

CHAUCER'S OFFICIAL LIFE

BY

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Introduction

The researches of Sir Harris Nicolas, Dr. Furnivall, Mr. Selby and others have provided us with a considerable mass of detailed information regarding the life and career of Geoffrey Chaucer. Since the publication of Nicolas's biography of the poet prefixed to the Aldine edition of Chaucer's works in 1845, the old traditional biography of conjecture and inference, based often on mere probability or the contents of works erroneously ascribed to Chaucer, has disappeared and in its place has been developed an accurate biography based on facts. In the sixty-five years since Nicolas's time, however, a second tradition--connected in some way with fact, to be sure--has slowly grown up. Writers on Chaucer's life have not been content merely to state the facts revealed in the records, but, in their eagerness to get closer to Chaucer, have drawn many questionable inferences from those facts. Uncertain as to the exact significance of the various appointments which Chaucer held, his engagement in diplomatic missions and his annuities, biographers have thought it necessary to find an explanation for what they suppose to be remarkable favors, and have assumed--cautiously in the case of careful scholars but boldly in that of popular writers--that Chaucer owed every enhancement of his fortune to his "great patron" John of Gaunt. In greater or less degree this conception appears in every biography since Nicolas. Professor Minto in his *Encyclopedia Britannica* article [Footnote: Ed. Scribners 1878, vol. 5, p. 450.] says with regard to the year 1386: "that was an unfortunate year for him; his patron, John of Gaunt, lost his ascendancy at court, and a commission which sat to inquire into the abuses of the preceding administration superseded Chaucer in his two comptrollerships. The return of Lancaster to power in 1389 again brightened his prospects; he was appointed clerk of the King's works," etc.

Similarly, Dr. Ward in his *Life of Chaucer*, after mentioning that Chaucer and John of Gaunt were of approximately the same age, writes: [Footnote: *English Men of Letters*. Harpers. 1879, p. 66.] "Nothing could, accordingly, be more natural than that a more or less intimate relationship should have formed itself between them. This relation, there is reason to believe, afterwards ripened on Chaucer's part into one of distinct political partisanship." With regard to the loss of the comptrollerships Dr. Ward writes: [Footnote: p. 104.] "The new administration (i.e. that of Gloucester and his allies) had as usual demanded its victims--and among their number was Chaucer.... The explanation usually given is that he fell as an adherent of John of Gaunt; perhaps a safer way of putting the matter would be to say that John of Gaunt was no longer in England to protect him." A little further on occurs the suggestion that Chaucer may have been removed because of "his previous official connection with Sir Nicholas Brembre, who, besides being hated in the city, had been accused of seeking to compass the deaths of the Duke and of some of his adherents." [Footnote: It is curious that Dr. Waul did not realize that Chaucer could not possibly have belonged to the parties of John of Gaunt and of Brembre.] Later, in connection with a discussion of Chaucer's probable attitude toward Wiclif, Dr. Ward writes: [Footnote: p. 134.] "Moreover, as has been seen, his long connexion with John of Gaunt is a well-established fact; and it has thence been concluded that Chaucer fully shared the opinions and tendencies represented by his patron."

Dr. Ward's treatment is cautious and careful compared to that of Prof. Henry Morley in his "English Writers." For example, the latter writes: [Footnote: Vol. 5, p. 98.] "Lionel lived till 1368, but we shall find that in and after 1358 Chaucer's relations are with John of Gaunt, and the entries in the household of the Countess Elizabeth might imply no more than that Chaucer, page to John of Gaunt, was detached for service of the Countess upon her coming to London." A few pages further on [Footnote: p. 103.] in the same volume occurs a paragraph on the life of John of Gaunt glossed "Chaucer's Patron." With regard to the grants of a pitcher of wine daily, and the two controllerships, Professor Morley writes: [Footnote: p. 107.] "These successive gifts Chaucer owed to John of Gaunt, who, in this last period of his father's reign, took active part in the administration." And again, [Footnote: p. 109.] "John of Gaunt had administered affairs of government. It was he, therefore, who had so freely used the power of the crown to bestow marks of favour upon Chaucer." [Footnote: p. 110.] "It was his patron the Duke, therefore, who, towards the end of 1376, joined Chaucer with Sir John Burley, in some secret service of which the nature is not known." [Footnote: Studies in Chaucer, vol. I, pp. 81-82.]

Finally, after mentioning Chaucer's being "discharged" from his controllerships, Morley writes: [Footnote: p. 243.] "During all this time Chaucer's patron John of Gaunt was away with an army in Portugal."

