

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Pip Wright, Lady Alice de Bryene

Pip Wright gave a well researched insight into the life of a 14th Century household at the February meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall. He began by saying that history can be annoying as it may offer only a partial view of events. This is true of the subject for his talk, Lady Alice de Bryene. She is buried in Acton Church, near Sudbury. A brass covering her grave probably does not look like her as these tended to be generic. It suggests that she was 4'6" tall, the average height for women of the period. He infers from other evidence that Lady Alice was a strong and formidable woman.

Lady Alice lived through the reigns of five kings as she was born about 1360 and died in 1435. She was approximately 75 when she died which was old for the time. These were difficult times as two kings, Richard II, who was eventually murdered and Henry VI, were aged 10 and 9 when they acceded to the throne. During her lifetime there was a serious plague epidemic in 1361, the Peasants' Revolt in 1381, and wars against France, including the Battle of Agincourt in 1415.

Lady Alice was the widow of Sir Guy de Bryene who died in 1386. She had two daughters. Unlike many women in the 14th Century, she did not remarry after being widowed in order to protect the considerable amount of land that she inherited from her husband. She was probably protected by her rich and powerful relatives who included Sir Richard de Waldegrave. She held 3,000 acres in Suffolk, 2,000 acres in Dorset and 1,000 acres in Gloucestershire. Much of the land was rented out to tenants at low rents as they helped with the harvest. Lady Alice lived at Acton Hall which was probably a moated medieval hall house constructed of wood. This would have had one large area where people ate and slept. She possibly had a separate room.

The most useful surviving evidence about Lady Alice and her household comes from a book of accounts which outlines the menus, the household costs and the numbers of people partaking in meals every day. The records are very detailed and were checked every three months to make sure that they balanced. This attention to detail suggests that Lady Alice kept a tight control over her estates. For example, the fish merchant came from Colchester every Saturday and the 1/2d loaf for his horse was recorded! These accounts show that a lot of fish and shell fish were eaten. There were three fast days in the week when no meat was allowed, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday, in addition to Lent and Advent. A range of meat, including beef, mutton, bacon and pigeons, were consumed on other days. Each person was given a loaf of bread at each meal and a slice of black bread made from the sweepings of the granary floor as a trencher or plate. There is no mention of fruit or vegetables but these would have been grown on the estate and may have been used for soups. The one luxury in the accounts appears to be the purchase of spices such as saffron, cloves, ginger, pepper and mace which would have been used to mask the flavour of the deteriorating meat towards the end of winter. The only sweeteners would have been honey and fermented barley (malt). Sugar was used as a medicine.

The number of guests varied. One page of accounts shown listed 48 guests and another 78. Passing travellers would be fed and given lodging for the night. Tradesmen who carried out specialist work, such as the millwright, would be accommodated. The numbers rose during harvest time.

Lady Alice was a religious woman and gave money to good causes. She left land rents and money to pay for a daily chantry mass to be said for her 'for ever' at Acton Church. It was ended by Henry VIII in the 1530s when he dissolved the monasteries. However, perhaps the most remarkable feature of Lady Alice's life is that her household accounts have survived over 600 years.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on Wednesday 27 March when Sarah Doig will give a talk about Daniel Defoe's Tour of the Eastern Counties. New members and visitors are very welcome. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net.

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