

CHAPTER 1

Before Bess

Andrew Cavendish, the Eleventh Duke of Devonshire, told me that he had not expected to survive the war. In the spring of 1944, he was a company commander in the Third Battalion of the Coldstream Guards – part of General Alexander’s Eighth Army which was fighting its way north through Italy in the long and bloody Battle of the Gothic Line. As a racing enthusiast, he judged his chances of returning home to be ‘very long odds indeed’. Coldstream officers, he explained, wore fawn rather than khaki trousers. As a result, they could be identified and picked off by German snipers. I asked the obvious question. Why did they not abandon what was surely no more than an affectation, and revert to regulation uniform? Before he replied, the Duke paused in astonishment. ‘We weren’t going to let the Germans tell us what to wear.’

The Duke had encapsulated, in a single sentence, all that is best and worst in the English aristocracy. He had also demonstrated the extraordinary confidence in way of life and standard of behaviour that comes from membership of a family which has been famous, rich and powerful for five hundred years or more. The Eleventh Duke was not an arrogant man. So another, often quoted, example of his self-assurance may be apocryphal. But if – when asked if he belonged to Pratt’s Club – he really did answer, ‘No. It belongs to me’, he was expressing a minor example of a greater truth. The Devonshires stamped their indelible mark on England. They helped to make it as it made them. Other families – the Russells, the Stanleys, the Cecils – played equally notable parts at moments in history. But the Devonshires endured. The family administered the dissolution of the monasteries, fought but failed to save Charles I, schemed successfully to depose James II, and produced a Prime Minister in the eighteenth century and, in the nineteenth, a politician who was described by John Buchan in *The Three Hostages* as ‘the epitome of Englishness’. They also built great houses, patronised the arts and, from time to time, scandalised respectable society.

Yet – despite what they had already achieved – when, in the seventeenth century, William Cavendish became Earl of Devonshire, the family felt so insecure about its origins that it employed a ‘pedigree

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maker' to trace its nobility back beyond the reign of Henry VII, the Welsh parvenu who, in 1485, defeated the Plantagenets on Bosworth Field and founded the Tudor monarchy.

The indisputable proof of noble lineage was the discovery of a blood line which stretched back to men who landed with William the Conqueror or fought with Henry V at Agincourt. The Devonshires' 'pedigree maker' knew his duty. He obligingly provided both a Norman and an Angevin knight – with equally dubious provenance. So the Cavendish story begins with a confusing mixture of fact and fiction. The family was happy to accept the inventions as historical truth.

The first myth was built around Robert Gernon. He possessed the essential qualification of mention in the *Domesday Book* and because of his kinship with a Ralph de Gernon – who lived in Essex, but was Lord of Bakewell in the Peak – established the necessary territorial connection. It was then necessary to find a suitable descendant who could relate Gernon to the Tudor Cavendishes. The pedigree maker found two – thus making it more difficult to expose his work as a fraud. One nominee was a Gernon descendant called Robert de Cavendish who, in 1226, contested the ownership of 6 acres of land along the Essex/Sussex border.¹ The only real evidence to support his claim to membership of the dynasty was his passion for the acquisition of land – an obsession which, for the next five hundred years, was a defining Cavendish preoccupation. The second contender was a Gernon who was said to have changed his name in order to inherit Cavendish Manor in Suffolk. In 1359, Cavendish Manor was certainly owned and occupied by a Sir John Cavendish – a busy and successful lawyer who became a judge. But the records show that he bought, rather than inherited, property and that he had no connection with the Gernons of the *Domesday Book*.

There is some circumstantial evidence to suggest a connection between Sir John and the Cavendish family. The College of Arms cannot identify the origin of the Cavendish crest, since it only began to compile 'a central register of Arms . . . when Henry VIII introduced a tax for having them in 1530'. But the College also reports that 'Sir John Cavendish, Chief Justice temp. Edward III, bore Sable three bucks heads cabossed Argent'. Three bucks still emblazon the Cavendish shield. They decorate the flag which flies over Chatsworth when the Duke is at home. Whether or not the connection could be confirmed, the 'Chief Justice temp. Edward III' was an ideal ancestor for a family of Tudor placemen. The Devonshires did not need much persuasion to accept him as their own.

Sir John Cavendish became the rising star of the Plantagenet judiciary. During the 1360s, he was a tax collector for Essex and Suffolk – a remunerative, but not exalted, position for a Cambridge graduate and

ambitious lawyer to occupy. He soon made up lost ground. In 1366 he became sergeant – a senior counsel – and by 1371 he was puisne judge in Common Pleas, inferior in rank only to a chief justice. A year later he became a justice of the King’s Bench. The sagacity which had contributed to his success was demonstrated by his refusal to rule on whether or not a female claimant was still a minor or old enough to inherit property. ‘There is no man in England who would rightly adjudge her age or her full age, for all women who are of the age of thirty want to be thought to be eighteen’.² In 1377, on the accession of Richard II, he was appointed Chief Justice with a salary of one hundred marks a year. In 1380 he was elected Chancellor of Cambridge University.

The necessary Agincourt connection was provided by Sir John’s younger son, another John. He was said to have been rewarded for his service on Saint Crispin’s Day 1415 by his appointment as Brouderer (embroiderer) of the King’s Wardrobe at the Court of Henry V. The award of needle-working rights was a strange way to recognise valour in battle and the improbability of the legend is confirmed by documents of the time which suggest that no one of that name ever held the title.³ The Cavendish genealogists attributed the discrepancy to a mistake by the record-keepers. The soldier who fought in the war against the French was certainly their invention. No one called Cavendish appears in the roll of knights who fought at Agincourt. It is unlikely that the pedigree maker built the Devonshire claim to nobility on an archer or one of the humble men-at-arms who stood shoulder to shoulder to repel the French charge.

In 1381, the poll tax – Richard II’s method of raising money to finance the Hundred Years War – provoked a revolt against the whole feudal system. On Blackheath in London, the Lollard priest, John Ball, preached the gospel of revolution to the gathering of rebellious Kentish bondsmen. His text was a question: ‘When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?’ Its message was reinforced by his sermon. ‘From the beginning all men were created alike and our bondage and servitude came by unjust oppression . . . Cast off the yoke of bondage and recover your liberty.’ What came to be called the Peasants’ Revolt demanded the commutation of servile dues and taxes, the limitation of rents and the repeal of the Statute of Labourers which held down wages by law. In *Piers Plowman*, the greatest poem of the Middle Ages, William Langland wrote that half of England ‘cursed the King and all his Council . . . for making such laws as labourers grieve’. That was a reflection of a hatred which created a lethal hostility to tax collectors and lawyers. The second John Cavendish was such a man.