Such absolute certainty and boldness of statement as Professor Morley's is scarcely found again in reputable writers on Chaucer. Professor Lounsbury in his life of Chaucer implies rather cautiously that Chaucer lost his places in the Customs because of John of Gaunt's absence from the country, and as the result of an investigation of the customs. Mr. Jusserand in his Literary History of England writes: [Footnote: Eng. trans., 1894, p. 312.] "For having remained faithful to his protectors, the King and John of Gaunt, Chaucer, was looked upon with ill favour by the men then in power, of whom Gloucester was the head, lost his places and fell into want." F. J. Snell in his Age of Chaucer has similar statements, almost as bold as those of Professor Morley. [Footnote: p. 131.] "John of Gaunt was the poet's life-long friend and patron." [Footnote: p. 149.] "Chaucer was now an established favourite of John of Gaunt, through whose influence apparently he was accorded this desirable post" (i. e., the first controllership.) Most remarkable of all: [Footnote: p. 230.] "Outwardly, much depended on the ascendancy of John of Lancaster. If the Duke of Lancaster prospered, Chaucer prospered with him. When the Duke of Gloucester was uppermost, the poet's sky was over cast, and he had hard work to keep himself afloat."

The last quotations which I shall give on this point are from Skeat's life of Chaucer prefixed to the single volume edition of the poet's works in the Oxford series: [Footnote: p. XIII.] "As the duke of Gloucester was ill disposed towards his brother John, it is probable that we can thus account for the fact that, in December of this year, Chaucer was dismissed from both his offices, of Comptroller of Wool and Comptroller of Petty Customs, others being appointed in his place. This sudden and great loss reduced the poet from comparative wealth to poverty; he was compelled to raise money upon his pensions, which were assigned to John Scalby on May 1, 1388." On the same page: "1389. On May 3, Richard II suddenly took the government into his own hands. John of Gaunt returned

to England soon afterwards, and effected an outward reconciliation between the King and the Duke of Gloucester. The Lancastrian party was now once more in power, and Chaucer was appointed Clerk of the King's Works," etc.

Closely connected with the question of Chaucer's relations with John of Gaunt, and indeed fundamental to it--as the constant reference in the foregoing extracts to the grants which Chaucer held would indicate--is the problem of the significance of Chaucer's annuities, offices, and diplomatic missions. Extracts from two writers on Chaucer's life will show how this problem has been treated. Professor Hales in his D. N. B. article [Footnote: 1 Vol. 10, p. 157.] says of the first pension from the King: "This pension, it will be noticed, is given for good service done ... The pension is separate from his pay as a 'valettus' and must refer to some different service." Similarly Professor Lounsbury in his Studies in Chaucer writes: [Footnote: 2 Vol. 1, p. 61.] "It is from the statement in this document about services already rendered that the inference is drawn that during these years he had been in close connection with the court." In regard to the grant of the wardship of Edward Staplegate, he says: [Footnote: 3 idem, p. 65.] "This was a common method of rewarding favourites of the crown. In the roll which contains this grant it is said to be conferred upon our beloved esquire." By way of comment on the grant of a pitcher of wine daily, he writes: [Footnote: 4 idem, p. 63.] "Though never graced with the title of poet laureate, Chaucer obtained at this same period what came to be one of the most distinguishing perquisites which attached itself to that office in later times." With regard to the offices: [Footnote: 5 idem, p. 66.] "Chaucer was constantly employed in civil offices at home and in diplomatic missions abroad. In both cases it is very certain that the positions he filled were never in the nature of sinecures." As to the diplomatic missions [Footnote: 6 idem, p. 70.] "their number and their variety, treating as they do of questions of peace and war, show the versatility of his talents as well as his wide knowledge of affairs. Nor can I avoid feeling that his appointment upon so many missions, some of them of a highly delicate and important nature, is presumptive evidence that he was not a young man at the time and must therefore have been born earlier than 1340.... these appointments are proofs that can hardly be gainsaid of the value put upon his abilities and services. Then, as now, there must have been plenty of persons of ample leisure and lofty connections who [Footnote: 7 Vol. 10, p. 157.] [Footnote: 8 Vol. 1, p. 61.] [Footnote: idem, p. 65.] [Footnote: idem, p. 63.] [Footnote: idem, p. 66.] [Footnote: idem, p. 70.] were both ready and anxious to be pressed into the service of the state. That these should have been passed by, and a man chosen instead not furnished with high birth and already furnished with other duties, is a fact which indicates, if it does not show convincingly, the confidence reposed in his capacity and judgment." With regard to the controllership, Professor Lounsbury writes: [Footnote: Studies in Chaucer, p. 72.] "The oath which Chaucer took at his appointment was the usual oath. ... He was made controller of the port because he had earned the appointment by his services in various fields, of activity, and because he was recognized as a man of business, fully qualified to discharge its duties." [Footnote: idem, p.74.] "In 1385 he was granted a much greater favor" (than the right to have a deputy for the petty customs). "On the 17th of February of that year he obtained the privilege of nominating a permanent deputy. ... It is possible that in the end it wrought him injury, so far as the retention of the post was concerned".

