



Made in Derby 2018 Profile

Bess of Hardwick

Bess of Hardwick has been described as one of the richest women in England during Tudor times and a good friend of Queen Elizabeth I. She also had an obsession with building.

This is borne out by the wording on her marble tomb effigy in Derby Cathedral - the parish church of All Saints in Bess's lifetime - which describes her as the "aedificatrix" (builder) of Chatsworth, Hardwick and Oldcotes.

Both Hardwick Hall – old and new- Chatsworth House – still exist and stand as a testimony to both Bess's wealth and her building fervour. Although nothing remains of Oldcotes, which was built for her son William Cavendish.

And although she spent much of her life marrying four times, having eight children and building grand houses in the north of the county, she also found opportunity to be in Derby.

She had a town house built on the north side of the Market Place. This was a large brick Tudor house, which enabled Bess and her husband, Lord Shrewsbury, to attend functions in Derby and probably later became Newcastle House and large parts of this were not demolished until 1971.

Earlier in 1599, Bess decided to found a charity in Derby to the rear of All Saints Church in Full Street.

It was called the Shrewsbury Hospital, later to become the Devonshire Hospital but more likely to resemble almshouses, to house eight poor men and four poor women, to be endowed with a rent-charge of £100 per annum.

The lucky people were to be chosen from the parishes of All Saints', St. Michael and St. Peter, and had to be "the most aged poor or needy persons within the said town of Derby, being of good and honest conversation, and not infected with any contagious disorder".

They were also charged with keeping the tomb of Bess clean and dust-free after her death in 1608 when they attended services.

Yet for all her wealth, Bess rose from a family of impoverished Derbyshire landowners. She married at 15 but was a widow within a year. She then met and married wealthy Sir William Cavendish – 20 years her senior – and together they bought the Chatsworth Estate.

They had eight children but she was a widow again by 30 and remarried elderly and rich William St Loe, who died in 1565 leaving his money to Bess.

She was wealthy enough to be independent but chose to marry the 6th Earl of Shrewsbury who was rich and powerful.

Tension grew when Bess and her husband were made custodians of Elizabeth's cousin Mary, Queen of Scots and Shrewsbury was enraged when Bess tried to engineer a marriage between her daughter and Charles Stuart, whose heirs had a claim to the English throne. He did not like the time and money spent on remodelling Chatsworth.

She eventually left Shrewsbury and fled to Hardwick and put her efforts into enlarging Hardwick Old Hall. Shrewsbury died in 1590 and Bess became richer than ever and decided to build Hardwick Hall near to the old hall.

Completed in 1599, the new hall was an extraordinary achievement and one of the great houses of the Elizabethan age. Like many other high-status Elizabethan houses it had huge windows – giving rise to the saying 'Hardwick Hall, more glass than wall'.

Bess of Hardwick used the fortune she had amassed to indulge the passion for building that defined her life and ensured her legacy. Her houses display her taste, wealth, and business acumen.