

The Lords of the Secular Hook Norton Manor

The Wars of the Roses, 1414-1553

The Chaucers and the Dukes of Suffolk

The poet Geoffrey Chaucer had served in the royal households of Edward III, Richard II and Henry IV. His sister-in-law, Katherine Swynford, was mistress, then wife, to John of Gaunt – father of Henry Bolingbroke, who deposed Richard II in 1399 to become Henry IV. So his son Thomas Chaucer started life with excellent connections; he served John of Gaunt and became esquire to Henry's queen, Joan. She granted him the manors of Woodstock, Hanborough, Wootton and Stonesfield (all of which had been held by Philip de la Vache). He was Chief Butler of England, Speaker of the House of Commons, Sheriff of Oxford and Berkshire, and Constable of the Castle of Wallingford. He also served Henry V and Henry VI. His wife Mathilda, daughter of Sir John Burghersh, brought him the manor of Ewelme near Wallingford, evidently a favourite residence: he chose to be buried there. By then his only child, Alice, was the wife of the Earl of Suffolk.

Alice, born in 1404, had been engaged in childhood to Sir John Phelip but was still under 12 when he died. The Hundred Years War dragged on and her second husband, Thomas Montacute, Earl of Salisbury, was killed at Orleans in 1428: they had no children. Salisbury's comrade in arms, William de la Pole, Earl of Suffolk, came from an East Anglian merchant family that had risen during the reign of Edward III. His father met his death (from dysentery) at the siege of Harfleur in 1415; his brother Michael died at Agincourt in the same year, and William, barely 19, succeeded to the earldom. In 1430 William applied for royal consent to marry Alice.

The couple prospered in royal service. Suffolk served in the French campaigns of Henry V and VI, and in 1428 had become commander-in-chief of the English army in France. In the 1430s he was a major influence in the royal administration, and in 1443 became the leading minister in Henry VI's weak government. However, he was blamed for military failures in France and the loss of

territory there, as well as hardships at home. The supporters of Jack Cade's rebellion in 1450 saw him as a "false traitor" and requested the King to

avoyd from hym all the fals progeny and affynyte of the Dewke of Suffolke, the
which ben openly knowne, and that they be p[u]nyshyd afftar law of lond.¹

Inevitably Suffolk plays a key role in Shakespeare's cycle of plays on the Wars of the Roses, where he is portrayed as a villain:

Ay, kennel, puddle, sink, whose filth and dirt
Troubles the silver spring where England drinks,
Now will I dam up this thy yawning mouth
For swallowing the treasure of the realm.²

What crime had Suffolk committed? Shakespeare's portrait is damning, but not necessarily the whole story. Suffolk *had* negotiated a truce with France and the contingent marriage of Henry VI and Margaret of Anjou. He acted as the king's proxy at the wedding in France, and there were rumours that he was the queen's lover. He was made Duke of Suffolk in 1448, but the peace with France did not hold and before long only Calais remained English. Henry VI's ineffectual reign fostered discontent and abuse of power, and Suffolk was seen as ambitious and unscrupulous. When he was impeached for high treason, the king, hoping to save his life, banished him but Suffolk's ship was intercepted, he was thrown into a longboat and beheaded. Who his murderers were is not clear.

What did the unfortunate Suffolk do for Hook Norton, where Alice had inherited lands belonging to the secular manor? Even before he and Alice officially received the lordship of the manor in 1438, he had been granted the right to hold a market and two fairs here. The market failed. The improvements to the parish church in mid-century, including the building of the tower, may have owed something to the duke and his wife.³

¹ *Historical Memoranda of John Stowe: On Cade's rebellion* (1450). Originally published by Camden Society, London, 1880. Online: www.british-history.ac.uk

² William Shakespeare, *Henry VI, Part 2*, Act 4, Scene 1.

³ Ralph Mann, "The Cherry Fair", in *Tales of Hook Norton* (HNLHG, 2019), pp. 22-24, reprinted as "Passages in Village Life, 1640-18202, in the *Reformation, Revolution and Reaction* section.

