

Bess of Hardwick's Letters

Letter ID: 149 (URL: <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=149>)

From: Bess of Hardwick;

To: Sir Francis Walsingham;

Date: 6 April 1584

Summary: Bess (countess of Shrewsbury) writes to Sir Francis Walsingham to 'unfold my strange miseries' (to do with marital discord with her husband, George, sixth earl of Shrewsbury) and to know 'what her Majesty is determined in this case'; asking for permission to let her sons 'seek their living in some other place'; and stating that she herself hopes to 'find some friend for meat and drink and so end my life'.

Archive: The National Archives, State Papers Domestic, Elizabeth I, 12/170, ff 10r-10v (item 6)

Delivery status: from Bess, sent

Letter features: Seal intact - no. Ribbon/floss – no. Letter packet - tuck and fold

Hands: Scribe A | unknown scribe | archivist | Bess of Hardwick |

Version: 1.0

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People Associated with Letter 149: Bess of Hardwick

Born Elizabeth Hardwick (in c.1521/2, d. 13 February 1608), the woman known to posterity as Bess of Hardwick married four times during her life, as a result of which her name changed from Hardwick to Barlow (or Barley), Cavendish, St Loe and then finally (when she was countess of Shrewsbury and then dowager countess) Talbot. As one of the five children of John Hardwick (1495-1528) of Hardwick, Derbyshire, and his first wife, Elizabeth (née Leake), Bess had three sisters (Mary, Jane and Alice) and one brother (James). The Hardwicks were established Derbyshire gentry who had inherited a modest manor house and c.400 acres in and around Hardwick. But when John died in 1528, and their lands were seized by the crown, Bess faced hardship. Bess's mother quickly remarried but her new husband, Ralph Leche of Chatsworth, Derbyshire, brought little land or money to the marriage, and three more daughters were born (Bess's half-sisters Elizabeth, Jane and Margaret). Little else is known of Bess's childhood but, while still young, she was married for the first time, to Robert Barlow (or Barley) of Barlow, Derbyshire, sometime in or before 1543. Barlow died in 1544 and Bess received a small inheritance. In 1547 she married the twice-widowed Sir William Cavendish, treasurer of the king's chamber. Bess and Cavendish had eight children, six of whom survived: Frances (1548), Henry (1550), William (1551, from whom the dukes of Devonshire are descended), Charles (1553, from whom the dukes of Newcastle and Portland are descended), Elizabeth (1554) and Mary (1556). Probably due to a mixture of affection and shared social ambition, Bess's second marriage was happy and fortuitous. She was now moving in courtly circles and experiencing (for the first time) considerable wealth. In 1549 Cavendish and Bess bought the estate of Chatsworth, which was held jointly in both their names and which he and then Bess, following Cavendish's death in 1557, ambitiously rebuilt. Soon after her second husband's death, and sometime before Elizabeth I's accession (in 1558), Bess married Sir William St Loe, a wealthy widower of ancient noble pedigree. St Loe was captain of the guard to the young queen and in addition to further improving Bess's finances, he also brought her into the queen's inner circle and she served briefly as a gentlewoman of the queen's privy chamber (in 1559). The marriage seems to have not been without affection; however, the two would have spent most of it apart - he serving the queen in London and Bess mostly at Chatsworth. Upon St Loe's death (probably in 1565), Bess inherited most of the estate. In 1567 Bess married for a final time, to George Talbot, sixth earl of Shrewsbury, one of the richest and most powerful men in England. To consolidate the union of their fortunes, the couple had Bess's eldest son, Henry, marry Shrewsbury's daughter (from his previous marriage), and Shrewsbury's eldest son, Gilbert (later the seventh earl), marry Bess's daughter, Mary. Also around this time, Shrewsbury was appointed to be the keeper of Mary Queen of Scots (from 1568-84). At first, relations between Bess and the Catholic Scottish queen seem to have been amicable; however, relations deteriorated all around as Bess's marriage to Shrewsbury broke down in the 1580s. An infamously nasty and highly public legal battle over estates ensued and finally the courts resolved that Shrewsbury provide Bess with a sizeable income from 1587 onwards (Shrewsbury died in 1590). In 1582, Bess took charge of the upbringing of her orphaned granddaughter, Arbella Stuart (1575-1615), claimant to the English

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and Scottish crowns. In 1587, Bess undertook her remarkable building works at Hardwick: the house now known as Hardwick Old Hall was complete by 1591; next to it, the extraordinary building now known as Hardwick New Hall was complete by 1599 and is one of the greatest architectural ventures of Elizabethan England. It was at Hardwick that Bess spent most of the remainder of her life, much of it devoted to caring for and managing Arbella, who came to loathe her existence in Derbyshire and devised several bizarre plans for her escape (to Bess's great distress). Bess also quarrelled with her eldest son, Henry, and disinherited both him and Arbella in her will. She left most of her estate to her beloved and faithful son, William Cavendish, who continued her great dynasty into the seventeenth century.