A merely casual reading of such statements as those I have given above must make it clear that they attempt to interpret the facts which we have about Chaucer, without taking into consideration their setting and connections--conditions in the courts of Edward III and Richard II, and the history of the period. [Footnote: Note for example the statement on page 3 above that "the Duke of Gloucester was ill disposed towards his brother John."] Surely it is time for an attempt to gain a basis of fact upon which we may judge the real significance of Chaucer's grants and his missions and from which we may determine as far as possible his relations with John of Gaunt. In the following pages then, I shall attempt first to discover the relative importance of Chaucer's place in the court, and the significance of his varied employments, and secondly to find out the certain connections between Chaucer and John of Gaunt. The means which I shall employ is that of a study of the lives of Chaucer's associates--his fellow esquires, and justices of the peace, and his friends--and a comparison of their careers with that of Chaucer to determine whether or not the grants he received indicate special favor or patronage, and whether it is necessary to assume the patronage of John of Gaunt in particular to explain any step in his career.

The Esquires Of The King's Household

THEIR FAMILIES

We have the names of the esquires of the king's household in two lists of 1368 and 1369, printed in the Chaucer Life Records [Footnote: See page 13 ff.]. In the study of the careers of these esquires the most difficult problem is to determine the families from which they were derived. Had they come from great families, of course, it would not have been hard to trace their pedigrees. But a long search through county histories and books of genealogy, has revealed the families of only a few, and those few in every case come from an unimportant line. It is clear then that they never were representatives of highly important families. A statement of the antecedents of such esquires as I have been able to trace, the names arranged in alphabetical order, follows.

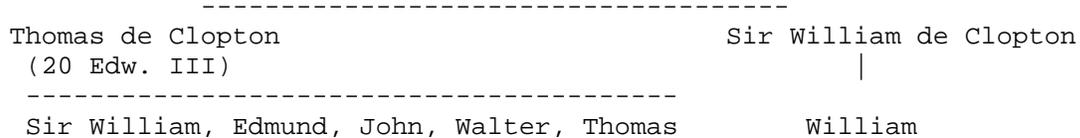
John Beauchamp was almost certainly either that John Beauchamp of Holt who was executed in 1386, or his son. In either case he was descended from a younger branch of the Beauchamps of Warwick. [Footnote: Issues, p. 232, mem. 26, Peerage of England, Scotland, etc., by G. E. C., vol. 1, p. 278.]

Patrick Byker, who was King's "artillier" in the tower of London, [Footnote: 1362 Cal. C. R., p. 373.] was the son of John de Byker who had held the same office before him. [Footnote: 35 Edw. III, p. 174 Cal. Rot. Pat. in Turr. Lon.] William Byker, probably a relative, is mentioned from about 1370 on as holding that office [Footnote: Devon's Issues, 1370, p. 33, Issues, p. 303, mem. 14.]. I have been able to learn nothing further about the family.

Nicholas Careu: in the records one finds reference to Nicholas Careu the elder and Nicholas Careu the younger [Footnote: Ancient Deeds 10681.]. Since the elder was guardian of the privy seal from 1372 to 1377 [Footnote: Rymer, p. 951, 1069.] and in 1377 was one of the executors of the will of Edward III, it seems likely that the esquire was Nicholas Careu the younger. At any rate the younger was the son of the older [Footnote: C. R. 229, mem. 33 dorso, 12 Rich. II.] and they were certainly members of the family of Careu in Surrey [Footnote: 1378 Cal. Pat. Roll, p. 143, 1381-5 Cal. Pat. Roll, passim, Cal. Inq. P. M. III, 125.]. The pedigrees of this family do not show Nicholas the younger (so far as I have found). But a Nicholas, Baron Carew, who may have been the keeper of the privy seal, does occur [Footnote: Visitation of Surrey Harleian Soc. p. 17.]. The name of his son, as given in the pedigree, is not Nicholas; consequently Nicholas, the younger, was probably not his eldest son. This last supposition is supported by certain statements in Westcote's Devonshire [Footnote: p. 528. Of course it is not certain that this Sir Nicholas was the Keeper of the Privy Seal.] where we are told that "Sir Nicholas Carew, Baron, of Carew Castle, Montgomery in Wales, married the daughter of Sir Hugh Conway of Haccomb, and had issue Thomas, Nicholas, Hugh," etc.

