

COVER STORY

Could she have saved her sons from Richard III?

Did she mastermind an uprising against Henry VI?

How did she react to the death of the princes in the Tower?

Did Edward IV marry her for love?

Sarah Gristwood unpicks the mysteries surrounding **Elizabeth Woodville**, Edward IV's controversial queen

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A head for a crisis
An oil on panel portrait of Elizabeth Woodville, a queen who played a leading role in some of the most explosive incidents in English history

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Elizabeth Woodville



The future Richard III pays homage to Edward IV, Elizabeth Woodville and the future Edward V, shown in a c1477 vellum. Six years later, Richard would declare Edward and Elizabeth's marriage illegitimate

Why did Elizabeth Woodville's marriage to Edward IV appal so many people?

When, in the autumn of 1464, Edward IV informed his councillors that he had made a secret marriage, his choice of bride – Elizabeth Woodville – went against all the conventions of his day. Kings were supposed to marry in order to cement a foreign alliance – Elizabeth would be the first English queen since the Norman Conquest. Kings were also supposed to marry fellow royalty – Elizabeth was the daughter of a mere knight.

The secrecy of the ceremony was another problem. In the years ahead, the first parliament of Edward IV's brother, Richard III, would denounce this as an "ungracious pretensed marriage", having taken place

"secretly, without Edition of Banns, in a private chamber, a profane place".

Worse still, in an age when many people believed a king's bride should be a virgin, Elizabeth was a widow. If that wasn't bad enough, her first husband had been killed in the Wars of the Roses fighting for the Lancastrians against Edward IV's Yorkists. And she was even five years older than Edward – though, as the king pointed out, with two young sons by her first marriage, she had at least proved her fertility.

More seriously, it was later alleged that Edward had no right to marry Elizabeth at all, having been earlier secretly precontracted

to someone else. The charge was raised in 1483, after Edward's death, when Richard of Gloucester signalled his intention to take the throne as Richard III on the grounds that Edward's sons – Richard's nephews – were illegitimate. One Bishop Stillington was said to have declared that he had earlier married Edward to Eleanor Butler (née Talbot), daughter to the Earl of Shrewsbury.

The evidence for Stillington's accusation is, at best, circumstantial – Eleanor was dead by 1483, so no one could ask her, and the earlier marriage hadn't been an issue in 1464. But for it to be raised at all shows that the marriage was, indeed, hugely controversial.

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Did she marry for love – and, if so, why was that so shocking?

It wasn't only Elizabeth's lowly background and colourful past that proved so shocking to England's court, it was also the fact that she and Edward may have married for love. For a king to choose his wife for love or lust – for "blind affection", as the Italian historian Polydore Vergil would put it at the beginning of the 16th century – was so odd as to amount almost to an indecency. So much so that it would later be alleged that Elizabeth's mother, Jacquetta, had used witchcraft to bring the two together.

But is it true that Edward and Elizabeth genuinely loved one another? Popular early versions of their first meeting certainly suggest so. Several describe a lustful king trying to force himself on a virtuous lady, who refuses to live with him "unchastely". One tale even has Elizabeth defending herself with a dagger; another has Edward holding a knife to her throat. But all the tales end happily. The king was so struck by the lady's virtue that he married her, in secret.

And yet it's possible that cold political calculation had some influence in Edward's decision to marry Elizabeth. The king may have seen some propaganda value in an alliance with a woman with connections to the Lancastrian side in the Wars of the Roses, and even in choosing an English bride. Edward's choice of Elizabeth may also have signalled his growing independence from the powerful magnate Warwick the Kingmaker (who had alternative marriage plans for Edward). And it wasn't as if Edward was marrying a peasant – though Elizabeth's father was a mere knight, her mother sprang from the royal line of Luxembourg.

