

# Blanche of Lancaster

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**Blanche of Lancaster** (25 March 1345/1347 – 12 September 1368) was a member of the English royal House of Plantagenet and the daughter of the kingdom's wealthiest and most powerful peer, Henry of Grosmont, 1st Duke of Lancaster. She was the first wife of John of Gaunt, the mother of King Henry IV, and the grandmother of King Henry V of England.<sup>[2]</sup>

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## Lineage

Blanche was born on 25 March 1345,<sup>[1]</sup> although the year 1347 has also been suggested.<sup>[3]</sup>

She was the younger daughter of Henry of Grosmont, 1st Duke of Lancaster and his wife Isabel de Beaumont. She and her elder sister Maud, Countess of Leicester, were born at Bolingbroke Castle in Lindsey. Maud married Ralph de Stafford and then William I, Duke of Bavaria;<sup>[2]</sup> however, Maud did not have children so her younger sister inherited their father's titles and estates.

## Marriage

On 19 May 1359, at Reading Abbey, Reading, Berkshire, Blanche married her third cousin, John of Gaunt, third son of King Edward III. The whole royal family was present at the wedding, and the King gave Blanche expensive gifts of jewellery.<sup>[5]</sup>

The title Duke of Lancaster became extinct upon her father's death without male heirs in 1361. However, John of Gaunt became Earl of Lancaster, Earl of Derby, Earl of Lincoln and Earl of Leicester (although Gaunt did not receive all of these titles until the death of Blanche's older sister, Maud, in 1362) as he was married to Blanche. The Duchy of Lancaster (second creation) was later bestowed on Gaunt. The influence associated with the titles would lead him to become Lord High Steward of England.

## Blanche of Lancaster

*Duchess of Lancaster*



Blanche of Lancaster and John of Gaunt on their tomb monument in St Paul's Cathedral, as depicted in 1658 by Wenceslaus Hollar. Anachronistic inaccuracies include Blanche's early-16th-century-style gable headdress

<b>Born</b>	25 March 1345/1347 <sup>[1]</sup> Bolingbroke Castle, Lincolnshire
<b>Died</b>	12 September 1368 Tutbury Castle, Staffordshire
<b>Burial</b>	St Paul's Cathedral, London
<b>Spouse</b>	John of Gaunt, 1st Duke of Lancaster
<b>Issue</b>	Philippa, Queen of Portugal <i>more...</i> Elizabeth, Duchess of Exeter Henry IV <i>Bolingbroke</i> , King of England
<b>House</b>	Plantagenet
<b>Father</b>	Henry of Grosmont, 1st Duke of Lancaster
<b>Mother</b>	Isabel de Beaumont



The Marriage of John of Gaunt and Blanche of Lancaster in Reading Abbey on 19 May 1359 by Horace Wright (1914), The Museum of Reading.<sup>[4]</sup>

Jean Froissart described Blanche (following her death) as "*jone et jolie*" ("young and pretty").<sup>[6]</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer described "White" (the central figure in his *Book of the Duchess*, believed to have been inspired by Blanche: see below) in such terms as "rody, fresh, and lyvely hewed", her neck as "whyt, smothe, streight, and flat", and her throat as "a round tour of yvoire": she was "bothe fair and bright", and Nature's "cheef patron [pattern] of beautee".<sup>[7]</sup>

Gaunt and Blanche's marriage is widely believed to have been happy, although there is little solid evidence for this. The assumption seems to be based on the fact that Gaunt chose to be buried with Blanche, despite his two subsequent marriages, and on the themes of love, devotion and grief expressed in Chaucer's poem (see below) – a rather circular argument, as it is partly on the basis of these themes that the couple's

relationship is identified as the inspiration for the poem. Blanche and Gaunt had seven children, three of whom survived infancy.

