

## Bess of Hardwick

A SLICE of Elizabethan history was brought vividly to life for Kyrle Probus members at their recent meeting, when Dr Gillian White gave a talk on 'Bess of Hardwick and Hardwick Hall.'

With a dynamic delivery that demanded the attention of her audience, Dr White, a former curator at Hardwick Hall, described how Bess, born about 1527 into a family of minor gentry, rose to be England's premier countess and possibly the second richest woman in the land, after Queen Elizabeth I.

In her early teens, Bess left home to complete her education in the household of Lord and Lady Zouche at Codnor Castle, Derbyshire. It was while here that Bess made her first, albeit brief, foray into marriage. She was still in her teens when she married another teenager, Robert Barlow, but was a widow by 17. 'Blink and you would miss husband number one,' said Dr White.

She went on to have three more husbands. The first of these was Sir William Cavendish, a wealthy court official who appears to have been the love of Bess' life. They were married for ten years and produced eight children, with six surviving to adulthood. Bess and Sir William bought Chatsworth and their descendants have come through to us today as the Dukes of Devonshire.

Some weeks before his death, Sir William was charged with embezzling a huge amount of money from his post as treasurer of the King's Chamber, leaving his widow Bess in financial and social crisis. Fortunately, her acquaintance with Elizabeth 1 paid off and the new Queen let her off all but the last £1,000 of the debt owed. This was paid off by her third husband Sir William St Loe, who also later died.

Bess' fourth and most prestigious marriage was to George Talbot, the sixth Earl of Shrewsbury and England's premier earl. Bess was now a very great lady. However, barely more than a year after the marriage, Talbot was made gaoler of Mary Queen of Scots who was detained in his care for nearly 16 years. The strain of this responsibility eventually broke up their marriage.

Talbot threw Bess out of Chatsworth and into another crisis, but then her family home, the Hardwick estate came up for sale. Bess bought it and as resourceful as ever, she began to rebuild first the old Hardwick Hall and then in 1590 built the more famous new Hardwick Hall just 300 yards away.

This building still stands in a remarkable state of preservation, containing notable collections of Elizabethan textiles, furniture and paintings. Some of these Dr White showed her audience on film, together with views of the great staircase, the long gallery and of course the vast array of 20ft high windows for which Hardwick Hall is famous - *'Hardwick Hall more glass than wall.'*

Bess moved into Hardwick Hall in 1599. She died in 1608 in her 81st year and is buried in Derby Cathedral. Bess of Hardwick was a capable and efficient woman in a man's world, said Dr White. She was a survivor and a dynasty builder and Hardwick Hall stands as her lasting monument.