In June 1381, as Wat Tyler and his Kentish followers marched on

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London, John Wraw, a Suffolk priest, led a related revolt which began at Liston – 10 miles away from the home of Chief Justice Cavendish. When news of the rising reached him, he hid his plate and valuables in the Liston church tower and fled to Ely. Neither the judge nor his property was spared. The church was looted and the manor sacked before the rebels marched on Bury Saint Edmunds and destroyed the monastery. On the following day – as much by chance as by intention – they captured Cavendish at Lakenheath. He was about to make good his escape across the Brandon River when Katherine Garner, a boat-woman with revolutionary inclinations, cut loose the ferry and allowed it to float downstream beyond his reach. The mob by which he was captured beheaded him on the spot – making him one of the few members of the family (religious and civil wars notwithstanding) to meet a violent death. They carried his head to Bury Saint Edmunds and set it on a spike in the market place, next to that of his friend, John of Canterbury, prior of the abbey. According to legend, they were arranged in a way which created the impression that the priest was hearing the Chief Justice's much-needed confession.⁴

The myths which grew up around the kernel of truth in the story included the claim that the East Anglian mob was motivated by more than general hatred of tax collectors. The legend describes the mobsters as 'incensed in a more than ordinary degree against the Chief Justice, his son having killed the notorious Watt Tyler'. So they 'dragged him into Bury market place and there beheaded him'.⁵ It is easy to understand why the Tudor Cavendishes welcomed such a dramatic episode being included in their pedigree – particularly since it is a tale of martyrdom endured by a man who supported the Crown against the rebellious peasantry. Unfortunately, the story has a flaw. In fact, the Chief Justice was beheaded many miles from Bury and on the day before Wat Tyler's death. Wat Tyler's assassin was Jenan or Ralph Standish.

If the Chief Justice was connected to the Cavendishes who became the Devonshires by more than their decision to copy his coat of arms, a link must have existed between him and a humble tradesman. A trades letter-book for 1312 describes Stephen Cavendish, a mercer, as 'the son of Watre de Ewelle, late apprentice of Walter de Cavendish', a guildsman of the same trade.⁶ The connection is confirmed by the practice – begun by Stephen Cavendish and continued by his son and grandson – of endowing the church of St Thomas the Martyr at Acton, and stipulating, in their wills, that they be buried within its walls. St Thomas was the church of the Mercers' Company. The likelihood is that the former Stephen de Ewelle changed his name to Cavendish in order to gain some sort of financial or social advantage from his master. Whatever the

reason, the Tudor Cavendishes' choice of forebear was not descended from a Norman knight. He was the protégé of a Plantagenet draper.

In his autobiography, Andrew Devonshire, the Eleventh Duke of Devonshire – a man incapable of real malice – wrote that Harold Macmillan ('Uncle Harold' by marriage) acted like, and would like to have been thought of as, a Trollopian grandee, but in reality was a Galsworthian businessman. The merchant who longed to be an aristocrat was not a new phenomenon in the Devonshire family. Several generations passed before they accepted their mercer origins. And for four hundred years the inventions about old nobility were accepted by men who might have been expected to recognise their implausibility. In 1851, the biography of Henry Cavendish – published in tribute to his scientific genius – blandly asserted that a Norman 'who had assisted William the Conqueror in his invasion of the realm . . . was the founding father of the dynasty'.

The dynasty did not have a founding father. It had a founding mother – Bess of Hardwick the four-times-married country girl who ruthlessly built the House of Cavendish. But the name was bequeathed to her descendants by her second husband, William Cavendish – son of George Cavendish, who had contested claims against his inheritance with uninhibited ferocity and, by 1525, had established uncontested ownership of the Cavendish property. The acquisitive instinct was in the Cavendish blood. It produced Cavendish tradition which George Cavendish could claim to have originated. He married money.

George Cavendish's first wife, Alice Smith, was the daughter of a Suffolk neighbour who brought to her marriage a dowry of local land and property in Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire. Three sons of the marriage survived: William, Thomas and George, the oldest of the brothers who – like his father before him – inherited the whole estate, after winning lawsuits brought against him by his dead mother's relations. His fortune was sufficient to maintain him in dignity for life. But he chose public service of a sort. In or about 1525, the year of his father's death, he became gentleman usher to Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, Archbishop of York, Lord Chancellor for life, twice Henry VIII's nominee for the papacy and the man who, above all others, made Tudor England a great power in the world. George Cavendish remained with Wolsey beyond the Cardinal's fall from royal grace in 1529. He was still in attendance when Wolsey died in Leicester in 1530 and he remained faithful to his old master's memory for the rest of his life. Immediately after Wolsey's death he was called before the Privy Council to confirm or deny rumours that the Cardinal's last words had been an incitement to treason. His answers were an object lesson in how to reconcile loyalty

and self-preservation. 'My Lord of Norfolk spoke to me first . . . "How say ye it is reported that your master spoke certain words, even before his departure from this life; the truth whereof I doubt not ye know" . . . "Forsoot" quoth I. "I was so diligent attending more to the preservation of his life than I was to note and mark every word that he spake: and, sir, indeed he spoke many idle words, as men in such extremities do, the which I cannot now remember."⁷

Surprisingly for an inquisition which thought it worth exhuming the last words of a dying man, the equivocation was accepted as proof that Cavendish was a loyal servant of the King as well as true to the memory of his old master. In consequence, he was offered employment both by Henry VIII and the Duke of Norfolk. Both offers were declined. All he asked for was a horse and a cart in which he could carry his chattels back to Suffolk. By the King's command he was given six of the dead Cardinal's best horses, a wagon, 5 marks for his expenses, £10 for wages due and an *ex gratia* grant of £20.

The rest of his life was spent in quiet retirement – perhaps because he was out of sympathy with the King's refusal to accept the authority of the Pope. His second wife was the niece of Thomas More who, although once the obedient servant of Henry VIII, had opposed the King's determination to flout the judgment of Rome and marry Anne Boleyn. There is no evidence to suggest that she shared her uncle's view that King Henry could not – legally and legitimately – annul his marriage to Catherine of Aragon. But the fact that she knew and occasionally met More was enough to put her life and freedom in jeopardy. Cavendish passed his time writing a biography of Wolsey which – more because of fashion than prejudice – was not published for more than a century after it was completed and then only in garbled and compressed form. For years its provenance was disputed. Then, in 1814, the Reverend Joseph Hunter – an antiquarian most famous for his *History of Hallamshire* – pronounced in Cavendish's favour. His judgement was supported by Samuel Weller Singer, whose 1821 edition omitted a number of laudatory poems which Cavendish had added in an appendix. The preface explained why. 'It is to be regretted that [the] artless narrative of facts in prose should have evoked the muse [of verse] in vain.'

