

COVER STORY

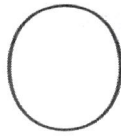
MARGARET BEAUFORT **MOTHER OF THE TUDORS**

She was pregnant at 12, widowed by the Wars of the Roses and almost died at the hands of Richard III. But, writes **Michael Jones**, nothing could prevent the indomitable Margaret Beaufort from engineering the rise of her son, Henry VII, to the English throne



Margaret Beaufort, shown in a c16th-century oil on panel painting, was the arch opportunist, switching allegiance in the Wars of the Roses in a bid to advance her family's cause

Cover story



On 14 February 1453, a nine-year-old girl was travelling to London to be introduced to the court of King Henry VI. Her name was Margaret

Beaufort, the only child of John Beaufort, Duke of Somerset, and inheritor of a large landed estate.

Margaret (born on 31 May 1443) had royal blood in her veins. But it was tainted blood, for her family was the illegitimate offspring of the king's great-grandfather, John of Gaunt, by his mistress, Katherine Swynford. When Gaunt subsequently married Katherine, the Beauforts were legitimised – but barred from succeeding to the throne. As Margaret approached the royal court that day in 1453, her family harboured hopes that that Henry VI would overturn this provision.

Margaret's father had died shortly before her first birthday and so she was brought up by her mother, Margaret Beauchamp. Her mother instilled in her a strong sense of personal destiny and family pride. Despite her young age, Margaret was bright and remarkably self-assured. Above all, she was well aware of the opportunities beckoning her.

That she would go on to take full advantage of these opportunities is beyond doubt. For, in the face of huge obstacles and sometimes mortal peril, Margaret played the 15th-century game of power-politics with bravery and determination. And, on 22 August 1485, her perseverance was rewarded when her son, Henry Tudor, defeated Richard III at the battle of Bosworth to become king. Charting Margaret's role in Henry's rise to power – and the establishment of the Tudor dynasty – reveals the skill-set of one of the great political survivors of the late Middle Ages.

In line for the crown

As the young Margaret travelled towards the royal court in February 1453, she found herself at the centre of a high-stakes tug-of-war. Three years earlier, Henry VI's chief minister, William de la Pole, Earl of Suffolk, had arranged her marriage to his son John. The dynastic implications of this planned alliance would not have been lost on Margaret for King Henry, married for eight years, as yet had no heir. The House of Commons had nervously claimed that Suffolk was steering his son towards the throne through the rights of his prospective wife, whom he "presumed and pretended to be next in line to the crown".

Fresh stories were eddying around the court: Henry VI intended to annul Margaret's match with Suffolk and instead marry her to his half-brother, Edmund Tudor. Young Margaret's importance in such schemes was clear. But contemporaries imagined her role



An effigy of John de la Pole, who Margaret rejected as a future husband

Margaret played the 15th-century game of power-politics with bravery, determination and no little skill

would be passive: by the standards of the time, she was merely a commodity in the medieval marriage market.

Few at Henry's court were in much doubt as to what would happen next. Margaret would meet her two suitors – John de la Pole and Edmund Tudor – and accede to the king's wish. But Margaret had other ideas. The young girl solemnly told the astonished gathering that, as the matter was of such gravity, she should be allowed more time to decide.

Margaret's spiritual adviser John Fisher tells us what happened next: "Being then little more than nine years old, and doubtful in her mind what she were best to do, she asked counsel of an old gentlewoman, whom she much loved and trusted, who did advise her to commend herself to St Nicholas, the patron and helper of all true maidens, and to beseech him to put in her thoughts the right course to take. This counsel she followed, and made her prayer full often, and especially that night, knowing that in the morning she would be required to give her answer. And as she lay in prayer, calling upon the saint – whether asleep or awake she could not remember – about four o'clock in the morning a figure appeared before her, dressed in white, rather like a bishop, and naming Edmund, bade her take him as her husband."

Margaret duly did – but not before she had made the entire Lancastrian court await her decision.

Margaret's experience of marriage was harsh. She conceived Edmund Tudor's child at the age of 12, and lost her husband to plague before the baby was born. The young widow was forced to seek the protection of Edmund's brother Jasper, giving birth to a son, Henry Tudor, on 28 January 1457 at Pembroke Castle in west Wales. The recollections of John Fisher reveal that the birth was a very painful one, because of her small build and young age, and Margaret, now 13, was almost certainly physically damaged by it. She would never bear another child.

Jasper Tudor, with the young mother and child under his protection, took charge of proceedings. According to the Welsh chronicler Elis Gruffydd, Jasper named the boy Owen, in memory of his own father. But Margaret, now well enough to attend the baptism, commanded the bishop to halt the service, begin again, and give her son the name of Henry. She spoke with such assurance that the entire assembly meekly followed her wishes.

