MARGARET BEAUFORT

1443-1509

Last month, we heard about Mary Queen of Scots. Born a queen, she had the whole world at her feet, wealth, position and power but either through a series of miscalculations or foolish choices or maybe sheer bad luck, she ended up on the executioners block. She lives on however, in literature, drama and opera, a tragic heroine.

By contrast, most people may not know who Margaret Beaufort was. Ironically, she was Mary Queen of Scots, great- grandmother. But her career was diametrically opposite to that of poor Mary. She started off considerably disadvantaged but through strength of character, political manoeuvering and dedication to her cause, she rose dramatically and ended up in a position of great influence, extreme wealth and honour. She has been described as a combination of Margaret Thatcher, Boadicea and Elizabeth I.

Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond & Derby was born in 1443, the child of John 1st Duke of Somerset and Margaret Beauchamp f Bletso.

From an early age she exhibited extraordinary religious fervour, and this was combined paradoxically with ruthless ambition. Her childhood heroine was Joan of Arc, whose piety and courage she admired greatly. As you can see from her portraits, she is usually wearing nun's garb or a suitably modest dress.

In the 15th century, the role of women was solely to provide an heir for the family

and to create what was called “a bridge for the generations. This was not the career that Margaret would have chosen for herself. She wanted to be a nun and aspired to be an abbess in a monastery, which was a very respectable career for a noble woman of that time and Margaret earnestly pleaded with her mother to be allowed to follow this path.

Her mother however, seems to have been an embittered young widow. She was Margaret Beauchamp of Bletso. Her husband, Margaret's Father and 1st Duke of Somerset died by his own hand, shortly after Margaret was born in 1443. This was an extremely shameful event and caused his wife to miscarry their second child. Margaret therefore grew up alone and her mother placed all her hope for the family on Margaret making a good marriage and restoring the family's fame and fortune. The one thing the family had was good connections. !

At the age of six, Margaret was betrothed to John de la Pole, aged four. What she thought about this we do not know, but at the age of ten this plan was suddenly dropped. Standing in front of her cousin Henry VI, young Margaret was made to formally renounce poor little John and she was formally engaged to Edmund Tudor aged twenty-five.

 Who was Edmund Tudor and why was this a good match.? So many things in history, as in life, are the result of a fluke or unexpected event. After the Battle of Agincourt in 1415, Henry V signed The Treaty of Troyes with the French King, Charles VI. This meant that on the death of Charles, Henry would become King of France and rule England and France together, thus fulfilling the English dream of reclaiming most of western France, and for 100 years this had been the English dream.! To seal the bargain, Henry was to marry Charles' young daughter, Katherine de Valois. Fatally, Henry did not pay attention to the fact that the French King was mad! Charles believed he was made of glass and wouldn't allow anyone to touch him.

The young couple saw very little of each other, Henry being constantly on campaign in France trying to mop up more possessions. However, he saw to it that Katherine had a child, a baby son, also named Henry, the future Henry VI. Unfortunately little Henry had inherited his French grandfather's insanity or mental illness as we would call it nowadays, and this was a major factor in the Wars of the Roses, as a weak king allows other people to get ideas. Suddenly, in 1422, aged 34, the mighty Henry V died of dysentery leaving this fragile baby as his heir and more importantly Katherine as a young widow. A young widowed queen is an anomaly and no one seemed to know what should be done with her. At a loose end, she fell in love with her Clerk of the Wardrobe, young handsome Owen Tudor. The couple married secretly and then retired to Wales, where Edmund and Jasper Tudor were born. The marriage of Edmund Tudor to Margaret Beaufort meant that any male child they had, would have a good Lancastrian claim to the throne.

Margaret, herself, was a member of the famous Beaufort family. Again this is a quirk of history, brought about by a strange liaison. John of Gaunt, the third and very mighty son of Edward III, was married to Blanche of Lancaster thus acquiring the vast estates and wealth of Henry Duke of Lancaster. Amongst other children, his heir was young Henry Bolingbroke, later Henry IV. However, John of Gaunt had a mistress, Katherine Swynford,with whom he had a long and steady relationship. Together they had four children, known as the Beauforts, John, Henry, Joan and Thomas. All of these children grew up at court, becoming friends with the royal children. They seem to have been extremely capable and well-liked. Despite the stain of their birth they prospered and with the help of their aristocratic father, they all made good marriages and even achieved high office. Another twist of fate meant that within a month, John lost his second wife Constance of Castile, his niece, the wife of Richard II and his daughter-in-law, wife of the future Henry IV.