For all that, there's no reason to doubt that this was a match made chiefly on the grounds of personal attraction. In fact, it was perhaps the first such in English royal history – but not the last. It could be argued that it was with Elizabeth Woodville that the notion of marriage for love as a viable option entered the chronicles of British royalty. Following her lead, all of Elizabeth's royal grandchildren – Henry VIII, Margaret Tudor and Mary Tudor – displayed a belief in their right to personal happiness; a belief that marriage and love should not be wholly different matters; a belief which, this May, we are witnessing once more in the wedding of Meghan Markle to Prince Harry.

Elizabeth Woodville depicted in a c15th-century vellum. To contemporaries, the idea of a royal couple marrying for love "was so odd as to amount almost to an indecency"



Did she exploit her power to enrich her cronies?

Of all the charges levelled at Elizabeth down the centuries, the one that she unreasonably enriched her whole extensive family has arguably proved the most damaging.

The way the Woodvilles and their connections hoovered up positions and advantageous marriages was certainly remarkable. (One of Elizabeth's brothers, aged around 20, was married to the Duchess of Norfolk, in her sixties.) A Milanese envoy reported that the Woodvilles "had the entire government of this realm". But Elizabeth was only doing what any contemporary would have done, and it is debatable how much of the Woodville advancement was really implemented on the queen's initiative. In an age when kin was key, Edward himself may have used these marriages and gifts of offices to strengthen his own power base.

And on a broader point, what can we say of Elizabeth's role as queen consort? Clearly not everyone in the English court was enamoured of Edward's choice of wife, but the king himself certainly thought highly of his queen's abilities. So much so that, when he crossed the English Channel to lead an invasion of France in 1475, he left his small son, Edward, as 'Keeper of the Realm', and that son in Elizabeth's charge. The will he made then names her the first of 10 executors: "Our said dearest wife in whom we have most singularly put our trust."

Yet despite being loaded with such great responsibilities, Elizabeth was not a political animal. There is no evidence of her having exercised overt political influence – and, having witnessed the influential role that Margaret of Anjou played during her husband, Henry VI's fraught reign, many of Elizabeth's contemporaries would have regarded this as a good thing.

Away from the political arena, Elizabeth seems to have had a lot going for her as a queen. She was beautiful, a patroness of arts and industry, and a gracious presence at ceremonies. For example, in 1472, she entertained the visiting Flemish courtier Lord Gruuthuse to a great banquet with dancing in her own chamber, and was noted as having ordered the resplendent cloth of gold hangings for his bed.

Above all she was fruitful, presenting Edward with 10 children, most of whom survived the perils of infancy. In other words, for as long as her husband was alive, Elizabeth seemed the model of what a late-medieval queen was supposed to be.

Could Elizabeth have saved her sons from Richard III?

When in April 1483 Edward IV suddenly died, he left the throne to his 12-year-old son, another Edward, who was being raised in Ludlow, Shropshire under the tutelage of Elizabeth's talented brother Anthony Woodville. Elizabeth's first instinct may have been conciliatory – one contemporary chronicler described how she "most beneficently tried to extinguish every spark of murmuring and disturbance" as the crown was passed to her son. But this wasn't enough to allay the fears of some people – notably Richard of Gloucester – that the boy would grow up wholly under Woodville influence. When Richard intercepted Edward and Anthony Woodville on the journey to London, Elizabeth immediately fled with her other children and her belongings into the sanctuary of Westminster Abbey.

In June, Richard wrote to York for

men to assist him "against the queen, her bloody adherents and affinity" who he claimed were trying to murder him. But he had not yet declared any intention of seizing the throne for himself; and it was on this basis that Elizabeth was persuaded – or coerced – into allowing her younger son, Richard, to be taken away from her to join his brother in the Tower of London.

Immediately afterwards, the elder Richard's adherents started spreading stories that the marriage of Edward and Elizabeth was invalidated by the former king's precontract to Eleanor Butler. Their sons were thus declared illegitimate, and as the summer wore on the boys disappeared from view, their fate one of the most

debated mysteries of British history.

