

= Lettice Knollys =

Lettice Knollys (/ ˈnɒliːz / NOHLZ , sometimes called Laetitia , also known as Lettice Devereux or Lettice Dudley) , Countess of Essex and Countess of Leicester (8 November 1543 ? 25 December 1634) , was an English noblewoman and mother to the courtiers Robert Devereux , 2nd Earl of Essex and Lady Penelope Rich , although via her marriage to Elizabeth I 's favourite , Robert Dudley , Earl of Leicester , she incurred the Queen 's unrelenting displeasure .

A grandniece of Anne Boleyn and close to Princess Elizabeth since childhood , Lettice Knollys was introduced early into court life . At 17 she married Walter Devereux , Viscount Hereford , who in 1572 became Earl of Essex . After her husband went to Ireland in 1573 she possibly became involved with Robert Dudley , Earl of Leicester . There was plenty of scandalous talk , not least when Essex died in Ireland of dysentery in 1576 . Two years later Lettice Knollys married Robert Dudley in private . When the Queen was told of the marriage she banished the Countess forever from court , effectively curtailing her social life . The couple 's child , Robert , Lord Denbigh , died at the age of three , to the great grief of his parents and ending all prospects for the continuance of the House of Dudley . Lettice Knollys ' union with Leicester was nevertheless a happy one , as was her third marriage to the much younger Sir Christopher Blount , whom she unexpectedly married in 1589 only six months after the Earl 's death . She continued to style herself Lady Leicester .

The Countess was richly left under Leicester 's will ; yet the discharge of his overwhelming debts diminished her wealth . In 1604 ? 1605 she successfully defended her widow 's rights in court when her possessions and her good name were threatened by the Earl 's illegitimate son , Robert Dudley , who claimed that he was his father 's legitimate heir , thus implicitly declaring her marriage bigamous . Lettice Knollys was always close to her large family circle . Helpless at the political eclipse of her eldest son , the second Earl of Essex , she lost both him and her third husband to the executioner in 1601 . From the 1590s she lived chiefly in the Staffordshire countryside , where , in reasonably good health until the end , she died at age 91 on Christmas Day 1634 .

= = Family and upbringing = =

Lettice Knollys was born on 8 November 1543 at Rotherfield Greys , Oxfordshire . Her father , Sir Francis Knollys , was a Member of Parliament and acted as Master of the Horse to Prince Edward . Her mother , Catherine Carey , was a daughter of Mary Boleyn , sister to Anne Boleyn . Thus Catherine Knollys was Elizabeth I 's first cousin , and Lettice Knollys her first cousin once removed . Lettice was the third of her parents ' 16 children .

Sir Francis and his wife were Protestants . In 1556 they went to Frankfurt in Germany to escape religious persecution under Queen Mary I , taking five of their children with them . It is unknown whether Lettice was among them , and she may have passed the next few years in the household of Princess Elizabeth with whom the family had a close relationship since the mid @-@ 1540s . They returned to England in January 1559 , two months after Elizabeth I 's succession . Francis Knollys was appointed Vice @-@ Chamberlain of the Royal Household ; Lady Knollys became a senior Lady of the Bedchamber , and her daughter Lettice a Maid of the Privy Chamber .

= = First marriage and love affair = =

In late 1560 Lettice Knollys married Walter Devereux , Viscount Hereford . The couple lived at the family seat of Chartley in Staffordshire . Here the two eldest of their five children , the daughters Penelope and Dorothy , were born in 1563 and 1564 , respectively . Lettice Devereux returned to court on at least one occasion , in the summer of 1565 , when the Spanish ambassador Diego Guzmán de Silva described her as " one of the best @-@ looking ladies of the court " and as a favourite with the Queen . Pregnant with her first son , she flirted with Robert Dudley , Earl of Leicester , the Queen 's favourite . The Queen found out at once and succumbed to a fit of jealousy . The Viscountess went back to Staffordshire where , in November 1565 , she gave birth to Robert , later 2nd Earl of Essex . Two more sons followed : Walter , who was born in 1569 , and Francis ,

who died soon after birth at an unknown date .

