

Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, was born on 12 April 1550 to John de Vere, 16th Earl of Oxford, and his second wife, Margery Golding. Oxford had a younger sister, Mary, and an older half-sister, Katherine, the daughter of the 16th Earl's first marriage to Dorothy Neville.

Few records have survived of the 16th Earl's life. During the Protectorate of Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset, he was forced to enter into an agreement to marry his daughter Katherine to Seymour's son Henry, and to entail the de Vere lands on their heirs. Somerset used threats and coercion to blackmail the 16th Earl into this agreement, perhaps by threatening to take action against him because of the 16th Earl's bigamous marriage to a certain Joan Jockey after the 16th Earl and his first wife, Dorothy Neville, had separated. The agreement was reversed after Somerset's attainder and execution in 1552. However, the Joan Jockey incident resurfaced years later in 1563 in a lawsuit by Oxford's half-sister Katherine, and again 1585 in the Key/Masterson lawsuit.

Shortly after he had entailed his lands on Somerset's heir, the 16th Earl secretly remarried. He was in love with Dorothy Foster, a Catholic gentlewoman attending on his young daughter Katherine. Somerset and his henchmen, who included the 16th Earl's brother-in-law, Sir Thomas Darcy, were against the marriage for the reason set out in the preceding paragraph, and forcibly separated the two. The 16th Earl determined to steal Dorothy Foster away, and to marry her in spite of Somerset. However, while he was on the way to effect this purpose, the Vicar of Clare persuaded him of the folly of marrying a Catholic against the Protector Somerset's wishes, and introduced him to Margery Golding, to whom he took an instant liking, and married on the spot.

After Somerset's execution in 1552 and the death of the young King Edward VI, John Dudley, Duke of Northumberland, caused his daughter-in-law, Lady Jane Grey, to be proclaimed Queen. The 16th Earl threw his support behind Queen Mary, and was instrumental in her accession to the throne. Despite this, he seems to have been regarded with suspicion by Queen Mary and her advisors, and was given no preferment during her reign. Moreover, the execution of Northumberland which resulted in part from the 16th Earl's support of Queen Mary doubtless sowed the seeds for his son, Robert Dudley's, animosity towards the house of de Vere.

From about the age of four, the 16th Earl's only son, Edward, was educated by private tutors. On 3 August 1562, however, Edward de Vere's life changed permanently. On 28 July 1562, only a few days before his death, the 16th Earl had made a will in which he had named Robert Dudley a supervisor. Dudley, later to become Earl of Leicester, was already the favourite and reputed lover of Queen Elizabeth, who had come to the throne after her sister Queen Mary's death in 1558. With the 16th Earl's sudden death, Oxford became Queen Elizabeth's ward, and was brought to London. In the following year, the Queen, by a grant made on 22 October 1563 expressing her desire to 'benefit' Robert Dudley, turned over the core lands of the Oxford earldom to her favourite for an annual rent. This grant is unprecedented in the annals of the Court of Wards. The usual procedure was for the Queen to dispose of a ward's lands outright for a cash sum. Robert Dudley, who had almost no financial assets at the time, was unable to come up with the

necessary cash, so the Queen played fast and loose with the wardship system in order to benefit her favourite and alleged lover.

This transaction laid the foundation of Oxford's later financial ruin. We have no direct evidence of Leicester's stewardship of the de Vere lands, but given other evidence of Leicester's practices in stripping lands of their assets and leaving them worthless, it seems likely that the de Vere lands had been mismanaged, and that the servants put in place by Robert Dudley served his interests, not Oxford's.

The question of whether Robert Dudley had anything to do with the 16th Earl's death must also be raised. Throughout his lifetime Leicester had the reputation of a murderer, and when one asks who benefitted from the 16th Earl's death, it is clear that the primary beneficiary of the 16th Earl's death was Robert Dudley. The 16<sup>th</sup> Earl had been in good health and attending to his usual business affairs only a few weeks prior to his death, and his sudden demise on 3 August 1562 cannot be explained as the result of a lingering illness.

Oxford's mother, Margery Golding, remarried after the 16th Earl's death. Her second husband was Charles Tyrrell.

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