## Death and commemoration

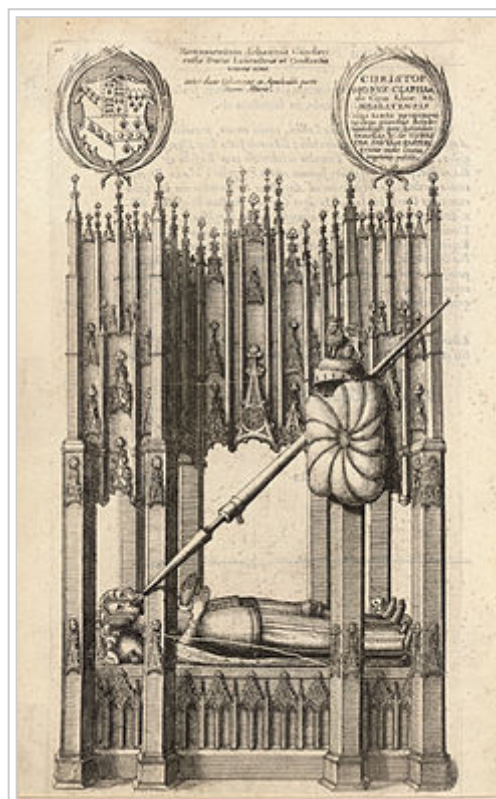
Blanche died at Tutbury Castle, Staffordshire, on 12 September 1368 while her husband was overseas.<sup>[8]</sup> She was 23 years of age at the time of her death,<sup>[1]</sup> although Froissart reported that she died aged about 22.<sup>[9]</sup>

It is believed that she may have died after contracting the Black Death which was rife in Europe at that time. Her funeral at St. Paul's Cathedral in London was preceded by a magnificent cortege attended by most of the upper nobility and clergy. John of Gaunt held annual commemorations of her death for the rest of his life and established a joint chantry foundation on his own death.

In 1373, Jean Froissart wrote a long poem, *Le Joli Buisson de Jonece*, commemorating both Blanche and Philippa of Hainault (Gaunt's mother, who had died in 1369).

It may have been for one of the anniversary commemorations of Blanche's death that Geoffrey Chaucer, then a young squire and mostly unknown writer of court poetry, was commissioned to write what became *The Book of the Duchess* in her honour. Though Chaucer's intentions can never be defined with absolute certainty, many believe that at least one of the aims of the poem was to make John of Gaunt see that his grief for his late wife had become excessive, and to prompt him to try to overcome it.

In 1374, six years after her death, John of Gaunt commissioned a double tomb for himself and Blanche from the mason Henry Yevele. The magnificent monument in the choir of St Paul's was completed by Yevele in 1380, with the assistance of Thomas Wrek, having cost a total of £592. Gaunt himself died in 1399, and was laid to rest beside Blanche. The two effigies were notable for having their right hands joined. An adjacent chantry chapel was added between 1399 and 1403.<sup>[10]</sup>



The tomb of Blanche and John of Gaunt in St. Paul's Cathedral, as represented in an etching of 1658 by Wenceslaus Hollar. The etching includes a number of inaccuracies, for example in not showing the couple with joined hands.

