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Then start music

Hello, and welcome to the Renaissance English History Podcast. I'm your host, Heather Teysko.

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So, let's get started.

Elizabeth Talbot, Countess of Shrewsbury is popularly known as Bess of Hardwick, and she's a woman I've become exceptionally fond of. She is an example of someone who created her own luck by taking the opportunities she had and making the most of them through her own smarts and energy. She was born into a family that was landed gentry, not noble, and she rose to become the second wealthiest woman in all of England, second only to Queen Elizabeth herself. She was part of the highest tier of nobility, in regular correspondence with William Cecil, Francis Walsingham, and others. She is often remembered as a dynasty builder, and often that's in a negative light, and she is also mostly remembered because her final husband, George Talbot, was Mary Queen of Scots' jailkeeper for 17 years. Her lasting legacy was her program of building works, including the famous Hardwick Hall.

Elizabeth was born around 1527, and she lived a pretty normal life early on, though she learned some incredibly important lessons about how women needed to take care of themselves. Her father, John, who had been a gentleman yeoman, died when she was very young, and her mother was left with children to care for, and a lot of uncertainty around her future and her finances. Bess watched her mother struggle to make ends meet. John's son and heir was still under age, and it was common then for underage heirs to be declared a "ward" so someone could buy the wardship and make money off of the lands until he was an adult. This was done with Bess's family, and as such, her mother was left with very little money to take care of her family.

When she was a young teenager she went to stay in the home of Anne Gainsford, Lady Zouche, and work as a sort of lady in waiting. This was common for young gentlewomen as a sort of finishing school. They would go stay with a household that was perhaps a few rungs higher than they were on the social scale, and they would learn valuable lessons about managing a household, and could possibly even someone to help them rise, perhaps even a husband. This is what happened to Bess, when she married Robert Barlow when she was still a teenager. He died when she was still very young, after only a year of marriage, but she was entitled to 1/3 of his land that he had inherited, which was called the widow's dower. His family were reluctant to give it to her, seeing as how she was still young and would marry again, and there were no children, but it was her legal right, and so she fought for it, and won. So she was awarded 1/3 of his estate, which was a decent income for a young woman who was still a teenager.

Her next move would be to the Grey home, which was a fortunate move for her as it brought her into contact with some of the very highest levels of nobility. This would have been the home of Frances Grey, who was Lady Jane Grey's mother, and Henry VIII's niece. Bess knew Lady Jane Grey, and for the rest of her life she kept a portrait of Jane, so we can imagine them having been friends, and Jane making an impression on Bess. It was at the Grey home where she met William Cavendish. He was a courtier and the Treasurer of the King's Chamber, who had served Cromwell in the dissolution of the monasteries, and he had made out quite well financially with that. She became Lady Cavendish. William was more than twice her age, and had two daughters, but it appears that their marriage was based on real feelings of attraction and affection. They were married for ten years before Sir William died, and during that time she had eight children, two of whom died in infancy.

Bess was sympathetic to the Protestants, which made sense considering she had served in the Protestant home of the Grey's, and her husband had made his fortune in the Dissolution of the Monasteries, so she wisely hedged her bets and asked Mary Tudor to be the godmother to her son Charles. But her son Henry was the godson of Elizabeth. The children from this marriage would all make good marriages themselves, one of whom married the younger brother of Lord Darnley, to whom Mary Queen of Scots had been married. Their daughter was Arbella Stuart, who had a claim to both the English and Scottish thrones through her father.

In 1559, Bess entered her third marriage, to William St. Loe. She was still only around 30, and had become wealthier through her marriage to William Cavendish, so she was an attractive prospect. William was the Captain of the Guard to Elizabeth, and owned large estates in Gloucestershire and Somerset. When you look at their letters, you can see that they also had a happy marriage, and he trusted Bess enormously. He left everything he had to her because he didn't have any sons, and he wanted to make sure that his daughters were protected, and his estates didn't go to his younger brother, who was a bad egg. In fact, his younger brother possibly poisoned William, without realizing that Bess was the sole heir. The two daughters, though, were already adults and married, so the bulk of the estate went directly to Bess.

When Sir William died, Bess was one of the wealthiest women in England with annual income of over 60,000 pounds which would be close to 17 million pounds in 2015 money. She also had become close with Queen Elizabeth, and was a Lady of the Bedchamber where she saw the Queen almost daily. She was still just in her late 30's, and she was still healthy, so of course she attracted the attention of a number of men. In 1568 she married George Talbot, the 6th Earl of Shrewsbury, and became a Countess. He had been married once before, and had seven children by that marriage, and two of those children married two of Bess's children from William Cavendish, so the families were further bound together.

In the very early years of her marriage to Shrewsbury they were happy, and their letters show that there was a lot of respect and affection between them. Sadly, events out of their control wound up ruining their marriage. I talked about Mary Queen of Scots in a previous episode, so if this information is new to you, be sure to check that out. When the Scottish lords rebelled against Mary and she was forced to abdicate in favor of her infant son James, she fled to England seeking Elizabeth's protection as a fellow Queen. But Elizabeth, and Cecil in particular, were uncertain of what to do with her. She was Catholic, and had a very good claim to the throne, a claim recognized by Catholics as being superior even to Elizabeth's, because the Catholics didn't recognize the validity of Henry's divorce from Catherine of Aragon, who was still alive when Anne Boleyn gave birth to Elizabeth, thus making her a product of bigamy and illegitimate in many Catholic eyes. So Elizabeth wasn't sure what to do with her, and took her into protective custody. Within a year of Bess and Shrewsbury's marriage, they had a new responsibility - being the keeper's of Mary Queen of Scots.

