

## Life of the Ewelme Almsman

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In normal times visitors arrive to admire the picturesque Cloisters, set in the peaceful surroundings enjoyed by those who live there. However, the life of the original almsmen in the 15<sup>th</sup> century was far different to the comfortable lifestyle of the present-day residents.

In medieval times Chantry foundations were established by those rich enough to endow them. They believed the intercessory prayers of the pious poor ensured their eternal souls did not linger long in Purgatory but sped swiftly to Heaven. In 1436 Alice, then Countess of Suffolk, and her husband Earl William de la Pole, inherited Ewelme from her mother Matilda Chaucer, and they planned to use their wealth to form such a foundation here. In 1437 a licence was obtained from King Henry VI to remodel and extend the church, add a Chantry Chapel, and build an accompanying Hospital (Almshouse) to be called God's House, for 13 poor, but devout men. (The school was added by 1454 to educate promising boys intended for Oxford University). Thus, the young and needy old of the Suffolk's estates, and more importantly, the eternal souls of the founders, were neatly catered for.

The money to finance the running of the foundation would come from three de la Pole manors. Two priests were appointed, one the Master of the Almshouse and a Grammar Master. Both were to receive £10 a year. Of the 13 poor men admitted, one, without 'fraude or gyle', was chosen to be the Minister. He was to report to the Master on the misbehaviours of the other 12, ring the bell to prayers, and act as doorkeeper. For this he received 16 pence a week, whereas the remaining 12 men had 14 pence, paid from the marble top of Alice's parents' tomb in the chapel. This was double the stipend of almsmen elsewhere (approximately the wage of an agricultural labourer), and any savings remaining at death had to swell the communal chest. Their accommodation comprised of two rooms, both with a hearth (a wooden ladder connected the upper floor), communal lavatories and a mortuary. They were provided with free candles and firewood, plus clothing of a tabard, a cloak with a red cross on the breast and a hood. For those generous provisions Alice expected her money's worth. Earl William's great-grandfather, a wealthy Hull merchant, had founded a Carthusian monastery and Hospital at Charterhouse in Hull. The Carthusian monks were a poor and meditative Order, which Alice wished to replicate in Ewelme, but by appointing secular paragons of virtue and piety. Hence the rules regarding the choosing of the almsmen were strict. Apart from poverty, the list stipulated they were to be clean and gracious of living, meek in spirit, not quarrelsome nor brawlers or tavern-haunters. No lepers, madmen, no infectious diseases - or the incontinent! No women, alcohol, or liaising with village riff raff, and no leaving the Cloisters for more than an hour without the Master's approval. The Master enforced the restrictions by levying fines for disobedience and lateness for services. (The widowed Alice visited in July 1458, and was so displeased at what she found, she promptly halved the wages)! To maintain discipline and order the 58 Statutes detailing the daily running and duties of the foundation were read aloud every quarter, with other mundane rules and regulations monthly.

The almsmen got up some time before 6.am, earlier than in other foundations, to kneel by their beds and say 3 Pater Nosters (Our Fathers), 3 Aves (Hail Mary's) and a Creed. The bell summoned them to climb the steep stairs, turning right to enter St Johns Chapel (by a door in the south wall, now disused). This was the first of their five visits to the chapel. With brief breaks for breakfast and dinner the relentless daily routine of Divine Services from 6.0 am to 6.0 pm consisted of Matins, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, Nones, Vespers and Compline. For those without a spiritual vocation and understanding of Latin, it must have been a life of intolerable boredom, as only prayers for the de la Pole family and the King were said in English. One source claims daily prayers amounted to 177 Aves, 39 Pater Nosters, and 7 Creeds! Feast Days demanded more! In her final years Alice moved permanently to the Manor in Ewelme to live with the family of her son John, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Duke. This was handy to keep a close eye on the running of her foundation, and when she died in May 1475 aged 71,

she was probably confident that her Charity had smoothed her path to Heaven. The almsmen were probably relieved her stern scrutiny was gone!

The Manor of Ewelme was appropriated by the Tudors after 1513, and surprisingly Henry VIII did not dissolve the foundation in the Reformation and seize its considerable assets but let God's House continue to function. The devotional practices necessarily changed with the abolition of the Roman Catholic Mass and prohibition of prayers for the dead. In 1617 King James I re-assigned the roles of the two Masters to Oxford University, for the Regius Professors of Medicine and Divinity. Over time this meant both Masters were largely absent. The situation at God's House gradually deteriorated, and although still benefitting from the endowment, it no longer met the original statute's requirements. Records are scant, but through the 18<sup>th</sup> century probably a reduced regime of twice daily prayer continued under the Minister, but by 1818 only half a dozen almsmen lived at the Cloisters, the others having found employment outside and sublet their homes to families! Daily prayers had ceased, although almsmen continued to receive a stipend, now 2 shillings a week. A new Master of the Almshouses, Dr Kidd, did leave Oxford in 1822 and worked to reinstate the Chantry chapel. The school had not been used in living memory when a new Rector Dr Burton was appointed in 1828. He restored the vandalised school buildings and established an elementary school for the education of village children.



**Almsmen attending the service in St John's Chapel**

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century the administration of God's House was tightened up. Married couples were officially permitted, however, a widow had to leave unless she was able to marry the incoming almsman! (In 1848, 61-year-old Sarah Green was the first woman to be recorded as dying in the Cloisters). The regulated devotional aspect had decreased, but shelter was available for the village elderly, a situation far preferable to entering the dreaded Wallingford Union Workhouse. Later, Rector Simcox (1889-1901) prompted the appointment of a nurse, and for distinctive gowns to be worn by the almsmen. The first woman to be appointed an almswoman in her own right was Mrs Minnie Harris, in 1976, and the last stipend paid from the Chaucer tomb top was to Mr Chris Robinson in 1986.