

COUNTRY LIFE

Ewelme, Oxfordshire: The medieval almshouses set up by Chaucer's granddaughter and still running today



Toby Keel, February 14, 2023



St Mary's Church and the Almshouses at Ewelme, Oxfordshire.

Credit: Alamy Stock Photo

Country Life's 21st century Grand Tour of Britain stops off at the remarkable church and almshouses at Ewelme, Oxfordshire.

You feel you can almost touch the late Middle Ages at Ewelme. This small settlement near Wallingford, south of Oxford, is where William de la Pole, Duke of Suffolk, and his wife, Alice Chaucer — granddaughter of Geoffrey and a great heiress — maintained and extended their palace.

[Ewelme, Oxfordshire: The medieval almshouses set up by Chaucer's grand-daughter and still running today - Country Life](#)

COUNTRY LIFE

Although little remains of that splendid house, several other structures survive. Medieval manors were rather like camp sites, scattered with disparate structures. As the spirit world seemed almost as vivid as the material one, they needed a church or chapel in which to offer Divine Service.

Alice rests in [Ewelme's church, St Mary's](#): alabaster effigies show how she looked in life and as a rotting corpse.



The Tomb of Alice de la Pole, granddaughter of Geoffrey Chaucer.

Death could come suddenly (and, for the Duke, it did: his head was hacked off as he sailed into exile from England), but prayers said by the living could benefit the living and the dead. Hence the hospital or almshouse called God's House, where 13 almsmen would be forever on their knees, their pay docked for absences or misdemeanours.

Together, church, God's House and school, all of which are still in operation, make one of the most beautiful compositions to come down from the 15th century.

[St Mary's, the parish church in Ewelme](#), is a Church of England building that is almost unchanged, and while it's free to visit donations are encouraged to keep the place maintained.

The almshouses are still running (and thus occupied) to this day, but areas including the cloisters can be visited.

See www.ewelmealmschousecharity.org to find out more.



A Water carrier at, Ewelme, Oxfordshire, c1860-c1922. Artist: Henry Taunt.

[Ewelme, Oxfordshire: The medieval almshouses set up by Chaucer's grand-daughter and still running today - Country Life](#)