

The Battle Abbey Roll. Vol. I.
by
The Duchess of Cleveland.

Prepared by Michael A. Linton

[Return to Index](#)

Beke : This great Norman house was divided into two branches, that gave their name to Bec-Crespin and Bec-en Caux, and claimed to descend from Duke Rollo's daughter Crispina, the wife of Grimaldi, Prince of Monaco. Their coat of arms, "Fuselee d'argent et de gueules," was that of the Grimaldis. Other authorities derive them from Amfrid the Dane, whose son Turstin Goz is given as the common ancestor of the house of Avranches, Earls of Chester, and the Barons of Bec-Crespin, hereditary Constables of Normandy, and Castellans of Tiliieres. Again, Dugdale asserts that Walter Bec, the progenitor of the Lords Beke of Eresby, had "a fair inheritance in Flanders"; in this following a pedigree furnished by Glover in 1582.^[1] It is in some respects unreliable; for it further affirms that Walter Bec received Eresby by gift of the Conqueror, whereas in reality it was only acquired one hundred years afterwards. Two of the name are found in Domesday; Goisfrid de Bec, a great baron in Hertfordshire; and Walter Bec, a small sub-tenant in Buckinghamshire. From one or other of these—to judge by the Christian name, most likely the latter—descended another Walter Bec, who married the heiress of Hugh Fitz Pinco, entered in the Liber Niger as holding seven knight's fees in Lincolnshire of the Bishop of Durham. She brought the estate said to have been the gift of the Conqueror; and her great grandson John was summoned to Parliament as Lord Beke of Eresby in 1295. The succession is distinctly set forth in a charter by which this Lord of Eresby confirms all the grants made by his ancestors to Kirksted Abbey, from the time of its foundation in 1139. Therein are mentioned "Hugo films Pincionis abavus meus";—"Walterus Beke, proavus meus";—"Agnes filia Hugonis filii Pincionis, quondam uxor predicti Walteri Beke";—"Henricus Beke avus meus";—"Walterus Beke pater meus."

The first Walter and the heiress of Eresby had four sons; of whom Hugh, the first-born, died on his return from the Crusade of 1189, unmarried: and Henry, the next, "being weak of understanding, his brothers divided the inheritance with him." These were:—Walter, seated at Luseby in Lincolnshire, whose grandson and namesake was Constable of Lincoln Castle in the time of Henry III. and Edward I.: and Thomas, a priest. The weak-minded heir, however, found a well born and richly dowered bride, and was the father of Walter II., with whose three sons, John, Thomas, and Anthony, the succession closed.

John was, as I have said, a peer of the realm, with the grant of a yearly market and fair at Spilsby, and license to make a castle at Eresby. He died, a very old man, in 1303, the year after his only son, on whose death he adopted his grandson Robert de Willughby, and made over to him Eresby and the other estates. Robert was the son of the eldest of his two daughters, Alice, wife of William de Willughby, of Willughby in Lincolnshire, and was summoned to Parliament as Lord Willoughby de Eresby in 1313. His descendants in the male line held the barony till 1525, when it passed through an heiress to the Berties,^[2] from whom it has been transferred by the Burrells to the Heathcotes. Lord Beke's other co-heiress, Margery, married Richard de Harcourt, of Stanton-Harcourt, in Oxfordshire.

His two younger brothers, Thomas and Anthony, were both of them princes of the Church. Thomas was Chancellor of Oxford in 1269, Lord Treasurer of England in 1279, and Bishop of St. David's in 1280: but his fame was utterly eclipsed by that of his magnificent brother Anthony, Prince-Bishop of Durham, one of the chief potentates of his age, and "the proudest Lorde in Christientie." "No man in all the Realm, except the King, did equal him for habit, behaviour, and military pomp: and he was more versed in State affairs than in ecclesiastical duties; ever assisting the King most powerfully in his wars; having sometimes in Scotland 26 Standard Bearers, and of his ordinary Retinue 140 Knights, so that he was thought to be rather a temporal Prince than a priest or Bishop."—Dugdale. As Prince Palatine, there was not, in point of fact, a single attribute of sovereignty that did not belong to him. He levied taxes; raised troops; sate in judgment of life and death; coined money; instituted corporations by charter; created Barons, who formed his council or Parliament, and granted fairs and markets. He was Lord High Admiral of the seas or waters within or adjoining the Palatinate; impressed ships for war; and had Vice-Admirals and Courts of Admiralty. Nor was aught wanting of the state and dignity of Royalty. Nobles addressed him only on bended knee; and knights waited bare-headed in his presence-chamber. His wealth was enormous, and his expenditure as magnificent as his income. He was a great builder. Besides his own collegiate chapel at Bishop's Auckland, he founded the two great collegiate churches of Chester-le-Street and Lanchester in his diocese of Durham; he built the castle of Somerton, near Lincoln, and the Manor of Eltham; re-built and castellated Auckland: "buildyed or renewyd Kensington, and gave it to King or Prince"; and added greatly both to Alnwick and Barnard Castle. Another of his erections was his palace in London, Duresme Place. The lavish splendour of his household was proverbial. He is known to have given forty shillings (about £80 of our money) for as many fresh herrings in Lent:—and once, hearing that it had been said of some costly stuff offered for sale, "This cloth is so dear that even Bishop Anthony would not venture to pay for it," he immediately ordered the whole to be bought and cut up into horse-cloths. Yet his own mode of life was rigidly austere. Like his great predecessor, St. Cuthbert, he was never known to look a woman full in the face, always rose from his meals with an appetite, and never took but one sleep, saying that it did not become a man to turn himself in bed.

