

Bess of Hardwick's Letters

Letter ID: 036 (URL: <http://www.bessofhardwick.org/letter.jsp?letter=036>)

From: Thomas Kniveton;

To: Bess of Hardwick;

Date: 7 November [1571]

Summary: Thomas Kniveton writes to his sister-in-law, Bess (countess of Shrewsbury), regarding the health of her husband, George, sixth earl of Shrewsbury, who 'is reasonably well but cannot continue'. He also reports on information sent to Shrewsbury regarding the taking of Edinburgh castle and the movement of Scottish lords, which may have implications for the safety of the Shrewsbury's 'charge' (Mary Queen of Scots). This letter is undated but was apparently written during Shrewsbury's collapse with gout in June 1571.

Archive: Folger Shakespeare Library, Cavendish-Talbot MSS, X.d.428 (43)

Delivery status: to Bess, sent

Letter features: papered seal, embossed Ribbon/floss – no. Letter packet - tuck and fold

Hands: Knivet, Thomas | archivist |

Version: 1.0

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People Associated with Letter 036: Thomas Kniveton

Thomas Kniveton was Bess's brother-in-law through his marriage to her half-sister, Jane (née Leche), daughter of Ralph Leche and his wife (also Bess's mother), Elizabeth (née Leake; widow of John Hardwick). He also worked in the service of Bess's fourth husband, George, sixth earl of Shrewsbury. Alongside the letter that survives to Bess (ID 036), there are other letters in Kniveton's unmistakable handwriting (to Shrewsbury) scattered throughout the Talbot and Shrewsbury Papers at Lambeth Palace Library (e.g. Shrewsbury Papers, MS 698, fol. 45; and MS 699, fol. 23).

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People Associated with Letter 036: 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 036

To my Ladey

May yt please your honor my lord ys very quiet and reasonably well but can not so contynew for he spends ye moste parte of the daye in his concell chamber abowte George Savels landes without fyre, I thinke hys lordship myndes your honour shall abyde at Chatsworth tyll nere chrystmas but that I lyke not yf I myght be hard, yestreday sir Valentyne browne wrete to my lord aduertysmentes frome barwyk which he neuer dyd befor all hys mater was of delyveranse of some prisoners that at takynge of edynboroughe castle were comytted and that the great lordes of Scotland meant to lye at Scarborowe thys wynter and there was great provyssyon and assembly as thoughe therin were some cause for my lord ye rather to respect the safetie of hys charge, ether hys so wrytyng was for that some dowbt vppon thys occasion wilbe made of hyr safety here and therfor hyr remove more sowtherly shall Imedyatly be thought mete or els they hard of my lord's sycknes and gave thys occasion tunderstand therof the troth for hys vnwoonted aduertysmentes hath no playne meanyng as after ys lyke to apere, god kepe your honour well
7th nouembr.

your honour's humble and most bownden seruant

Tho. Knyvets

Diplomatic view of Letter 036

[Address Leaf]

[Address Leaf: Notes]

curious

Edenborough Castle taken [Later editorial note, hand: archivist]

To my Ladey

§

[Letter Text]

[Letter Text: Notes]

X.d.428

(43) [Item number, hand: archivist]

7 [Old foliation/item number, hand: archivist]

May yt please yo^r hono^r my l. ys v^r y quⁱ et
and reasonably well but can not so contynew
for he spends y^e moste parte of the daye in
his concell chamber abowte George Savels
landes withowt fyre, I thinke hys l. myndes
yo^r ho. shall abyde at Chat. tyll nere
chrystmas but that I lyke not yf I
myght be hard, yestreday *sir* Valentyne
browne wrete to my l adu^r tism^{tes} frome
barwyk w^{ch} he neu^r dyd befor all hys
mater was of delyv^r anse of some pⁱ soners
that at takynge of edynboroughe castle
were comytted and that the great lordes
of Scotland meant to lye at Scarborowe
thys wynter and there was great provyssyon
and assembly as thoughe th^r in were
some cause for my l. y^e rath^r to respect
the safetie of hys charge, eth^r hys so
wrytyng was for that s^one some dowbt
vppon thys occasion wilbe made of hyr safety
here and th^r for hyr remove more sowtherly

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shall Imedyatly be thought mete or els
they hard of my l. sycknes and gave thys
occasion tunderstand th^r of the troth for hys
vnwoonted adu^r tyssm^{ts} hath no playne meanyng
as aft^r ys lyke to apere, god kepe yo^r ho. well
7th nouembr.

yo^r ho.^r humble and most bownden
seruant

Tho. Knyvets

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