

The Remarkable Life of Alyce Chaucer of Ewelme Manor

The historical significance of our modest village is often overlooked, however, due to a girl named Alyce who was born here in 1404, Ewelme became a key player in the 15th century. This was highlighted in the Festival held this May to illuminate her influence in medieval England, her legacy to the village, and to commemorate the 550th anniversary of her death in 1475.

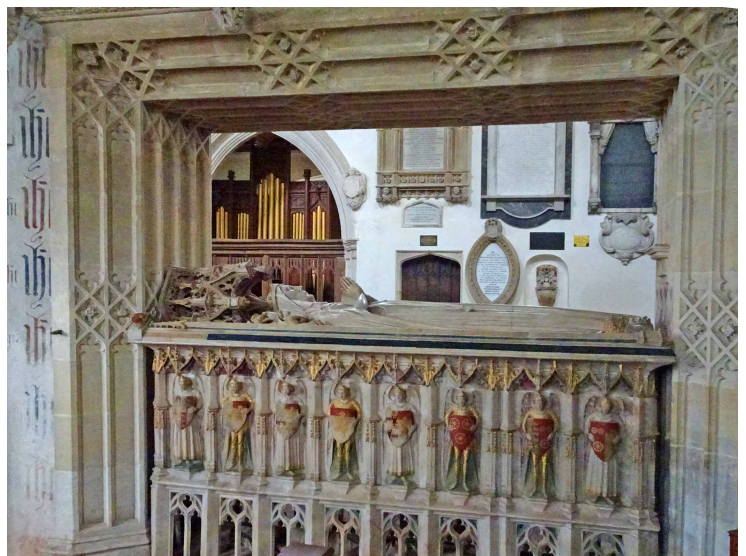


Alyce was the granddaughter of the famous poet Geoffrey Chaucer, being the only child of a knight and politician Thomas Chaucer, and his wife Matilda. Although born a commoner, Alyce advanced to high status through strategic marriages, making her one of the most formidable and wealthy medieval women of the 15th century. Her political influence in the English Court elevated her to being the second lady in importance next to the queen. At her death aged 71, her acquired wealth made her the richest.

In 1414 when Alyce was 10 years old, her parents married her to widower Sir John Phelip, a prominent courtier and friend of King Henry V, but he died a year later. At 18 she rose up the social scale marrying widower Thomas Montagu, Earl of Salisbury, the commander of the English army. He was killed in 1428. In 1430 the wealthy widow married the bachelor soldier William de la Pole, Earl of Suffolk.

After inheriting Ewelme in 1436, Alyce and her husband ploughed their wealth into the village. They made the Manor into a grand moated house reflecting their status. Their lasting legacy, which we see today in a modified form, was with the rebuilding and extending of the church by adding a Chantry chapel in which thirteen almsmen prayed three times daily for their benefactors. (Alyce's splendid triple decker alabaster tomb with its effigy, lies between the altar and the chapel, and is the pre-eminent feature of our church).

The almsmen lived in the purpose-built Cloisters - still housing Almspeople. A grammar school was added by 1450 to prepare promising boys from extensive estates for entry to Oxford. The school still functions to educate children.



Earl William became hugely influential in the service of the ineffectual young king Henry VI, and Alyce became a prominent lady in the English Court. In recognition of her status, she was made a Lady of the Garter in her own right in 1432 - a rare honour for a woman. Alyce's garter can be clearly seen on the left arm of her effigy. Before the coronations of Queen Victoria and Queen Mary (consort of George V), Courtiers were sent to Ewelme to identify where ladies wore the garter.

In 1444 Henry VI insisted on marrying a French princess and instructed William to negotiate for the hand of Margaret of Anjou. The devious French king forced William to cede almost all the territories the English had conquered during the 100 Year War, including the strategically important Maine and Anjou. William acted as proxy for the King at the wedding ceremony, and Alyce accompanied the teenage Queen to England the following year. Alyce became a Duchess in 1448 when their service was rewarded with the Dukedom of Suffolk. William's rise in political power caused his unpopularity with both the nobility and common people, and he was particularly blamed for the loss of the French territories. In 1450 his opposers pounced, and he faced charges of treason, corruption and maladministration. Henry VI exiled him for 5 years but when sailing from the Dover coast he was captured by his enemies and beheaded on May 2nd, 1450.

Alyce's only son John (2nd Duke) was 8 yrs old, and he and Alyce retreated to the relative security of Ewelme. John's betrothal to the high-born Lady Margaret Beaufort was annulled by Henry VI in 1453 whereupon Alyce shrewdly changed her affiliations from the doomed Lancastrian king to the rising House of York by marrying John to the Duke of York's daughter Elizabeth Plantagenet. He therefore became the brother-in-law to two kings, Edward IV and Richard III, and Alyce's 11 grandchildren were born with Royal blood. Her oldest grandson John, Earl of Lincoln, was briefly heir to the throne of Richard III. However, this royal connection proved the downfall of the de la Pole's when Alyce's grandsons rebelled against the new Tudor king Henry VII and were systematically eliminated. The de la Pole possessions were seized by the Crown in 1503, and Ewelme became a favourite hunting manor for Henry VIII, then bequeathed to his daughter Elizabeth I. Ewelme was finally sold out of royal ownership by the Stuarts, and its turbulent past gave way to our quiet English backwater once again.

