

THE DERBY WOMEN - 3RD JULY 2025

Celebrating the Women in the House of Stanley



The Hon Caroline Neville,
19th Countess of Derby, by
Emma Sergeant (2005)



Many Stanley women had to run the estates when their husbands were away on political or court business, and alongside their preoccupation with the future of the dynasty, for many the creation of a great house became their life's work. Without a great house at its centre, land had little function in the display of wealth, position and power.

Elizabethan prodigy houses were created specifically to impress the monarch with the intention of persuading The Queen to visit. Later, during the eighteenth century, Knowsley saw a great deal of architectural activity as it became the principal family seat, and was expanded in celebration of the family's return to good fortune following the suffering endured at the hands of Oliver Cromwell. Knowsley Hall and its marvellous art collection became the physical embodiment of the Derby dynasty's wealth, learning and power.

However, it was not enough for a grand house to be an art gallery alone; it was essential that an atmosphere of conviviality was achieved, and here the Derby wives excelled, with the family becoming famed for its hospitality to the present day.

In an era when the ultimate aim for a daughter was to make a good wife, the personal achievements of the Stanley women seem even more pronounced. The financial security and position of their marriage afforded them a freedom to develop their characters to their fullest potential. It took energy, endurance and ambition to rise beyond the normal expectations of a wife, characteristics that Stanley women possessed in abundance.

Women of the House of Stanley

Convention tells us that women are often attracted to powerful men. But what happens when the women too are powerful? Here, six centuries of Stanley women, many of them Countesses of Derby, address that very question, women whose power and influence helped to shape the Derby Earldom along with many other great dynasties.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the story of Lady Margaret Beaufort (1443 - 1509), who was instrumental in bringing the earldom to rest upon the Stanley family. In 1485, England was in a state of civil war, and the Wars of the Roses reached their climax with the Battle of Bosworth. Margaret's husband Thomas, 2nd Baron Stanley was King Richard III's Lord High Constable and Lord Steward. When Henry Tudor challenged King Richard, Lord Stanley, a powerful man highly skilled in the art of warfare who possessed his own private army, was central to the King's battle plan. Margaret however, had been married before to the Earl of Richmond, and together they had a son – none other than Henry Tudor. Through Margaret's influence, Stanley chose to support his stepson rather than his boss on the battlefield, and several other key figures also took their armies and followed Stanley. As a result Henry, with his smaller army and relative inexperience, was victorious. It was Lord Stanley who took the crown from the fallen King Richard and placed it upon Henry Tudor's head, proclaiming him to be King Henry VII of England. In recognition for his service, Stanley was created first Earl of Derby.

Lady Margaret Clifford (1540 - 1596), wife of the 4th Earl of Derby, was daughter of the Earl of Cumberland and Eleanor Brandon, grand daughter of King Henry VII. Through her, the 4th Earl's children were brought into the royal bloodline, and Queen Elizabeth I referred to Lady Margaret as "one very near in blood to us."

It would have been easy for the women of the Stanley women to be engulfed in the shadows of their husbands' achievements – but many can be celebrated for their own endeavours. Despite the vicissitudes of difficult childbirth, the distance between London and the family seat and the public and Royal demands on their husbands' time, both Stanley and Derby wives have been political hostesses, famous actresses, connoisseurs and collectors of works of art, setters of fashion, and stoic defenders of their own castles, not to mention the all important role of running several great houses, providing a duty of care to staff and estate workers and raising their own children.

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One of the most famous Countesses of Derby was the wife of the 7th Earl of Derby, Charlotte de la Trémoille (1599 - 1664), whose portraits can be found in many rooms within Knowsley Hall. It is a testament both to her strength of character and those of her daughters that they survived incarceration and worse at the hands of Oliver Cromwell's Parliamentary forces, culminating in the siege of Lathom House in 1644. At this time the Countess was alone at Lathom, as the Earl was away defending the Isle of Man. When the Parliamentary forces demanded that Lady Derby, whom they had dubbed 'The Whore of Babylon' yield Lathom House, Her Ladyship replied that "she would neither tamely give up her house, nor purchase her peace with the loss of her honour." In the siege that followed, Charlotte soon realised that she had no chance of overcoming her attackers by force, and therefore had to rely on her own cunning and wits for her very survival.



