

Mary Dudley, Lady Sidney

Mary Sidney (née **Dudley**), **Lady Sidney** (c. 1530–1535^[1] – 9 August 1586) was an English lady-in-waiting at the court of **Elizabeth I**, and the mother of the courtier and poet **Sir Philip Sidney**. A daughter of **John Dudley, Duke of Northumberland**, she was marginally implicated in her father's attempt to place **Lady Jane Grey** on the English throne and affected by his attainder.

Mary Dudley was one of Queen Elizabeth's most intimate confidantes during the early years of her reign. Her duties included nursing the Queen through smallpox and acting as her mouthpiece towards diplomats. A sister of Elizabeth's favourite, **Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester**, she remained always loyal to her family. She was the mother of seven children and accompanied her husband, **Sir Henry Sidney**, to Ireland and the **Welsh Marches**. From the 1570s the couple complained repeatedly about their, as they saw it, niggardly treatment at the Queen's hands. Still one of Elizabeth's favourite ladies, Mary Sidney retired from court life in 1579, suffering from ill health during her last years.

1 Family and early years of marriage

Mary Dudley was the eldest daughter among the 13 children of **John Dudley, 1st Duke of Northumberland** and his wife **Jane Guildford**.^[1] Mary Dudley was well-educated. Fluent in Italian, French, and Latin,^[2] she was interested in alchemy, romances, and writing poetry.^[1] Her copy of **Edward Hall's** *Chronicles* bears her annotations in French.^[2] She also became a friend, correspondent and frequent visitor of the scientist and magus **John Dee**.^[3]

On 29 March 1551 Mary Dudley married **Henry Sidney** at Esher, Surrey. Possibly a love match, the ceremony was repeated in public on 17 May 1551 at her parents' house **Ely Place, London**.^[1] Four months later Henry Sidney became Chief Gentleman of Edward VI's Privy Chamber;^[4] he was knighted by the young King on the day his father-in-law, who headed the government, was raised to the dukedom of Northumberland.^[5]

In May 1553 Mary's second youngest brother, **Guildford Dudley**, was married to Edward's favourite cousin, **Lady Jane Grey**.^[6] According to Lady Jane it was Mary Sidney who, on 9 July 1553, called upon her to bring her to **Syon House**, the place where she was informed she was Queen of England according to King Edward's will.^[7]

After **Mary I's** triumph within a fortnight and the arrest and execution of the Duke of Northumberland, the Sidneys were in a precarious situation. Like the rest of the Dudley family, Mary Sidney was attainted and suffered the consequences in her legal status.^[1] Henry Sidney's three sisters, however, were favourite ladies of Queen Mary, which may have saved his career.^[1] In early 1554 he went with an embassy to Spain to plead with England's prospective king consort, **Philip**, for the pardon of his brothers-in-law **John, Ambrose, Robert, and Henry**.^[8] John Dudley, the eldest brother, died days after his release in October 1554 at **Penshurst Place** in **Kent**, the Sidneys' manor house granted to them by Edward VI in 1552.^[9] **Philip Sidney**, Mary Sidney's first child, was born there in November 1554 and named after his godfather, the King.^[10] His godmother, the widowed Duchess of Northumberland, died in January 1555. She left her daughter 200 marks as well as a cherished clock "that was the lord her father's, praying her to keep it as a jewel."^[11]

In 1556 Mary Sidney went with her husband to Ireland, where they resided mostly at **Athlone Castle**.^[12] Their first daughter, **Mary Margaret**, was born some time after their arrival. Queen Mary acted as godmother, but the child died at "one year and three quarters old".^[13] Meanwhile, the infant Philip stayed behind at **Penshurst**^[14] until his mother returned from Ireland in September 1558.^[1] She had been restored in blood earlier in the year when the Dudley's attainder was lifted by Mary I's last parliament.^[15]

2 Serving Elizabeth I

On Elizabeth I's accession in November 1558 Mary Sidney became a Gentlewoman of the Privy Chamber "without wages", an unsalaried position which left her dependent on her husband.^[1] Like her brother Lord Robert, the royal favourite, she belonged to the Queen's closest companions.^[16] In the 1559 negotiations over **Archduke Charles**, the Habsburg candidate for Elizabeth's hand, she acted as go-between for the Queen and her own brother in their dealings with the Spanish ambassador **Álvarez de Quadra** and his Imperial colleague, **Caspar von Brüner**.^[1] Through Lady Sidney, Elizabeth discreetly indicated her serious intention to marry the Archduke and that he should immediately come to England. De Quadra informed Philip II that

Lady Sidney said that if this were not true, I

might be sure she would not say such a thing as it might cost her her life and she was acting now with the Queen's consent, but she (the Queen) would not speak to the Emperor's ambassador about it.^[17]

Philip's envoy received assurances from Lord Robert and Sir Thomas Parry as well.^[18] Yet Elizabeth cooled down again and gave Mary Sidney further instructions to deal with the Spaniards, until she herself told de Quadra "that someone had [spoken to him] with good intentions, but without any commission from her".^[19] Angry at her brother and the Queen, Lady Sidney felt betrayed.^[1] The Spanish ambassador, in his turn, was piqued that she used an interpreter, when "we can understand each other in Italian without him."^[17]