A portrait of Edward IV. His sudden death in April 1483 would have lethal consequences for his young sons, and throw his kingdom into turmoil



BRIDGEMAN



A 19th-century depiction of the princes in the Tower. Elizabeth's part in their final months continues to be debated

When did she learn that the princes in the Tower were dead?

In that summer of 1483 Elizabeth, still in sanctuary, entered into a conspiracy with an unlikely ally: Margaret Beaufort, the mother of Henry Tudor, who since the death of Henry VI had been the Lancastrian claimant to the English throne. A marriage was agreed between Elizabeth's eldest daughter, Elizabeth of York, and Margaret's son, Henry, and both ladies would raise their supporters against Richard.

It is often said that Elizabeth Woodville's actions showed she believed her sons were dead. Why else would she support a plan to promote Henry Tudor? Polydore Vergil, a few decades on, dramatically described how she heard of their murder, and "with lamentable shrieks made all the house ring, she struck her breast, tore and cut her hair".

But it is unclear whether the rebellion initially planned to place Henry Tudor on the throne, or whether that came only *after* rumours of the princes' death began to spread. Edward IV himself had discussed the possibility of marrying his daughter to Henry, and thus bringing the Lancastrian heir safely into the fold. Either way, the rebellion failed, and in January 1484 Elizabeth Woodville was stripped of her queenly status and income.

Two months later, "dame Elizabeth Grey, late calling herself Queen of England" was persuaded to leave sanctuary and allow her elder daughters to go to their uncle Richard's court. It has been argued she would never have done so unless she had by now come to believe Richard was innocent of her sons' deaths – or even that they had not died at all. Elizabeth disappears from the records for the rest of Richard's reign, which paves the way for one theory that the younger of her sons, at least, survived and was given into her charge, in an obscure part of the country.

But it is equally possible that she was enough of a pragmatist simply to realise that some sort of life had to be made for her surviving daughters, whatever had happened to her sons. They could not remain in sanctuary indefinitely.



In 1486, Elizabeth Woodville leased a manor in Westminster Abbey (above). Was this a sign that she'd fallen out with an English king once again?

Did she support a revolt against Henry VII?

Yes – and no. After Henry seized the English crown from Richard III – and brought the Wars of the Roses to an end – he fulfilled his promise to marry Elizabeth's daughter Elizabeth of York. He also restored his new mother-in-law to her rank as queen dowager, giving her a grant for life of six manors in Essex and an annual income of £102. When Elizabeth of York gave birth to a son, the infant's godmother, Elizabeth Woodville, carried the little prince to the high altar at the christening.

But less than a year into the new reign, Elizabeth had already begun negotiating a lease on a manor within the precincts of Westminster Abbey. Her position at court might well have been difficult given the pre-eminence of that other dowager figure, Margaret Beaufort, 'My Lady the King's Mother'.

Soon Elizabeth would, willingly or otherwise, find her plans changing again. In February 1487 all the lands granted to her were taken away from her – albeit only to be given to her daughter. She was given a small

annuity and, abruptly, took up residence in Bermondsey Abbey.

Elizabeth may herself have chosen this retirement, but the timing is suggestive, coming hard on the heels of a threat to Henry VII's throne. In 1487, Lambert Simnel was made the figurehead of a Yorkist uprising against Henry and at first claimed (though he later changed his story) to be the younger of the princes in the Tower. There may have been some fear that a discontented Elizabeth – resentful that Henry seemed determined to keep his wife, Elizabeth's daughter, in the background – might lend a rebel her support.

Certainly Elizabeth's life ahead lay mostly in the convent, with only a very few recorded appearances at court, and her death on 8 June 1492 was followed by a humble and almost shabby funeral with (as a herald noted) "nothing done solemnly". **H**

Sarah Gristwood is a journalist and author whose books include *Game of Queens: The Women Who Made Sixteenth-Century Europe* (Oneworld, 2016)

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