

Despite the accusation against Somerset, there is evidence to suggest that some of the accusations were fabricated in order to justify his execution.

How seriously did the attempt to alter the succession in 1553 threaten dynastic security?

In the early months of 1553 Edward VI's health began to deteriorate and, despite treatment, he continued to decline.

Source H A medical student involved in the care of Edward VI describes the decline in the king's health

.....
In what concerns our King's health be assured of this that he is steadily declining. Today the Duke of Northumberland called the doctors together and asked them what the King's chances were. With one voice they answered that since this season of the year is kindest to him, but it has not improved his condition, so, when autumn comes it will end his life. The duke hearing this told them not to slacken their efforts nor stop praying to God that he will benefit from their treatment. Meanwhile, Northumberland told them that 'you will all be paid your fees every month, at a rate of one hundred crowns'.

Letter from John Banister, a medical student who was at Greenwich with the king, to the Imperial ambassador, Jehan Schefve, 28 May 1553

According to the Succession Acts and Henry's will, the throne was to pass to Edward's half-sister, Mary. However, during the spring and summer a plot developed to alter the succession so as to exclude Mary. Most accounts of the events have suggested that the driving force behind the attempts to alter the succession was Northumberland as it was essential if he was to preserve his power. As a result, he arranged the marriage of his son, Guildford Dudley, to Lady Jane Grey, which was followed soon after by a change in Edward's will to name Jane as his successor.

Source I The writer, a Suffolk gentleman and Catholic supporter of Queen Mary, assesses Northumberland and his role in the attempt to change the succession in 1553

.....
The Duke of Northumberland was an ambitious man. After a notable victory outside Norwich in 1549 against the peasants, who had been stirred up against the better sort by idle men, Northumberland sought to control both the King and the kingdom. In 1553 the King showed signs of imminent death. He dared not make any protests, but fell in with the Duke's wishes to alter the succession. The dying king spoke to the nobles and lawyers: 'It is our resolve, with the agreement of our noblemen, to appoint as our heir our dear cousin Jane. For if our sister Mary were to be queen, all would be over for the religion we have established.'

From Robert Wingfield's *The Life of Mary Queen of England*, 1553

Lady Jane Grey

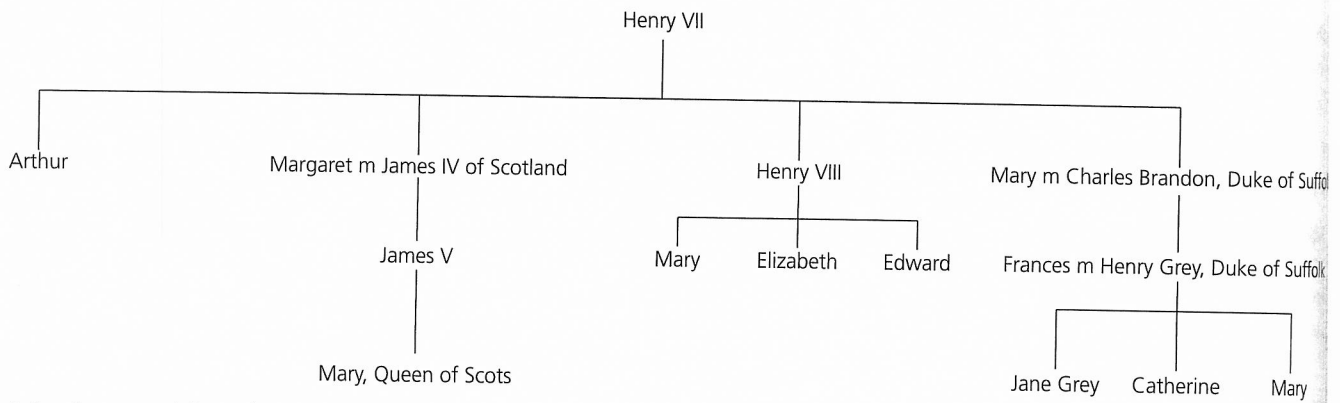
Lady Jane Grey was born in 1537 and had a distant claim to the throne as her grandfather, the Duke of Suffolk, had married Mary, Henry VIII's sister. It is unlikely that she knew of the plot or the decision to make her queen until just before her proclamation as queen. There is little doubt that she wanted nothing to do with the decision.

