

# Catherine Brandon, Duchess of Suffolk

**Catherine Brandon, Duchess of Suffolk**, *suo jure* **12th Baroness Willoughby de Eresby** (22 March 1519 – 19 September 1580), was an English noblewoman living at the royal courts of **King Henry VIII**, **King Edward VI** and later, **Queen Elizabeth I**. She was the fourth wife of **Charles Brandon, 1st Duke of Suffolk**, who acted as her legal guardian during his third marriage to **Mary Tudor**, the younger sister of **Henry VIII**. Her second husband was **Richard Bertie**, a member of her household. Following **Charles Brandon's** death in 1545, it was rumoured that **King Henry** had considered marrying Catherine as his seventh wife, while he was still married to his sixth wife, **Catherine Parr**, who was Catherine's close friend.

An outspoken supporter of the **English Reformation**, she fled abroad to **Wesel** and later the **Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth** during the reign of **Queen Mary I**, to avoid persecution.

## 1 Family

Catherine Willoughby, born at **Parham Old Hall, Suffolk**, on 22 March 1519 and christened in the church there four days later,<sup>[1]</sup> was the daughter of **William Willoughby, 11th Baron Willoughby de Eresby**, and his second wife, **María de Salinas**. Lord Willoughby's first wife, **Mary Hussey**, the daughter of **William Hussey, Chief Justice of the King's Bench**, had died childless before 1512, and in June 1516 he married **María de Salinas**. **Dona María de Salinas** had come to the English court with **Henry VIII's** Queen consort, **Catherine of Aragon**, and was one of the Queen's ladies-in-waiting and closest friends.<sup>[2]</sup> The King favoured another match bolstering his own marital alliance with **Spain**, and even named one of his warships the *Mary Willoughby*. It seems clear that Catherine was named for the Queen, but her mother's lifelong friendship with **Catherine of Aragon** did not prevent her daughter from becoming one of England's **Marian exiles** later in life.

Catherine had two brothers, **Henry** and **Francis**, who died as infants.<sup>[1]</sup>

## 2 Early life

According to **Goff**, Catherine likely spent her early childhood at **Parham**, as her mother was in almost constant attendance on **Henry VIII's** Queen, **Catherine of Aragon**.<sup>[1]</sup>

On 14 October 1526, when Catherine was seven years of age, **Lord Willoughby** died after falling ill during a visit to **Suffolk**,<sup>[3]</sup> and was buried at **Mettingham**.<sup>[4][5]</sup> As his only surviving child, Catherine inherited the barony. Her father held some thirty manors in **Lincolnshire**, and almost the same number in **Norfolk** and **Suffolk**, worth over £900 per annum,<sup>[6]</sup> and Catherine is said to have been 'one of the greatest heiresses of her generation'.<sup>[7]</sup> However her inheritance became a subject of dispute for many years, as there was doubt as to which lands had been settled on the heirs male and which on the heirs general, and the matter was further complicated by a deed which **Lord Willoughby** had drawn up before leaving for **France** to campaign in **Henry VIII's** wars in 1523.<sup>[8]</sup> In 1527 Catherine's uncle, **Sir Christopher Willoughby**, accused his sister-in-law, Catherine's mother, **María de Salinas**, of withholding documents from him which established the title to various estates, and of having kept him out of possession of estates which rightfully belonged to him.<sup>[9]</sup>

At her father's death, Catherine's wardship fell to the King, who on 1 March 1528<sup>[10]</sup> sold it to his brother-in-law, **Charles Brandon, 1st Duke of Suffolk**. On acquiring Catherine's wardship, **Suffolk** immediately intervened in the family quarrel with a letter to **Cardinal Wolsey**, and his intervention appears to have cowed **Sir Christopher Willoughby**, who wrote to **Wolsey** that the Cardinal's anger was 'worse to him than death'.<sup>[11]</sup>

