

ALYCE CHAUCER OF EWELME (1404-1475)

Mistress Chaucer, Lady Phelip, Countess of Salisbury and Countess, Marchioness and Duchess of Suffolk

Alyce Chaucer, was born in Ewelme in 1404, the only child of Thomas Chaucer and Maud Burghersh and the granddaughter of the courtier and poet Geoffrey Chaucer. She was well educated and in adulthood possessed a large library of books. Although born a commoner, Alyce advanced herself to high status through strategic marriages, making her one of the most formidable 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!

Strategic marriages

In 1414 when Alyce was 10 yrs old, her parents arranged a marriage to widower Sir John Phelip, a prominent courtier to Henry V. However, she was widowed a year later. When she was 18, she rose up the social scale marrying widower Thomas Montagu, Earl of Salisbury who was killed in 1428. In her mid-twenties, in 1430 or early 1431 Alyce married bachelor William de la Pole, Earl of Suffolk. Alyce was shrewd woman, especially when it came to securing her own interests. As a rich widow she was a prize catch, and in a masterstroke of negotiation she drew up her own marriage contract, ensuring that William had no control over her extensive lands from her previous husbands and her future inheritance from her wealthy parents. She also retained financial authority, preventing William from using her wealth without her consent—an unusual arrangement in an era when women's property typically became their husbands upon marriage!

Endowments in Ewelme and motherhood

After her mother's death in 1436 Alyce inherited Ewelme, and she and William decided to endow a foundation of Almshouse, Chantry and School and shape Ewelme Manor into a grand house reflecting their station. As her husband gained influence in the service of the mentally fragile young king Henry VI, Alyce joined William on the climb up the greasy pole of power in the English Court. In recognition of her status, Alyce was made a Lady of the Garter in her own right on 1st May 1432—a rare honour for a woman.

Alyce had to wait until she was 38 yrs old and after 12 years of marriage, before she produced their son and heir John in 1442. John was raised in Ewelme and Alyce ensured he had a good education and taught skills befitting a knight. Advancement by an ambitious marriage was also planned.

Downfall of William

William's role in the negotiations in the 1444 Treaty of Tours for the marriage of Margaret of Anjou to Henry VI, brought honours from the grateful king, but growing hostility from the nobility who resented the de la Pole's common origins, material greed and growing influence over the king and his young queen. In early 1450 William was impeached by the Commons, and Alyce originally faced the same 18 Articles on charges of treason, corruption, extortion and bribery! After William was banished and murdered on 2nd May 1450 Alyce quickly sought the protection of the king, and as William was not attainted for treason Henry allowed her 8-yr old son now 2nd Duke John to inherit his father's possessions and titles with Alyce as his guardian. Alyce retrieved William's body to be buried at

Charterhouse in Hull in accordance with his Will. She retreated with her son to the relative security of her Manor at Ewelme.

Danger from the Jack Cade rebellion

Even after her husband's murder Alyce was in great personal danger from the implacable mob. In June 1430 a rebellion occurred when disaffected men from Kent, led by rabble-rouser Jack Cade, marched on London to present their grievances to the king. They named his prominent advisors considered guilty of corruption, maladministration and abuse of power, (specifically those close to Duke William). The surrender of territories in France was still an open sore and blamed on William. Alyce was included - as '*a commoner and above her station*' and having a malign influence over the king and queen. They demanded she face a charge of treason! (Although women could not be charged with treason). Henry VI refused to see the mob. The rebels were hunted down and the leaders hanged. Discontent over his advisors continued to haunt the king. In November 1450 Parliament met and demanded Henry banish several men and one woman from his presence - for being a bad influence on him! That woman could only be Alyce!

Survival and a New Alliance

Alyce retired from political life and focused on her son's upbringing and the management of her widely scattered estates and foundation of the Almshouse and Grammar school. When her son Duke John's marriage to Lady Margaret Beaufort was annulled by the king in 1453, Alyce changed her affiliation from the House of Lancaster to the rising House of York. She arranged John's marriage to Elizabeth Plantagenet, daughter of Richard, Duke of York. This Royal Duke was the widely suspected mastermind of her husband's assassination. (It is alleged Duke John also suspected his father-in-law). However, as Elizabeth was the sister of the future Edward IV and Richard III this shrewd move bonded the de la Poles to the Yorkist regime. In 1471/1472 the victorious new king Edward IV entrusted Alyce with the wardship of her former friend, the captured Lancastrian ex-queen Margaret of Anjou, at Wallingford Castle.

Later years and enduring legacy

Alyce died in 1475 at the venerable age of 71, her years of ambitious planning had borne fruit. Her decision to ally with the victorious House of York meant her son was brother-in-law to two kings, and her grandchildren of Royal blood from her daughter-in-law. Mercifully, Alyce was dead when her dynasty began to fall apart in 1485, after Henry Tudor's victory at Bosworth overthrew the House of York. Eventually three of Alyce's grandsons unsuccessfully rebelled against the new enabling Henry VI to seize Ewelme in 1503. Remarkably, the Tudor's allowed the Suffolk Legacy of Chantry, Almshouse and School, established by Alyce and William in 1437 to remain, then survive the Reformation and continue to this day.

Alyce could be proud of being a medieval woman courageously surviving in a man's world. Defying her enemies, she skilfully advanced her family and herself - becoming '*The Serene Princess*' - Duchess of Suffolk. As a character Alyce was ambitious, probably imperious and considered acquisitive, (in 1475 she was reputedly wealthier than the King!) Allegedly, an old chronicler observed wryly - '*...she could not bid farewell to all her greatness without regret.*'