

# **T**he LIFE & TIMES of EUSTACE Fitz JOHN De BURGH De VESCI (1088 - 1157)



EUSTACE Fitz JOHN De BURGH De VESCI, Lord of Alnwick, Constable of Knaresborough and Cheshire and 4th Baron of Halton, was a powerful magnate in Northern England during the reigns of King Henry I, King Stephen and King Henry II. He was born in 1088 in Knaresborough, Yorkshire, England and died at age 69 in battle fighting for the King in Wales in 1157.

His father, JOHN "Monoculus" FitzRICHARD De BURGH (1055-1138) was a tenant-in-chief who appeared in the Domesday Book in 1086 AD owning estates in Essex and Norfolk. The family was not of exalted origin but represented the "middle rank" of society. EUSTACE FitzJOHN De BURGH made his career serving three Kings of England, and was elevated by marriage to two wealthy brides and appointed high office into one of the most important figures in the Medieval North of England.

EUSTACE FitzJOHN De BURGH De VESCI witnessed Royal Charters from at least 1119 but may have been at the Court of King Henry I (youngest son of William The Conqueror) as early as 1114. Through KING HENRY I's patronage, Eustace married two rich heiresses, bringing him on both occasions much landed honour.

In 1112 the 24-year old EUSTACE Fitz JOHN De BURGH married BEATRIX De VESCI (1090-1115), the 22-year old heiress of YVES II De VESCI, who brought him control of ALNWICK CASTLE and the Barony of Alnwick in Northumberland. He also received land in Lincolnshire and five and a half knights fees in Yorkshire previously belonging to Ranulf de Mortimer (who died 1104).

*BEATRIX De VESCI, daughter of Yves de Vesci, Lord of Alnwick and Malton, Yorkshire & his wife Alda Tyson married firstly EUSTACE FITZJOHN (1088-1157). A manuscript concerning the founders of Watton Priory records the marriage of "Eustachius filius Johannis" and "filia et hærede Ivonis de Vescy", adding that she died giving birth to their son William. An undated*

charter recording the foundation of [Alnwick Abbey](#), Northumberland recites a donation by "Willielmi de Vesce, filii Eustachii, filii Johannis", for the souls of "patris mei Eustachii et matris meæ Beatricis".

The 25-year old BEATRIX De VESCI died giving birth to their son, WILLIAM Fitz EUSTACE De VESCI in 1115.

In 1120, EUSTACE FitzJOHN De BURGH then married 26-year old Agnes FitzWilliam (1094-1166), Heiress of Halton and Widnes, daughter of Baron WILLIAM FitzNEAL, Constable of Chester. They had 2 sons: Richard (born 1127) and Geoffrey (born 1129).

[Widnes is in the County of Cheshire, North West England, one mile north of the town of Runcorn, six miles west of the major town of Warrington, 131 miles north of Cardiff, and 168 miles north-west of London. Widnes lies two miles south-east of the Merseyside border, and was historically in the County of Lancashire. Today Widnes falls within the Unitary Authority of Halton.](#)

His BARONY of ALNWICK stretched across the potential Scottish invasion routes of the River Tweed Basin, and was one of the two largest baronies in Northumberland, holding between 14 and 17 knight's fees by 1166, nearly three times the size of the average Lordship in the County. He became a trusted friend and officer of KING HENRY I, who granted him large estates and made him Constable of Bamburgh Castle. He served jointly as Justiciar of the North with Walter de Espec, having responsibility for the Counties of Cumberland, Northumberland, Durham, and Yorkshire. As a supporter of KING DAVID of SCOTLAND, he fought for him (and was wounded) at the Battle of the Standard (Northallerton) in 1138.

[The Battle of the Standard, sometimes called the Battle of Northallerton, took place on 22 August 1138 on Cowton Moor near Northallerton in Yorkshire. English forces under William of Aumale repelled a Scottish army led by King David I of Scotland. King Stephen of England, fighting rebel barons in the south, had sent a small force \(largely mercenaries\), but the English army was mainly local militia and baronial retainers from Yorkshire and the north Midlands. Archbishop Thurstan of York had exerted himself greatly to raise the army, preaching that to withstand the Scots was to do God's work. The centre of the English position was therefore marked by a mast \(mounted upon a cart\) bearing a pyx carrying the consecrated host and from which were flown the consecrated banners of the minsters of Durham, York, Beverley and Ripon: hence the name of the battle.](#)

About 1145 Eustace FitzJohn De Burgh De Vesce obtained from Ranulf, Earl of Chester, a large Honour with lands in Cheshire, Lancashire and Yorkshire, and gained the office of Constable of Chester along with the status of Chief Counselor in Ranulf's dominions. He also received a grant from Roger de Mowbray of fourteen knight fees worth of estates in Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, with townships along the River Humber.