Roger Clebury. In Westcote's Devonshire [Footnote: p. 555.] occurs an account of a family named Cloberry, of Bradston. In the course of his statement, which is devoid of dates or mention of lands other than Bradston, Westcote refers to two Rogers.

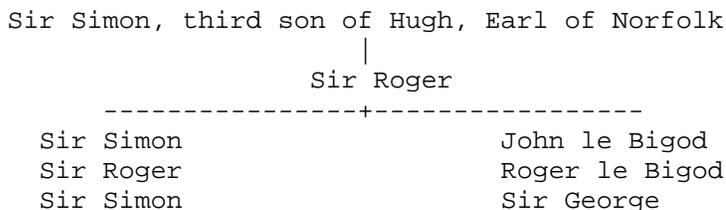
Several men of the name of William de Clopton are mentioned in the county histories. Unfortunately no facts appear in the records to connect any one of them with the esquire of that name. At any rate from the accounts given in Gage [Footnote: Gage's History of Suffolk: Thingoe Hundred, p. 419.] and Morant [Footnote: Morant's Essex, vol. 2, p. 321.] the following pedigree is clear:



The elder Sir William, according to Gage, married first Anet, daughter of Sir Thomas de Grey, and secondly Mary, daughter of Sir William Cockerel. With his second wife he received the manor and advowson of Hawsted and lands in Hawsted, Newton, Great and Little Horningsherth and Bury St. Edmunds. Morant speaks of the family as an ancient one and traces it back to the time of Henry I.

Robert de Corby was son of Robert and Joan de Corby [Footnote: Pat. Roll 291, mem. 1.]. His father had been yeoman in the King's court and had received a number of grants from the King [Footnote: Cal. C. R., p. 496 (1345). Cal. Rot. Pat. Turr. Lon. 38 Edw. III, p. 178 b.].

Collard, or Nicholas, Dabrichcourt was a son of Nicholas Dabrichcourt, brother of Sir Eustace Dabridgecourt of Warwickshire [Footnote: Visit of War (Harl.) p.47, Beltz Mem. of Garter, p. 90.]. The latter had won the favour of Philippa in France and had come to England when she was married to Edward III. George Felbrigge was, according to Blomefield's Norfolk, [Footnote: Vol. 8, p. 107 ff.] descended from a younger branch of the Bigods. The head of this family was the Earl of Norfolk.



The younger branch of the family had assumed the name of Felbrigge from a town of that name in Norfolk. As will be seen, George Felbrigge came from the younger branch of a younger branch of the family, and his ancestors seem to have been neither influential nor wealthy.

Robert de Ferrer's pedigree was as follows: [Footnote: Baker's Northampton, vol. 1, p, 123.]

```
John Ferrers = Hawise d. of Sir Robert Muscegros.
Baron Ferrers
  Robert, 2nd baron = Agnes ( 8) d. of Humphrey Bohun,
                    |                               Earl of Hereford
                    +-----+-----+
John, 3rd baron      Robert
obit. 2 Apr. 1367    died 1381
```

Since his brother died only a year before the date of the first of the lists, it is very likely that Robert became a member of the King's household, while still a younger son. His father, Robert, second baron Ferrers, was one of the Knights of the King's Chamber. He fought in the campaigns in France and Flanders.

Thomas Frowyk was probably a member of a prominent London family of merchants. Lysons writes of the family as follows: [Footnote: Parishes in Middlesex, etc, p. 228.] "The manor of Oldfold was at a very early period the property of the Frowyks or Frowicks. Henry Frowyk, who was settled at London in 1329, was sixth in descent from Thomas Frowyk of the Oldfold, the first person mentioned in the pedigree of the family. ... Thomas Frowyk, a younger brother of Henry above mentioned, inherited the Oldfold estate, which continued in the family till his grandson's time." This Thomas Frowyk is mentioned in the Close Rolls between 1351 and 1353 as Justice of the Peace for Middlesex, and in [Footnote 1: Ancient Deeds A 9086.] 27 Edward III as lieutenant of the Queen's steward.