Walter Devereux was raised to the earldom of Essex in 1572 . In 1573 he successfully suggested to the Queen a project to plant Englishmen in Ulster . In the autumn he went to Ireland , not to return for two years . During this time Lettice Devereux possibly engaged in a love @-@ affair with the Earl of Leicester ; her whereabouts in the following years are largely unknown , though . In 1573 Leicester sent her a present of venison to Chartley from his seat Kenilworth Castle in Warwickshire , and she made hunting visits to Kenilworth in 1574 and 1576 . She was also present in July 1575 when Dudley entertained the Queen with a magnificent 19 @-@ days festival at the castle . Elizabeth and the court (including the Earl of Leicester) then progressed to Chartley , where they were welcomed by the Countess of Essex .

When Walter Devereux returned to England in December 1575 , the Spanish agent in London , Antonio de Guaras , reported :

As the thing is publicly talked of in the streets , there can be no harm in my writing openly about the great enmity between the Earl of Leicester and the Earl of Essex , in consequence , it is said , of the fact that while Essex was in Ireland his wife had two children by Leicester Great discord is expected in consequence .

These rumours were elaborated on years later in Leicester 's Commonwealth , a Catholic underground libel against the Protestant Earl of Leicester satirically detailing his alleged enormities . Here the Countess of Essex , after having a daughter by Leicester , kills a second child " cruelly and unnaturally " by abortion to prevent her homecoming husband from discovering her affair . There is no evidence that any such children ever existed .

The Earl of Essex returned to Ireland in July 1576 . At Dublin , he died of dysentery on 22 September during an epidemic , bemoaning the " frailness of women " in his last words . Rumours of poison , administered by Leicester , immediately sprung up and continued notwithstanding an official investigation which concluded that Essex had died of natural causes . His body was carried over to Carmarthen , where his widow attended the funeral .

The Countess ' jointure , the lands left to her under her husband 's will , was too little to live by and did not comprise Chartley , so that she and her children had to seek accommodation elsewhere . She partly lived in her father 's house at Rotherfield Greys , but also with friends ; Leicester 's Commonwealth claimed that Leicester had her move " up and down the country from house to house by privy ways " . She pleaded for an augmentation of her jointure with the authorities and , to reach a compromise with the late Earl 's executors , threatened " by some froward advice " to claim her dower rights . These would have amounted to one third of the Devereux estate . After seven months of wrangling a more satisfactory settlement was reached , the Countess declaring to be " content to respect my children more than myself " . She equally ? though unsuccessfully ? tried to move the Queen to forgive Essex ' debts to the Crown , which very much burdened the inheritance of her son , the young Earl of Essex .

= = Marriage to Leicester and banishment from court = =

Lettice Knollys married Robert Dudley , Earl of Leicester on 21 September 1578 at around seven o'clock in the morning . Only six other people were present at the Earl 's country house at Wanstead , Essex ; among these were the bride 's father and brother , Francis and Richard Knollys , the bridegroom 's brother , Ambrose , Earl of Warwick , and his two friends , the Earl of Pembroke and Lord North . The officiating chaplain Humphrey Tyndall later remarked that the bride wore a " loose gown " (an informal morning dress) , which has triggered modern speculation that she was pregnant and that the ceremony happened under pressure from her father . The marriage was , however , in planning between Leicester and his wedding guests for almost a year . While Lettice Devereux may well have been pregnant , there is no further indication as to this . The marriage date coincided with the end of the customary two @-@ years @-@ mourning for a widow .

Leicester ? a widower since 1560 ? had for many years been in hope of marrying Elizabeth herself , " for whose sake he had hitherto forborne marriage " , as he confessed to Lord North . He also feared Elizabeth 's reaction and insisted that his marriage be kept a secret . It did not remain one for

long , the French ambassador , Michel de Castelnau , reporting it only two months later . When the Queen was told of the marriage the next year , she banished Lettice Dudley permanently from court ; she never forgave her cousin , nor could she ever accept the marriage . Even Lady Leicester 's movements through London were resented by the Queen , let alone summer visits to Kenilworth by husband and wife .