Catherine is said to have been betrothed to **Henry Brandon, 1st Earl of Lincoln** (died 1534), **Suffolk's** son by his third wife, **Mary Tudor**.<sup>[12]</sup> **Mary Tudor** died at **Westhorpe, Suffolk**, on 25 June 1533, and on 21 July the young Catherine was one of the chief mourners at her funeral.<sup>[13]</sup> As early as 1531 it had been rumoured in the household of **Henry VIII's** future Queen, **Anne Boleyn**, that **Suffolk** was personally interested in Catherine,<sup>[6]</sup> and six weeks after **Mary Tudor's** death the **Imperial Ambassador**, **Eustace Chapuys**, reported to **Charles V** that:<sup>[14]</sup>

On Sunday next the Duke of Suffolk will be married to the daughter of a Spanish lady named Lady Willoughby. She was promised to the Duke's son, but he is only ten years old, & although it is not worth writing to your Majesty, the novelty of the case made me mention it'.

Although **Suffolk** was forty-nine and Catherine only fourteen, the marriage was a successful one.<sup>[15]</sup> The **Willoughby** inheritance was not fully settled until the reign of **Queen Elizabeth I**, but **Suffolk** was able to force

Sir Christopher Willoughby to relinquish possession of some of the contested Willoughby estates, and Suffolk eventually became the greatest magnate in Lincolnshire. As such, he played an important role in quelling the Lincolnshire rebellion in 1536,<sup>[16]</sup> and built an imposing residence at Grimsthorpe,<sup>[6]</sup> which came into Catherine's possession at the death of Elizabeth de Vere, Dowager Countess of Oxford, widow of the 13th Earl.<sup>[17]</sup>

Suffolk and his new Duchess had two sons, Henry Brandon, 2nd Duke of Suffolk, born 18 September 1534 at Catherine's mother's house in the Barbican,<sup>[18]</sup> and Charles Brandon, 3rd Duke of Suffolk, born 15 March 1535.<sup>[19]</sup> Her marriage brought Catherine into the extended royal family, because Henry VIII's will made his younger sister Mary Tudor's descendants the next heirs to the throne after his own children. The Duke and Duchess of Suffolk officially greeted Anne of Cleves when she arrived in England in 1539 to marry the King, and in 1541 they helped arrange a royal progress for the King and his next Queen, Catherine Howard. This progress later became notorious for the Queen's adulterous trysts with her kinsman, Thomas Culpeper, though the Duke and Duchess's home at Grimsthorpe Castle was "one of the very few places on the route ... where Catherine Howard had not misbehaved herself".<sup>[20]</sup>

### 3 Personality and beliefs



Miniature of Catherine Willoughby by Hans Holbein, the Younger

Noted for her wit, sharp tongue, and devotion to learning, by the last years of Henry VIII's reign the Duchess of Suffolk was also an outspoken advocate of the English Reformation. She became a close friend of Henry's last queen, Catherine Parr, particularly after the Duke died in 1545, and was a strong influence on the Queen's religious beliefs. In 1546, as the Queen's religious views

grew controversial, the King ordered the Queen's arrest, though his wife managed to cajole him into cancelling this. The Duchess of Suffolk once gave a banquet and during a party game afterwards named Bishop Gardiner as the man she loved least. She named her pet spaniel "Gardiner", provoking much amusement when she called her dog to heel.<sup>[21]</sup> Several years later when Gardiner was imprisoned during the reign of King Edward VI, she is quoted as saying, "It was merry with the lambs when the wolf was shut up."<sup>[22]</sup>

Suffolk died 22 August 1545,<sup>[23]</sup> and it was rumoured that the King was considering the Duchess — still only in her mid-20s — as his seventh wife.<sup>[24]</sup> In February 1546, Van der Delft wrote: "I hesitate to report there are rumours of a new queen. Some attribute it to the sterility of the present Queen, while others say that there will be no change during the present war. Madame Suffolk is much talked about and is in great favour; but the King shows no alteration in his behaviour to the Queen, although she is said to be annoyed by the rumour".<sup>[25]</sup> But the friendship of the two Catherines remained strong, and after Henry VIII's death in 1547, the Duchess helped fund the publication of one of Catherine Parr's books, *The Lamentation of a Sinner*. She also became a patron of John Day, England's leading religious publisher; Day printed various books with the Duchess of Suffolk's coat of arms from 1548 onward. Beginning in 1550, the Duchess helped establish Stranger churches for foreign Protestants, principally Dutch, who were fleeing religious persecution on the Continent.

