

A Long Life – Alice Countess of Warwick

Introduction for teachers and readers

The imagined voice of a noblewoman is used to tell this story. Alice the Countess of Warwick was born in Flamstead in 1281 and is thought to have died there too, around 40 years later. Alice was connected to the royal and noble lives of late 13th and early 14th century England. Since she was a noblewoman, Alice's life, and those of her family, are well documented and have been used in the telling of this tale.

This written version matches the long audio recording with the same title.

Alice: a long life, well lived!

Good Dames and Squires, pray sit with me as I spin you the tale of my life. By God's good grace I have walked on his glorious creation for nigh on 40 years, so my yarn is long! Here, warm yourself by my fire and I shall begin. My name is Alice, Countess of Warwick.

On April 26th, in the year of our Lord 1281, I was born in this Village to Mary and Ralph de Tony (some say Toni, Todeni, Tosney or Toeni), Lord of the Manor. We have French lineage and consider ourselves to be Anglo Norman. My family descended from the Dukes of Normandy and my own great, great, great-grandfather carried William the Conqueror's standard into battle at Hastings. For his bravery and loyalty to King Willam, Raoul II (sometimes Ralph or Roger) was awarded the Manor here and another, at Wrethamthorpe in Norfolk. Over the years my family have

acquired much land and property; we have wealth and are favoured at Court. My great, great-grandfather was the first to be born on English soil and, since then, we have all been born here in Flamstead, including me and my elder brother Robert. My father died when I was 11 and all his lands and manors in Essex, Worcestershire, Wiltshire, Hertfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Norfolk and the Welsh Marches, were passed to Robert. I was then under my brother's care and protection until I came of age, at 15.

When I was 12, I was matched with Thomas, the son of Sir William of Leybourne, and we were betrothed and promised in marriage. It was a good match; Robert and his wife Maud chose well for me, and I remained happily married from the age of 16 until Thomas was called to glory at God's side when I was 23. I was content for my elders to arrange my marriage because it's imperative that we marry for position and power and to keep the bloodlines strong.

My duty as a wife was to support my husband, understand his business, enhance his standing, and provide him with healthy children, preferably sons.

As I've just said, at 23 I was made a widow and had to set my mind to running my late husband's affairs. By this time I had an infant daughter, Juliana, and I concentrated on making sure that what had been left to me thrived and was successful. I was fortunate that I had received learning from my mother and had paid attention to Thomas's way of business, but it was still hard to keep on top of everything. So I surrounded myself with trusted agents to help me.

The year of our Lord 1309 was a year of great joy and deep sadness. In this year, I lost my dear brother Robert to ague, which you might call malaria. Because he had no child of his own, I inherited all his land and property. I charged Maud, his wife, my beloved sister-in-law, with running the de Tony's affairs in Hertfordshire, and so she stayed on in Flamstead at the Manor House to oversee my interests. She did well and I am ever grateful to her.

In February 1309 also, after a short courtship, I married Guy de Beauchamp, 2nd Earl of Warwick. This was, indeed, an advantageous marriage as he was an extremely wealthy peer, second only to the Earl of Lancaster. He was knighted by King Edward I and was a seasoned

soldier and military commander. Guy was an extremely learned man, having received a thorough education from the Church when he was a boy. His opinion was much sought after by his contemporaries and he had a library of over 40 books. He was at King Edward I's side when he died and carried the ceremonial swords at the coronation of King Edward II.

Sadly, Guy and Edward II did not see eye to eye, to put it mildly. On many occasions Guy would rage violently at Edward's decisions, which caused the King to mock him, naming him the "Mad Dog of Arden", and saying that he frothed at the mouth like a rabid hound. Guy could be ruthless and felt that the new king was a mere shadow of his father, so he set about marshalling sympathetic earls and clergy to help him to limit the king's power. He and his supporters felt that the king's favourite, Piers Gaveston, was an unhealthy influence on Edward, so they set about capturing and imprisoning him at Warwick Castle for the good of the country. Guy believed that this 'devil in the heart of England' should stand trial for his crimes. With the other barons he tried him and condemned him to death. He was executed. When Guy refused to have 'that mongrel's body' on his land, his corpse was taken to Oxford to rest at the Dominican Friary. May God have mercy on his soul!