Activity

Read Source I.

- 1 What does Wingfield's account suggest were Edward's reasons for altering the succession?
- 2 How might Wingfield's religious beliefs influence his views?
- 3 How might this affect the reliability of the source?

Enquiry topic: Mid-Tudor crises, 1547–58



▲ Family tree and the Lady Jane Grey affair.

Activity

Read Source J.

- 1 The French ambassador had arrived in England on his first ever visit on 30 April. How might this affect the reliability of his letter?
- 2 Use your knowledge of the attempts to alter the succession in 1553 to assess how useful Source J is as evidence of preparations to alter the succession. (AS)

Read Sources J and K.

- 3 What can we learn from the ambassador's two letters about French involvement in the question of the succession?
- 4 What is the purpose of the ambassador's letters? How might this affect their reliability?
- 5 Foreign ambassadors were reporting back on the issue of the succession, as Sources J and K show. Why were foreign powers so concerned about the situation in England?

Plans were in place to prevent Mary's accession.

Source J The French ambassador explains that plans were in place to prevent Mary's accession to the throne

I sounded out the Duke of Northumberland on the illness of the King and also on the proposal which your Majesty [Henry II] had asked M. de L'Aubespine to make to him and he finally disclosed much to me. He [Northumberland] told me that they had provided very well against the Lady Mary's ever attaining the succession, and that all the lords of the Council are so well united, that there is no need for you to enter into any doubt on that score.

Antoine de Noailles, who had arrived for the first time in England on 30 April, writing to Henry II of France, 28 June 1553

The ambassador wrote again the following month.

Source K The ambassador outlines the Council's reaction to possible French and Imperial aid

After a while when the members of the Council had reached their decision, the Duke, speaking for all of them, thanked your Majesty very humbly for all the generous offers which you are pleased to make them. They desire to ask your aid and to employ your forces when occasion presents itself. I left them in such a frame of mind that I could discover nothing in them opposed to the advancement of your affairs; nor were they disposed, in my opinion, to welcome the proposals, which the Imperial deputies will make to them.

From the French ambassador's letter to Henry II, King of France, 7 July 1553

However, there is evidence to suggest that the attempts to alter the succession were driven by Edward, rather than Northumberland. Edward was certainly playing a much greater role in government, attending Privy Council meetings and setting some agendas. Northumberland was astute enough to recognise Edward's skills and was therefore quick to involve him in consultations and government. Edward was also committed to Protestantism and it is possible that in order to preserve the religious reform programme he wanted to exclude Mary.

The succession was altered by the 'Devise for the Succession' first issued in May 1553.

Source L Edward VI issues his 'Devise for the Succession' setting out who would succeed to the crown in the event of his death

.....
 As Lady Mary and Lady Elizabeth are both illegitimate, they have no claim to the crown. As half blood to us, they would be barred by ancient law and custom of this realm and could not succeed us even if legitimate. Were the said Mary or Elizabeth to have the crown of England and marry a foreigner, he would rather practise his own country's laws and customs within this realm. This would utterly subvert the good of the nation. We therefore declare that the crown shall, for lack of issue of our body, come firstly to the eldest son of Lady Frances Grey or, secondly, to the Lady Jane and her male heirs.

Letters patent for the limitation of the crown, 21 June 1553

However, with Edward's health declining rapidly, the initial devise was of little use. There were no male heirs of the Grey family and no possibility that any would be born before Edward died. Therefore, in early June the devise was altered to make Jane the heir. Articles were drawn up and councillors and other notable people were forced to sign them so that they were committed to the scheme. It was only with the change in the devise that Northumberland's importance was raised. When Guildford married Jane she was not heir to the throne and it can be argued that Northumberland was simply securing a good marriage for his son.

