struggle. Under threat of being hanged, he was forced to surrender his castles of Pleshey and Saffron Walden, and, above all, the Tower of London, the true source of his might. He was then set free, 'to the ruin of the realm,' in the words of the 'Gesta Stephani.'

Rushing forth from the presence of the king, 'like a vicious and riderless horse, kicking and biting' in his rage, the earl burst into revolt. With the help of his brother-in-law, William de Say, and eventually of the Earl of Norfolk, he made himself master of the fenland, the old resort of rebels. Advancing from Fordham, he secured, in the absence of Bishop Nigel, the Isle of Ely, and pushing on thence seized Ramsey Abbey, which he fortified and made his headquarters. From this strong position he raided forth with impunity, burning and sacking Cambridge and other smaller places. Stephen marched against him, but in vain, for the earl took refuge among the fens. The king, however, having fortified Burwell, which threatened Geoffrey's communications, the earl attacked the post (August 1144), and while doing so was wounded in the head. The wound proved fatal, and the earl died at Mildenhall in Suffolk about the middle of September, excommunicate for his desecration and plunder of church property. His corpse was carried by some Templars to the Old Temple in Holborn, where it remained unburied for nearly twenty years. At last, his son and namesake having made reparation for his sins, Pope Alexander pronounced his absolution (1163), and his remains were interred at the New Temple, where an effigy of him was, but erroneously, supposed to exist.
Geoffrey, First Earl of Essex, who presented a perfect type of the ambitious feudal noble, left by his wife Rohese, daughter of Aubrey de Vere (chamberlain of England), three sons: Ernulf (or Ernald), who shared in his revolt, and was consequently exiled and disinherited, together with his descendants; and Geoffrey (d. 1166) and William, who succeeded him in turn, and were both Earls of Essex.

[*Geoffrey de Mandeville: a Study of the Anarchy*, 1892, synopsis for the *Dictionary of National Biography* by J.H. Round.]

The description of the last days of the rebel earl Geoffrey in the above *Study of the Anarchy* reads:
The fortified post which the king's men had now established at Burwell was a standing threat to Fordham, the key of his line of communications. He was therefore compelled to attack it. And there he was destined to die the death of Richard Cœur de Lion. As he reconnoitered the position to select his point of attack, or as, according to others, he was fighting at the head of the troops, he carelessly removed his headpiece and loosened his coat of mail. A humble bowman saw his chance: an arrow whizzed from the fortress, and struck the unguarded head. . . In the meantime the Abbot of Ramsey heard the startling news, and saw that his chance had come. The earl might be willing to save his soul at the cost of restoring the abbey. To Mildenhall he flew in all haste, but only to find that the earl had already lost consciousness. There awaited him, however, the fruit of his oppressor's tardy repentance in the form of instructions from the earl to his son to surrender Ramsey Abbey.

Inverted arms of Geoffrey de Mandeville with a broken lance, symbolizing his death and excommunication (Matthew of Paris)