# Issue

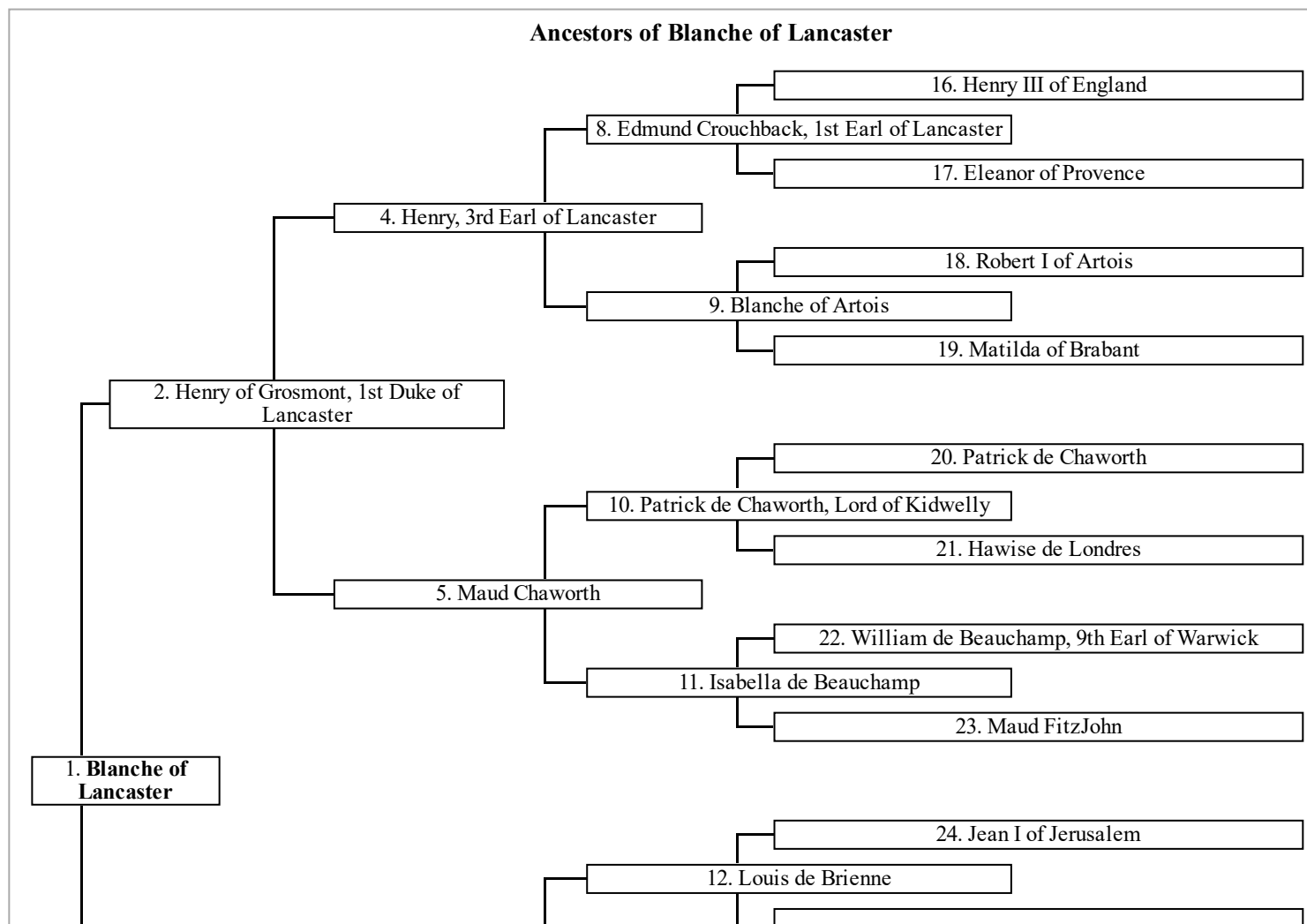
Blanche and John of Gaunt together had seven children:<sup>[11]</sup>

