

## **EUSTACE FITZ JOHN De VESCY (1088-1157)**

Eustace Fitz John De Vescy was a powerful magnate in northern England during the reigns of King Henry I, King Stephen and King Henry II.

From a relatively humble background in the south-east of England, Eustace made his career serving Henry I, and was elevated by the King, through marriage and office into one of the most important figures in the North of England. Eustace Fitz John acquired a great deal of property in the region, controlled Bamburgh Castle, Northumberland, Alnwick Castle, Northumberland, Knarsborough Castle, Yorkshire and served jointly with Walter Espec as Justiciar of the North. After Henry I's death in 1135, Eustace became involved in the warfare between the supporters of Stephen and his rival the Empress Matilda, the latter led by Matilda's uncle David, King of Scotland.



**Bamburgh Castle, Northumberland**

He lost **Alnwick Castle** temporarily to King David, while **Bamburgh Castle** was taken by King Stephen.

Eustace Fitz John became a supporter of King David, fighting and suffering defeat at the **Battle of the Standard** (also known as the **Battle at Northallerton**) in **1138**. He maintained most of his lands in the north however, and from c. 1144 became one of the main followers of **Ranulf II, Earl of Chester**, through whom he gained even more land. **Eustace Fitz John subsequently founded three religious houses and died on campaign in Wales with Henry II in 1157.**



**Alnwick Castle, Northumberland**

Alnwick Castle is a castle and country house in Alnwick in the English county of Northumberland. It is the seat of the 12th Duke of Northumberland, built following the Norman conquest and renovated and remodelled a number of times.



**Knaresborough Castle ruins, Yorkshire.**

Knaresborough is a market and spa town and civil parish in the Borough of Harrogate, North Yorkshire, England, on the River Nidd 4 miles east of Harrogate

**Eustace Fitz John's family came from the south-east of England.** His father **John "Monoculus" Fitz Richard De Burgh** was a **tenant-in-chief** who appeared in the Domesday Book owning estates in Essex and Norfolk. The family was not of exalted origin, representing the middle rank of society. Eustace had two known sisters, **Agnes** and **Alice**. He also had two brothers, **Payne** and **William**, and it is thought that Payne, whose career was as successful as Eustace's, was probably the eldest. Eustace probably did not inherit much from his father, but instead depended on success as a Royal servant.

**Eustace Fitz John** is witnessing Royal Charters from at least 1119 but may have been at King Henry's court as early as 1114. Through King Henry's patronage, **Eustace married two heiresses**, bringing him on both occasions much landed honour. **Beatrix, (m. 1110) daughter and heiress of Ivo de Vescy, brought him control of Alnwick Castle and the Barony of Alnwick in Northumberland.** He probably received, in addition, land in Lincolnshire as well as five and a half knights fees in Yorkshire previously belonging to **Ranulf de Mortimer** (died 1104).

Although it has often been claimed that this marriage brought Eustace the **Lordship of Old Malton**, a former Royal Manor in the North Riding of Yorkshire, this was probably a separate gift from the King. This marriage occurred sometime before 1130. Another marriage, which also occurred before 1130, was to **Agnes (m. 1115) daughter of the Constable of Chester, William Fitz Nigel**, and this eventually brought him more land in **Yorkshire** (Bridlington) as well as in **Northamptonshire** (Loddington), both held of the **Earl of Chester**.

Eustace would gain control of many other sub-tenancies, held of various Lords from the **Archbishop of York** and the **Bishop of Durham** to **Nigel d'Aubigny** and the **Count of Aumale**, and in Henry's reign he held lands at **Aldbrough, Tickhill** and **Knaresborough** from the King.



**Tickhill Castle, Doncaster**

**Eustace Fitz John had thus emerged as one of the key players in King Henry's reordering of Northumbrian society following the destruction of the Earldom of Northumbria in the late 11th-century.** According to historian William Kapelle, Eustace was one of the "three mainstays of Henry's new regime in the North", the other two being **Walter Espec** and **King David of Scotland**. In Northumberland he is known to have commanded authority over at least ten local notables, including **John FitzOdard, Lord of Embleton** and **Robert II de Umfraville, Lord of Redesdale**.