Striking a bargain

Margaret Beaufort did not wait upon events. No sooner had the 'churching' – the 40 days of ritual purification after the birth of a child – been completed, she was already making moves to avoid another husband being forced upon her. In March 1457, she entered into an agreement to marry the Duke of Buckingham's second son, Sir Henry Stafford. Jasper Tudor and his retinue accompanied her to the duke's manor of Greenfield, near Newport, but it was the 13-year-old Margaret who struck a bargain with one of the most powerful aristocrats in the country.

Yet the wheel of fortune was to turn against her once more. For much of Margaret's early life, England was ravaged by the Wars of the Roses, a bloody conflict that pitted the Lancastrian king Henry VI against his enemies, now led by Edward, Duke of York.

In March 1461, Edward seized the crown (as Edward IV), and crushed Henry's army at the battle of Towton. One of Edward's first moves as monarch was to grant the wardship of Henry Tudor to one of his closest supporters, William Lord Herbert. Margaret and her son were separated, and Henry brought up at Herbert's stronghold at Raglan Castle. Margaret refused to be discouraged, however, keeping in touch with her son through a stream of messages and occasional visits.

The handsome and charming Edward IV won a brief reconciliation with Margaret's cousin, Henry Beaufort, Duke of Somerset, through sheer charisma. It surprised many.

The five lives of Margaret Beaufort

From bitter inheritance to England's most powerful woman

1 The infant heiress

Margaret was brought up by her mother with a strong sense of her Beaufort lineage, and the family's closeness to the ruling House of Lancaster. The Beauforts' illegitimate origins – and the stigma of her father John Beaufort's disgrace and suicide after an unsuccessful military

campaign in France – demonstrated the mutability of human fortunes. (John Fisher remembered Margaret's tears at her son's coronation, motivated by the fear that their fortunes might change once more). It also fuelled a determination to redeem her family's reputation.



Margaret Beaufort's personal coat of arms



Amanda Hale plays Margaret in the TV series *The White Queen*

2 The child bride

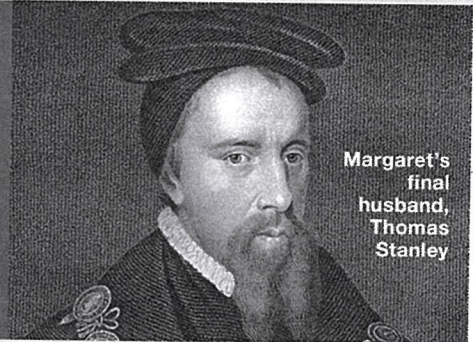
A young and wealthy heiress in the medieval marriage market was normally a pawn in the game of powerful men – but Margaret sought to take command of the situation, claiming the decisions to marry first Edmund Tudor and then Henry Stafford as her own. She was not entirely successful (she cannot have

anticipated that the 24-year-old Tudor would consummate their union when she was still only 12, a decision shocking by modern standards and unseemly by medieval ones), but it gives us a powerful insight into the way she made sense of the world.

3 The canny networker

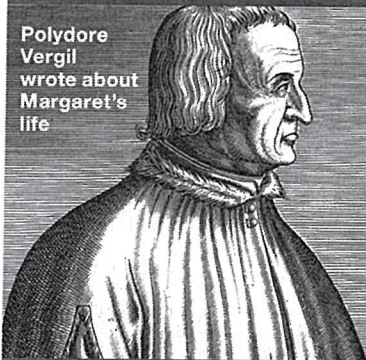
Margaret Beaufort revered Henry VI, and in her son's reign attempted to get the hapless king made a saint, but to her credit she was prepared to work with Edward IV. Her marriage to Thomas Stanley, steward of the royal household, gave her a permanent place at the Yorkist court in the second half of Edward's reign. John Fisher praised Margaret's acces-

sibility – "She was of singular easiness to be spoken unto, and full courteous answer she would make to all that came to her" – and her interest in court protocol began at this time. And the agreement of June 1482, by which Edward IV allowed the restoration of Henry Tudor to lands and titles and a marriage to one of his daughters, was a remarkable triumph.



Margaret's final husband, Thomas Stanley

Polydore Vergil wrote about Margaret's life



4 The rebels' ringleader

The Tudor historian Polydore Vergil gives a striking portrait of Margaret's role in the rebellion against Richard III in the autumn of 1483. Vergil related how Margaret sent her physician, Lewis Caerleon, into the sanctuary at Westminster Abbey, to plot with Elizabeth Woodville. She also opened discussions with the Duke of Buckingham

through John Morton and her trusted servant Reginald Bray. Meanwhile, money was also sent to Henry Tudor in Brittany.

