

Margaret Beaufort Transcript Season 4, Episode 8

Hello, and welcome to the Time Pieces History Podcast. Today, we're looking at Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry VII and sometimes described as 'the mother of the Tudors.'

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Margaret had a good start to her life – her father was the 1st Duke of Somerset and grandson of John of Gaunt, the 1st Duke of Lancaster. Born in 1443 in Bletsoe Castle in Bedfordshire, she was her parents' only child. At the time of her birth, Somerset was a key player in the court of Henry VI.

Not long after a military expedition to France on behalf of his king, Somerset and Henry fell out. Accused of treason, he was banished from court and died soon afterwards, leaving his daughter in the care of her mother, and her land and estates in wardship with the 1st Duke of Suffolk.

Suffolk arranged for his son, John de la Pole, to be married to Margaret when she was about two years old and the boy was only a little older. However, the marriage was annulled not long after, when it was pointed out that the couple were closely related – their great-grandmothers were sisters.

Margaret was also related to the king, as they shared a great-grandfather. Somerset's grandparents were unmarried, so all offspring were regarded as illegitimate. When Gaunt finally married his mistress, the Beaufort family were legitimised but banned from ascending the throne. This no doubt spurred Margaret's later ambitions.

Not long after, Henry VI, who'd clearly forgiven all the Beauforts, made Margaret the ward of his half-brothers, Jasper and Edmund Tudor, with the intention of marrying her to the latter. When she married him, she was 12 and he was 24.

Some accounts, unsurprisingly, show that Margaret simply went along with this arrangement, but others seem to suggest that she was 'offered' a choice between John and Edmund. This seems unlikely, given her age and position, and the fact that she was closely related to John.

Regardless, Margaret found herself a teenage mother, and quickly a teenage widow, when Edmund died of the plague two months before his son, the future King Henry VII, was born. The War of the Roses had just broken out, and the Lancastrian

Edmund had been taken captive by the Yorkists; Margaret probably barely knew her husband.

Childbirth was difficult for the young and small Margaret, and it's likely that some damage occurred which prevented her from having subsequent children. As soon as she'd recovered, her brother in law, Jasper, married her off to Sir Henry Stafford. They were also related, and a dispensation had to be granted before the second cousins could wed.

Interestingly, some sources again suggest that Margaret was the instigator in choosing her husband. They were married quite happily for a decade, and were sometimes able to visit the young Henry, still in the care of his uncle. The war was raging on, although it wasn't until 1461 that Margaret got involved.

The Yorkist Edward IV became king, and decided that Henry should be put under the wardship of one of his allies. At this time, it was wise for the Beauforts to try to stay close to the new king, and Margaret's cousin Henry, became friends with Edward.

Unfortunately, cousin Henry soon decided to go off and join the Lancastrians exiled in Scotland, and in 1464 King Edward IV blamed the rest of the family, embarking on a mission to punish them all. Margaret managed to effect a reconciliation, but the Wars of the Roses weren't over.

In 1470 Henry VI managed to briefly regain the throne, before Edward returned to unseat him. In 1471, Margaret's third husband died in battle – fighting on Edward's side. Henry was murdered, along with many of the Beauforts, and the young Henry had been fighting with his uncle Jasper and was forced to flee to Brittany.

Margaret quickly arranged a marriage to Thomas Lord Stanley, member of a powerful family and a key member of Edward's court. She spent several years working to persuade Edward to allow her son to return home, but he died in 1483, before that could happen.

This is where Margaret really got stuck in. Edward's son was crowned Edward V, with his brother the Duke of Gloucester ruling until the boy reached majority. However, he quickly declared the marriage of his brother Edward to Elizabeth Woodville invalid and their children illegitimate. And then he got himself crowned Richard III.

The two sons were banished to the Tower, where they may or may not have been murdered, depending on who you believe. But that's a story for another time. However, we do know that Margaret conspired with the widow Woodville to have her son named Henry VII and to marry Edward IV's daughter, thereby uniting the Lancastrian and Yorkist thrones.

They planned an uprising, with the Woodvilles supported by Henry and Jasper, who would come back from exile. The uprising failed, and as so many of her family were

involved (I'm not going to mention them, because they all seem to have the same names, and this is confusing enough!) Margaret was lucky to get away with her life.

Throughout all of these machinations, the inference is that Margaret was a driving force. She had arranged politically beneficial marriages for herself, and was attempting to do the same for her son. She manipulated her third husband's relative, the Duke of Buckingham, into the failed uprising, and worked to secure her fourth husband's position too.

In 1485, Henry had managed to raise an army and travelled to England to confront Richard III, with the final decisive battle fought at Bosworth Field. She may or may not have been instrumental in her husband Lord Stanley's decision not to respond to Richard summoning him to the battlefield, even though his son was taken hostage by the king.

Many of Stanley's relatives and supporters *did* join in the battle, and Richard was under the impression that the men were on his side. Margaret, though, had persuaded them to switch their allegiance to her son, a fact the king only learned during the fight itself.

Richard had split his army into three, putting two sections under the command of two trusted generals. Henry, inexperienced in warfare, allowed the Duke of Oxford to take charge of his men, and they stayed closer together.

Conditions were difficult, with some of Henry's men struggling to cross marshy ground. However, they quickly recovered and gained the upper hand. Richard urged one of his generals, Northumberland, to go and help, but he declined, either for personal reasons or because his troops couldn't get across a narrow ridge.

Richard was keen to kill Henry himself, although he succeeded only in killing his standard-bearer. Henry promptly dismounted from his horse and hid amongst his bodyguards. The king was separated from the majority of his troops and Margaret's stepson William Stanley went to help Henry.

Outnumbered, Richard was soon unhorsed but refused to retreat. It's not certain who struck the fatal blow, but he was killed with a halberd, or pole weapon, the force of which is thought to have driven his helmet into his skull.

After Henry's victory, Margaret was made a Countess and did secure Edward IV's daughter's hand in marriage for her son. She made sure she was on an almost equal footing with the new queen, although she wasn't simply handed power. She remained influential in court, though, and arranged the marriages of several of her grandchildren.

When Henry VII's wife died, Margaret took over many of the queen's responsibilities, and when his eldest son Arthur died, she secured the rights of his second son, the future Henry VIII.

And when Henry himself died some years later, his mother was executrix of his will. His new heir took advice from his grandmother in choosing his privy council, although Margaret died just two months after her son, in 1509.

Thanks for listening! Please tune on Thursday, and let me know what you think of today's episode too.