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People Associated with Letter 149: Sir Francis Walsingham

Sir Francis Walsingham (c.1532-1590), was a principal secretary and an intelligencer to Elizabeth I. During the reign of Queen Mary, he lived in exile in Europe. Then, having returned to England following the accession of Elizabeth I, he married Ursula (née St Barbe; with whom he had two daughters); and backed by powerful figures at court (such as Cecil and Leicester) he was initially appointed as an ambassador to France in 1570. In 1573 he was appointed as principal secretary and a privy councillor. By the early 1580s he was one of the queen's key advisors and intimates - evidenced by her nickname for him, her 'Moor'. Walsingham is known to posterity mainly for his complex coordination of intelligence operations - most famously for the discovery of the Babington Plot in 1586, which ultimately led to the execution of Mary Queen of Scots, previously held in the custodial charge of Bess and her fourth husband, George Talbot, sixth earl of Shrewsbury.

Other letters associated with Sir Francis Walsingham:

8 June 1576 (Recipient)(URL: <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=234>)

29 December 1578 (Recipient)(URL: <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=123>)

28 January 1581/2 (Recipient)(URL: <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=144>)

6 May 1582 (Recipient)(URL: <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=146>)

6 May 1582 (Recipient)(URL: <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=145>)

7 February 1582/3 (Recipient)(URL: <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=148>)

2 December 1585 (Recipient)(URL: <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=153>)

Normalised view of Letter 149

To the ryght honorable my very good frend Sir Francys Walsingham knyght her majestys
prencypall secretarye./

1584 6 April The Countesse of Shrewsbury.

Syr to vnfold my strange meserys shall but troble you so well knowing them, to tell you her
majestys gracyus words frome tyme to tyme shalbe also nedeles, nether to declare the fassyon
or cause of our delays or to remembar how by Letters from her selfe and others I was promysed
defence from all opressyon what saruyce I haue done how absolutly without feare proceded
multettuds can Iudge for many eyes behoulds me but yf my harte had not ben parfyete as
becomes me thys trauell had not nead I could haue made my owne peace./ now my desyre ys
being no Longar able to hould thys course that I may know what her magjesty ys detarmened in
thys case and that yt wyll please you to bynde me so much more as to be a meanes to [p]urchas
Lysence of her magjesty for my sonnes to seke ther Leueings in some other place and that
only ther deets may be prouided for which the Lande wyll hardly doe in my lord's Lyffe and
myne for synce they may not peacable inioy ther owne necessetye makes me sue for that which
heretofore I would haue hendared by all means, and ther banyshment I trust wyll pacyefye hys
indygnatyon, for my selfe I shall fynde some frend for meate and drenke and so end my Lyffe,
Sir I beseeche you be earnest for vs and so I take my Leaue./ thys monday./

your dystressed dessolat frend./

EShrouesbury

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Diplomatic view of Letter 149

[Address Leaf]

[Address Leaf: Notes]

April 6. 1584

Dom. [Later editorial note, hand: archivist]

To the ryght honorable my
very good frend S:^r Francys
Walsingham knyght her ma:^{ty}s
prencypall secreтарыe./

1584

6 April

The Countesse of
Shrewsbury.

[Overleaf]

[Overleaf: Notes]

12 [Foliation, hand: archivist]

[Letter Text]

[Letter Text: Notes]

6 [Item number, hand: archivist]

10 [Foliation, hand: archivist]

~~161~~ [Old foliation, hand: archivist]

11 [Foliation, hand: archivist]

(6.) [Item number, hand: archivist]

Syr to vnfold my strange meserys shall but troble you so well
knowing them, to tell you her ma:^{ty}s gracyus words frome
tyme to tyme shalbe also nedeles, nether to declare the
fassyon or cause of our delays or to remembar how by
Letters from her selfe and others I was promysed defence
from all opressyon what saruyce I haue done how
absolutly wth out feare proceded her mult y ettuds can Iudge
for many eyes behoulds me but yf my harte had not
ben parfyete as becomes me thys trauell had not nead

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I could haue made my owne peace./ now my desyre
ys being no Longar able to hould thys course that I
may know what her mag:^{ty} ys detarmened in thys
case and that yt wyll please you to bynde me so
much more as to be a meanes to ...urchas Lysence of
her mag:^{ty} for my sonnes to seke ther Leueings in some
other place and that only ther deets may be
prouided for w^{ch} the Lande wyll hardly doe in
my l. Lyffe and myne for synce they may not
peacable inioy ther owne *[deletion]* necessetye makes me
sue for that w^{ch} heretofore I would haue hendared
by all means, and ther banyshment I trust wyll
pacyefye hys indygnatyon, for my selfe I shall
fynde some frend for meate and drenke and so
end my Lyffe, S.^r I beseeche you be earnest for
vs and so I take my Leaue./ thys monday./

your dystresed dessolat frend./

EShrouesbury

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