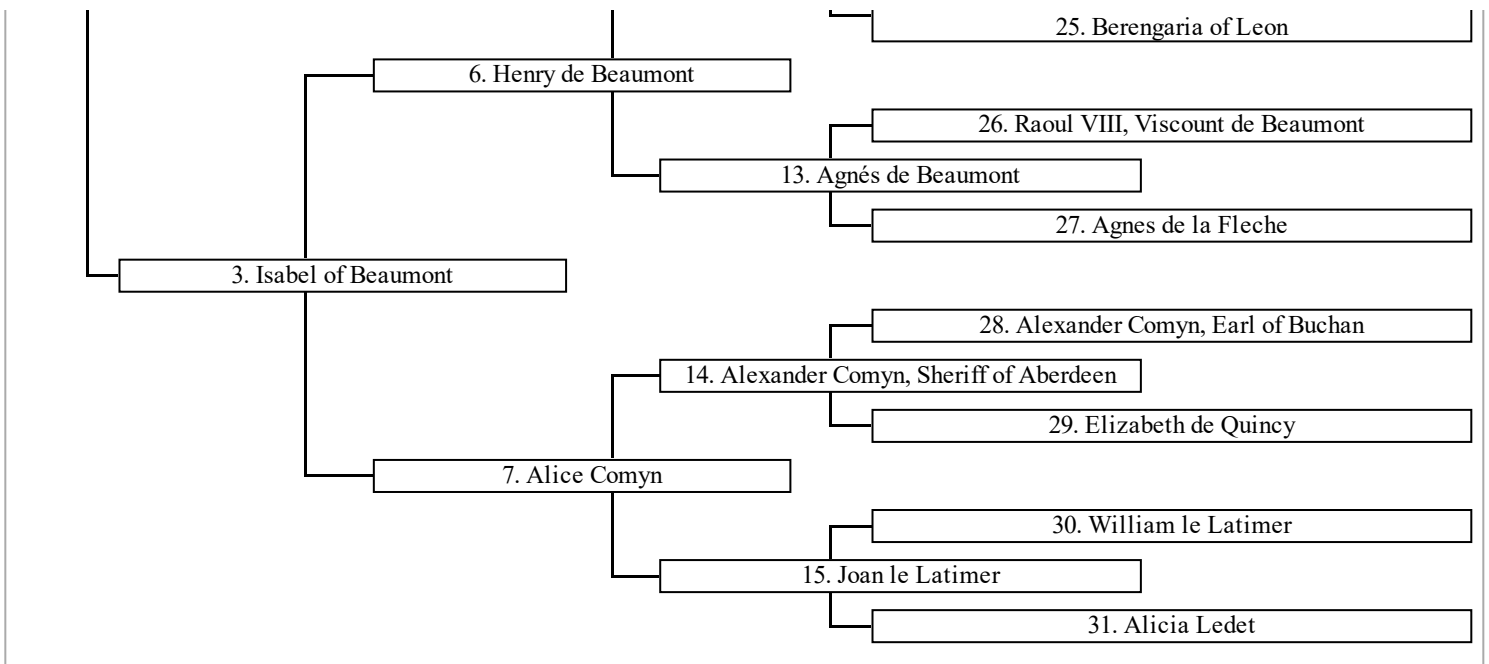
- Philippa of Lancaster (31 March 1360 – 19 July 1415), wife of John I of Portugal.
- John of Lancaster (c.1362/1364); died in early infancy.
- Elizabeth of Lancaster (21 February 1364 – 24 November 1426); married firstly John Hastings, 3rd Earl of Pembroke, secondly to John Holland, 1st Duke of Exeter, thirdly to John Cornwall, 1st Baron Fanhope.
- Edward of Lancaster (1365–1365).
- John of Lancaster (4 May 1366); died in early infancy.
- Henry IV of England (3 April 1367 – 20 March 1413); married firstly Mary de Bohun and secondly Joanna of Navarre.
- Isabel of Lancaster (b.1368); died young.

# The Book of the Duchess

Geoffrey Chaucer was commissioned by Gaunt to write a poem after Blanche's death which was titled *The Book of the Duchess*. The poem tells the story of the poet's dream. Wandering a wood, the poet discovers a knight clothed in black, and inquires of the knight's sorrow. The knight, meant to represent John of Gaunt, is mourning a terrible tragedy, which mirrors Gaunt's own extended mourning for Blanche.

# Ancestry





## References

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2. The Complete Peerage
3. L.A. Loschiavo, 'The birth of "Blanche the Duchesse": 1340 versus 1347', *Chaucer Review*, vol. 13 (1978), pp. 128–32.
4. BBC, Your Paintings: *The Marriage of John of Gaunt and Blanche of Lancaster at Reading Abbey, 19 May 1359 by Horace Wright, 1914*. BBC (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/yourpaintings/paintings/the-marriage-of-john-of-gaunt-and-blanche-of-lancaster-at-41601>)
5. Mortimer, Ian (2008). *The Perfect King The Life of Edward III, Father of the English Nation*. Vintage. p. 335.
6. Jean Froissart, *Le Joli Buisson de Jonece*, ed. A. Fourrier (Geneva, 1975), p. 55 (lines 246–47).
7. Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Book of the Duchess*, lines 905, 910, 942, 946, 950 (<http://omacl.org/Duchess/>)
8. J.J.N. Palmer, 'The historical context of the *Book of the Duchess*: a revision', *Chaucer Review*, vol. 8 (1974), pp. 253–61. She was traditionally believed to have died in 1369, but Palmer's evidence that she died the year before is now widely accepted by all scholars.
9. Froissart. *Joli Buisson*, p. 55 (lines 246–47).
10. O.D. Harris, "'Une tresriche sepulture': the tomb and chantry of John of Gaunt and Blanche of Lancaster in Old St Paul's Cathedral, London', *Church Monuments*, vol. 25 (2010), pp. 7–35.
11. Charles Cawley, *Medieval Lands, Kings of England 1066–1603*. Retrieved 6 March 2011

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