Whatever the quality of either the poetry or the prose, the biography leaves no doubt that George Cavendish remained devoted to his deposed and discredited master. His *Life of Cardinal Wolsey* is unstinting in its praise of a man who 'executed his office . . . so justly and exactly that he was held in great estimation'.⁸ There are passages in which the encomium is slightly double-edged. 'In fullness of time he served all their turns, so they had their purposes and he had their good will.'⁹

But, surprising for an era in which past allegiances were rarely forgiven, his loyalty did not prejudice the new regime against him. Indeed it may have counted in his favour. For it is reasonable to suppose that it was thanks to him that, after Wolsey's fall, his brother William Cavendish was employed by Thomas Cromwell – Master of the Rolls, Keeper of the Privy Seals, Vicar General and, for almost ten years, after the King, the most powerful and feared man in England.

Unlike his brother, George, William Cavendish had neither attended Cambridge nor registered at Gray's Inn. Apart from that, nothing else is known about his life and work before 1531, the date in which he is first mentioned in Cromwell's papers.¹⁰ A year later he was assisting Cromwell in the dissolution of the monasteries.

The process had begun long before Cromwell became the instrument of the King's greed. As early as the end of the fifteenth century Bishop Alcock of Ely had closed the nunnery of Saint Radegund in Cambridge, on grounds of the dissolute lifestyle of the sisters, and Bishop Fisher of Rochester had dissolved two Kentish houses for the same reason. The Saint Radegund building had become Jesus College and Bishop Fisher had spent the income from Kent on funding St John's College in the same city. But what had begun as a genuine reform became a method of financial royal expenditure, first in the reign of Henry VII and then, more extensively, in the interest of his son. Some of the money was put to good use. Wolsey, acting on the authority of a papal bull, dissolved a score of monasteries and used the money so acquired to build schools and colleges in Ipswich and Oxford. The pattern was firmly established with the closure of Christchurch in Aldgate.¹¹ But it was Cromwell who spread the process throughout the kingdom and diverted capital, endowments and revenue to the royal treasury. The surrender of the previous incumbents was accepted, on Thomas Cromwell's behalf, by William Cavendish.

In 1533, parliament created the Court of Augmentation to give the dissolution the trappings of legitimacy – usually by providing a pension for the monks and nuns while expropriating the monasteries and convents. Three years later William Cavendish became one of its auditors on a salary of £20 a year which was increased by the profit that he was allowed to make on the sale of the property. Most of his work was done in the Midlands and the Home Counties, though there were occasional excursions further afield. From time to time he sent accounts of his activities to the courts. They usually emphasised the difficulty of his work and the success with which his duties had been discharged. 'Saint Sepulchres of Canterbury' proved 'very arduous and painful to gather and receive.'¹² At Little Harlow the prioress took 'her discharge

like a wise woman'.¹³ But at Saint Albans the prior 'began to wax melancholy, saying that his friends counselled to die rather than to surrender'.¹⁴ The godly man did not accept their advice. Instead he made an arrangement by which he leased most of the abbey to Cavendish and kept the rest – as his personal possession.

There is no doubt that William Cavendish exploited his position for personal gain, in a way which modern society would regard as corrupt. But in Tudor England such abuse was not so much accepted as expected, as long as the malfeasance remained within moderate limits. From time to time Cavendish was accused, with inconclusive results, of going too far – or allowing his greed to become too obvious. In 1533 Robert Farrington, a Cambridge scholar, complained that he had been cheated of 4 marks which were rightfully his due.¹⁵ Five years later Cavendish was found to have accepted unauthorised gifts of plate from the Abbot of Merrivale, who hoped that what amounted to a bribe would guarantee that his abbey was not sequestered. In the same year Cavendish was indicted for claiming unjustified expenses – the invoice for £34 16s 8d being 'written in his own hand and being without the knowledge of the clerks'.¹⁶ He was excused the expenses fraud after making a humble apology and attributing the discrepancy to what he described as an error built on a misunderstanding. In 1540 he was judged to be 'guilty of malpractice during his audit at Darley, Pipewell, Merrivale, Lilleshall and Stafford'.¹⁷ Once more, censure was not followed by punishment. By then he had achieved a status which guaranteed that he would be acquitted of all but the most serious indictment. He had evolved from auditor to henchman.

In the summer of 1538 he had arranged – by methods which he did not reveal to the court – for a Lincolnshire priest to give evidence in the trial of Henry Litherland, the Vicar of Newark. Litherland was convicted of treason and executed. Cavendish had exposed a traitor. A man who could perform such service to the Crown would not be prevented from acquiring valuable property – in the course of duty – on terms so favourable that the transaction amounted to theft. Cavendish was in an ideal position to gratify his passion for land. It is impossible to distinguish between those of his numerous land deals which were acquired honestly (at least by the standards of the time) and those which even Tudor England would have condemned as illegal. But many of the grants of local land which followed his official duties were authorised recompense for his success in filling the King's coffers.

In one way and another he acquired Northaw Manor in Hertfordshire¹⁸ together with the associated properties including rectories in Cardigan and Berwick. That was no more than a beginning. By 1538 his

inventory of property included the site of the Grey Friars monastery in Stafford, related premises in Stoke and, most significantly as it turned out, abbey granges in Lilleshall – where he had conducted an audit which was subsequently said to be corrupt. Apart from Henry VIII himself, the major benefactors of the dissolutions were the Talbots, the Russells and the Dorsets. But other families – less exalted in Tudor times – built their subsequent fame and fortune on the plunder of holy houses. Thanks to Sir William, the Cavendishes were among them.

Within two days in 1540, William Cavendish was dealt a double blow. Margaret, his wife, died on June 9 and on June 10 Thomas Cromwell was arrested. A bill of attainder – certifying that Cromwell had committed treason by promoting the marriage between Henry and Anne of Cleves – was passed on June 29 and he was executed a month later. William survived both tragedies with remarkable ease. Death was accepted with equanimity in sixteenth-century England. Close connection with a convicted traitor was less easily brushed aside. But Cavendish not only avoided banishment or imprisonment. He was promoted. In August, less than two months after Cromwell's death, he was appointed one of the three commissioners who were to support and assist the Lord Treasurer in Ireland. He was allowed 13s 4d a day for living expenses. The senior commissioner received 20s.

The commissioners were appointed to survey the King's land, to award portions of it as a sign of royal esteem (where appropriate and in anticipation of the Irish parliament being reconvened) and to advise on the possibility of reducing the number of Irish military garrisons. They were also charged with examining the accounts of Sir William Brabazon, the Vice-Treasurer, who was suspected of corruption beyond even the tolerance of the Tudor Court. Inevitably, their remit was extended to supervising the dissolution of the Irish monasteries. Anthony St Ledger, the Deputy of Ireland, told the King that 'Mr Cavendish took great pains in your said service . . . And I note him to be such a man who little feareth the displeasure of any man.'¹⁹ Cavendish was also – despite the occasional discrepancies in his accounts, which were almost certainly not the result of incompetence – judged to be a man of precise intellect and careful judgement.