Significant was Eustace's **Barony of Alnwick**, which stretched across the potential Scottish invasion routes of the Tweed basin and was one of the two largest baronies in the County (the other being the Balliol barony of Bywell), holding between 14 and 17 knight's fees by 1166, nearly three times the size of the average lordship in the county. Henry I's only surviving pipe roll, for 1129–30, shows that Eustace was serving jointly as Justiciar of the north along with Walter Espec, and had custody of the former Capital of the **Northumbrian Earldom, Bamburgh Castle**.

Allowances made to Eustace Fitz John for the repair of the gate of **Bamburgh Castle** and the construction of fortifications at Tickhill and Knaresborough in Yorkshire are also recorded in this pipe roll. This and evidence of Royal Writs show that Eustace Fitz John and Walter Espec had **Justiciar responsibility** for the **Counties of Cumberland, Northumberland (with Durham) and Yorkshire**, a role that involved hearing pleas and conveying instructions from central government.

The death of **King Henry I** on **December 1, 1135** led to the accession of **Stephen de Bois**, to whom Eustace Fitz John submitted. Stephen's seizure of the throne was contested by Henry I's daughter, the **Empress Matilda**, who had been Henry's designated heir.

The **Gesta Regis Stephani** claimed that certain "**very intimate friends of Henry**" had been against **Stephen de Bois** from the beginning because of loyalty for **King Henry's daughter Matilda**, and names Eustace Fitz John's brother Payne as one of these, making it quite possible that Eustace had likewise never been on Stephen's side.

*Gesta Regis Stephani is a mid-12th-century English history by an anonymous author about King Stephen of England and his struggles with his cousin, Empress Matilda, also known as the "Empress Maud". It is one of the main sources for this period in the history of England.*

However, just like **Eustace Fitz John De Vescy**, they did swear fealty to **King Stephen** after a short time. This capitulation meant that King Stephen let them keep the honours and positions they had held under Henry, and King Stephen is even found confirming the grants of Eustace's family between 1136 and 1138. **Matilda** was supported by her uncle **King David of Scotland**, and he did not accept Stephen's succession peacefully.

Thus, **Eustace Fitz John** was placed in the front line of a new war, and when **King David** invaded northern England Eustace's **Castle of Alnwick** was among those captured by David in the first two months of the year (though it was returned in March). King Stephen relieved Eustace of control of **Bamburgh Castle** when he returned from his punitive invasion of Lothian early in 1138. It has been claimed that Eustace must have gone over to King David's side by the end of 1137, when David invaded northern England. There is no proof however that Eustace had switched allegiance at this point. After David crossed back into Northumberland in April 1138, Eustace became one of David's active supporters, and during King David's siege of **Wark Castle** in May Eustace tried to persuade him to besiege **Bamburgh Castle** instead.

**Eustace Fitz John had a long association with the Scottish King,** or at least with his Norman follower **Robert de Brus, 1<sup>st</sup> Lord of Annandale**, as Eustace's name appears as witness to **King David's charter** recording the grant of Annandale to Robert, issued at Scone in **1124**. Eustace fought at the **Battle of the Standard** in **August 1138**, fighting for King David in the second line with the men of Cumbria and Teviotdale. The battle ended in defeat, and **Eustace Fitz John** was wounded and fled to **Alnwick** in its aftermath, leaving his castle at Malton to be captured soon after.

Despite the defeat for King David, peace the following year brought David victory, his son **Henry** becoming **Earl of Northumbria and Huntingdon**, and under the rule of **Earl Henry**, Eustace regained many of his **Northumberland possessions** and received other lands in the **Earldom of Huntingdon**.