His chief delight was in war and feats of arms, for he was every inch a soldier; and the little army marching under the banner of St. Cuthbert was foremost in all Edward I.'s Scottish expeditions. None but himself was ever suffered to lead it in the field; and on one occasion, whilst fighting in the melee at the battle of Falkirk, he was met by the cry, "To your mass, O priest!" Langtoft's rhyming Chronicle praises his activity and boldness of heart:

"Le eveske de Duram, ke mouf fet a loer,
En conquerant la tere fu tuzjours li primer."

He "never left the precincts of his castle but in magnificent military array" r and a short-bladed sword inscribed with his name is still preserved at Auckland. Edward I. appointed him Constable of the Tower, and frequently employed him on embassies. When, as his ambassador to Rome, he brought a Royal gift of some vessels of pure gold to the Pope, "His Holiness, taking especial notice of his courtly behaviour and magnanimity of spirit, advanced him to the title of Patriarch of Jerusalem." He died in 1310, and was the first Bishop ever buried in Durham Cathedral, where he rests in the chapel of the Nine Altars. Before his time none had ever ventured to be laid near the sacred grave of St. Cuthbert; and such was the superstitious dread of the people, that at his funeral they did not dare to bring in the body through the church doors, but introduced it furtively through a whole broken in the wall for that purpose. This breach is, I believe, still visible. His heir was his nephew Robert, Lord Willoughby de Eresby.

It is remarkable that three other prelates—all of them collateral descendants of the House of Eresby, are found within the next half century, viz.: Thomas, elected Bishop of Lincoln in 1319, who died a few months afterwards; Anthony, "made Bishop of Norwich by the Pope's mandate in 1337, who, being as proud and overbearing as his 'magnanimous' namesake and kinsman, but without his good qualities, was poisoned by his servants in 1343"; and Thomas, third of the name, who again was Bishop of Lincoln. The first Thomas—Lord Beke's brother—"died in 1293, and as the last Thomas was elected to the see of Lincoln in 1342, it follows that there was no less than five bishops of the same name and family living within the brief period of half a century—a fact unparalleled in the history of the Anglican, perhaps even of the whole Catholic Church."—Herald and Genealogist, vol. vii., p. 453. A John Beke was Vice Chancellor of Oxford 1450-52. Beke's Inn, in that city, existed until the beginning of the sixteenth century.

Further ramifications of the family are to be met with. In 1156, Everard de Bec, and Alan de Bec (then a minor) held lands in Cambridge of Hugh de Dovres (Lib. Niger). Hugh Beke, a contemporary of Walter I., Lord of Eresby in right of his wife, married, like him, an heiress, who brought him Livingsbourne (since Bekesbourne), a chief member of the Cinque-port of Hastings, which he held in grand seijeanty of the King by the service of furnishing one ship. (Testa de Nevill.) "Bekesbourne appears to have passed into other hands about the end of the thirteenth century; but the name is met with in the neighbourhood about the beginning of the fifteenth century, from which time down to the present day the descent of the family is to be regularly traced.—Ibid.

- ^[1] The age of Elizabeth is said to have been prolific of mendacious heralds and spurious genealogies. A warrant was issued in 1547 by the Earl Marshal to Somerset Herald, "directed to all justices of the peace, constables, and head-boroughs, authorizing the apprehension of one W. Dakyns, 'a notable dealer in arms, and maker of false pedigrees, for which fault about XX. years past, he lost one of his ears.'"—Sir Bernard Burke. Glover was himself Somerset Herald in 1582, and "has always been esteemed an author of the greatest celebrity; so much so, that his works are extolled as the height of all attainable correctness: and are valued in as great a degree as the tables of Apollo were estimated in the Temple of Delphos."—Banks. Yet here we find "the divine Glover." as some of his disciples were pleased to call him, falsifying a date, and interpolating three generations. I fear Banks had some reason for speaking of the Herald's College as "that repertorium of romantic story."

- ^[2] Peregrine Bertie, Lord Willoughby de Eresby, "one of the Queen's best swordsmen," and appointed in 1587 her general in Flanders, is the hero of a rousing old ditty, preserved in Bishop Percy's 'Reliques of Ancient English Poetry,' which tells us how

"The bravest man in battle
Was brave Lord Willoughbie."

[Return to Main Index](#)