Charlotte de la Trémoille, wife of the 7th Earl of Derby, tearing up the summons to surrender Lathom House - circle of Isaac Fuller (early 18th century)



Lady Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond and Derby, second wife of the 1st Earl of Derby, 18th century copy after English School (c.1509)

Although Charlotte and her children were in due course rescued from their immediate plight by Lord Derby and Charles I's nephew Prince Rupert and his army, worse was to come. Her eldest daughter Henrietta Maria (1630 - 1685) accompanied Charlotte to the Isle of Man, and in 1651 was forced to endure the surrender of Peel Castle and Castle Rushen, and the seizure of all her possessions except her clothes. Two of Charlotte's other daughters, Katherine (b.1631) and Amelia (1633 - 1702), were arrested and imprisoned in 1650 in a Parliamentary attempt to blackmail Lord Derby into compliance. Their father subsequently became their fellow inmate following his capture in 1651, and they had to endure the spectacle of watching their father be taken from his prison cell, knowing that he was on the way to his place of execution. Such experiences certainly shaped the character of all Charlotte's daughters, who were noted for their "piety and sweetness".

As Dorothea Helena de Rupa married the 7th Earl's son Charles in 1650, the turbulence of the times dictated that there was little opportunity for being merely a 'trophy wife.' Despite the poverty stricken circumstances that she now found herself in, Dorothea showed true Stanley spirit and resolve and was highly instrumental in campaigning for Lord Derby's pardon following his capture in 1651. Following the death of her husband in 1672, she became renowned for her good works caring for the poor of south west Lancashire.

When the 10th Earl died with no issue, the heir to the Earldom was Sir Edward Stanley, 5th Baronet of Bickerstaffe, who then became 11th Earl of Derby. His mother, Elizabeth Patten (d.1694), was therefore the matriarch of a new Derby dynasty. As heiress of Thomas Patten of Preston and Thornley, she brought wealth, land and property to the Stanley family. Similarly, the 11th Earl's wife Elizabeth Hesketh (1694 - 1776), heaped more wealth and good fortune upon the Stanley family, as she was daughter and heiress of Sir Robert Hesketh of Rufford. By all accounts she was the ultimate hostess, playing an active role in the sporting and social world of the South Lancashire landed gentry.

Before becoming the 12th Earl of Derby's second wife, Eliza Farren (1759 - 1829) achieved position and status in her own right as a celebrated comic actress, specialising particularly in portraying aristocratic ladies. Despite his admiration for her, Lord Derby's relationship with Eliza remained platonic for many years whilst his first wife, Lady Elizabeth Hamilton, from whom he was separated, still lived. He eventually married Eliza in 1797, and she brought great happiness and joy to Lord Derby and his children during their life together at Knowsley.

Indeed, during the time of the 12th and 13th Earls, Stanley women showed themselves to be highly skilled in the most complex art of all, that of nurturing and raising a memorable dynasty. Charlotte, the 12th Earl's eldest daughter (1776 - 1805), married her cousin Edmund Hornby of Dalton Hall. Her married name was therefore Charlotte Hornby, which, was also the maiden name of the 13th Countess.

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Eliza Farren, second wife of the 12th Earl of Derby, after Sir Thomas Lawrence (c.1790)

Lady Mary Sackville West (1824 - 1900), Marchioness of Salisbury and 15th Countess of Derby, was widowed by her first husband at the age of 43. A year later she and her five children were forced to leave their family home by the new Lord Sailsbury. In 1870 she married the 15th Earl of Derby, after a very public friendship for 20 years. They had a happy marriage, and rarely spent time apart. They shared many similar interests yet differed in personalities. Whereas Edward was shy and insular, Mary was a prominent political hostess and through her actions and activities managed to maintain his position at the centre of British politics.

Stanley women have experienced at first hand the pain of war, social upheaval, poverty and personal loss, as well as the happiness that good fortune and a loving family can bring. Their stories grace the pages of many a historical treatise, and yet those same experiences have at some time touched all our lives. They have throughout the centuries met all of life's challenges squarely, with the wit, charm and intelligence that so typically characterises these extraordinary women – the women of the House of Stanley.