After three years of arduous and uncongenial labour – only interrupted by a brief return to England in 1541 during which Cavendish married his second wife, Elizabeth Parker of Pollingford in Suffolk – the two surviving Irish commissioners reported that their work was done. The Dublin parliament had met and declared Henry to be King of Ireland. Cavendish resumed work in the Office of Auditor in the Court of Augmentations, supervising the disposal of recently vacated

monastic land and property. Then, in 1546 tragedy struck again. His second wife died in childbirth.

Once more personal grief was assuaged by professional success. An instruction to audit the monasteries in Boulogne was suddenly countermanded. Cavendish was immediately to become Treasurer of the Chamber – in effect managing the King's private accounts – on a salary of £100 a year, as much again in living expenses, £20 to pay clerks, £10 for boat hire (transport between the Tower of London and Hampton Court) and another £10 for office expansion. Equally important, in terms of both prestige and opportunities, he would become a figure in the Court of Henry VIII and would even occasionally attend meetings of the Privy Council itself.

Perhaps the demand that Cavendish should provide weekly statements of account was no more than good financial practice. But it is possible that he brought with him a reputation for dubious dealing. Whatever the reason, he was required to demonstrate his probity and efficiency. He responded in the grand manner by immediately preparing an hitherto unheard-of estimation of the office's overall financial position. Debts of £14,000 were outstanding, leaving him so short of funds that he would be able to discharge only the most pressing debts. A precise statement was impossible since his predecessor, who had not been given the account books, had bequeathed him records which were not up to date. The Privy Council was satisfied with the explanation and, as a matter of routine, issued him warrants to spend the King's money as he thought fit.

William Cavendish – one of the 'Gentlemen of Hertfordshire' who, in 1546, were chosen to attend the Admiral of France when he visited England – became a figure of consequence in Tudor England. His success, indeed his survival, was only partly attributed to his ruthless ambition and flexible principles. He was fortunate to be in the right places at the right times and his luck survived the death of Henry VIII in 1547. Cavendish remained – offices and prestige intact – in the service of the new King, Edward VI. All in all, it was an eventful year. In the notebook* in which he recorded both notable public and significant private events, he wrote: 'Memorandum. That i was married unto Elizabeth Hardwick, my third wife, in Leicestershire at Bradgate House, the 20th of August in the first year of King Edward 6 at 2 of the clock after midnight, the domynical letter B†.'

* The notebook was lost. It was last seen in Welbeck Abbey in 1946.

† The letter – related to the date on which the first Sunday in January fell – was used in church calendars.

CHAPTER 2

Four Weddings and . . .

Elizabeth Barlow – Bess of Hardwick – was the daughter of John Hardwick, a Derbyshire yeoman who farmed 450 acres in his native county and earned rent for another 100 acres in Lincolnshire.¹ His ancestors had inhabited the Hardwick area since the end of the fourteenth century as tenants of the Savages of Stainsbury to whom they were probably related by marriage. They lived in a large farmhouse that was protected, on one side, by a sheer drop down to the River Doe Lea. With the passage of the years, it came to be called Hardwick Hall. The Hardwicks – John and his wife, born Elizabeth Leake of nearby Haslam – had four daughters and a son. Sources disagree about when their daughter Elizabeth was born. The evidence points to sometime between February 1521 and May 1522*. Her only brother, James, was born in 1526 and was barely a year old when his father died at the age of forty-one. In consequence the whole family was the object of attention from the Office of Wards.

Henry VII had devised an ingenious way of raising revenue which Henry VIII implemented with undisguised enthusiasm. The gentlemen of England were required to place themselves at the service of their sovereign when the safety of the realm was threatened. Anyone unpatriotic enough to inherit a family estate before he was old enough to bear arms had to compensate for the gap which his infancy left in the line of battle. The compensation was the contribution of some of his inheritance towards the upkeep of the royal household. John Hardwick married late in life and – on the reasonable assumption that he would die before his son came of age – determined to frustrate the Tudor laws of inheritance. He left all his land and property in the hands of a trust which was to administer the estate for the twenty years before James, his son, came of age. Meanwhile, the income was to be used for the benefit of his widow and the welfare of his children with suitable dowries (between 40 and 60 marks [£30 to £40]) being provided for each of his daughters. That, he felt certain, would be enough to find them husbands ‘of a middling sort’.²

*The conclusion of the latest research by Philip Ridden of Nottingham University.

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The whole arrangement was so obviously a contrivance that it is hard to imagine why John Hardwick believed that it would be allowed to stand. But, initially, it was. The legal system of the day required that an Inquisition Post Mortem enquired into the nature, and general purposes, of the trust. Surprisingly it found the arrangement a legitimate attempt efficiently to manage Hardwick's legacy rather than a contrivance to avoid (or even evade) paying the King his rightful dues. Unfortunately for the Hardwick family, the Office of Wards was not so easily convinced. It insisted that the Feodracy – its investigative arm – re-examine the case. Three commissioners were appointed.

Henry VIII by Grace of God, King of England and France, defender of the faith and Lord of Ireland to his beloved and faithful John Gyfford and his beloved John Vernon Esquire and Anthony Babbington esquire, greetings . . . Know that we have assigned to you . . . to enquire by the oath of true men of Derby . . . by whom the truth of the matter can be better known, what lands and tenements John Hardwick of Hardwyke Hall deceased . . . held both in demand and in service in the county aforesaid on the day which the same John Hardwyke died.³

Two of the commissioners, John Vernon of Haddon Hall and Anthony Babbington, were friends and neighbours. That may account for the length of time which the deliberations took and for the acceptance, in evidence, of clearly bogus claims about John Hardwick's having disposed of his property long before he died. John Hardwick had failed to sign all the necessary documents.⁴ But, even had the formalities been observed, the case would have gone against him. Whatever their inclinations, the commission had no choice but to conclude that his estate had, in effect, passed into the possession of his only son, an infant, and was, in consequence, forfeit to the Crown.

The surveyor, who was employed by the Commission, estimated that the value of the contested property was £20 a year. No doubt influenced by the members who were John Hardwick's friends, he recommended that the widow be treated leniently. The Office of Wards decided that a quarter of the legacy was to be used as a jointure for Amy Racheford – a young lady whose *locus standi* remains a mystery. John Bugby, a courtier with the title 'Officer of the Pantry', bought another quarter for £20 which was to be paid to the Crown in three annual instalments. He was also granted the wardship of the Hardwick daughters, an obligation which carried with it the right to profit from their marriage settlements. Half of the land – including Hardwick Hall – was kept in the King's possession. Elizabeth continued to live in the Hall – either

by grace and favour or on payment of a peppercorn rent – and rented back half of what had been her land from the Office of Wards.⁵ Nobody was satisfied with the outcome. According to John Bugby – who made an official complaint to the commission – John Lecke and Henry Marmyon (the two original executors of John Hardwick's will) had reacted to their exclusion from its bequests by attacking Hardwick Hall and breaking all its windows.⁶ The story was a malicious invention.

