

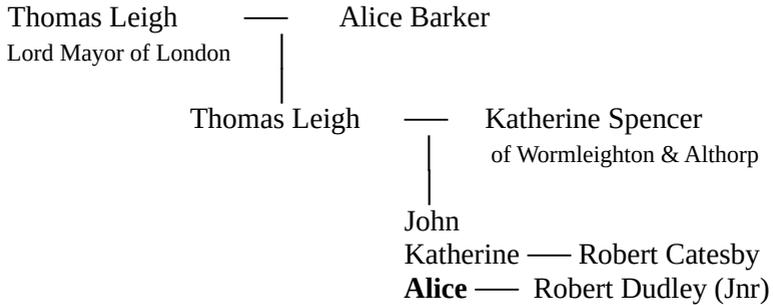
***Alice  
and the  
Adventurer***



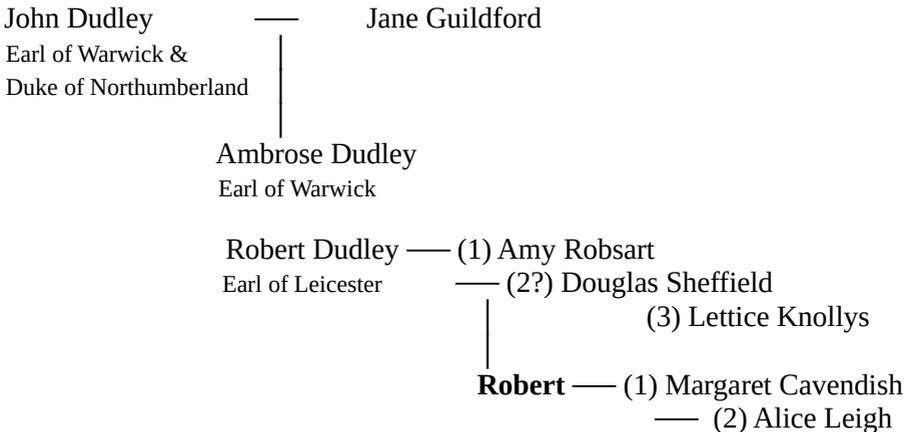
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## *My family – the Leighs*



## *Robert's family – the Dudleys*



# 1 *Beginnings*

I was born in 1579 when Elizabeth 1st was on the throne and I was named Alice, after my grandmother. Why should my life matter to you, I can hear you asking? Well, I lived in Kenilworth Castle and owned a lot of the land in Ladbroke in the early 1600s. You can see proof of my devotion to Ladbroke in the silver Communion set I gave to the church. It will not be kept in the church, of course, it is far too valuable for that.

I didn't know I was privileged. My home had been an old Cistercian monastery before my grandfather changed it into a great country house, Stoneleigh Abbey. He had been Lord Mayor of London and he was proud of the fact that he had escorted Queen Elizabeth round London on the eve of her coronation in January 1559 after which he had been knighted. He had died before I was born but my Grandmother, after whom I had been named, lived on for many years and continued the building of the estate with her younger son Thomas. He had married Kathryn Spencer, the youngest daughter of Sir John and Lady Kathryn of Althorp, and they are my parents.

I wasn't their first child. I had an older brother, John, and a sister, Kathryn and after me there were two other little boys but they didn't last long. I was sad that I was always the baby of the family but my life was easy with a nanny and a governess who lived with us and taught Kathryn and me how to read and write, learn other languages and to sew and make music. There was plenty of time to explore the large grounds and we had a nursery with wooden toys including my favourite doll.

Kathryn and I always knew that we would get married and it didn't occur to us that there was any other way than marrying the men our father chose for us. Kathryn, being about four years older, was first and she considered herself lucky when she was introduced to Robert Catesby as he was tall and handsome, a renowned horseman, good tempered, generous and generally popular with everybody. As our family had

Protestant faith, if she was surprised that our father was proposing a liaison with a family whose Catholic leaning cost them heavily in fines, she accepted that he knew best. The Catesby family held lands in Ashby St Ledgers in Northamptonshire, as well as parts of Gloucestershire and Warwickshire, including Ladbroke.

Our grandfather, a merchant, had been admitted to the Freedom of the Mercer's Company, which gave Robert and Kathryn the right to be married in the Mercer's Chapel in Cheapside in London in 1592. About a year after they were married, Robert's grandmother died and he inherited Chastleton in Oxfordshire. Kathryn was happy at the beginning of her marriage and they soon had a little boy whom they called Robert after his father and she persuaded Robert to allow him to be christened in the Anglican church at Chastleton which was surprising as he was a very devout and practising Catholic. However their next little boy died and Kathryn joined him soon after when she was just 23 years. I was very saddened with this news.

More problems were to follow. Her husband Robert was imprisoned and fined for his Catholicism. In order to pay his fines he twice mortgaged Chastleton to my father. This seemed to embitter him further and he even supported the Earl of Essex's failed rebellion against Queen Elizabeth, the fines he was subjected to this time forced him to sell Chastleton.

After Queen Elizabeth died and King James 1 acceded to the throne, it was obvious that he was not going to tolerate Catholics either, which was when Robert became one of the main conspirators in the gunpowder plot to blow up the Houses of Parliament. After the barrels were discovered in the cellar, Robert and other conspirators fled to Holbeache House in Staffordshire where he was tracked down. Rather than allow himself to be caught he fought back to back with a co-conspirator and they both died from the same musket fire. I was told that the last thing he did was to seize an image of the Virgin Mary and clasp it as he died. I could almost be relieved that my sister had not lived to see this.