**Gloucester Abbey, Gloucestershire**

**EUSTACE FitzJohn De BURGH was a generous patron of the Church. He founded Alnwick Abbey, Northumberland in 1147, and Priories at Malton and Watton, Yorkshire, 1150;. He was a patron of Gloucester Abbey, Gloucestershire, and Bridlington Priory, Yorkshire.**

**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 I's reign he held lands at Aldborough, Tickhill and Knaresborough from the King. Eustace acquired a great deal of property in the region, and he controlled Bamburgh Castle, Northumberland, Alnwick Castle, Northumberland, Knaresborough Castle, Yorkshire and served jointly with Walter Espec as Justiciar of the North. After King Henry I's death in 1135, Eustace became involved in the warfare between the supporters of King Stephen and his rival the Empress Matilda, the latter led by Matilda's uncle David, King of Scotland.**



**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.



**Bridlington Priory, Yorkshire**



**St. Mary's Priory,  
Malton, Yorkshire**



**Bamburgh Castle, Northumberland**



**Watton Priory,  
Yorkshire**

**WATTON** is a Village and Civil Parish in the **East Riding of Yorkshire, England**. The Village is situated on the A164 road, about 6 miles (9.7 km) north of **Beverley** and 6 miles (9.7 km) south of **Driffield**. According to the 2011 UK census the Civil Parish of Watton had a population of 259, an increase on the 2001 UK census figure of 238.

In the 6th Century **WATTON** was home to a **Frankish Saint, MONEGUNDA OF WATTON** and in the 13th Century to **William de Malton**, master-mason who built **Beverley Minster** was buried here. The **Venerable Bede** in his **Ecclesiastical History of the English People** tells of a miracle of **Saint John of Beverley** that took place in **Watton**. It is also the setting for the 12th-Century miracle story **De Sanctimoniali de Wattun**.

**Watton** is the location for **WATTON PRIORY** which was a **Gilbertine** double-monastery founded in 1150 by **EUSTACE FITZ JOHN De Vesci**. The present building dates mainly from the 14th and 15th Centuries, although it has earlier origins, and a house was added in the 19th Century. It is a Grade I listed building. **The Priory was dissolved in 1539 by Henry VIII**. **The Nun of Watton**, famous from **Ailred of Rievaulx's De Sanctimoniali de Wattun**, is noted for her pregnancy while in the priory.

**A double monastery is a monastery combining separate communities of monks and of nuns, joined in one institution to share one church and other facilities. The practice is believed to have started in the East at the dawn of monasticism.**

'Near to the Priory is the **Church of St Mary** which was designated a Grade I listed building in September 1966 and is now recorded in the National Heritage List for England, maintained by Historic England. The Church building is primarily of 15th Century construction, but some 13th Century materials remain, while the South Porch, and North Vestry are dated **1859**. The parapet to the Tower is 20th Century.



**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.**

**Knaresborough Castle** resides on an outcrop overlooking the town of Knaresborough and Nidd Valley in North Yorkshire England. The Castle was first built by a Norman Baron in circa. 1100 on a cliff above the River Nidd. The first reference to the castle occurred in 1129 when it was recorded that £11 was spent on the Castle by its custodian **EUSTICE FitzJOHN**. There is documentary evidence dating from 1130 referring to works carried out at the Castle by **King Henry I**.

The Castle later played a historical role in 1170 when its owner **Hugh de Morville**, Constable of Scotland fled to it after taking part in the infamous murder of **Archbishop Thomas Beckett** in Canterbury Cathedral.

**In 1205 King John** took control of **Knaresborough Castle**. He regarded Knaresborough as an important northern fortress and spent £1,290 on improvements to the castle. The castle was later rebuilt at a cost of £2,174 between 1307 and 1312 by **King Edward I** and completed by **King Edward II**, including the Great Keep. **Edward II gifted Knaresborough Castle to his "boy-friend" and lover, Piers Gaveston and stayed there himself when the unpopular nobleman was besieged in 1312 at nearby Scarborough Castle.**

**Knaresborough Castle was owned by Royalty through the 15th Century. King John**, who used the Castle as one of his main administrative strongholds in Northern England, spent lots of money on improvements and upkeep. When staying at the Castle, he adored hunting in the surrounding Forest of Knaresborough.

However, the majority of maintenance and enhancements occurred under **King Edward II and King Edward III** between 1307 and 1350. Most of these improvements are still intact today.

One such effort included construction of the King's Tower around 1310. **After Queen Phillipa, wife of Edward III, received the Honour and Castle of Knaresborough as part of the marriage settlement, she transformed the Castle into a true Royal Residence while spending many Summers here. Her son, JOHN of GAUNT acquired the Castle in 1372, adding it to the vast holdings of the DUCHY OF LANCASTER. Katherine Swynford, Gaunt's third wife, obtained the Castle upon his death.**

In 1644, Knaresborough Castle was besieged for six months by Royalists during the English Civil War before the defenders ultimately surrendered after part of the curtain wall was destroyed by cannon fire. **Much of the Castle was demolished in 1648 to keep it from being defendable again, however, the King's Tower and Courthouse were left intact after townsfolk persuaded Parliamentarians to permit use of the Tower as a prison.**





Tickhill Castle, Doncaster

**EUSTACE FitzJOHN De BURGH De VESCI** had thus emerged as one of the key players in King Henry II's reordering of Northumbrian society following the destruction of the **EARLDOM OF NORTHUMBRIA** in the late 11th-Century.

