

The Tomb of Alyce, the ‘Serene Princess’

By Carol Sawbridge



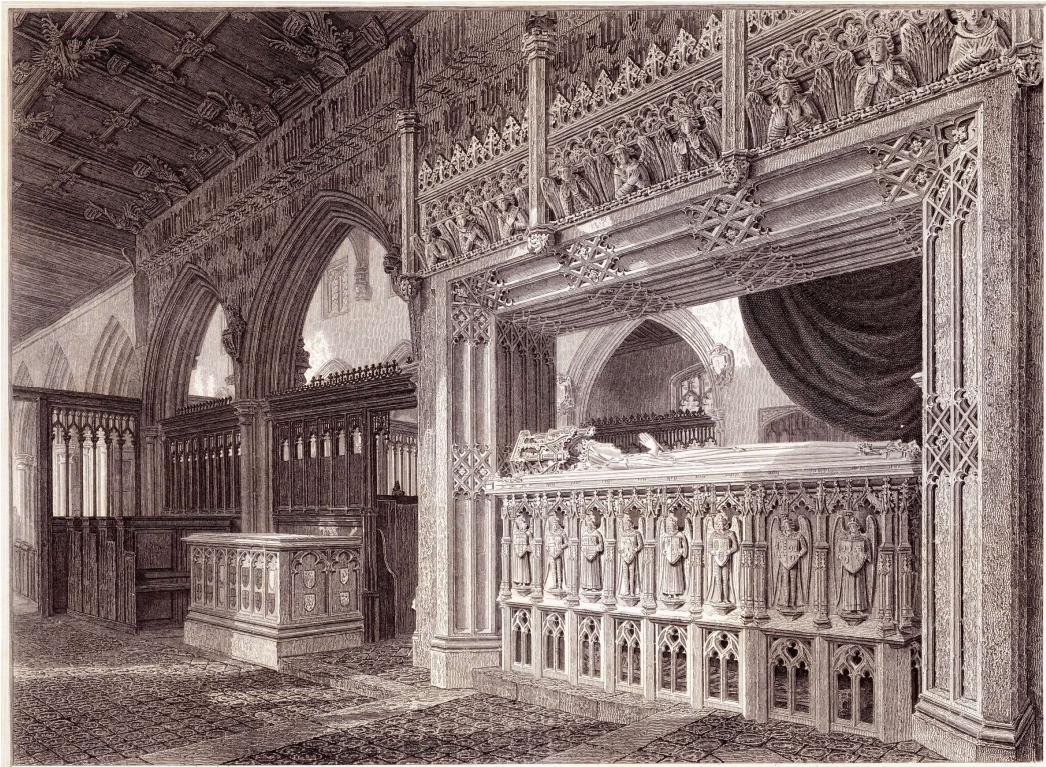
Under the recumbent figure on the magnificent alabaster tomb are inscribed the words in Latin -

Pray for the soul of the most serene princess Alyce, Duchess of Suffolk, patron of this church and first founder of this almshouse, who died on 20th May in the year of our Lord 1475.

Although titled a ‘princess’, she achieved her rank through her marriages, progressing from commoner Mistress Chaucer to Lady Phelip, to Countess of Salisbury, and after her third marriage - Countess, Marchioness and finally Duchess of Suffolk.

Two of her powerful husbands wished her to be buried with them, but Alyce chose her Chaucer church in Ewelme where daily prayers in St John’s Chapel would be offered up for her and her family as prescribed in the Statues.

Her effigy is clothed in the habit of a vowess (a woman living under religious vows of celibacy but who kept her place in society).





She wears her ducal coronet and on her left arm the Order of the Garter which was granted to her in 1432.

At Alyce's head are angels holding the shields of her family.

Her face is possibly an attempt at a likeness. Her hands folded prayer and her feet resting, not on the usual dog symbolising fidelity, but on a lion symbolising strength. It is a statement of the wealth and importance of a powerful woman.



The heraldic shields of the important families associated with her are displayed.

In stark contrast to the top tiers, the cadaver space is small and private, the memento mori shows a corpse – its purpose to shock the onlooker to reflect on their accomplishments for good in life before their eventual death. [These became popular in France during the Black Death in the 14th century but were usually associated with men).

The funeral shroud is pulled aside to reveal the semi-naked corpse, still with a trace of red paint on its lips, the dead eyes looking up at biblical scenes with intercessory saints. (These are reproduced in a painting on the Chaucer tomb).

Alice's memento mori is notable as is the only alabaster memento mori in existence and the only intact full length female cadaver.

The tomb was probably commissioned in Alyce's lifetime and may have been carved in London between 1470 and 1475. It is acknowledged as the most spectacular example in the country of the finest quality material and workmanship available at the time.



[Before the coronations of Queen Victoria and Queen Mary (consort of George V), Courtiers were sent to identify where ladies wore the Garter].