Infant destitution is one of the myths which helped to create the legend that still surrounds Bess. During the years which followed the death of her first husband, Elizabeth Hardwick (née Leake) – Bess's mother – did not live in grinding poverty. But both her income and her place in society substantially deteriorated. The only way to improve her circumstances was to remarry. Unhappily the man she chose – or the only husband available – was Ralph Leche, the younger son of the Leches of nearby Chatsworth. Leche's father – also Ralph – was, or was about to become, a man of substance. He had negotiated land sales with Thomas Cromwell on behalf of Derbyshire smallholders and had acted as agent for the Earl of Shrewsbury during the purchase of additions to his family's property. In 1535 he was appointed 'a commissioner to enquire into the spirituality of the county [of Derbyshire] recently transferred from Pope to King'.⁷ But the younger Ralph – either because of a temporary change in political fashion or his father's parsimony – had nothing to contribute to the marriage except an annuity (variously estimated at £6 13s 4d and £10 13s 4d a year) and the income from some scattered lands in the south of Derbyshire. Imprisoned for debt in 1538 and 1544, he died in 1549.⁸

According to Elizabeth, Leche deserted her and her children. Whether or not that complaint was justified, he certainly failed to provide the security which his union with Elizabeth was supposed to bring. In consequence, Bess – his stepdaughter – was brought up in an atmosphere of regret and resentment that the family's right to place and property had somehow been snatched away. No doubt that contributed to the creation of what one of her detractors called 'a woman of masculine understanding and conduct'.⁹ It certainly made her mother and stepfather eager to find her a suitable husband. Bess was still young when, in the spring of 1543, she was betrothed to thirteen-year-old Robert Barlow* – the son of a close neighbour, a distant relative, and a young man of substantial means.

The evidence suggests that Bess was motivated by neither love nor the need for security but pity. Nathaniel Johnson, the seventeenth-century

* Some contemporary papers refer to him as Barley.

the devonshires

Yorkshire antiquarian, wrote that he was 'told by some ancient gentleman [that] Mr Barlow lay sick of a Chronic Distemper. In which time this young gentlewoman, making many visits upon account of them being neighbourhood in the country and out of kindness to him being very solicitous to afford him all the help she was able to do him in his sickness, ordering his diet and being then young and handsome he fell in love with her.'¹⁰ The circumstances of their meeting, if not the nature of her affection, is not in doubt. Bess met Robert Barlow when she was in service – part maid and part lady-in-waiting – either in the household of Frances Grey, wife of the Marquis of Dorset, or 'in London attending Lady Zouche'. Both women were Bess's distant relatives.

There followed, on April 24 1543, one of the unconsummated adolescent marriages by which the Tudor aristocracy secured advantageous alliances – leaving the 'bedding' to follow when the happy couple reached a suitable age. So the wooing and wedding may not have been as romantic as Johnson's account suggest. And the antiquarian slightly spoilt his own story – and provided evidence to support the sceptics – by repeating an unsubstantiated allegation made a century earlier. 'She took such advantage of [Barlow's] great affection for her that, for lack of issue by her, he settled a large inheritance of land upon herself and her heirs, by which his death in a short time after, she fully enjoyed.'¹¹ But whether Bess's intention was to exploit or comfort Barlow their union constituted the first episode in a matrimonial saga in which Bess is represented as always marrying for money rather than love. Horace Walpole even presumed to describe the attribute which enabled her to profit from each marriage.

Four times the nuptial bed she warmed,
And every time so well performed,
That when death spoiled each Husband's billing,
He left the widow every shilling.

Tudor portraits are notoriously unflattering. So the earliest known likeness of Bess, painted in about 1560* when she was in her mid-thirties, may do her less than justice. But it certainly does not suggest that – even at the time of her first marriage – she was a ravishing beauty. In so much as appearance is an indication of character, it confirms her reputation as a woman of single-minded determination and iron will – not attributes which the Tudor gentry always found

* It is still to be seen in Hardwick Hall.

attractive in women. The portrait does reveal, beyond doubt, the extent of her aspiration. She is dressed, quite literally, like a queen – black velvet gown, lined with fur and decorated with pearls. Whatever attracted Barlow to Bess and Bess to him, the importance of the marriage is clear. It was the first of Bess's great matrimonial leaps from obscurity on a modest income to the fame and wealth which made her, after Queen Elizabeth, the greatest lady in all England.

Barlow was denied the opportunity to advance his bride towards the status which she was determined to achieve. He died on December 19 1544. The right to inherit what money Robert Barlow had left was put in doubt by his early death. He was still a minor and his father was still alive. So for the second time in her young life, Bess's prospects were in jeopardy of forfeit to the Office of Wards – or the Court of Wards as it had become. And a second possible impediment imperilled her inheritance. According to the Duchess of Newcastle, wife of Bess's grandson, Barlow had 'died before they were bedded together, they both being very young'. If that was so, Bess's inheritance rights were extinguished by the fact that the marriage – not being consummated – was a fiction. Bess was in good company. The arguments which ended in the Reformation turned on the same point. If Prince Arthur – the eldest son of Henry VII who died in youth before he succeeded to the throne – had failed to consummate his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, there was no impediment to her becoming his brother's wife and Queen to Henry VIII. But if, in his own coarse words, Arthur had 'spent the [wedding] night in Aragon' the marriage was invalid and Anne Boleyn was the true Queen of England.

Virgin or not, Bess claimed a 'widow's dower' – one third of the income which was earned by her late husband's estate. The Barlow family and Sir Peter Frecheville of Stavely – who had bought the wardship of George Barlow, Robert's twelve-year-old brother and natural heir – contested her claim. Bess – in her seventeenth year – began the first of the long, numerous and complicated legal actions which were to be a feature of her life. No doubt with the help of her mother – who had already suffered at the hands of the Office of Wards – she took her case to court. Frecheville argued first on a point of law (probably that the marriage was never consummated) that Bess had no entitlement. Then he claimed that part of the rent, included in Bess's demands, was for property leased, rather than owned, by the Barlow family. The case dragged on.