When a succession dispute for the **Bishopric of Durham** erupted in **1141**, Eustace Fitz John supported (pro-David) **William Cumin** against **William de Ste Barbara**; and in **1143**, Eustace helped negotiate a truce between the two claimants. Eustace's number of known associations with David and Henry after 1144 is small, appearing only as witness to one charter of Earl Henry issued at Corbridge at some point between 1150 and 1152.

**Around 1144** Eustace Fitz John seems to have entered a beneficial relationship with **Ranulf II, Earl of Chester**. Eustace Fitz John was married to the sister of Ranulf's constable, **William Fitz William**, and in either 1143 or 1144 William died. This made Eustace's wife and her sister Matilda joint heiress to the lands and offices of William Fitz William who was childless.

**In either 1144 or 1145 Eustace** obtained from **Ranulf** a large honour with lands mostly in **Cheshire, Lancashire and Yorkshire**, and gained the office of **Constable of Chester** along with the status as **Chief Counselor** in Ranulf's dominions. Earl Ranulf's patronage also seems to have gained Eustace a grant by Roger de Mowbray (the Earl's captive from the Battle of Lincoln) of fourteen knight fees worth of estates in Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, with townships along the River Humber. This was probably part of the attempts of the Earl and his half-brother the **Earl of Lincoln, William de Roumare** to tighten their family's grip on the region.

**Eustace Fitz John's** position vis-a-vis **King Stephen** probably mirrored that of **Ranulf**, and like other pro-Matildans there was probably no permanent stabilisation of relations until the settlement between Stephen and Matilda in the winter of **1153**. In the following year, Eustace Fitz John attested a charter King Stephen issued at York in favour of **Pontefract Priory**. Eustace had a good relationship with Stephen's successor **King Henry II**, and the latter seems to have regarded Eustace as one of his supporters. King Henry confirmed Eustace's gifts to his son William de Vesci and would recognise the latter's succession to his father's lands.

After Henry's accession in **1154**, Eustace Fitz John attested the new King's charters.

**Eustace Fitz John died in July 1157 near Basingwerk in Flintshire, where on campaign with King Henry II against the Welsh he was ambushed and killed.**

**Eustace Fitz John De Vesci** was remembered as a great monastic patron. He patronised Gloucester Abbey, a **Benedictine house**, as well as the **Augustinian Priory of Bridlington**. In 1147, he founded his own abbey, **Alnwick Abbey**, as a daughter-house of England's first **Premonstratensian Monastery, Newhouse Abbey in Lincolnshire**.

The Order of Canons Regular of Prémontré, also known as the Premonstratensians, the Norbertines and, in Britain and Ireland, as the White Canons, are a religious order of Canons regular of the Catholic Church founded in Prémontré near Laon in 1120 by Norbert of Xanten, who later became Archbishop of Magdeburg in Saxony-Anhalt, Germany

Two years later, Eustace turned his favours to the order of **Gilbert of Sempringham**, in 1150 founding a **Gilbertine Priory at Malton in Yorkshire** and another (with a nunnery) at **Watton, Yorkshire** around the same time.

Later tradition held that Eustace founded these houses in penance for fighting with the Scots, but this has no basis in fact. Watton, scene of Ailred of Rievaulx's De Sanctimoniali de Wattun, was founded jointly with Eustace's landlord William Fossard. Probably Eustace's patronage of the Gilbertines was influenced by the policies and inclinations of **William, Earl of York** and **Henry Murdac, Archbishop of York**. Eustace had become closely associated with the Earl of York. He witnessed two of Earl William's charters, between 1150 and 1153, and obtained land from him. **Eustace's name appears on coins minted at York, a city under the control of the Earl.**

#### **NOTES:**

**Eustace Fitz John De Vescy was born about 1080, died July 1157.** He married **Agnes Fitz William** about 1096, daughter of **William Fitz Nigel, Constable of Chester**. She was born about 1083. Child of Eustace Fitz John De Vescy and Agnes Fitz William was: Sir Richard Fitz Eustace, Lord of Halton, Constable of Chester, born about 1098, of Cheshire, England. He married: Jane Bigod abt 1120, daughter of Roger Bigod and Adelize/Alice de Toeni.