However, the plot was poorly managed, which adds further weight to the view that it was not Northumberland's work. As an experienced soldier it is likely that he would have ensured he had sufficient forces available to be able to ensure control, but instead he had dismissed his professional force in 1552. Moreover, he would have ensured that Mary was captured and unable to raise forces; instead she escaped to East Anglia. Finally, he would have launched a propaganda campaign to prepare the nation for the change in succession.

Edward died on 6 July, but his death was kept quiet for two days before prominent men in London were forced to sign the devise, and the Council ordered sheriffs and justices of nearby counties to raise forces. However, Mary was quick to respond to her brother's death. She proclaimed herself queen and sent letters to the Privy Council and towns informing them. Mary behaved as the rightful monarch and made it clear that any who opposed her were opposing the legitimate ruler. The question of legitimacy was important, particularly for the ruling classes, because if they supported an illegal claimant all laws could be challenged and their right to their land could be questioned. It was in their interests to support the rightful ruler and avoid the potential for civil war and anarchy. This forced the Privy Council to respond to her letter claiming the throne.

Source M The Privy Council, led by the Duke of Northumberland, rejects Mary's claim to the throne on the death of Edward VI

.....
 We advise you that our Sovereign Lady Queen Jane is possessed of the crown, not only by good order of old ancient records of this realm, but also by the late King Edward's letters signed with his own hand and sealed with the Great Seal of England, with nobles, councilors and judges agreeing

Activity

Read Source L.

- 6 Why, according to the devise, should Mary and Elizabeth be excluded from the succession?
- 7 What is the purpose of the devise? How might this affect its reliability?
- 8 In what ways is the devise useful to a historian studying the succession crisis of 1553?

Read Source M.

- 9 What sources of authority are used to justify Mary's exclusion from the throne?
- 10 What is the purpose of the letter to Mary? How might this affect its reliability?

to these letters. We must remind you that owing to the divorce between King Henry VIII and your mother, in accordance with the law of God and confirmed by Acts of Parliament [1534 and 1537] you are illegitimate and unable to inherit the crown.

The Privy Council to Mary Tudor, 9 July 1553

On 10 July, against her wishes, Jane was proclaimed queen. Meanwhile, Mary had also proclaimed herself queen in East Anglia: she issued proclamations, **letters of summons** and finally asked the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, for help. It appeared as if the country was on the verge of civil war as Mary was able to raise a large force. As a result, Northumberland lost his advantage and had to leave London to confront the challenge. His departure gave members of the Privy Council the chance to reconsider their views, having been forced to agree to the devise and most of them soon declared for Mary. Moreover, not only did Northumberland not gain support as he marched towards Mary, but many deserted despite him raising their pay! In the end, Northumberland was forced to abandon his march towards Framlingham, Mary's base, and retreated to Cambridge, where he proclaimed Mary queen. When she entered London at the end of the month she was greeted with enthusiasm.

Mary's triumph placed many who had originally supported the devise in a difficult position and they were soon writing to Mary to explain their actions.

Source N Thomas Cranmer, who had supported the exclusion of Mary Tudor, explains his actions to her and asks for forgiveness.

.....
Most lamentably mourning and moaning himself unto your Highness, Thomas Cranmer, although unworthy to write to your Highness, am now obliged, with a most penitent heart, to ask mercy and pardon for my great and serious offence in upholding the last Will of our late Sovereign Lord, King Edward VI, which God knows I never liked. And if by any means possible it had been in my power to have prevented the making of that Will, I would have done it.

And whereas it is contained in two Acts of Parliament, as I understand, that I with the Duke of Northumberland did devise the deprivation of your Majesty from your Royal Crown, it is untrue. For the Duke never said anything to me to get me to agree to such a thing.

His heart was such toward me that he would never trust me in such a matter, or ever think I could be persuaded by him. It was others of the Council, as well as the King, that persuaded me, as the Duke was not present.