The concept of family is just as important here at Knowsley today as it was all those centuries ago. The Hon. Caroline Emma Neville (b.1963), second

daughter of Her Majesty's Lord Lieutenant of Essex, the 10th Lord Braybrooke (d.2017), married Edward, 19th Earl of Derby on 21st October 1995. Knowsley Hall remains very much at the heart of family life, just as it was in the 18th century, for them and their children Henrietta, Edward and Oliver. Lady Derby developed a deep love of art from an early age, which was nurtured by her paternal grandfather, and resulted in a double degree in History and History of Art. This has certainly been put to good use, first at the Royal Collection, and then here at Knowsley. Along with her husband, Lady Derby has worked tirelessly upon the restoration, not only of the Derby Collection, but also of Knowsley Hall and its gardens, following the departure of Merseyside Police, who had rented half of the Hall from 1970 to 1997.



Lady Mary Catherine Sackville West, Marchioness of Salisbury, wife of the 15th Earl of Derby by Jane Hawkins after James Rannie Swinton (c.1850)

SPEAKERS AND TIMINGS

09.15 - Opening remarks by Lady Derby

09.30 - Dr Elizabeth Norton (Tudor Historian) - Margaret Beaufort, Patroness of learning

10.30 - Dr. Vanessa Wilkie - Weaving with Silver Threads: Writing History with the Lives of the 5th Countess of Derby and her Stanley Co-Heiresses

11.30 - Refreshments

12.00 - Dr Anna Keay OBE - Charlotte, 7th Countess of Derby: England's Virago or the Whore of Babylon?

13.00 - Book Signing and Lunch

13.45 - Dr Jennifer Davey - A female politician: the career of the fifteenth Countess of Derby

14.45 - Caroline Derby - Walpole's Queen of Comedy, Eliza Farren, 12th Countess of Derby

15:15 - Caroline Derby closing remarks

15.30 - Final Refreshments, Book Signing and opportunity to network with the speakers

16.30 - End



SPEAKER BIOS



Caroline Derby (*The Countess of Derby*) is a historian, curator, and storyteller. Born a Neville, married to a Stanley, she grew up on Audley End Estate before studying History and History of Art at London University and then working for a decade as Exhibitions Assistant to the Royal Collection. She married the 19th Earl of Derby in 1995 and they have 3 children. She is convinced that education and knowledge of history have the power to change lives.



Dr Elizabeth Norton is an historian specialising in queenship and the Tudor period. She is the author of several books, including a biography of Margaret Beaufort and the critically acclaimed '*The Lives of Tudor Women*'. Her new book, '*Women Who Ruled the World: 5000 Years of Female Monarchy*' will be released in September 2025. She regularly appears on television, including the BBC's '*The Boleyns, A Scandalous Family*' on which she also acted as consultant. She was also the lead historical consultant on the recent feature film '*Firebrand*'.



Vanessa Wilkie, Ph.D., is the head of the Library Curatorial department and curates the Library's renowned collections of medieval manuscripts and British history. She earned her Ph.D. in British history from the University of California, Riverside, and was a visiting assistant professor of history at the University of Redlands before coming to The Huntington in 2013. She is an elected Fellow of the Royal Historical Society and has held fellowships from the American Philosophical Society and the Houghton Library. Wilkie co-curates the Library's 'Stories *From the Library*' exhibition series and curated '*Magna Carta: Law & Legend*' and '*The Reformation: From the Word to the World*'.

She has published on female editorial practices, patronage, and death rituals. Her book '*A Woman of Influence: The Spectacular Rise of Alice Spencer in Tudor England*' (Atria/Simon & Schuster) was published in April 2023.



Dr Anna Keay OBE is a historian and curator and, since 2012, the Director of the Landmark Trust. She previously worked in curatorial roles at English Heritage and Historic Royal Palaces. Her PhD was on the court of Charles II and her books include '*The Last Royal Rebel: the Life and Death of James, Duke of Monmouth*' (2016) and '*The Restless Republic: Britain without a Crown*' (2022) which won the Duff Cooper Prize for Non-Fiction and was *Sunday Times* History Book of the Year, 2023.



Jennifer Davey is Director of The History of Parliament Trust, one of the country's most ambitious and authoritative history projects. Previous to her appointment at The History, she was Associate Professor at the University of East Anglia. She is an historian of Modern Britain, with a particular expertise in the politics and culture of Victorian Britain. Her first book – '*Mary, Countess of Derby and the politics of Victorian Britain*' (OUP, 2019) – explored how a woman was able to carve out a career as a politician in the mid-nineteenth century. She is currently writing a second book for OUP, provisionally titled '*Queen and Country*', which will reexamine the relationship between Queen Victoria and her subjects.