

The History of Reading Society



The object of the Society is to cultivate interest in and to encourage research into the history of the town of Reading

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Dear Friends,

We were so glad that, in an uncertain summer, we had two fine evenings for our summer walkabouts.

Mr. Walker very kindly conducted two groups round the cemetery - a second tour being necessary because over seventy people turned up for the first one, and it wasn't always possible to see the features he was pointing out because of the press of people.

The walk around Ewelme church and almshouse was also well attended and most interesting. I am pleased to include an article about the Suffolk family who built the church.

The autumn/winter programme is enclosed, and we look forward to hearing Mr. Walker's "Personal View of Reading" in March. The first meeting of the new session is on Thursday, September 17, at 7.30.

Programmes do go to all the public libraries in Reading, but there's nothing like a personal recommendation to bring folk along - so come yourself and bring a friend.

If transport is a problem, ring one of the committee members in good time before the meeting and probably something can be arranged.

With every good wish

Elspet Naish

August 1998

Ewelme and The Dukes of Suffolk.

In England, the 1400's were a troubled time politically. The century started with the deposition and murder of Richard II by his cousin, who became Henry IV.

Henry's successor, Henry V, was an able soldier who revived the English claim to the French throne, invaded France, won a battle at Agincourt, got the (mad) French king, Charles VI, to declare him his heir, but then died, only a year later, in 1422 at the age of 35. Henry had married the mad Charles' daughter and left as heir their eight month old son, Henry VI, who in due course was crowned King of England AND King of France. At first his uncles were regents, but when he declared himself of age in 1437, it soon became obvious that he had none of his father's ability, or love of war.

His close advisors came to be people of his Household, chief among whom was William de la Pole, third Earl of Suffolk.

The de la Pole family had originally been prosperous merchants in Hull. Their wealth enabled them to lend money to various kings, whose gratitude elevated the head of the family to the Earldom of Suffolk. They had made several advantageous marriages and with the marriage of the first earl to Katharine, the heiress of Wingfield in Suffolk, Wingfield became their principal home.

The third earl was loaded with honours by Henry VI. He became Steward and then Chamberlain. He became a marquis and then a duke - a title usually reserved for members of the royal family. Of course Suffolk was also a great patron, and took care to get many of his friends and supporters into positions of power. This Suffolk faction aroused the hostility of other great nobles, many of whom disliked the king's desire to end the war with France. Another source of Suffolk's unpopularity was that, thanks to the war with France, which dragged on unsuccessfully, and to Henry's building schemes, notably at Eton and Cambridge, by 1450 the crown was virtually bankrupt. This, of course, was not Suffolk's fault but as the king's chief minister the blame fell on him. He was charged by Parliament with treason, as having mismanaged foreign policy and having used crown money to enrich himself.

Henry - to save Suffolk - exiled him in 1450 for five years, but the ship taking him abroad was intercepted in the Channel and he was be-headed "on behalf of the community of the realm" by the crew of the "Nicholas of the Tower".

A contemporary wrote that "a seaman took a rusty sword and smote off his head with half a dozen strokes and, taking away his gown of russet and his gown of velvet with metal rings, threw his body on to the sands of Dover".

Suffolk left a 46 year old widow, Alice (1404-1475), who survived him by 25 years. The Duchess was a granddaughter of the poet Chaucer, whose only son Thomas had married Maud, the Burghersh heiress, whose estates were at Ewelme. Alice was born and brought up at Ewelme and had a great affection for it. She was first betrothed to Sir John Pheilip, but he died before she was of marriageable age. She then married the Earl of Salisbury who died when she was 24. At 26, she married William de la Pole, at that time Earl of Suffolk. During her long widowhood she used her great fortune carefully and wisely. She lived at Wingfield Castle in Suffolk, in London, but most often in her great house at Ewelme (now disappeared - alas!)

She and her husband founded both a school and an almshouse in the village. Both are early examples of brickwork and the school must be one of the longest continuously occupied in the country. The original regulations for the almshouse survive and it is still inhabited by retired people with Ewelme connections.

Ewelme church is very well worth visiting and has many interesting features. It was financed by the Duke and Duchess and was built between the time of their marriage in 1430 and the Duke's death. In the church there are the tombs of Thomas Chaucer and Maud Burghersh and also the undamaged, specially magnificent tomb of Duchess Alice herself. She is shown in her beautiful mediaeval dress, wearing her coronet as a duchess and on her left arm the Order of the Garter, which she had been given permission to wear " at the ensuing feast of St. George in 1432". It is said that when Queen Victoria wanted to know how a lady DID wear the Garter she took Alice as a precedent.

Alice's son John, the second Duke, was born at Ewelme in 1442, and he married Princess Elizabeth (Plantagenet), sister of Edward IV and Richard III. It was to their son John that Richard left the crown in his will, made before Bosworth. However John was killed at the battle of Stoke in 1487, and of his two brothers the elder was executed by Henry VIII in 1513 and the other died abroad in 1525.

Henry VIII used the now extinct Suffolk title for his friend Charles Brandon, who in 1515 married Henry's sister Mary, the widow of Louis XII of France. They were the grand parents of Lady Jane Grey, the "Nine Days Queen".

The Warren Road at Caversham.



There is a mound in a field in Leicestershire which it is suggested should be preserved as a national monument; English Heritage has identified it as a rabbit Warren constructed probably in the 1280's in what was then Leicester forest,

owned by the Earls of Leicester. It has survived because the land has been used only for grazing and has never been ploughed up.

Purpose-built warrens contained breeding chambers known as pillow mounds to make catching the animals easier. Nesting places were made of stone slabs or cut into the sub-soil, with sloping underground drainage channels. Blaby District council supports English Heritage's application for registration as ancient monument status.

English Heritage says that profits from a well-managed warren could be considerable, and by the 16th and 17th centuries they were a common feature on most manors and estates before beef and mutton became more widely available in the 19th century. Rabbits, of course, were kept for food for the various estates and manors; dovecotes, fishponds and deer parks served the same purpose.

Warren Road was so named because of a rabbit warren which was once here. It was known as an ancient warren as early as 1254/55, and in 1479 a certain James Hide was named as the holder of the office of "Keeper of the Warren". Later still, in 1586, the warren received a mention in Chancery proceedings.

This warren belonged to Caversham Old Rectory which was a small estate which included two farms, Toots Farm and Lower Farm, as well as the warren. The Rectory originated in early Norman days, when the local priest needed farmland as well as the tithe for his support. Over the centuries the lands were sold off piece by piece, and the house itself was pulled down in 1933; now the garden with its gazebo forms one of Reading's parks known as Caversham Court.

Norman Wicks