**Eustace had two sons, one by each wife.** **William de Vescy**, his son by **Beatrix**, served as Sheriff of Northumberland between 1157 and 1170, and would become the ancestor of the Northumberland de Vescy family. **Robert Fitz Eustace De Vescy**, his son by **Agnes**, is known to have married **Aubrey de Lisours**, daughter of **Aubrey de Lacy** and niece of **Ilbert II de Lacy** (another Baron captured by Earl Ranulf at the Battle of Lincoln). He became ancestor of a second line of **de Lacys**. Several sources, including Roger of Howden, report that Eustace had only one eye.

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**Eustace Fitz William de Vesci (1169/70-1216)** was one of a group referred to by contemporaries as 'the **Northerners**', the original hard-line leaders of the baronial resistance to King John. **The son of William de Vesci and Burga, daughter of Robert de Stuteville, lord of Cottingham (Yorks.), he was lord of Alnwick in Northumberland and an extensive landowner in northern England.**

He was married to **Margaret, illegitimate daughter of William the Lion, King of Scotland** and half-sister of Alexander II of Scotland. At **Richard the Lionheart's second coronation in 1194**, following his release from captivity in Germany, he witnessed a Royal Charter in favour of his father-in-law.

**At the end of 1194 Eustace** is found engaged in **King Richard's** service at **Chinon, the great Angevin castle in Anjou**, and five years later was one of the guarantors of the treaty between **King John**, newly succeeded to the throne, and Count Renaud of Boulogne.

**In 1210 he accompanied King John on his expedition to attempt the pacification of Ireland.** Accused in 1212, alongside another important northern **Lord Robert Fitz Walter**, of plotting against King John's life, he fled to Scotland, and his lands were seized. After King John's submission to **Pope Innocent III** in 1213, however, he was allowed back, and a few months later he was awarded restitution of his lands, although his Castles at Alnwick and Malton were destroyed.

**Later in 1213** in a gesture indicative of his continued defiance of King John, he refused to enlist in John's expedition to Poitou, in south-west France, and in the following year he also refused to pay scutage (money in lieu of military service). His intense dislike of King John was evidently well known to the Pope who, in 1214, warned him to remain loyal to the King, since the Pope regarded John as a faithful son of the Church.

**In 1215 he was deeply involved in the military operations that led up to the making of Magna Carta**, associating himself closely with a Yorkshire rebel, his kinsman **Robert de Ros of Helmsley**. In September he was one of a group of nine malcontent barons singled out for excommunication by the Pope. Although by the following May he was seeking a reconciliation with the King, as soon as Louis, the French King's son, took on the leadership of the baronial cause he went over to him.

**He met his death in late August 1216 at Barnard Castle in County Durham, where he was shot in the head by an arrow while conducting siege operations. He was buried at Alnwick Castle and left a young son William, who came of age in 1226.**

**NOTE:**

**In 1220, the 30-year-old Sir SIMON De La WARDE II** married 20-year-old **LADY CONSTANCE DE VESCY** (1200-1252) of Knaresborough. Lady Constance was the daughter of **EUSTACE FITZ JOHN DE VESCI** (1169-1216) a prominent figure in English history in the 13<sup>th</sup>. Century.

**Sir Simon De La Warde II was the son of Sir Willian Fitz Simon De La Warde and grandson of the famous Sir Simon De La Warde (The Crusader).**

They had 3 children: **John De La Warde** (born 1215), **Anne De La Warde** (born 1226) and **William Fitz Simon De La Warde** (born 1225).

**The De La WARDE Family was already a prominent name in Yorkshire and throughout England and Scotland by virtue of their military prowess, but their influence and prestige would have been greatly enhanced as a result of their association by marriage with the De Vescy Family.**

The De Vesci Family were originally from southeastern England and destined to become future members of the Committee of Twenty-Five Barons known as the **SURETY OF MAGNA CARTA**. They were charged with ensuring that King John complied fully with the terms of Magna Carta.