In October 1562, Elizabeth became critically ill with **smallpox**; Mary Sidney nursed her until she contracted the illness herself, which according to her husband greatly disfigured her beauty. That she took to wearing a mask afterwards is, however, a myth.^[1] She continued her court service, unless absent when accompanying her husband to Wales and Ireland.^[1] In late 1565 the couple travelled to Ireland, where Sir Henry was to take up his post as **Lord Lieutenant**. On the passage one of the ships sunk with all Lady Sidney's jewels and fine clothes on board.^[1] In 1567 Henry Sidney returned for a few weeks to the English court. His wife stayed behind at **Drogheda**, which came under rebel attack. Lady Sidney resolutely requested the **Mayor of Dublin** to relieve the town with troops, which he did.^[20] Later in the year Sir Henry sent her back to England because of her ill health, which was apparently caused by the Queen's criticism of his lieutenantship.^[1] An unfriendly letter from Elizabeth "so perplexed my dear wife, as she fell most grievously sick upon the same and in that sickness remained once in trance above fifty-two hours".^[21]

The four Dudley siblings who survived into Elizabeth's reign, Mary, Ambrose, Robert, and their much younger sister Katherine, kept a close bond among themselves,^[22] while Henry Sidney and Robert Dudley were friends since their common schooldays with Edward VI.^[23] Mary Sidney's third child Elizabeth was born at her brother Robert's house at **Kew** in late 1560. Until 1569 she had four more children, among them the future Countess of Pembroke and poet **Mary Herbert**, and **Robert**, who became the first **Sidney Earl of Leicester**.^[1] The death of her nine-year-old daughter **Ambrosia** in 1575 elicited a letter of condolences from Queen Elizabeth.^[24] Henry Sidney being once again in Ireland,^[1] in January 1570 Robert Dudley entertained his brother Ambrose as well as "Sister Mary" and "Sister Kate" at **Kenilworth**.^[25] The same castle was the scene of the great festival of 1575, at which the whole Sidney family were guests and Lady Sidney excelled in stag hunting.^[1] In 1577 Robert Dudley negotiated the match of his 15-year-old niece Mary with his friend, the 40-year-old **Earl of Pembroke**.^[26] Her mother

organized the wedding festivities at **Wilton House**.^[1]

By the 1570s, Sir Henry Sidney and his wife had become somewhat disillusioned and embittered about lacking financial rewards on the Queen's part for their long service.^[1] In 1572 Lady Sidney even had to decline a barony for her husband in a letter to **William Cecil**, himself **Baron Burghley** since the previous year.^[27] The expenses such a title implied were simply too great, Sir Henry's mind being "dismayed [by the] hard choice" between choosing financial ruin and royal displeasure "in refusing it".^[28] Two years later, in 1574, she quarrelled with the **Lord Chamberlain** (her brother-in-law, the **Earl of Sussex**) over accommodation at court.^[1] She refused to exchange her accustomed rooms with a cold chamber that had previously been "but the place for my servants".^[29] All in all though, she explained, "old Lord Harry and his old Moll" would accept "like good friends the small portion allotted our long service in court; which as little as it is, seems something too much."^[1]

Elizabeth was still attached to her old friend when Mary Sidney left the court in July 1579—because of bad health,^[1] or out of solidarity with her brother Robert, **Earl of Leicester**, who was in disgrace for having married.^[30] She joined her husband at **Ludlow** in 1582, where he was serving his third turn as **President of the Council of Wales**. A year later her health was in such a state that Henry Sidney believed he would soon have the opportunity to take a second wife.^[1] Mary Sidney died on 9 August 1586, three months after her husband, in whose elaborate funeral she had participated. She was buried by his side at **Penshurst**.^[1]

3 Ancestry

4 Notes

- [1] Adams 2008c
- [2] Stewart 2000 p. 40
- [3] French 2002 pp. 126–127; Woolley 2002 p. 99
- [4] Alford 2002 p. 156
- [5] Beer 1973 p. 119; Loades 1996 p. 285
- [6] Loades 1996 pp. 226, 239
- [7] Ives 2009 p. 187
- [8] Adams 2008c; Adams 2002 p. 133
- [9] Stewart 2000 p. 17
- [10] Stewart 2000 p. 9
- [11] Collins 1746 pp. 34–35
- [12] Adams 2008c; Stewart 2000 p. 19
- [13] Stewart 2000 pp. 19–20

- [14] Stewart 2000 p. 19
- [15] Adams 2002 p. 134
- [16] Adams 2008a
- [17] Stewart 2000 p. 27
- [18] Stewart 2000 pp. 27–28
- [19] Stewart 2000 pp. 28–29
- [20] Stewart 2000 p. 62
- [21] Stewart 2000 pp. 62–63
- [22] Gristwood 2007 p. 15
- [23] Adams 2008b
- [24] Adams 2008c; Stewart 2000 p. 144
- [25] Gristwood 2007 pp. 190, 191
- [26] Stewart 2000 pp. 200–201
- [27] Stewart 2000 pp. 143, 60
- [28] Stewart 2000 p. 143
- [29] Stewart 2000 p. 143; Adams 2008c
- [30] Kendall 1980 p. 182
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