

Bess of Hardwick Transcript Season 4, Episode 11

Hello, and welcome to the Time Pieces History Podcast. Today, we're looking at Bess of Hardwick.

I'd love to know what you think of these episodes, so please come and find me on Twitter: @GudrunLauret, or leave a comment on your audio player of choice. Alternatively, you can pop a message onto the relevant podcast page over at gudrunlauret.com/podcast, where you'll find the shownotes, useful links and an episode transcript – no email address required to access that.

I went through a phase in my late teens and early 20s of reading biographies. If it wasn't rock musicians of the 1960s, it was women from history. A strange combination, I grant you. Anyway, I'm fairly sure I read one about Bess of Hardwick, or Elizabeth, Countess of Shrewsbury, around that time, but I must have borrowed it from the library, as I don't have it now.

Bess was born in Derbyshire 1527, and was married (and widowed) four times. Each time, Bess became wealthier and better connected, although she'd already had a good start in life – her father was a gentleman yeoman and owned several hundred acres of land.

Her first marriage, in 1543, was to the heir of a nearby estate, one Robert Barley or Barlow, who was aged about 13 at the time of the wedding. In actual fact, they never lived together and was probably a marriage of convenience – although to benefit Robert's family, rather than Bess. The unfortunate Robert died a year later, leaving Bess a very young widow.

A family friend arranged for her to go and stay with the Zouche family at Codnor Castle, which would have eased the pressure on her widowed mother, who had three other daughters to care for, as well as the only son. From there, Bess became lady in waiting to one Frances Gray, which paved her way to the Tudor court. Frances, of course, was the mother of Jane, Henry VIII's third wife.

It was at court that Bess met her second husband, Sir William Cavendish, who was 20 years her senior and a widower twice over. Cavendish had been a close ally of Thomas Cromwell and remained a favourite of the King – he served as treasurer of Henry's chamber.

While this marriage would have helped Bess cement her position, she also loved her husband, and they had a happy marriage. They had eight children, six of whom lived to adulthood, and the couple were both social climbers. The Dukes of Devonshire and Newcastle are both descendants of the Cavendishes.

Sadly, Cavendish died in 1557, a decade after the wedding and leaving the 30-year-old Bess a widow for the second time. By this point, the couple had purchased

Chatsworth Hall, and building and renovation work had been going on for some time. Bess had managed to get the property into joint names, which was unheard-of for the time.

The advantage of this was that the family was able to remain there after the death of Cavendish – as the oldest son was only seven, the estates would have gone into wardship had Bess not had her name on the deeds. Bess had been enthusiastic about the works carried out on the house, and had had a great deal of input into what was done.

In 1559, Bess married Sir William St Loe, who was even wealthier than Cavendish. St Loe was also extremely well-connected and close to the new Queen, Elizabeth I. He got his new wife a position as Lady of the Bedchamber, which put her front and centre for a dispute that became a scandal.

Jane Seymour's sister, Lady Katherine, had been closely watched since Elizabeth ascended the throne, because she too was of royal blood. She had married Lord Hertford or Edward Seymour, in secret, and became pregnant. Edward, also potential claimant to the throne, is described as a nephew of Jane, but hopefully not Katherine's son...

Anyway, Katherine decided to confess to Bess what she'd been up to, and Bess was not impressed. That rhymed and it wasn't supposed to! I digress. Katherine's unborn child, of course, was a strong contender to topple Elizabeth, who was already unpopular with the Catholic supporters of the Grays.

When Katherine could no longer hide the bump, Queen Elizabeth learned that Bess had known of the marriage, and accused her of plotting against her. She had both Bess and Katherine put in the Tower, and while Bess was released a few months later, she was dismissed from her position in disgrace.

In 1564, St Loe died in suspicious circumstances, and it's thought that he was poisoned by his younger brother. If that was an attempt to take the estates it failed, as St Loe had left everything to Bess – he even favoured her over his own two daughters.

By this point, Bess was independently wealthy and owned a number of properties as well as Chatsworth, and could have settled into a respectable, if early, retirement, overseeing renovations of her houses. She didn't, though.

In 1567, Bess married George Talbot, the 6th Earl of Shrewsbury, and became a countess. Shrewsbury owned most of the north of England and was a very powerful man. Bess made the somewhat creepy decision to further secure the futures of herself and her children by marrying two of her offspring to two of her husband's. She also made sure she retained ownership of Chatsworth.

Soon after the marriage, Shrewsbury was given responsibility for Mary, Queen of Scots. Forced to abdicate and then taken captive by her cousin Elizabeth I, Mary was brought to England and in need of somewhere to stay. The Shrewsburys became her captives, and the unfortunate Mary spent the last 15 years of her life with them.

Elizabeth I hadn't entirely forgiven Bess for the Katherine Gray scandal, but she admired her strength and resilience, and Bess proved useful – she sent her own spy into Mary's household and reported back everything she learned. The truce was short-lived, however, as Bess arranged the marriage of her daughter, also Elizabeth, to Charles Stuart, another claimant to the English throne.

Bess spent some more time in the Tower, but was eventually set free. This scandal, the pressure of having to take care of Mary, and the escalating costs of improvement works Bess was carrying out at Chatsworth put her marriage under strain and she moved back to Hardwick in 1584.

Having bought her family home from the estate of her brother, who died in debt, Bess now set her sights on restoring the Hall. It was completely remodelled over a period of five or six years, and Bess lived there with one of her sons and his family.

When Shrewsbury died in 1590 he made Bess the second-richest woman in the country; only the queen herself was wealthier. The new widow was still only in her 60s and with so much money at her disposal, embarked on a new project.

The original family home, now referred to as the Old Hall, was left incomplete as Bess began overseeing the construction of an entirely new building right next door. Completed in 1599, Hardwick Hall is a remarkable piece of architecture. It has huge glass windows, a two-storey great hall and monogrammed towers.

With that done, she spent the next nine years working on the Old Hall and another property nearby known as Oldcotes - sadly there is nothing left of it today. She died aged 81 in 1608, and was buried in Derby Cathedral.

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