In the autumn of 1545, Frecheville offered a compromise – 'a small recompense . . . at his pleasure',¹² subject to Bess's undertaking to abandon all other claims on the Barlow property. The widow – impelled

by desperate need rather than satisfaction – was at first inclined to accept. But her resentment at what she thought an injustice was strong enough to make her, on second thoughts, decide to fight rather than compromise. So the adjudication was left to the court. Bess won. She was awarded ‘the third part of the manor of Barlow with 80 messuages [houses], 7 cottages, 880 acres of land, 260 acres of meadows, 550 acres of pasture, 320 acres of woods, 400 acres of furze and heath and £8.10.0 rent with appertances and sundry properties in the villages of Barley, Barley Lees, Dronfield and Hulmfield’.¹³ It was not the fortune that a recital of the judgment suggests. But it did provide an income of about £30 a year. The settlement left Bess secure though not prosperous, but she chose again to become a ‘gentlewoman’ in a noble house. She joined the household of Henry Grey, the Marquis of Dorset, at Bradgate House. If she went into service with the object of meeting a man who would make a suitable husband, her plan succeeded. At Bradgate she met William Cavendish. Knighted and made a member of the Privy Council by Henry VIII, he had been promoted from the Court of Augmentation to become Treasurer of the King’s Chamber – a more remunerative as well as a more distinguished position for which he had paid the King £1,000. And he had retained, under Edward VI, all the offices which he had been granted by Henry VIII. So, despite the discrepancy in ages – she was twenty and he was forty-two – Sir William was an attractive proposition to a young woman who was looking for status and security and he, ‘being somewhat advanced in years’, married Bess ‘chiefly for her beauty’. To dispute that judgement is not to denigrate Bess’s real, if unconventional, charm. And there is no other plausible explanation of their mutual attraction. Whatever it was that brought them together, Bess and Sir William were married at Bradgate in 1547, eight months after the death of Henry VIII.

Initially the Cavendishes lived in Sir William’s increasingly dilapidated Northaw Manor in Hertfordshire and his London house in Newgate Street to the north of the old Saint Paul’s Cathedral. From the start they meant to move up in the world. Their financial and social progress was meticulously recorded in Sir William’s lost notebook and can be judged by the godparents who graced the christenings which were a regular feature of their lives. In 1548, ten months after the marriage, ‘Frances, my 9th child and the first by the said woman was born on Monday between the hours of 3 and 4 at afternoons viz 18 June Anno 2 R[ex] E[dward] 6. The dominical letter G.’ The principal godmother was Lady Frances Grey – the daughter of the late Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk, and his wife Princess Mary, favourite sister of the late King Henry VIII after whom, despite a period of

estrangement, he had named the *Mary Rose*. The principal godfather was the new Duke of Suffolk, Brandon's thirteen-year-old son. In 1544, Elizabeth Barlow, née Hardwick, was the widow of a Derbyshire yeoman who had not, at his death, come of age. Four years later, her daughter's godmother was, albeit distantly, in line of succession to the thrones of England and France.

Bess's second daughter, Temperance, was born a year later. She died in infancy – but not before she had been baptised in the presence of godparents who were at least as illustrious as those who had attended her sister's christening. They were the Countess of Warwick, whose son was to marry Lady Jane Grey (the reluctant claimant to Queen Mary Tudor's throne), and the Earl of Shrewsbury. But their eminence was nothing as compared with the distinction of the godparents who, in 1550, witnessed the baptism of Henry, the first Cavendish son. The Earl of Warwick was joined by the Duke of Suffolk and the Princess Elizabeth – while her brother Edward and sister Mary lived childless, third in line to the throne of England. William, the Cavendishes' second son, boasted almost as illustrious godparents as his older brother. William Paulet (the Lord Treasurer), the Countess of Northampton and the Earl of Pembroke all swore to bring him up in the true Christian religion.

At the start of their marriage, Bess and William Cavendish – although lavish spenders as their place in society required – lived well within their means. Their annual income included rents worth £250, annuities of £400 and favours of one sort or another which were sold for a, not unnaturally, undisclosed sum. Their total expenditure was £340.¹⁴ So, for a while, they lived in prudent affluence. Their income grew as Bess took increasing charge of the Northaw estate and, as a first step to improving its efficiency, enclosed what had previously been common land. But so did their expenditure. London was full of strange delights – including exotic foods – that Bess had not previously experienced. And her husband came to believe that conspicuous consumption was essential to the preservation of his status.

It was not, however, an attempt to economise which prompted the decision to leave Northaw Manor and Hertfordshire in favour of Derbyshire. Nor was it, as romantics have suggested, purely the result of the young wife's longing for home and her elderly and indulgent husband's reluctance to frustrate her hopes. It was political prudence that made them move to the then wild and remote Peak. From the beginning of the sickly King Edward's reign, it was clear that Catholic Mary would one day inherit the throne and no one knew how determined she would be to impose the 'true religion' on England. But there

was always the fear – as her succession grew more certain – that, even if she forgave the part that Cavendish had played in the despoliation of the religious houses, there would be fanatics at her court who were still looking for heretics to burn. Derbyshire was first a refuge and then the hope of permanent stability and security.

On June 30 1549, Sir William Cavendish bought the manor of Chatsworth from Thomas Agard at a bargain price. Two years earlier, Agard had bought the house from Francis Leche, nephew of Bess's stepfather, Ralph Leche, and husband of her sister Alice. Francis Leche had discovered that his wife was unfaithful and had sold the property, for virtually nothing, in order to avoid its being inherited by sons who, he suspected, were not his. He then changed his mind and claimed that the sale was invalid. The legal dispute which followed further depressed the price. Of course Bess – shrewd beyond her years – knew the financial consequences of her sister's conduct. Agard's son, who was short of capital, was forced to sell the property. On his wife's advice Sir William made a derisive offer. It was accepted.

The £600 purchase included, as well as Chatsworth itself, several nearby manors, land in the associated parishes and substantial acres in Repton and the Trent Valley.¹⁵ It was the first episode in what, for Sir William and his wife, was an orgy of acquisition. Early in 1550 they bought the manor of Ashford in the Wye Valley and the rectory at Edensor – both only a few miles from Chatsworth. In June 1552 Northaw Manor itself and all the Cavendish land in Hertfordshire, Middlesex, Wales and East Anglia was exchanged with King Edward for four principal estates and four smaller properties in Derbyshire including Doveridge and Meadowpleck. The deal also brought them land as far away as Devon. But Derbyshire had become their kingdom.

King Edward VI died in 1553 and Mary Tudor became Queen of England. Within weeks of her accession, a rebellion was raised in the name of Lady Jane Grey and the Protestant faith. It was the product of frustrated ambition. For years the Grey family had hoped that their daughter Jane would marry the young King. But as his health deteriorated and it became clear that he would not long survive, they conspired with the Duke of Northumberland in a plot for the studious and innocent sixteen-year-old Jane to usurp the throne. Her tenuous claim to the succession – great-granddaughter of Henry VII and Edward's cousin – was reinforced when the enfeebled Edward was persuaded to nominate her as his successor. In May 1553, in preparation for her accession, Jane was married to Guildford Dudley, Northumberland's youngest son, with the intention that he would rule the kingdom in his wife's name. Two months later Edward died and Jane – with the

endorsement of the Protestant faction at Court – was proclaimed Queen of England. She reigned for nine days.

