

## Robert Dudley

The Tudors will always appeal to the makers of TV soaps and big screen movies. Here are exactly 118 years of vaunting ambition, infidelity, murder and intrigue. If you had made the Tudors up, they would have been thrown out as far-fetched.

But if one sets aside the royals themselves, one man seems to encapsulate the whole era, a man whose ambition (and wealth) knew no bounds, and who swash-buckled his way to within an inch of the throne of England itself. In a time of over-achievers, he over-achieved more than most.

The man was Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester. I could give his dates (1544-88), but that would be unduly to curtail his activities. Long after he was laid to rest in St Mary's church in Warwick, Dudley continued to stride through literature and the popular imagination. The hero of Lytton Strachey's *Elizabeth and Leicester*, and the villain of Walter Scott's *Kenilworth*, he still picks up acting credits today.

Robert Dudley is the subject of an exhibition currently running at Leamington Spa Art Gallery & Museum. A trip to the gallery serves as the perfect stopping-off point before launching forth to explore Lord Leicester's Warwickshire, which is itself rich in Elizabethan history.

Robert and his brother, Ambrose - one the Earl of Leicester, the other Earl of Warwick - bestrode the Tudor Midlands. In another era, such as that of their reputed ancestors, the Beauchamps, they would surely have been king-makers and war-lords. But the reign of Elizabeth was, in general, a more peaceful place, and war had been replaced by pageantry, gardening and building work instead.

The recent reconstruction of the formal gardens at Kenilworth Castle by English Heritage, created solely to entertain the Queen in 1575, gives some hint of how much Leicester was prepared to fork out when required. It was, perhaps, Leicester's last official attempt to persuade Elizabeth to take his hand in marriage. But the Virgin Queen was not for turning.

The Leamington exhibition explores Dudley's relationship with the towns and cities that lay within his patch, notably with Coventry and Warwick, the fairest towns in the county. In addition, there's a rare opportunity to view *The Black Book of Warwick*, one of the most important manuscripts to be held in the West Midlands.

Robert Dudley's relationship with the towns close to him were not always easy. When he rode into Warwick in September 1571 to celebrate his investiture as a member of the Order of St Michael, no one came out to meet him. The corporation had decided, in its wisdom, that Dudley was not royalty (much as he'd like to be) and therefore did not merit a formal welcome. Given that Dudley had in his train a couple of earls and half a dozen knights, it was an embarrassing omission.

When the burgesses did finally appear, Dudley had gone off in a huff to Kenilworth, and had to begged to return.

Dudley got his revenge within days. Announcing that he wished to found a hospital or almshouse in the town, he chose an attractive cluster of buildings at the top of the High Street as the perfect location. The fact that one of them was the town's guildhall did not stand in his way, and the corporation was thus deprived, at a stroke, of its only public building and meeting-place. It was only five years later that Ambrose and Robert provided them with an alternative.

With Coventry, on the other hand, Lord Leicester's relationship was much less rocky. Each year the Mayor and Corporation gave him a yoke of oxen, and he gave them a side of venison. And beyond this simple greasing of palms, Leicester made considerable efforts to revive the city's economy, long in the doldrums. By getting the city a licence in 1568 to manufacture "Armatiers cloth" Leicester did his best to boost Coventry's once lucrative cloth trade.

No wonder, then, that when Robert Dudley visited Coventry in 1581, St Mary's guildhall was redecorated in his honour, and the bill for cut flowers went through the roof.

But the trouble with vaunting ambition is that it usually ends in disappointment. By the time Robert Dudley died in September 1588, a few months after the Armada, the prospect of a royal marriage had long since vanished. The fact that Elizabeth kept Dudley's last letter to her as a treasured heirloom (a copy of it is on display at Kenilworth Castle) was no consolation. Or not to him, anyway.

Nor was there to be any Midland empire, so assiduously nurtured, to hand on to sons and heirs.

Leicester's sole legitimate son - "the noble imp" - lies beside him in the Beauchamp Chapel at Warwick, having died four years before his father at the age of three. An illegitimate son - also called Robert Dudley - failed to establish himself as legal heir either to his father's or his uncle's estates, and took himself off to live in Florence instead.

Ambrose too died without issue and the two earldoms disappeared, at least for the foreseeable future.

The exhibition at Leamington is a welcome introduction to those remarkable years of Elizabeth's golden age, when England's most powerful man, and her greatest writer, lived within a stone's throw of each other.