Margaret's role may have been a little less all-encompassing than Vergil claimed, but the broad tenor of his account is confirmed by Richard III's own act of parliament against her.

5 The king's mother

During the reign of her son, Henry VII, Margaret held an unparalleled position of power. She was able to attend to works of religious patronage and the great educational foundations, at Christ's and St John's Colleges in Cambridge (the coat of arms pictured above is sited at St John's). In the last decade of Henry's rule,

Margaret ran a court of equity from her palace of Collyweston (in Northamptonshire) and governed the Midlands on the king's behalf. She outlived her son, falling ill at the coronation banquet of her grandson, Henry VIII. She died on 29 June 1509 – with the new Tudor dynasty firmly founded.



Henry VII entrusted the rule of the Midlands to his mother



A c1477 vellum shows Edward IV with, among others, his wife Elizabeth Woodville, his son Edward and his brother Richard. Edward's death in 1483 triggered a period of chaos and bloodletting that culminated in Margaret Beaufort's son Henry seizing the throne

"The king made full much of him," Gregory's Chronicle reported indignantly, as the two former enemies went hunting together, and in a signal mark of favour, shared the royal bed. But when Somerset betrayed Edward's trust and joined other Lancastrian exiles in Scotland in the spring of 1464, the king was furious, pursuing a vendetta against the whole family. It was now that Margaret's skills as a diplomat came to the fore. She managed to rebuild bridges with the Yorkist king – employing her husband's connections – and in December 1468 the two of them entertained King Edward at their hunting lodge of Brookwood, near Woking.

She was also an opportunist. When her son's guardian, Lord Herbert, was killed in the aftermath of the battle of Edgcote on 26 July 1469, she bemoaned the horror befalling those caught up "in fierce and terrible warfare" – and then promptly began

a search of the legal records, in an attempt to overturn Henry Tudor's grant of wardship.

She wouldn't have to wait long to gain access to her son again, for in the autumn of 1470 a rebellion – led by George, Duke of Clarence and the Earl of Warwick, 'the Kingmaker' – forced Edward IV into exile and saw Henry reinstalled on the throne. On 27 October 1470, mother and son paid a visit to the returned Lancastrian king, during which Henry reportedly made a prophecy that Margaret's son "would heal the divisions of war" and reunite the nation.

The tables turn

But Margaret did not let sentiment cloud cold, political calculation. In March 1471, all was once again on a knife-edge as Edward IV returned from exile with a fresh army. At the end of the month, her cousins arrived at her manor of Woking, in an effort to enlist

her support for King Henry. But Margaret and Stafford decided that the Lancastrian forces simply weren't strong enough to prevail – and, as the Beauforts rode towards the West Country, Stafford and his retainers headed off in the opposite direction, to join Edward's army.

Victories at Barnet and Tewkesbury, on 14 April and 4 May 1471, re-established Edward IV on the throne. Margaret's decision to throw her lot in with him was vindicated but her prudence came at a cost. In the aftermath of Tewkesbury, Henry VI was almost certainly murdered on Edward's orders, Margaret's remaining male Beaufort cousins were killed, and her husband Henry Stafford died of battle wounds. Meanwhile her son Henry, in Wales with the Lancastrian forces of his uncle, Jasper Tudor, fled into exile in Brittany. Margaret did not know if she would see him again.

After the uprising, Margaret was only spared execution because of her husband's loyalty to Richard III

In May 1472 she drew up her will, instructing her trustees to preserve an estate "should Henry ever return to England and be restored to favour". Sadly, this prospect seemed far distant.

Most aristocratic women may now have retired from political life altogether and joined a religious community. But Margaret's resilience was extraordinary. In June 1472 she once more negotiated a marriage alliance, this time with Thomas Lord Stanley, the steward of Edward IV's household. The Stanleys were great landowners in Lancashire, Cheshire and north Wales, and the match gave Margaret an influential position at the Yorkist court. By the summer of 1482 she was at last able to broker an agreement with Edward IV for her son to return to England, secure a landed estate and a marriage to one of Edward's daughters. But the king died, on 9 April 1483, before it could be put into effect.

King Edward's son and heir was now recognised as Edward V, and first a governing council and then a protectorate, under Edward IV's younger brother Richard, Duke

of Gloucester, was set up to rule the country until he came of age. But the protectorate itself abruptly ended when Richard dramatically announced that his brother's marriage to his queen, Elizabeth Woodville, was invalid and the couple's two sons illegitimate. Gloucester now claimed the throne himself, being crowned Richard III on 6 July 1483.