### 4 After Henry VIII's death

The Dowager Queen remarried to Thomas Seymour shortly after the death of the King. In August 1548, Catherine Parr gave birth to a daughter. She died several days later. Upon the death of Dowager Queen, her widower took off for London with his new baby daughter. Months later, Seymour would be arrested, tried, and executed for treason. His daughter, Mary, was left an orphan aged only seven months.<sup>[26]</sup> The Duchess of Suffolk was appointed guardian and was entrusted with the custody of Mary.<sup>[26]</sup> The Duchess could not support the young infant so she wrote to Sir William Cecil, asking for funds.<sup>[26]</sup> The letter the Duchess wrote clearly reflects her resentment towards the child.<sup>[26]</sup> The letter was obviously taken into account for in January 1550, an act in Parliament was passed restoring Mary to what was left of her father's property.<sup>[26]</sup> No claim was ever made and the queen's daughter seems to disappear from history at this time.<sup>[26]</sup> Linda Porter, biographer of Queen Catherine Parr, believes that the child died and was buried near the Duchess's estate in Grimsthorpe.<sup>[26]</sup> Years later, the Duchess also became the custodian of one of her Brandon step-granddaughters, Lady Mary Grey, when the latter was placed under house arrest after marrying without

royal consent.

In 1551 both the Duchess's sons, already students at Cambridge, died within an hour of each other of the sweating sickness. Four months afterwards, attempting to reconcile herself to this personal tragedy, Catherine wrote to Sir William Cecil that 'truly I take this [God's] last (and to the first sight most sharp and bitter) punishment not for the least of his benefits, in as much as I have never been so well taught by any other before to know his power, his love, and mercy, my own wickedness, and that wretched state that without him I should endure here'.<sup>[27]</sup> In recovering from this misfortune and its severe test to her faith, Catherine built a new life. In this period she employed Hugh Latimer as her chaplain.<sup>[6]</sup> She married her second husband, Richard Bertie (25 December 1516 – 9 April 1582), a member of her household, out of love and shared religious beliefs, but she continued to be known as the Duchess of Suffolk, and her efforts to have her husband named Lord Willoughby de Eresby were unsuccessful. In 1555, during the reign of Queen Mary I, the Berties were among the Marian exiles who left for the Continent. Their persecution by Stephen Gardiner, the Bishop of Winchester and Lord Chancellor, and subsequent wanderings were recounted in Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, in an account probably written by Richard Bertie himself for the 1570 edition. During this period Sigismund II Augustus, the King of Poland and Duke of Lithuania appointed them as administrators of Lithuania, based at Kražiai.<sup>[28]</sup> After their return to England, they lived at Catherine's estate, Grimsthorpe in Lincolnshire, and at court. By Richard Bertie, Catherine was the mother of Peregrine Bertie, who married Mary de Vere, only sister of the whole blood of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, and of Susan Bertie, who married firstly, Reginald Grey, 5th Earl of Kent, and secondly, Sir John Wingfield, a nephew of Catherine's friend, Bess of Hardwick.

## 5 Literary tributes

Catherine and Richard Bertie's exile became the basis of a ballad by Thomas Deloney (1543–1600), *The most Rare and Excellent History, Of the Dutchess of Suffolks Calamity*, and of Thomas Drue's play, *The Life of the Duchess of Suffolk*, published in 1624. It may also have been the subject of an unpublished play from 1600 by William Haughton, *The English Fugitives*. Catherine's second marriage to one of her servants and subsequent persecution also present parallels to the plot of John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*.