These events seem to have prompted John to think about the future and the fate of the Beaufort children and he set about legitimising them. This was not easy or usual but he persuaded both the Pope and the King, Richard II to grant this unusual request and it took place formally at court. It meant that the Beauforts had all the rights and privileges that were enjoyed by others of royal birth, with the one proviso that they could not ascend the throne itself. The four Beauforts did extremely well, occupying some of the high offices of state and Henry even became a Cardinal. Edward IV and Richard III were direct descendants of Joan Beaufort.

All of these tangled relationships led to the Wars of the Roses. At the time, the conflict was known as the Cousins' War. All the combatants in that very complicated Civil War, were descendants of three of Edward III's sons, Edward, the Black Prince, John of Gaunt and Edmund Crouchback. Margaret was to enter this conflict in support of her son, Henry Tudor. She achieved her ambition largely through tactical manoeuvering, diplomacy and making use of the men she cultivated.

When little Margaret married Edmund Tudor, she was twelve, scarcely old enough to be a wife, let alone a mother. By thirteen, she had had a baby and Edmund was dead. Aged twenty -five, he died in prison, of battle wounds and Margaret had seen almost nothing of him. The birth was a horrendous experience for Margaret. Labour went on for days and in despair the midwives tossed her up in a blanket, This seemed to do the trick and amazingly young Henry Tudor lived to tell the tale. What distressed Margaret most was that, not only did her Mother not come near her at this difficult time but sent a message that if there were to be a choice between Margaret and the baby, then the baby was to be saved. The only person left to help Margaret was the baby's uncle young Jasper Tudor and he was to play a major part in Henry's upbringing and eventual triumph as Henry VII, first Tudor King of England and Father of Henry VIII.

After Edmund died, Margaret's Mother re-appeared, this time with a second arranged marriage for her fourteen-year-old daughter. The husband was Sir Henry Stafford, aged thirty-three and second son of the mighty Duke of Buckingham. Again, there was no choice and no consideration of age or temperament, just a question of “wedding and bedding” as it was called, and no doubt it was a very good match dynastically, except that this time Margaret failed to conceive a child at all. She must have been traumatised after her previous experience but in fact, she did not have to go through it again. The first birth, at such a young age may have damaged her irrevocably! However, this marriage turned out to be much better than the first. Henry didn't care for fighting and resisted Margaret's attempts to make him engage in battle on the Lancastrian side. He seems to have been more of a father to young Margaret and encouraged her love of study and learning and allowed her the run of his vast library. She studied Latin and French and began to translate texts from both these languages into English, which was gaining ground as an official language since Chaucer's day.

During this period, battles were raging between the Lancastrians and the Yorkists and although by this time Margaret had lost guardianship of her young son, her conviction that he was a plausible heir to the throne became even more entrenched..

With a Yorkist king on the throne, young Henry was actually removed from Jasper's care and became the ward of the Duke of Hereford, a Yorkist supporter, where he spent many apparently happy years. Margaret actually saw very little of her son whilst he was growing up but never lost faith in his destiny or was it perhaps her own ambition to be Margaret Regina? Eventually Henry Stafford did engage in battle on Margaret's insistence but returned home wounded and died in 1471.

A widow again, Margaret now 28, took complete charge of her own life. Presumably there was no mother to arrange any more marriages or perhaps she had lost interest. . Clever enough to see that marriage was the way to power and influence, Margaret actually wrote to someone whom she thought might help the cause. This was the wily and wealthy Thomas Stanley 1st Earl of Derby. He was known to be a calculating man,who always seemed to come out on the winning side in any situation. He had a reputation for waiting to see how the wind was blowing before charging in on the winning side. He also had money and more importantly an army. He was well aware of what Margaret was up to and decided to play along. They had a written agreement that the marriage was purely a business arrangement, with mutual interest being the prime motivation.. For a woman to propose marriage to a man was an extraordinarily bizarre event in mediaeval Europe!

This was a period when Lancastrian and Yorkist kings were ascending and descending the throne at an alarming rate. Battle followed battle and Margaret must have been amazed to see her son moving up the rankings even faster than she could have hoped. Henry VI's young son, Prince Edward was killed at Tewkesbury, Edward IV suddenly died of a chill. The Duke of Clarence disappeared into the Tower, Henry VI disappeared into the Tower. Edward IVs two young heirs, Edward and Richard disappeared into the Tower. Finally Edward's younger brother Richard took the throne as Richard III, but by this time, his young son, also Edward, had died followed shortly afterwards by his wife Anne Neville, thus leaving him without an heir or the possibility of one.