This act permanently damaged the relationship between Edward and Guy; from 1312 until Guy's death in 1315 there was much political jousting between them. While loathing and detesting the very sight of each other, at times they also needed each other's support. In the end Guy took over the running of England's political affairs because King Edward was unable to lead his people wisely. In a strange twist of fate, soon after Guy's death, Edward had Gaveston's foul body removed from Oxford and reburied at Kings Langley, a village on the very edges of our land here in Hertfordshire. This alone shows what a weak, feeble-minded creature Edward was and how he wished to thumb the royal nose at our family.

Guy died in highly mysterious circumstances at Warwick Castle. He had withdrawn from government in July on account of ill health and a month later he was dead. At the time rumours swirled that the King had ordered his spies to have Guy poisoned, but I know better than to make my feelings known on that score! It even came to my ears, via various sources, that I was suspected of hastening his death because I was supposedly an overly ambitious, avaricious woman with my eye to the main chance. I assure you this was not the case; it was just an attempt to sully my name and undermine the family's influence.

Sadly, Guy never lived to see his two sons and five daughters: Thomas, John, Elizabeth, Maud, Isabella, Emma and Lucia, reach maturity. Just as I did before, I ran my late husband's affairs and estates successfully and profitably until our son Thomas was of age. By the time Guy died we had amassed a great fortune and our estates were spread over nineteen English counties, with land in Scotland and Wales as well.

The sheer responsibility of running such a vast domain was mentally and physically challenging. I was also much worn down by all the political manoeuvring of the years before Guy's death. Indeed, the shock of his death caused me a great measure of pain, but by my good fortune, and God's will, William la Zouche de Mortimer came to my aid and a year after Guy's death, we married. I bore two more children to him, Alan and Joyce, and we live in blissful contentment.

From time to time my mind wanders back to happier, more carefree times in Flamstead. I long to be back then and to go to pray at the small stone-built church, dedicated to St. Leonard of Noblat. I still remember Christina of Markyate when I pray and hope that I have her courage and fortitude as a strong woman in a man's world. In another link with my childhood, if I or my family are ill, I consult with the great London physician, John of Gaddesden. He was a friend of my dear brother Robert; they studied

together when they were boys. John has written a great treatise on medicine, and treated one of Edward's sons. Both Guy and I trusted him completely with matters relating to our health and wellbeing.

Now here I am, sitting in my spacious, well-appointed manor house, in my beloved Flamstead. I have plenty of servants to do my bidding and I can devote my time to educating my girls and teaching them to sew, dance and have good manners. My husband, William is a fine man, who runs our affairs well and is a good, kindly father to Alan and Joyce, and to the eight children who came before. He has taken a great deal of trouble to educate and school my eldest son Thomas, because we know that he will, at my passing, become the next Earl of Warwick. William wants to be sure that Thomas is wise in his decisions, competent in business and brave in battle, if need arises. William dotes on the girls and is keen that we bring them up to be strong, well-read women who will be great assets to their own future husbands. It is of great comfort to me to sit with my embroidery and look out toward the Church and know that we want for nothing and that all our needs are catered for. Presently, I shall take the children across to the Church to pray and give thanks for all we have and that God has entrusted to us.

I hope I have not tired you too much?
After nearly 40 years of life, three husbands, 10 children and all that goes

on between, there is a great deal to tell. Pray taste a morsel of my gingerbread before you depart. It is made with only the finest white flour, deep red wine, honey and exotic spices. See the pure gold on top? The spices in the bread cost 10 times as much as the gold, but take, eat and may God go with you this day and always!

Fare thee well!