Mary, supported by her sister Elizabeth and ‘innumerable companies of common folk’,¹⁶ rallied her forces in East Anglia and marched on London. As Northumberland led Jane’s army out of London to meet them, he passed Northaw Manor, once the home of the resolutely Protestant Sir William Cavendish – a friend of the Greys and father of Northumberland’s godson. Even though he was in Derbyshire – far away from the turmoil of near civil war – Cavendish must have feared that the doomed rebellion marked the end of his pomp and prosperity. He had inherited a £200 legacy from Edward VI, a sure sign that he was close to the men who had surrounded the young Protestant King – many of whom favoured Jane Grey and were ready to fight for her. Although he had played no part in the plot (and there was no evidence to suggest that his Protestant friends had even asked him to do so) he was associated with its perpetrators. And the part that he had played in the dissolution of the monasteries and the confiscation of their properties – some of which he had subsequently acquired – was, in itself, enough to put his life and liberty in danger. A purge of Jane Grey’s sympathisers might well have led him to the Tower and the block.

Cavendish decided his only hope lay in proving that he had been loyal to Queen Mary when her future was in doubt – even though he cannot have had much hope that his stratagem would succeed. So, despite the absence of supporting evidence, he announced that he had spent £700 in raising a band of fighting men to help in the defeat of the usurper, Jane. And, against all probabilities, the Queen believed him. He was reappointed Treasurer of the Chamber. Even more surprisingly, six months after the rebellion – when Charles (his third son) was born – Queen Mary agreed to become the boy’s godmother. The price that Cavendish paid for the unexpected honour was apostasy. The child was baptised according to the rites of the Catholic Church. No doubt Mary thought that the christening was a sign of repentance. In fact it was no more than proof of Sir William’s will to survive at any cost.

Although the Cavendishes were secure in Queen Mary’s affection, they remained committed to Derbyshire. They bought more local land in Baslow and Beeley and although they sold property in Gridlow, Goatscliffe and Youlgreave, Sir William – by then a Justice of the Peace – had become a figure in the county. Keeping up appearances at Chatsworth – with some time spent in London – proved more expensive than life divided between London and Northaw. Bess’s account

book for eleven weeks, in late 1555, shows that, in addition to wages and household expenditure, Sir William spent £352. One grocery bill – from Robert Harrison for ‘all thynges from the begynynge of the world to thys day’ – came to £6 11s 10d.¹⁷ Annual expenditure amounted to £2,000 a year – not allowing for increased gambling losses which were the inevitable result of Sir William’s association with the aristocracy. But the greatest expenditure was incurred by the passion which earned Lady Cavendish the sobriquet of ‘Building Bess’. It was an obsession which she shared with her husband. During his lifetime, Sir William was an enthusiastic partner in the enterprise which came to be an essential part of creating the Cavendish dynasty – the building, and constant rebuilding, of Chatsworth House.

Little is known of the original building apart from its location on the hill above the then turbulent waters of the Derwent. The Cavendishes built on the same site. They began work during December 1551 when Roger Worde, a master mason, was paid 20 shillings to design a new house.¹⁸ It was not finished for almost fifty years. What came to be called Elizabethan Chatsworth was drawn, in some detail, during 1699, in preparation for the first Duke of Devonshire’s major rebuilding. It was a ‘tall square structure . . . of a surprising height’ with four – or, in places, five – storeys enclosing a courtyard.¹⁹ ‘At each of its corners was a large square turret . . . An impression of severity . . . was further emphasised by a heavy breastwork of massive towers in the foreground.’ Although ‘forbidding of aspect’,²⁰ it was clearly intended to be more a palace than a fortress. In 1555 Cavendish wrote to John Thynne – owner and builder of Longleat – asking for the loan of his ‘connyng plaisterer . . . which hath in your hall made diverse pendants and other pretty things’ and added, in a note of clear impatience, that his own hall was ‘yet unmade’.²¹ While the work was still going on, he and Bess began to furnish the house with a splendour which they thought appropriate to their undeniably improving social position.

Seven large symmetrical ponds were dug in the land by which the house was surrounded. Their main purpose was drainage. But they were decorated with arched bridges and fountains and, on an island in one of them, what is now called Queen Mary’s Bower was built. Together with the Stand (or Hunting Tower as it became known) it was, for many years, regarded as a relic of Elizabethan Chatsworth. It is now accepted as a Victorian folly.

Sir William’s success – indeed his survival – during the reign of ‘Bloody Mary’ can be attributed to a combination of cunning and competence. Yet, although for most of his career he was regarded as

a loyal, efficient and conscientious public servant, he ended his life submerged in the suspicion of corruption and allegations of incompetence. In the summer of 1557 Queen Mary – determined to send troops to reinforce her husband Philip of Spain in his war against France – demanded that every department of state made savings and that the money which was pared from their budget be contributed to the cost of the expedition. That led to an unexpected audit of Sir William's account books. When the Privy Chamber ledgers were examined, it was discovered that he had not issued, or even prepared, a formal statement of accounts 'for his entire period of office from February 1546 until . . . 1557, both as Treasurer of the Chamber and a member of the Court of General Surveyors'. He was accused of using public money for private purposes, told to account for the £5,237 5s 0¼*d* which was missing from the royal coffers and instructed that from then on his books would be subject to regular audit.

It took six months for the books to be examined fully and returned to Cavendish.²² They were accompanied by a claim for the return of the money (which the auditors alleged he owed the Crown) and an instruction to attend the Privy Council to account for his actions and hear its adjudication on how the matter was to be resolved. His claim that he was too ill to attend the Council in person was almost certainly genuine and accepted as such by his inquisitors. An almost immediate amendment to the injunction gave permission for a clerk to represent him at the proposed tribunal – a strong indication that Cavendish would escape the severe punishment that he might have expected. But, although he was not to lose his head, it seemed probable that he would lose his job and possible that he would lose most of his possessions. On October 12 Robert Bestnay, his secretary, accompanied by two clerks, delivered what must have been a hurried response to the charges. It was impossible to deny that the books did not balance, but Bestnay insisted that the blame lay elsewhere. So he read out a plea from his master for royal forgiveness. 'I . . . humbly beseech Her Majesty, pitying my condition . . . to pardon and allow all things.' He had been 'most truly deceived to [his] great grief'. So to 'Her Majesty's merciful consideration' he humbly submitted himself. Were Queen Mary's grace not to be bestowed upon him his whole family, including his 'innocent children', would be 'utterly undone and like to end [their] days in no small penury'.²³

An inventory of detailed excuses followed. Thomas Knot, a clerk who had been inherited from his predecessor (but had remained in his service), had absconded leaving debts of £1,200 and taking £500 with him. Warwick (by then executed for high treason despite abandoning

Jane and denouncing her as a traitor) had, on the unlawful accession of his daughter-in-law, prevented him from entering his office. He had lent money to sundry other servants of Henry VIII, Edward VI and the Queen herself, none of which had been repaid. The list went on and on until it concluded with what he clearly thought would guarantee a sympathetic response – the details of the expense which he had gladly incurred in raising a battalion of troops to fight for the Queen during her brief usurpation by Lady Jane Grey.

