

Tudor Spies and Spymasters: The Queens

Elizabeth I, Queen of England



Elizabeth, daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, was born in September 1533. Catholics rejected her claim to the English throne from her birth because in their eyes her parents' marriage wasn't valid. Her father executed her mother and declared Elizabeth illegitimate before she was 3 years old. After her father's death, she navigated various dangers during the reigns of Edward VI, and Mary I.

When she came to the throne in 1558, Elizabeth surrounded herself with intelligent, dedicated ministers who helped her overcome challenges to her reign and threats to her life. Under Elizabeth's leadership, supported by William Cecil and Francis Walsingham, her council countered plots and ensured the survival of the Queen and her religion.

Mary Queen of Scots



Mary became Queen of Scots as an infant in 1542 and was sent to France and betrothed to the Dauphin in 1548. She married Francois in 1558 and the pair claimed the English throne. Briefly Queen of France, she returned to Scotland in 1561 after Francois's early death. After two disastrous marriages, she abdicated her throne to her baby son and fled to England in 1568.

While in England, she was the focus of several plots to install her on the English throne in Elizabeth's place. After being found guilty of treason for her involvement in the Babington plot, Mary was executed in 1587. Catholics consider her a martyr for her faith.



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William Cecil



William Cecil, born in 1520, served as Secretary of State for Edward VI and in parliament during the reign of Mary I, all the while developing a relationship with Elizabeth Tudor. When Elizabeth became Queen in 1558, Cecil was the first minister she appointed, and he was at her side until his death in 1598. He was an indefatigable worker and navigated foreign and domestic challenges and opportunities for his queen.

He recruited men to help him preserve Elizabeth's life, reign, and religion, notably Francis Walsingham. Cecil was created Baron Burghley in 1571. As his health declined, he trained his son to replace him, counseling him to "serve God by serving the Queen." His work is a primary reason Elizabeth survived to an old age.

Francis Walsingham



Francis Walsingham, born about 1532, held important positions in Elizabeth I's government and is commonly known as her Spymaster. A devout Protestant, Walsingham spent Mary I's reign on the continent, making religious, business, and political connections that would serve him well in his future. He was Ambassador to France during the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre in 1572 and vowed nothing like that ever happen in England..

When he returned to England, Walsingham was determined to protect Protestantism at any cost. He assembled a team of "watchers" throughout Europe and developed a network to track threats to the queen. His work was central to the arrest of Mary queen of Scots in the Babington Plot--she blamed him. Walsingham's work is considered an early example of modern espionage.