Richard's seizure of the throne was bloody and confused. The new king ordered Edward IV's sons, Edward and Richard, to be confined to the Tower, had Edward's chamberlain, William, Lord Hastings, executed for treason, and forced Elizabeth Woodville to withdraw into sanctuary at Westminster Abbey with her daughters.

And what of Margaret Beaufort? Ever the pragmatist, she initially sought an accommodation with Richard in order to safeguard the arrangements for Henry Tudor's return drawn up a year earlier. She and her husband even played a prominent role in Richard's coronation.

Hatching a plot

But it wasn't long before the relationship between king and countess turned sour. Alarmed by the fate of the princes in the Tower, Margaret changed tack, organising a rebellion in which a rising by the Duke of Buckingham and the Woodvilles would be supported by an invasion force led by Jasper and Henry Tudor from Brittany. Margaret "was commonly called the head of that conspiracy", the historian Polydore Vergil remarked.

All the while, an extraordinary prospect was opening up: of a marriage alliance between Henry and Edward IV's oldest daughter, Elizabeth of York, by which Tudor could himself claim the throne. However, the rising collapsed – and Margaret, deprived of all lands and servants by an act of parliament, was only spared execution because of her husband's continued loyalty to Richard III. When Henry Parker, Lord Morley, wrote "In King Richard's days, she was oft in jeopardy of her life," he certainly wasn't exaggerating.

But, in the summer of 1485, Margaret's luck was to change again. Henry recruited a new invasion army, landed in Wales, and on 22 August – with Stanley's support – defeated and killed Richard III at Bosworth Field. The man who Margaret described in her letters as "my dearest and only beloved joy in the world", was now king of England. And, as he himself acknowledged, he owed much to his mother. Her seemingly endless reserves of resolve and practicality had forged a most surprising medieval success story. Margaret Beaufort was truly one of history's great survivors. **H**

Did Margaret have the princes in the Tower murdered?

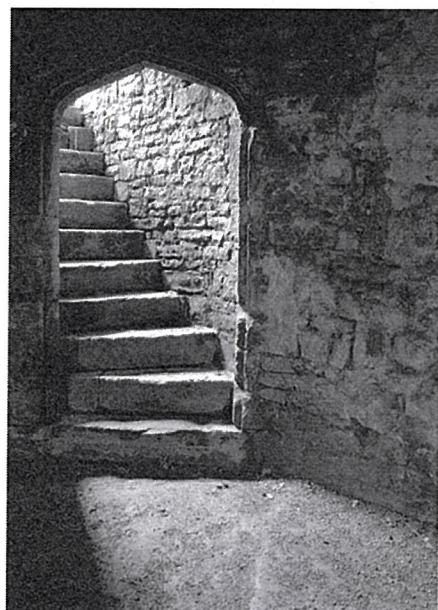
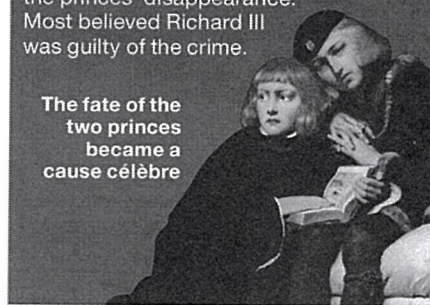
The disappearance of the two sons of Edward IV, the princes in the Tower, is one of our enduring royal mysteries. The majority of contemporaries believed that they had been killed sometime around August 1483 and Richard III, and also the Duke of Buckingham, were seen as the most likely culprits.

In the early 17th century researchers William Cornwallis and Sir George Buck first suggested that Margaret Beaufort might have killed the the princes, in order to further Henry Tudor's chances of taking the throne. Such a possibility cannot be ruled out, and has recently been revived in Philippa Gregory's historical novel *The Red Queen*, and the BBC's 2013 dramatisation of Philippa's *Wars of the Roses* books. It represents the darkest and most terrifying fruit of her remorseless ambition for her son.

While a motive for Lady Margaret existed – albeit a profoundly disturbing one – hard evidence for her involvement in such a scheme is scant indeed. Buck claimed to have found proof in "an old manuscript book", but as he never cited its provenance or quoted from it, its existence remains a mystery.

No contemporary chronicler or source blamed Margaret for the princes' disappearance. Most believed Richard III was guilty of the crime.

The fate of the two princes became a cause célèbre



Raglan Castle, where Henry Tudor was raised – away from his mother

Michael Jones is a fellow of the Royal Historical Society. He co-authored, with Philippa Langley, *The King's Grave: The Search for Richard III* (John Murray, 2014)

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