According to historian William Kapelle, **EUSTACE FitzJohn** was one of the "three mainstays of King Henry's new regime in the North" the other two being **Walter Espec** and **King David of Scotland**. In Northumberland Eustace is known to have commanded authority over at least ten local notables, including **John Fitz Odard, Lord of Embleton** and **Robert II de Umfraville, Lord of Redesdale**.

**EUSTACE FitzJOHN'S Barony of Alnwick** was crucial to England's security since it 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. **King Henry I's** only surviving Pipe Roll, for 1129–1130, shows that **Eustace FitzJohn** 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 paid to **Eustace FitzJohn** 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 other evidence of Royal Writs show that **Eustace** and **Walter Espec** both 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 the wealthy Anglo-Norman **Stephen de Blois, Count of Boulogne**, to whom Eustace 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 King Henry**" had been against **Stephen de Blois** from the beginning because of loyalty for **King Henry's daughter Matilda**, and names **Eustace FitzJohn's brother Payn** as one of these, making it quite possible that **Eustace** had likewise never been a committed supporter of **King Stephen**.

*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 FitzJohn De Burgh**, 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 King Henry, and Stephen is even found confirming the grants of Eustace's family between 1136 and 1138. **Empress Matilda** was supported by her uncle **King David of Scotland**, and he did not accept **Stephen's** succession peacefully.

Thus, **Eustace FitzJohn De Vesci** 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 King 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 FitzJOHN had a long association with the Scottish King**, or at least with his Norman follower **Robert I de Brus**, 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 (at Northallerton, Yorkshire)** in **August 1138**, fighting for David in the second line with the men of Cumbria and Cheviotdale. The battle ended in defeat, and **EUSTACE** was wounded and fled to **Alnwick** in its aftermath, leaving his **Castle at Malton** to be captured soon after.

**He lost ALNWICK CASTLE temporarily to King David, while BAMBURGH CASTLE was taken by King Stephen.** Eustace became a supporter of David, fighting and suffering defeat at the **BATTLE OF THE STANDARD (Northallerton, Yorkshire, England)** in **1138**. He maintained most of his lands in the North however, and from **circa 1144** became one of the main followers of **RANULF II, EARL OF CHESTER**, through whom he gained even more land.

**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 the new **EARL HENRY**, **EUSTACE FitzJOHN** 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 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 FitzJOHN DE BURGH DE VESCI** entered a beneficial relationship with **RANULF II, EARL OF CHESTER**. **EUSTACE** was married to **AGNES FitzNIGEL**, the **sister of Ranulf's Constable, William FitzWilliam**, and in either 1143 or 1144 **William** died.

**This made EUSTACE'S wife, AGNES FitzNIGEL and her sister MAUD MATILDA De Grelley joint heiress to the lands and offices of the late WILLIAM FITZWILLIAM.**

**In either 1144/1145 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 Counsellor in Ranulf's dominions**. **Earl Ranulf's patronage** also 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's position vis-a-vis King Stephen probably mirrored that of **Ranulf**, and like other Matilda supporters there was probably no permanent stabilization of relations until the settlement between Stephen and Matilda in the winter of **1153**. In the following year, Eustace 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 Vescy and would recognize the latter's succession to his father's lands. After Henry's accession in 1154, Eustace attested the new King's charters.

Eustace FitzJohn De Burgh De Vesci died on July 10, 1157 at age 69 years, near Basingwerk in Flintshire, where on campaign with King Henry II against the Welsh the contingent of the King's army was ambushed in the Pass at Consyllt and killed.

Eustace Fitz John De Burgh De Vesci is remembered as a great monastic patron.

## **T**he "MERGER" of the De VESCI and the De La WARDE FAMILIES of Yorkshire.

- In 1224, Lady **CONSTANCE De VESCI** (1197-1262) of Knaresborough, Yorkshire, the Great - Granddaughter of **EUSTACE FitzJohn De Burgh De Vesci**, married **Sir SIMON II De La WARDE** (1190-1262) of Guiseley, Yorkshire.
- This marriage joined two prominent military families who had helped to shape the evolving history of Yorkshire, England, Scotland and Wales for over a Century, since the Norman Invasion. Their descendants would continue to play a role in the **political, military and religious** future of Britain for the next several Centuries.
- Their influence would contribute to the future development of not only the **British Isles** but also the Colonial outposts of the **British Empire** in North America, Australia & New Zealand.
- In many aspects of **LIFE** in modern times there are significant improvements in the lives of the so-called **ordinary man** but, regrettably, there are too many examples of **inequality, suppression of opportunity** and **unacceptable greed** and **exploitation** by some groups in our society. There are still **despots** and **dictators** who openly flout the law and gather wealth far beyond their needs or the justified rewards for their contribution to society.
- **Violence and killing (aka WAR)** are still the chosen outcome to **international disputes**.
- We need a new **CONSTITUTION** to live by. The **Christian 10-Commandments** would be a great start! Add one extra clause for **Climate Change** and we might save the World!

**Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose!**  
**(The more things change, the more they stay the same!)**