## 6 Ancestry

### 7 Issue

1. Henry Brandon, 2nd Duke of Suffolk (18 September 1535 – 14 July 1551) died of the sweating sickness
2. Charles Brandon, 3rd Duke of Suffolk (1537/38–14 July 1551) died of the sweating sickness an hour after his older brother.
3. Susan Bertie, Countess of Kent (1554 – unknown) Married firstly in 1570, Reginald Grey of Wrest, 5th Earl of Kent and secondly on 30 September 1581, John Wingfield by whom she had two sons Peregrine Wingfield and Robert Wingfield.
4. Peregrine Bertie, 13th Baron Willoughby de Eresby (12 October 1555 – 1601). Married 1577 Mary de Vere, daughter of John de Vere, 16th Earl of Oxford and Margery Golding.<sup>[29]</sup> They had seven children.

## 8 Notes

- [1] Goff 1930, p. 9.
- [2] Goff 1930, pp. 2-3.
- [3] According to Goff, he died at Hertford in Suffolk.
- [4] Harder 2008, p. 28.
- [5] Goff 1930, p. 13.
- [6] Wabuda 2004.
- [7] Harris 2002, p. 66.
- [8] Goff 1930, p. 15.
- [9] Goff 1930, pp. 10, 15-16.
- [10] Wabuda dates Suffolk's acquisition of the wardship to February 1529.
- [11] Goff 1930, pp. 17-18.
- [12] Goff 1930, pp. 23-4.
- [13] Goff 1930, p. 20.
- [14] Goff 1930, p. 23.
- [15] Goff 1930, p. 28.
- [16] Goff 1930, pp. 61, 83.
- [17] Goff 1930, pp. 7, 85.
- [18] Goff 1930, p. 37.
- [19] Goff 1930, p. 48.
- [20] Anthony Martienssen, *Queen Katherine Parr*
- [21] Anthony Martienssen, "Queen Katherine Parr", p. 195.

- [22] Martienssen, p. 195
- [23] Richardson I 2011, p. 299.
- [24] *The Mistresses of Henry VIII* by Kelly Hart
- [25] Letters and Papers from the Reign of Henry VIII, 21, pt. i, no. 1027; by Francis van der Delft, Imperial ambassador)
- [26] Linda Porter. *Lady Mary Seymour: An Unfit Traveller*, History Today Volume: 61 Issue: 7 2011.
- [27] Harris 2002, p. 109.
- [28] Evelyn Read (1962), *Catherine, duchess of Suffolk*, London: Cape, OCLC 808762
- [29] The Peerage.com

## 9 References

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- Richardson, Douglas (2011). Everingham, Kimball G., ed. *Magna Carta Ancestry: A Study in Colonial and Medieval Families*. I (2nd ed.). Salt Lake City. ISBN 1449966373.
- Works related to **Catharine Bertie** at Wikisource: Dictionary of National Biography, 1885-1900, Volume 4, p. 403.

## 10 Further reading

- *My Lady Suffolk: A Portrait of Catherine Willoughby, Duchess of Suffolk* by Evelyn Read (1963) ASIN B000JE85OK
- *Queen Katherine Parr* by Anthony Martienssen, McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York 1973
- *Women, Reform and Community in Early Modern England: Katherine Willoughby, Duchess of Suffolk, and Lincolnshire's Godly Aristocracy, 1519-1580: 19 (Studies in Modern British Religious History)* by Melissa Franklin Harkrider
- *The Mistresses of Henry VIII* by Kelly Hart

## 11 In fiction

- Catherine's story is very fictionalized in the novel *The Sixth Wife: A Novel* by Suzannah Dunn
- Her character is played by Rebekah Wainwright in the historical fiction series *The Tudors*, where she is called **Catherine Brooke**, and much of her story has been changed.

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