Lettice Dudley continued to style herself Countess of Essex for several years into her new marriage . She lived very discreetly , often with her relatives at the Knollys family home in Oxfordshire . In February 1580 she was expecting the birth of a child there . For the birth of Leicester 's heir , Robert , Lord Denbigh , in June 1581 , she moved to Leicester House on the Strand . A further advanced pregnancy was reported in September 1582 by the French ambassador , yet the outcome is again unknown . The next year Lettice Dudley became officially resident at Leicester House , and Elizabeth was once again furious with the Earl " about his marriage , for he opened the same more plainly than ever before " . A few weeks later Michel de Castelnau was a guest at Leicester 's palatial mansion : " He especially invited me to dine with him and his wife , who has much influence over him and whom he introduces only to those to whom he wishes to show a particular mark of attention . "

Robert Dudley had been close to the Knollys family since the early 1550s ; several of Lettice 's brothers had been in his service and his marriage only enhanced his relations with her siblings . To his four stepchildren he was a concerned and generous stepfather . The Dudleys ' domestic life is partly documented in the Earl 's accounts ; Lettice Dudley financed her personal expenses and servants out of her revenue as Dowager Countess of Essex , remaining largely excluded from society life .

The three @-@ year @-@ old Lord Denbigh died suddenly on 19 July 1584 at Wanstead . His death shattered the dynastical hopes of the House of Dudley . Leicester stayed away from his court duties for a few weeks " to comfort my sorrowful wife for the loss of my little son , whom God has lately taken from us . " He also thanked Lord Burghley for ? unsuccessfully ? pleading with the Queen " on behalf of my poor wife . For truly my Lord , in all reason she is hardly dealt with . "

In 1585 Leicester led an English expedition to assist the rebellious United Provinces against Spain . He incurred Elizabeth 's wrath when he accepted the title of Governor @-@ General in January 1586 ? what had especially kindled her fury was a tale that the Countess of Leicester was planning to follow her husband to the Netherlands " with such a train of ladies , and gentlewomen , and such rich coaches , litters , and side @-@ saddles , as Her Majesty had none , and that there should be such a court of ladies , as should far pass Her Majesty 's court here . " Thomas Dudley , who informed Leicester about these events , stressed that " this information " was " most false " . At this same time the Earl was giving his wife authority to handle certain land issues during his absence , implying they had no plans to meet in Holland . William Davison , whom Leicester had sent to explain his doings to the Queen , described a visit to the Countess during the crisis : " I found her greatly troubled with tempestuous news she received from court , but somewhat comforted when she understood how I had proceeded with Her Majesty . "

The Earl returned to England in December 1586 , but was sent again to the Netherlands in the following June ? to the grief of his wife , as the young Earl of Essex remarked in a letter . Leicester eventually resigned his post in December 1587 . The Countess was with him when he died unexpectedly , possibly of malaria , on 4 September 1588 at Cornbury Park , Oxfordshire ; they had been on their way to Kenilworth and Buxton . The Earl 's funeral at Warwick in October 1588 was attended by his widow as well as numerous members of her family circle .

= = Blount and Essex = =

Lettice Dudley was left a wealthy widow . Leicester 's will appointed her as executrix and her income from both her husbands ' jointures amounted to £ 3 @,@ 000 annually , to which came plate and movables worth £ 6 @,@ 000 . However , her jointure was to suffer greatly from paying off Leicester 's debts , which at some £ 50 @,@ 000 were so overwhelming that she was advised to decline the responsibility of dealing with her husband 's financial legacy .

In March or April 1589 the Countess married Sir Christopher Blount , a relatively poor Catholic soldier 12 years her junior , who had been the Earl of Leicester 's Gentleman of the Horse and a trusted friend of his . The marriage was a great surprise and the Earl of Essex complained that it was an " unhappy choice " . In the face of tittle @-@ tattle that had reached even France , Lady Leicester ? she continued to be styled thus ? explained her choice with being a defenceless widow ; like her marriage to Leicester , the union proved to be a " genuinely happy " one . Some 60 years later it was claimed in a satirical poem that she had poisoned the Earl of Leicester on his deathbed , thereby forestalling her own murder at his hands , because he had found out about her supposed lover , Sir Christopher Blount .