The connections of Thomas Hauteyn are not quite so clear but apparently he likewise was derived from a family of London merchants. Blomefield's Norfolk [Footnote 2: Vol. 10, p. 426 ff.] tells of a family of Hauteyns of knightly rank. Sir John Hauteyn probably became a citizen of London in 16 Edward II and was subsequently receiver of the King's customs of wool at London. Even earlier than this, in 15 Edward I, a Walter Hawteyn was sheriff of London [Footnote 3: Ancient Deeds A 1625]. In 7 Edward III a John Hawteyn was alderman of a ward in London [Footnote 4: idem, A 1472]. We can suppose some connection between Thomas Hauteyn and this family because he held certain tenements in London [Footnote 5: idem, A 7833].

John de Herlyng, who was usher of the King's chamber and the most important of the esquires in Chaucer's time, came of a family settled in Norfolk. Blomefield gives a pedigree of the family beginning with this John de Herlyng [Footnote 6: Vol. 1, P. 319], but, is unable to trace his ancestry definitely. He finds mention of a certain Odo de Herlyng, but is forced to the conclusion that the family was an unimportant one before the time of John de Herlyng.

With regard to Rauf de Knyveton very little information is forthcoming. Glover's Derby [Footnote 7: Vol. 2, P. 135, 6.] gives the pedigree of a family of Knivetons who possessed the manor of Bradley and says that there was a younger branch of the family

which lived at Mercaston. Ralph, though not specifically mentioned, may have been a younger son of one of these branches.

Although Helmyng Leget was an important man in his own time-sheriff of Essex and Hertfordshire in 1401 and 1408 [Footnote 8: Morant's Essex, vol. 2, p. 123.], and Justice of the Peace in Suffolk [Footnote 9: Cf. Cal. Pat. Roll. 1381-5, p. 254.]--Morant is able to give no information about his family. Perhaps his position in the society of the county was due in part to the fact that he married an heiress, Alice, daughter of Sir Thomas Mandeville. [Footnote 10: Cf. Cal. Pat. Roll. 1381-5, p. 254.]

John Legge, who is on the lists as an esquire, but in the Patent Rolls is referred to chiefly as a sergeant at arms, was, according to H. T. Riley, son of Thomas Legge, mayor of London in 1347 and 1354. [Footnote 11: Memorials, P. 450.] Robert Louth was evidently derived from a Hertfordshire family. A Robert de Louth was custodian of the castle of Hertford and supervisor of the city of Hertford in 32 Edward III [Footnote: Cal. Rot. Pat. Turr. Lon., p. 169 b.] and between 1381 and 1385 was Justice of the Peace for Hertford. [Footnote: Cal. Pat. Roll index.] Probably Robert de Louth was a younger son, for John, son and heir of Sir Roger de Louthe (in 44 Edward III) deeded land in Hertfordshire to Robert de Louthe, esquire, his uncle. [Footnote: Ancient Deeds, D 4213.]

John de Romesey comes of an eminent Southampton family of the town of Romsey [Footnote: Woodward, Wilks, Lockhart, History of Nottinghamshire. vol. 1. p. 352.] which can be traced back as far as 1228, when Walter of Romsey was sheriff of Hampshire. His pedigree is given as follows by Hoare: [Footnote: History of Wilts, vol. 3, Hundred of Oawdon, p. 23.]

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Walter de Romesey 34 Edward I.
      |
Walter de Romesey 23 Edward III = Joan
      |
    John de Romesey = Margaret d. and
      (Co. Somerset)      heir of...?
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Hugh Strelley was a member of the family of Strelley (Straule) of Nottingham and Derby. From the fact that his name does not occur in the pedigree given in Thoroton's History of Nottinghamshire [Footnote: Vol. 2, p. 220.] and that he held lands of Nicholas de Strelley by the fourth part of a knight's fee, [Footnote: Cal. Pat. Roll, 1892, p. 56.] it is clear that he belonged to a subordinate branch of the family. Further, he was even a younger son of this secondary stock, for, as brother and heir of Philip de Strelley, son and heir of William de Strelley, he inherited lands in 47 Edward III. [Footnote: C. R. 211, Mem. 38.]

Gilbert Talbot was second, son of Sir John Talbot of Richard's Castle in Herefordshire. [Footnote: Cf. Nicolas: Scrope-Grosvenor Roll, vol. 2, p. 397.]

Hugh Wake may be the Hugh Wake who married Joan de Wolverton and whom Lipscombe connects with the lordly family of Wake of Buckinghamshire. [Footnote:

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