Sir William did not live to hear the Privy Council's response. He died, aged fifty-two, in London on October 25 1557. Although, surprisingly, he had made no will, six months before his death he had put all his Derbyshire lands in trust for the use of himself and his wife in their lifetimes before being passed on, in various portions, to his children. Thus the Office of Wards had no dominion. But, although his land and property were worth more than he claimed in his submission to the Privy Council, Bess – with six children of her own and two stepchildren, all under age – was not left a fortune. And the Privy Council required her to repay what her husband, as a result of corruption or incompetence, owed to the sovereign.

A bill requiring the repayment of all debts to the Crown was introduced into parliament in January 1558. It passed all its stages in the House of Lords and was given a Second Reading in the Commons. Bess – warning that, if it became law, it would 'not only undo me and my poor children but a great number of others'²⁴ – in her attempts to have it annulled was assisted by Sir John Thynne of Longleat. The extent of his intervention is not known. But in March, Queen Mary – probably more anxious to protect her debtor friends than penalise her duplicitous servants – ordered that the bill be abandoned. A similar bill was put to parliament in March 1559. It made the same progress and met the same fate. So the threat of immediate ruin was averted. But by then the world had changed. Elizabeth had succeeded her sister on the throne of England and Bess of Hardwick had married for the third time.

Both changes – royal and matrimonial – worked to Bess's immense advantage. Elizabeth remembered that while still a princess with an uncertain future she had been invited to serve as godmother to one of Bess's sons. The circle within which Bess and her second husband had moved firmly linked the Cavendishes to the Protestant cause, allowing the brief obeisance to Catholicism to be accepted as an expedient rather than an expression of genuine doubt about the Reformation. But it is easier to understand why Bess wanted to be at Court than it is to imagine why the Queen chose to bestow favours on the widow of a minor

official – particularly one who was still burdened with the debt incurred by her dead husband's mismanagement of his office. The answer that commends itself to the romantic historians is that the attraction of Bess's personality transcended all other considerations. It is much more likely that Bess benefited from Elizabeth's notorious weakness for flattery. Whatever the cause of Elizabeth's patronage, there is no doubt that her protégée worked to maintain it with single-minded determination.

Bess was again living beyond her means. In the year that followed her second husband's death, she enjoyed an income of £300 a year from rents alone – considerably more than her living expenses. But she also had debts to the Crown of £5,000.²⁵ That was, in itself, a reason for continuing her life at Court. Proximity to the Queen would be enough to protect her from being pauperised by enforced repayment. And Bess had special additional reasons for welcoming the chance to establish herself in the higher reaches of society. It was a prospect which would have commended itself to any impecunious (and comparatively young) widow of her time. Life in society offered the hope of finding a husband who would enable her to take the next step towards the status for which she craved. During her second matrimonial fishing trip Bess caught Sir William St Loe, Chief Butler of England and Captain of the Queen's Yeomen Guard. Lady Cavendish became Lady St Loe in the autumn of 1559.

William St Loe was a professional soldier who had made his name in Ireland. In 1548 he been appointed Lieutenant of the King's Forts in Leinster and had discharged his duties with such distinction that, at the age of twenty-eight, he was knighted and granted an annuity of £40. In 1553, he became Keeper of the Horse to Edward VI and, after the death of the King, served as Gentleman Attendant to Princess Elizabeth. His association with the Protestant cause was so close that in 1554 he had been accused of complicity in Thomas Wyatt's rebellion against Queen Mary – the last folly of the conspirators who had plotted to make Lady Jane Grey queen. He was imprisoned in the Tower along with the Princess Elizabeth herself and was, no doubt, fearful – as she must have been – that he would follow Jane Grey to the block. 'The Nine Day Queen' had been spared execution when her father-in-law was beheaded. But Wyatt's abortive rising had convinced Mary that, while Jane lived, she would remain the pretender around whom the Protestants rallied. Elizabeth was released into house arrest after eight weeks, but St Loe spent four months in the Tower and seven in the Fleet Prison before he was paroled on 'oath of good bearing' and on the payment of a £200 fine. The experience bound him to the Princess Elizabeth with the bonds of mutual fear and suffering.

In November 1558, when Mary Tudor died, St Loe was called back into the service of Elizabeth and became an obvious candidate for preferment in a Court which had to be purged of men who had supported Mary, Catholicism and Spain. As Chief Butler of England, St Loe did little more than perform the occasional ceremonial duty and supervise the royal cellar. But as the Captain of the Guard, he was the protector of Queen Elizabeth's life and safety. Elizabeth must have trusted him completely. And she expressed her confidence in material terms. St Loe was granted a life annuity of 100 marks, 50 marks a year payable from customs dues, various wardships and gifts of land. Bess's third marriage confirmed both her prosperity and her place in the heart of Elizabethan England.

The betrothal of Sir William St Loe and Lady Cavendish was announced in July 1559 and the marriage took place on August 27 – a date chosen by the Queen as a sign of her patronage and approval. The groom was a widower of forty and on the death of his father in the previous year, he had become a comparatively rich man. All Bess had to set against St Loe's wealth and guaranteed income was the rents she received from the heavily encumbered Chatsworth estate and debts to the Crown of £5,000. Materially, as well as in terms of status, Bess got the better of the bargain. In consequence of their marriage, Bess became a Lady of the Privy Chamber – probably as a wedding gift from the Queen – and acquired more stepchildren. St Loe had two, as yet unmarried, daughters.

The St Loes might have become a happy family had not St Loe been suddenly indicted in the Exchequer Chamber – unaccountably along with his wife – on the charge of withholding money from the Treasury.²⁶ Such changes in fortune were common in Elizabethan England. So were sudden pardons – one of which the Queen granted St Loe on the payment of £1,000. On the evidence of his three surviving letters to his wife – written to his 'own sweet Bess' when, to his regret, court duties kept them apart – he would have gladly have paid ten times as much to avoid a prison sentence which denied him the pleasure of her company. In February 1560 he nearly lost her for ever.

Sir William St Loe's brother, Edward, was certainly disreputable and dishonest and probably guilty of a series of murders which he had committed in the hope of financial gain. In 1558, he had married Bridget Scutt, the second wife and widow of a tailor to Henry VIII. The wedding to St Loe had taken place barely a month after the death of the bride's first husband. Doubts about his probity increased with the discovery that he had spent the four weeks between funeral and marriage buying his bride's inherited property at discretionary prices.