

FACT SHEET No 319

JOHN OF GAUNT

by Christine Bowering

Reproduced from her article in the Steward of -

Like many of my age who visit the Minster, my first introduction to John of Gaunt was via the biographical novel Katherine by Anya Seton written in the mid 50's. I found it fascinating and it introduced me to life in the 14th century. I have subsequently read the more historically correct story of John and Katherine written in 2007 by Alison Weir, which has enlightened me further and I thoroughly recommend it.

John was the 3rd son of Edward III and his wife Philippa of Hainault. He was born in Ghent, hence the name Gaunt, in 1340. He is known as a very able military leader, statesman and peacemaker. His early years were spent with his brother, the Black Prince, fighting in the 100 years' war with France (1337 – 1453). As a younger son, the King set about ensuring that he married into a wealthy family and in 1359 John married the beautiful Blanche of Lancaster, who was 14. On the death of his father-in-law, John inherited half of his lands and the title Earl of Lancaster. The following year, on the death of Blanche's sister, he inherited the remaining half and his father gave him the title Duke of Lancaster. He was thus one of the richest men in England eventually owning more than 30 castles and estates (modern figures suggest it would be comparable to 80 billion pounds in today's currency). From 1367 to 1374 John served as commander in the war.

John was in France when Blanche died in child birth. During their nine year marriage Blanche had 7 children of whom only 3 survived beyond infancy, one being Henry of Bolingbroke who eventually became Henry IV, having deposed his cousin Richard II and ascending the throne in 1399.

Following the death of Blanche, John of Gaunt married Constance of Castile in 1371. In 1386 he made an abortive military attempt to enforce a claim to the Crown of Castile and for a time styled himself as King of Castile. He returned to England where he was a moderating influence in the political and constitutional struggles of the minority reign of his nephew Richard III.

Constance died in 1394 and John married his mistress, Katherine Swynford. He obtained the legitimisation of their 4 children giving them the family name Beaufort. The Beauforts played an important part in 15th century politics.

An image of John of Gaunt is one of the heads on the West Side of the Pulpitum. This would indicate that many heads were added later than the original build.