This would have been a thankless job for anyone, though early on before anyone realized how long it would go on, it seemed to be a mark of being in good favor with the Queen, and both Shrewsbury and Bess were excited to be so well thought of. But Shrewsbury was essentially a prisoner as well, because he couldn't just leave Mary unattended, so he needed to be there with her. If there were any sorts of plots to free her, the rumors would circulate that he wasn't strict enough with her. But on the other hand, she was the presumed heir to the throne, and he needed to tread carefully because certainly if she ever did become Queen, she would remember her treatment. So they were really stuck in a giant pickle, and over time, as the months turned into years and the years went on and on, it wore them both down. To make matters worse, the money that George Talbot had been allotted for Mary's care never went far enough, and he was constantly supplementing it from his own pockets. Early on Bess spent time doing needlework with Mary, and the two women became somewhat close.

But Bess could leave, and did leave. She went to Court, and she took charge of her building project at Chatsworth, which had been a project started by William Cavendish. She and Shrewsbury had signed the equivalent of prenuptial agreement, and Bess still had her own independent income. The fact that she wasn't tied to the dark and dreary castles where Mary was held, and she had money to work on her building projects likely irritated Shrewsbury to no end. Bess was, in every way, a very independent woman, and Shrewsbury's first wife had apparently been quite meek and mild, so he likely found the difference to be a lot more than he

had bargained for. Over time he became more and more exasperated with Bess, but also with the rest of his family. When Bess often took the side of his other children over him and urged him to take better care of them, it made him incredibly angry.

All of this stress wound up leading to the breakdown of their marriage, and it was really big news at court as it happened. Shrewsbury petitioned people like Cecil and Walsingham to force his wife to obey him, while Bess also petitioned them saying that she was being cheated of the lands and rents that were rightly hers as part of her prenuptial agreement. Time after time courts found in her favor, but Shrewsbury never followed through on any of their orders, and just grew more and more angry with everyone, including Bess and his children. Even Queen Elizabeth begged them to reconcile, but they never did, and Bess often blamed Mary in a large part for their breakup.

Mary was moved to another keeper where she got herself implicated in the plot that would lead to her execution, and Shrewsbury was a witness to her execution. He died in 1590, and Bess became the Dowager Countess of Shrewsbury. She spent the next part of her life advocating for the rights of her granddaughter Arbella, mentioned earlier, and starting another giant building project, Hardwick Hall, which would become her lasting legacy. Arbella came from the marriage of Bess's daughter, Elizabeth, to Charles Stuart, the son of the Countess of Lennox, who was herself the daughter of Margaret Tudor, Henry VIII's sister, and therefore also the daughter of Henry VII. So Charles was the great grandson of Henry VII making Arbella his great great granddaughter through Margaret Tudor. The marriage got them all into hot water with Queen Elizabeth -there was a law in place stating that anyone who had a claim to the throne needed to consult the Queen before getting married, which they didn't do. Arbella had a claim to both the thrones of Scotland and England, and became a small thorn in Queen Elizabeth's side. Bess raised Arbella herself after her parents both died, and there was a lot of fuss over who Arbella would marry, though nothing ever came out of all the plans, and Arbella herself became very frustrated at her lack of freedom, and tried to elope. Sadly, the two wound up falling out and Bess begged Queen Elizabeth to take Arbella off her hands.

Bess died in February of 1608, age 81. She does have a descendent on the throne - Queen Elizabeth II. Hardwick Hall still stands as a testament to this woman's clever tenacity, and her ability to brilliantly play her cards. There has been a lot of negativity around Bess, saying she was shrewd and a schemer, but it seems like it smells of sexism because if a man was doing the same things, he would be seen as ambitious, which would be good. Bess did want the best for her family, she wanted a good life for herself, and she wanted the lands that were her legal right, and she was clever about all of it. And for that reason, I think she's pretty awesome, and I hope you do too.

So that's it for this week. The book recommendation is *Bess of Hardwick Empire Builder* by Mary S. Lovell. I'll put a link up on the site and facebook page, which is [facebook.com/englandcast](https://www.facebook.com/englandcast), where you can again contact me, send me show ideas, or just say

nice things. And again, you can get all the book recommendations and supporting materials for each show on the blog at <http://www.Englandcast.com>. You can also check out my blog dedicated to inspiring excitement and passion about history, travel and the humanities at kuratory.com, that's k-u-r-a-t-o-r-y dot com. I've also started doing regular quick segments on different aspects of Tudor history on youtube, called the Tudor Minute. There's a link on the blog and facebook page. Thanks so much for your listenership and support. The next episode I do will be in partnership with the podcast History, Bitches, and will be on ghosts of the Renaissance, so I'm excited to put that together in time for Halloween. Talk to you soon!