

Mary Queen of Scots

What do you do with a political rival who is too dangerous to leave at liberty, and too internationally significant to get rid of ? It's a dilemma which has been faced by many governments over the centuries, and not least by the Burmese generals today.

Queen Elizabeth I was in just such a quandary throughout the middle (and golden) years of her reign. When her cousin - the Catholic Queen of Scotland - fled from a Protestant revolution north of border in 1568 to seek sanctuary in England, all the Tudor monarch's worst nightmares arrived in one fell swoop.

Here was a legitimately crowned head of Europe, a strong claimant to the English crown and a potential rallying-point for all the Catholic dissidents in England asking for indefinite bed and breakfast. Pray, what was to be done with her ?

The obvious solution, both then and now, is what we call "house arrest", though for a royal prisoner in Tudor times the confinement was not quite so strict. Mary would retain her household staff and servants (30 in number), and would have relative freedom of movement within certain prescribed limits. And the queen's guard would be no burly prison warder, but a member of the English aristocracy, in the first instance the Earl of Shrewsbury and subsequently Sir Amyas Paulet.

So far so good. Now, where in England to keep her ? Here we have a puzzle. Of all the parts of the country in which to lock up a Catholic queen, the county of Staffordshire looks like a very odd choice indeed. This was, according to two of Elizabeth's own bishops, one of the most "barbarous" counties in the kingdom, a place crawling with Catholic dissidents and "popish trish-trash". If anything was going to turn these dissidents into active traitors, it was plonking a Catholic claimant to the English throne in their very midst.

Yet that is exactly what Elizabeth and Sir Francis Walsingham - Elizabeth's spy-master general - elected to do. Mary arrived at Tutbury Castle in February 1569, and remained there, off and on, for the following 16 years, before her final journey to trial and execution at Fotheringay.

Tutbury was not the only stop on the Queen of Scots' tour of the Midlands. At the time of the Northern Rising she was moved to Coventry, and later held at both Chartley Hall and Tixall in Staffordshire.

The long and drawn-out itinerary also included brief halts at Burton-on-Trent and Hall Hill near Abbots Bromley.

It did not take long to see that Tutbury Castle was a highly risky location. Paulet informed Walsingham that "there were many recusants and other suspected papists within twelve miles of Tutbury, whose wives are not unlikely to do bad offices." If the Scottish Queen needed willing carriers to convey messages back and forth between herself and her supporters, Staffordshire had them to spare. It was, as Paulet himself admitted, almost impossible (as well as indelicate) to search every basket of laundry that passed in and out of the castle.

Mary's own behaviour only added to her local support. On her regular trips outside the castle to take the air she took money to distribute as alms to the locals. On one Maunday Thursday she distributed cloth and money to 60 young boys and girls in the town. If it was simply a matter of hearts and minds, then Mary was half-way to the throne of England already.

So why, given its risks and doubtful loyalty, was Staffordshire chosen as a place of confinement ? For that we probably need to explore the inside of Sir Francis Walsingham's head. The best way to get rid of Mary for good was to find some direct evidence of a plot against Elizabeth that could be traced directly back to her cousin.

Place the Queen of Scots in a location that was largely sympathetic to her cause, and the rebels would come out of the Tudor woodwork, and attempt to get in touch with her. How long would it be before Mary could be tempted and entrapped ?

Quite a long time is the answer to that. If plotting was in progress while Mary was at Tutbury, then the secret letters were so well hidden that even Francis Walsingham could not get his stealthy hands on them. And Mary managed to keep her hands spotlessly clean.

Only when Mary was moved to Chartley Castle (a home of the Earl of Essex) in 1585 did the conspiracy duly emerge. Known as the Babington Plot, the plan was to assassinate Elizabeth and place Mary on the throne. Walsingham used Gilbert Giffard, the son of one of the leading Catholics of Staffordshire, as his double agent, acting as a go-between among the conspirators, and passing on details to Whitehall as well. The letters to and from Mary were found concealed inside beer barrels, owned by the brewer from Burton who was supplying Tutbury Castle.

On August 11 1585 Mary was arrested during a hunting trip and conveyed to Tixall, while her apartments at Charley were searched. Here at last was enough evidence to convict her of treason, and get rid of the problem altogether.

On September 21 Mary Queen of Scots was conveyed out of Chartley on her last fatal journey. It was the last she would see of Staffordshire and, pretty soon afterwards (in 1587), the last she would see of this world as well.