Letter from Cranmer to Queen Mary, 1553

Mary soon released Gardiner and Norfolk from jail and showed leniency towards many who had opposed her, with Paget joining the new Privy Council, although William Cecil was imprisoned.

However, some others failed in their appeals to Mary, despite letters similar to that of Cranmer, as Source O shows. Mary had Northumberland, Lady Jane Grey and Guildford Dudley arrested and all were later executed.

Activity

Read Source N.

- 1 Cranmer was writing to Mary I. How might that have affected his language?
- 2 What was happening to people who had opposed Mary's accession to the throne to affect how Cranmer wrote?
- 3 What was the purpose of Cranmer's letter? How might this affect its reliability?
- 4 Use your knowledge of events of 1553 to assess how useful Source N is as evidence of attempts to alter the succession. (AS)

William Cecil

Born in 1520, the son of minor gentry from Lincolnshire, William Cecil had risen through government. He had been appointed Surveyor of Princess Elizabeth's estates in 1550 and then Secretary of State under Northumberland, before he fell from power under Mary. However, he was restored as Secretary of State by Elizabeth and became her main advisor.

Source O Lady Jane Grey explains to Queen Mary I the circumstances in which she was proclaimed Queen Jane in the previous month

.....
Then came the Duke of Northumberland himself who declared to me the death of the King.

The Duke said the King had told him that he had well considered the Act in which it was ordained that whoever recognised Mary, or Elizabeth her sister, as heir to the Crown were to be considered traitors, seeing that Mary had disobeyed the King her father and her brother and was, moreover a chief enemy to the Word of God and that both were illegitimate. Therefore the King declared that he would disinherit them. Before his death, he commanded his Council that they should carry this into effect.

The Duke of Northumberland added that I was the heir nominated by His Majesty, at which words all the lords of the Council knelt before me exclaiming that they rendered me that homage because it belonged to me, being of the right line. On hearing this I remained stunned. Those present can witness that I fell to the ground weeping piteously and lamenting not only my insufficiency but the death of the King.

Letter from Lady Jane Dudley, August 1553

Northumberland was executed on 22 August despite his renunciation of Protestantism.

Source P A letter from a London merchant in which he comments about Northumberland's renunciation of the Protestant faith when on the scaffold

.....
Today the Duke of Northumberland was executed.

As I hear, he confessed himself worthy to die because he was a great helper of this false religion [Protestantism]. Therefore God had punished us with the loss of King Henry VIII and with the loss of King Edward, then with rebellion and the sweating sickness, but still we would not convert to Catholicism. He required all that were present to remember the old learning, thanking God that he could now call himself a Christian, for this 16 years he had been none.

A great number turned with his words.

Letter from William Dalby, 22 August 1553

How serious a threat to the power of the monarchy was a female ruler?

Although it may seem strange to us, the accession of a female ruler did cause serious concerns in sixteenth-century society. England had been ruled by a female ruler only once before, in the twelfth century. That had resulted in civil war as many had refused to accept Matilda as queen and supported Stephen instead.

There were a number of reasons why it was feared that a female ruler would weaken the monarchy:

- A woman would be unable to control faction.
- A woman would be unable to lead an army into battle.
- A woman was expected to marry, but this caused two further problems – the question of who Mary should marry and the sixteenth-century view that women, even a queen, should be subservient to their husbands.

Activity

Read Source O.

- 5 What can we learn about the personality of Lady Jane Grey from the source?
- 6 What, according to Lady Jane Grey, was her role in the events?
- 7 What is the purpose of the letter? How might this affect its reliability?

Read Source P.

- 8 Use your knowledge of Northumberland to assess how useful Source P is as evidence of his religious views. (AS)

Matilda and Stephen

Matilda was the only surviving child of Henry I, but when he died she was not present as she was in dispute with her father. Stephen was her cousin and was crowned king in 1135. Matilda was unpopular and at first it appeared as if war would be avoided, but it broke out in 1139 and continued intermittently until 1147.