

# Bess of Hardwick's Letters

**Letter ID: 032 (URL: <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=032>)**

From: Susan Wingfield, dowager countess of Kent (Susan (Bertie) Grey, Countess of Kent: 'my howse');

To: Bess of Hardwick;

Date: 26 January 1592/3

Summary: Susan Wingfield writes to Bess (dowager countess of Shrewsbury) informing her that her search for a clerk for Bess has yet been unsuccessful; but recommends the bearer of the letter as a porter. Apologises for employing a scribe for writing the letter, but 'my finger continues so evil as that I am not able to hold a pen'.

Archive: Folger Shakespeare Library, Cavendish-Talbot MSS, X.d.428 (38)

Delivery status: to Bess, sent

Letter features: Seal intact - no. Ribbon/floss – no. Letter packet - accordion

Hands: unknown scribe | archivist | Susan Wingfield, dowager countess of Kent |

Version: 1.0

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## **People Associated with Letter 032: Susan Wingfield, dowager countess of Kent**

Susan Wingfield (née Bertie, dowager countess of Kent; b. c.1553; still alive in 1611), married Bess's nephew John Wingfield after the death of her first husband (Renald Grey, de jure earl of Kent), in 1581. As the marriage took place without Elizabeth I's permission, Bess was involved in writing petitions to court in order to appease Elizabeth I's displeasure (see ID 148). When her husband was killed by a bullet to the head in 1596 (during Essex's expedition against Cadiz) she was left penniless and with numerous debts owing; she was granted an annuity by the queen a year later.

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## People Associated with Letter 032: 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.

## Normalised view of Letter 032

To the Righte honorable & good Lady the cowntis of Shrewsberye/

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My honorable good Lady, whearas yt pleased yow to Desier me to helpe yow to a Clarke and aporter, but as yet, I can not hear of ani one that is ffite ffor the office of a Clarke/ but for yowr porter, the bearer hearof I take to be a very fitt man, & for whose truethe I dair answeare/ otherwise I would haue been Loothe to write or speake in his behalfe, and I hoope yowr Ladiship shall find him willinge dilligent and redy to please, thus greatlie desiringe to hear of yowr Ladiships well doinge wishinge all thinges to fawle out to yowr Ladiships desier, prainge yow to pardon me that I write not this with my owne hand, ffor that my ffinger continuethe so evell as that I am not able to howld a penn, and soo I commit yowr Ladiship to god ffrom my howse the xxvjth of January /1592/

Your Ladiships most assured Lovinge Neece // // // // //

Susan Kent

## Diplomatic view of Letter 032

[Address Leaf]

### [Address Leaf: Notes]

Susan <sup>^Grey^</sup> Countess of  
Kent Widow of Reginald  
E. of Kent D.<sup>r</sup> to Rich<sup>d</sup>  
Bertie Esq<sup>r</sup>, by Catherine  
Dwtchess of Suffolk, his Wife.  
1592. [Later editorial note, hand: archivist]

To the Righte honorable &  
good Lady the cowntis  
of Shrewsberye/

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[Letter Text]

### [Letter Text: Notes]

X.d.428  
(38) [Item number, hand: archivist]  
151 [Old foliation/item number, hand: archivist]  
41 [Old foliation number, hand: archivist]

My honorable good Lady, whearas yt pleased yow to  
Desier me to helpe yow to a Clarke and aporter,  
but as yet, I can not hear of ani one that is  
ffite ffor the office of a Clarke/ but for yowr  
porter, the bearer hearof I take to be a  
very fitt man, & for whose truethe I dair  
answeare/ otherwise I would haue been Loothe  
to write or speake in his behalfe, and I  
hoope yowr Ladiship shall find him willinge  
dilligent and redy to please, thus greatlie  
desiringe to hear of yowr Ladiships well  
doinge wishinge all thinges to fawle out  
to yowr Ladiships desier, prainge yow to  
pardon me that I write not this w<sup>th</sup> my  
owne hand, ffor that my ffinger continuethe

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so evell as that I am not able to howld a  
penn, and soo I commit yowr Ladiship to god  
ffrom my howse the xxvj<sup>th</sup> of Ianuary /1592/

Your Ladiships most assured Lovinge  
Neece //////////////

Susan Kent  
§

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