At this point, encouraged by Stanley, Margaret did an extraordinary thing. Although violently opposed to the Yorkist claims to the throne, she went to court and befriended Edward's Queen, Elizabeth Woodville. She was so successful, that she was appointed lady-in-waiting to the person, she was plotting to overthrow and appears to have become the queen's confidante. After the death of Edward IV, she moved to the court of Queen Anne, and again bcame a trusted adviser to the young queen. It was during this period that she suggested secretly that her young son Henry, in exile in France, should marry Edward IV's eldest daughter Elizabeth

 and a private agreement was drawn up, unbeknown to Richard III, who was contemplating marrying the girl himself., although marrying a niece would have been unlawful.

By this time, Henry Tudor and Jasper were in exile in Brittany, where they were raising funds and assembling an army. Margaret was in constant touch,writing letters in code, sending money and recruiting men like the Duke of Buckingham to fight for her cause. The first attempted invasion failed due to bad weather and the Duke of Buckingham was killed. Things didn't look very promising but a second attempt was made in 1485. The key person at this stage was Lord Stanley, who appeared to be supporting Richard. He played both sides very carefully and nobody could guess what he might do. Margaret must have been on tenterhooks to see if he would keep his promise or let her down. At the very last moment Stanley's men charged against Richard III's troops together with young Henry Tudor and won the day at the famous Battle of Bosworth. Richard was killed and dragged away unceremoniously whilst Henry Tudor, aged twenty-nine, became the first Tudor King of England. He did indeed marry Elizabeth of York, as his mother intended, and the marriage, a very successful one, united the red rose of Lancaster and the white rose of York and created some stability for a war torn country. Jasper married Katherine Woodville, Elizabeth's sister and widow of the Duke of Buckingham. He carried the crown at the coronation ceremony and was greatly honoured by Henry, who gave him lands and estates in Wales and the Midlands.

Margaret Beaufort now acquired the glorious title of 'My Lady, the Kings' Mother'.

She seems to have held a very eminent position at court. From letters, we know that Henry had a close and affectionate relationship with his mother. According to the Pope's envoy he consulted her on important matters and even Henry VIII placed her coat- of- arms ahead his own. She had an important role in educating her grandchildren and brought in tutors from Oxford and Cambridge to teach them. She would have had a great influence on her grandchildren, particularly in matters of religion, on which subject she was profoundly conservative. How ironic that her grandson brought about the greatest upheaval in religious matters that England had ever known! Would this ever have happened if Margaret, his grandmother had still been alive ! Probably not and our history could have been very different.

As to her legacy, Her grandson Henry, was King of England, her grand-daughter Margaret became Queen of Scotland, her grand-daughter Mary, became Queen of France. Her great-grand-daughter Mary, became Queen of England, her great-grandson Edward became King of England and finally but not least her great-grand-daughter became England's greatest queen, Elizabeth I.

Her great-great-grandaughter was the ill-fated Mary Queen of Scots.

Margaret was a woman of her time and constrained by her inferior position as a woman but her legacy was far beyond her time. She pursued her interest in learning and education to the end of her life. With the help of Bishop John Fisher, Chancellor of the University of Cambridge, she founded St John's and Christ's Colleges and endowed the Lady Margaret Professorships of Divinity at Cambridge and Oxford.

These colleges were foundations that brought together monks and secular priests to study, debate and pray for the souls of their benefactors.

 She also founded a free school at Wimborne in Dorset, where her parents are buried. She funded preachers throughout England, and two interpreters of scripture, one at Oxford and one at Cambridge. Lady Margaret Hall in Oxford is named in her honour. She was also a scholar and translated devotional works like the Mirror of Gold and The Imitation of Christ. So she lives on through her benefactions and endowments .

She died at Oxford,aged 66, just one month after her son Henry VII, and two months after the coronation of Henry VIII. Her funeral service was conducted by her confessor, Bishop Fisher. In his eulogy, he likened her to Martha in the Bible.

She now lies in Westminster Abbey, in a magnificent tomb, designed by the Italian sculptor, Pietro Torrigiano. It is in the south aisle of Henry VII's Chapel, which he built for himself and his family. A few feet away, lies her great granddaughter, Mary Queen of Scots. Margaret lies in state, dressed in traditional widow's dress, hands raised in prayer, her head resting on pilllows decorated with the Tudor badge, As a tribute to his Mother, Henry designed this magnificent tomb and placed her amongst the kings and queens of England. Margaret Regina indeed!