In 1593 Lettice Knollys sold Leicester House to her son , after which it became known as Essex House . She moved to Drayton Bassett near Chartley in Staffordshire , her main residence for the rest of her life . Still banished from court , she saw no point in returning to London without being reconciled to Elizabeth . In December 1597 she had heard from friends that " Her Majesty is very well prepared to hearken to terms of pacification " , and was prepared to do " a winter journey " if her son thought " it be to any purpose " . " Otherwise a country life is fittest for disgraced persons " , she commented . She travelled to London , staying at Essex House from January till March 1598 , and seeking a reconciliation with Elizabeth . At last a short meeting was granted in which the Countess kissed the Queen and " the Queen kissed her " , but nothing really changed .

Lettice 's second son , Walter Devereux , died 1591 in France while on military duty , and in subsequent years she was anxious for her elder son 's safety . She addressed him " Sweet Robin " , longing for his letters and helpless about his moodiness and depression . After returning from his command in Ireland without licence , Essex was imprisoned in 1599 ; his mother came to London to intercede for him with the Queen . She tried to send Elizabeth a present in form of a gown , which Elizabeth neither accepted nor refused . Her efforts to get sight of her son made matters worse : " Mislike is taken that his mother and friends have been in a house that looks into York Garden where he uses to walk and have saluted each other out of a window . "

During Essex ' revolt , trial , and execution in February 1601 , Lettice remained at Drayton Bassett . She not only lost her son but her " best friend " , as she called her third husband . Sir Christopher Blount was executed on 18 March 1601 , three weeks after the execution of his stepson , to whom he had been a friend and confidant for many years .

= = Litigation and old age = =

The executions and attainders of Essex and Blount led to a legal dispute over the Countess of Leicester 's remaining property . In this context she claimed that Blount , in the process of paying off Leicester 's debts , had squandered her jewels and much of her landed wealth . The death of Elizabeth I in 1603 meant some form of rehabilitation for the Countess ; the new monarch , James I , not only restored her grandson , the third Earl of Essex , to his father 's title and estate , but quickly cancelled the rest of her debts to the Crown , almost £ 4 @, @ 000 .

Even more than his debts , the Earl of Leicester 's will triggered litigation . He had intended his illegitimate son from his early 1570s relationship with Douglas Sheffield , the adolescent Robert Dudley , to inherit Kenilworth after the death of his brother , Ambrose Dudley , 3rd Earl of Warwick . Some of the countess ' jointure manors lay in the castle 's vicinity , while at the same time they had been assigned to the younger Dudley 's inheritance by the overseers of Leicester 's will . After Warwick 's death in February 1590 , lengthy legal proceedings ensued over whether particular parts of Lady Leicester 's jointure belonged to the Kenilworth estate or not .

In 1603 Dudley initiated moves to prove that he was the legitimate son of his parents and thus the heir to the earldoms of Warwick and Leicester . If successful , this claim would not only have implied that Lettice Knollys ' union with Leicester had been bigamous , but would also have nullified her jointure rights . Consequently , in February 1604 , she filed a complaint against Dudley in the Star Chamber , accusing him of defamation . She was backed by Sir Robert Sidney , who considered himself the only legitimate heir of his uncles Leicester and Warwick . During the Star Chamber proceedings 56 former servants and friends of the Earl of Leicester testified that he had always

regarded Dudley as his illegitimate son . The other side was unable to cite clear evidence and the King 's chief minister , Robert Cecil , thought it unwise to rake up the existing property settlement , so the outcome was in favour of Lady Leicester . All the evidence was impounded to preclude a resumption of the case .

Throughout her life , Lettice Knollys cared for her siblings , children , and grandchildren . Until their respective deaths in 1607 and 1619 , her daughters Penelope and Dorothy were her closest companions . The young third Earl of Essex , also called Robert , shared much of his life with the old Countess at Chartley and Drayton Bassett . Still walking a mile a day at nearly 90 , she died in her chair in the morning of 25 December 1634 , aged 91 . Widely mourned as a symbol of a by @-@ gone age , she wished to be buried " at Warwick by my dear lord and husband the Earl of Leicester with whom I desire to be entombed " . Her request was respected and she came to rest in the Beauchamp Chapel of Collegiate Church of St Mary , Warwick , opposite the tomb of her son , young Lord Denbigh .

= = Ancestry = =