After William's murder, Alice Chaucer proved herself undaunted. She lent the king 3,500 marks for sending an army to Gascony. Parliament petitioned for her banishment, but the queen refused to sanction it. Alice saved William de la Pole's possessions and title for her young son; John was first married to a child heiress, Margaret Beaufort, but the marriage was dissolved on the grounds of consanguinity (both of them traced their lineage back to John of Gaunt). When William de la Pole was killed, King Henry VI bestowed Margaret on his own half-brother. Alice changed sides and her son John was married to Elizabeth, the sister of the future Yorkist king Edward IV. Margaret, at 13, became the mother of a boy who became the eventual victor in the Wars of the Roses, Henry VII.

Alice died in 1475 and her tomb in St John's Chapel at Ewelme shows her dressed as a vowess: beneath the worldly edifice is another, less visible, image of her body decaying in death. A memento of the doom that awaited all.



Alice Chaucer's Tomb
Photograph: ©Gill Geering

Deadly Quarrels

Alice's astuteness and royal connections did little to alleviate her son John's financial difficulties. He had difficulty maintaining the lifestyle expected of a duke. His father's attainder led to the loss of several important titles (and revenues). His mother's

death, when the new duke could claim the final third of the income from their manors, also meant that the dower she had received for her two earlier marriages reverted to her former husbands' families. Other income from her possessions was detained for a while by her executors. Having missed out on a potentially advantageous marriage when Henry VI passed Margaret Beaufort to his half-brother, Edmund Tudor, in 1453, John was married off to Elizabeth, the Duke of York's sister. Her marriage portion was modest, but when Henry was deposed, John, Duke of Suffolk, was the new king's brother-in-law. At the coronation of Edward IV, the duke participated as steward of England. Yet he never enjoyed the wealth or power of his parents. In turbulent times, he was loyal to Edward IV, then Richard III, though he managed to avoid the fateful battle of Bosworth Field. His son John, the Earl of Lincoln, was given important rank and titles by Richard III and was seen as Richard's heir. When Henry VII took the crown, both father and son were reconciled to the new king but within two years Lincoln rashly supported the pretender Lambert Simnel and was killed at the battle of Stoke Field. His property and inheritance were confiscated, impoverishing his father further. John de la Pole, second Duke of Suffolk, died in 1492.

His second son, Edmund, regained land forfeited by his brother, but at a price that so weakened his finances that he had to relinquish the title of duke, and several of the manors surrendered, including Hook Norton, were administered by a royal commission. He had legal difficulties over land in Yorkshire; he was indicted for the murder of Thomas Crue, but the king stopped the trial and Edmund fled without leave to France. Clearly Henry VII regarded him as a potential rival, seeking support from foreign powers, and royal pressure brought him back. A punitive fine of a thousand pounds was imposed. A second flight followed. This time Suffolk was openly planning to claim the English crown. The plot fizzled out; Suffolk negotiated terms and, though he believed his life to be safe, was imprisoned in the tower.

Both Edmund de la Pole and his brother Richard were exempted from a general pardon on Henry VIII's accession to the throne in 1509 and Edmund was executed in 1513. The manor of Hook Norton was granted to a commission to hold for the life of his widow, Margaret. His only child became a nun.

Richard de la Pole remained abroad, claiming his brother's titles and continuing to ferment plots against King Henry. The French king, Louis XII, supported his claim to the English crown. Richard fought with the French against the English on occasion and undertook various missions for Louis's successor, King François I. He was with François on his invasion of Italy in 1498, and died in action at Pavia in 1525 where he was buried.

Richard's activities on the continent can have had little impact on Hook Norton. On the death of Lady Margaret Pole in 1515, the manor of Hook Norton was passed to one of Henry VIII's closest friends, who received the manors and the title of the disgraced dukes of Suffolk

Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk

While John, Earl of Lincoln, fought on Richard III's side at Bosworth Field in 1485, Sir William Brandon had been Henry VII's standard-bearer and died in the battle. He left an infant son, Charles, who grew up in royal circles as his uncle, Sir Thomas Brandon, was one of Henry VII's most trusted advisers. Charles would become a comrade of the future Henry VIII, and, unlike many courtiers, never betrayed his king – even if he did sometimes anger his imperious royal master.

Charles waited upon the king at table, and was one of the king's "spears", a group of young men who shone at the jousts. Henry VIII, some years his junior, was a keen jouster and it seems likely their boisterous friendship was formed then. They jousting together; at court revels Brandon and Henry dressed identically, and Brandon's portrait at the National Gallery shows there was a spurious likeness between the two, at least later in life.



Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk
© National Portrait Gallery

Rewards were showered upon Brandon. In 1514 Henry created him Duke of Suffolk and awarded him the possessions of Edmund, Earl of Suffolk, and of John, Earl of Lincoln, including the manor of Hook Norton.

Brandon played fast and loose with several ladies. He was first betrothed to his young ward, Lady Lisle; flirted with Margaret of Austria, regent of the Netherlands, then contracted a marriage with Lady Anne Brown and abandoned her, even though she was pregnant with his child. Instead he married her aunt, Dame Margaret Mortimer, and sold off much of her land. The marriage was annulled and he married Lady Anne, who gave him two daughters but died in 1510. He found the time to father three illegitimate children. And then there was the king's sister, Mary, widow of Louis XII of France.

Henry might have envied Brandon's marital career. He certainly valued his service. When Louis died, Brandon was sent to bring Mary home. First, though, he married her — without the king's permission. Furious, Henry demanded Mary's jewels and plate, half her dowry, the wardship of Lady Lisle and £24,000. Perhaps it was a love match, but Brandon was already in debt, and the King's revenge crippled him.



Charles Brandon and Mary Tudor
© National Portrait Gallery

He did, however, enrich Hook Norton by the foundation of a charity which was to survive to the present day.

By deed poll, dated 12th May, 13th Henry 8th (1522), Charles Duke of Suffolk, gave and granted to Thomas Newman, and 11 others, a messuage, or cottage, commonly called the Garrett, with a garden adjoining, in Hook Norton, situate in a certain street, called the High-street,... to hold to the said Thomas Newman and others, their heirs, and assigns, of the chief lord of the fee, to the use and

common advantage of all the tenants, within his manor of Hook Norton, then being, or which should thereafter inhabit there, yielding to him and his heirs, yearly, 5s, by two payments, at Easter and Michaelmas, with power of distress in case the same should be in arrears.⁴

When Mary died, Brandon's relationship with the king began to falter. The king required Brandon to settle their affairs. Even after protracted negotiations, Brandon owed nearly £7,000. As he was unable to meet the debt, an exchange of lands was forced upon him. Suffolk had to give up his estates in Oxfordshire and Berkshire and various titles. He tried to claim expenses, saying that he had spent £1,500 on a hunting lodge at Hook Norton. Henry VIII, who had been unimpressed at the hunting there, was unyielding.

Brandon, though, remained loyal. He continued to do the king good service in the field, dealing effectively with an uprising in Lincolnshire, and the king insisted he make the northern county his base. He died in 1545, at about the age of 60, and was buried in St George's Chapel at Windsor, a sign of genuine royal favour. His two sons died young, of the "sweating sickness". Frances, Brandon's daughter by Mary, married Lord Grey who became Duke of Suffolk. After the death of King Edward VI, Brandon's granddaughter, Lady Jane Grey, was queen for a few days but was executed by order of Henry VIII's daughter, Mary.

Lady Jane's father-in-law was John Dudley, Earl of Warwick, who had been granted the manor and park of Hook Norton in spring 1551. By the autumn he had sold it to King Edward VI, perhaps in part exchange for the title of Duke of Northumberland. A man of great influence and power, Dudley claimed he was obeying the radical protestant Edward's wish to exclude his catholic half-sister Mary from the succession. Mary prevailed. Dudley was executed.

Edward VI granted the manor of Hook Norton to John Croker, originally from Faringdon, who was Oseney Abbey's bailiff here. Before the dissolution of the

⁴ *Reports of the Commissioners for Enquiring Concerning Charities In The Hundreds Of Banbury & Bloxham [&c.] J D Rusher's Edition, Banbury, 1826. pp 111-113: [Internet Archive: Digital Library].* By 1928 the charity's capital was £176 15s. 4d, with a yearly income of £4 8s. 4d, and was administered by the Heath Allotment Trust under the supervision of the Parish Council, which had taken over several charities including the Suffolk Charity. See "Looking after the Poor" in the *Health, Education and Welfare* section of this website.

abbey, Croker had leased the abbey's manor, lands and rights in Hooky and was able to unite the ecclesiastical and secular manors.

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For later secular Lords of the Manor, see "Avoiding a Squire: the Crokers and their Foes, 1530-1670" and "The Duke of Buccleuch and Enclosure in Hook Norton", in the *Reformation, Revolution and Reaction* section of this website.

The Ecclesiastical Manor of Hook Norton is covered by the articles on "Oseney Abbey" in this section.