## 2 *My Marriage*

I was telling you about my sister's marriage to Robert Catesby and his untimely end. By this time I had been married for a few years myself. Like Kathryn, our father had decided who I was to marry and Robert Dudley was the man he selected. Of course, we all knew about the Dudleys as the father of my chosen husband had been a great favourite with Queen Elizabeth who wouldn't agree to marry him but didn't want him to marry anyone else.

I knew the story that he had married Amy Robsart when they were quite young but she had broken her neck falling downstairs and I heard the speculation about that. Then my future father-in-law got together with Lady Douglas Sheffield, a widow, and my Robert was their child. Robert insisted that his mother and father had been married and, even though they didn't live together, Robert senior acknowledged him as his son.

My fiance was tall, handsome, an excellent horseman and very clever, being enrolled at Christ Church, Oxford at the age of 14. Because his parents were not living together, his childhood was spent with various families connected with his father although he could see his mother whenever he wanted to. However she married again and moved to Paris when he was only about six so he never knew a proper home life. He led an expedition to the West Indies when he was 20 and was knighted after he helped to raid Cadiz about two years later. After the death of his father and his Uncle Ambrose, Earl of Warwick, he had inherited Kenilworth Castle and other lands.

He was supposed to marry a girl called Frances with Queen Elizabeth's consent but they had to wait as they were deemed to be too young and Frances secretly married someone else and was banned from court. So, at the age of 17, he married Margaret Cavendish but she died

without them having a child. This, then, was my Robert and I was determined to give him the happy life which I felt he had been deprived of until then.

Robert and I were married in the small church at Ashow quite near my home and my mother's sister, Aunt Alice came to be a witness as well as my parents.

What girl could have been happier then. I was married to a brave, handsome, successful courtier, lived in Kenilworth Castle a very short distance from my parents and I was expecting my first baby very soon after we were married. All men hoped for sons but when my little Alice was born, we didn't mind as it was obviously going to be easy for me to produce more and the son would surely be next. I kept hoping pregnancy after pregnancy to have the boy we both wanted so badly but after Alice there was a girl Douglas, then Frances, Anne and Katherine who were all born within four years. I loved my little girls but I was very tired having so many babies in such a short time with the inevitable disappointment at the end of each term.

However they were all healthy babies and we still had hope but other things started to go wrong. My Robert's father, fed up with Queen Elizabeth's unwillingness to make a permanent commitment to him, had married Lettice Knollys who was a widow and already had several children. This threw the whole question of my husband's legitimacy into question and he fought a long battle in law but there was too many facts against the marriage. For example, how could his mother have married again if she already thought she was married? This then called doubt upon his right to inherit Kenilworth and Warwick. Also by now Queen Elizabeth had died and King James – a Stuart King – was on the throne and he started looking at our properties.

If we had had sons maybe my Robert would have stayed with me but in 1605 he decided England was no place for him any more so he decided to go abroad – for two years, he told me.

### 3 *Robert's life abroad*

I've told you about the beginning of my marriage to Robert Dudley and he had left me and our five children to go abroad on the King's business for two years. Well, after a while the news came to me that his cousin Elizabeth Southwell had been in his party, disguised as a page, and had become his mistress. I was forced to accept that the children and I had been abandoned.

As if he hadn't hurt me enough he converted to Catholicism and tried to say that our marriage was not legal. I was relieved that there were so many witnesses to the event but even so, he 'married' Elizabeth the following year.

The King ordered Robert to come home and I didn't know whether or not I could take him back after all that had happened. However I didn't have to make that decision because Robert refused and was declared an outlaw and his lands were confiscated.

I realised that I would have to fend for myself and my children although my father was a tremendous support and used the law to help me to stay in my home for some more years before I was forced to sell Kenilworth Castle which was valued at the time for £50,000. Henry, Prince of Wales offered me £14,000 which I had to accept but he had only paid me £3,000 before he died in 1612 and the new Prince of Wales, Charles, who was to become Charles 1, took over the castle but refused to pay the balance of the money. He also transferred Warwick to other people. These were very anxious and unhappy years but I did realise how fortunate I was that, even though the lands including Ladbroke were taken by the Crown, I was allowed to benefit from the rents, which brought me in some income so gradually I got back on my feet again. By this time the girls ages ranged from 15 down to 9 years.

Obviously people were keen to tell me about what was happening

to Robert when news of him came back from the continent. Part of me didn't want to know but a bigger part did and I couldn't help feeling a stab of jealousy when I learned that he and Elizabeth went on to have 13 more children, including the boys I had longed for. By the time Elizabeth died giving birth to the last child, their lives were so divorced from mine that I couldn't really empathise with the situation.

I always knew how clever Robert was, with a wonderful mathematical brain and maybe he needed to be out of this country to find an outlet for his talents. Once established in Florence, he became advisor to Ferdinand 1, Grand Duke of Tuscany where he designed and built warships. With the Emperor's agreement he took on his Grandfather's title, the Duke of Northumberland. He also masterminded the construction of harbour fortifications and the draining of the swamp around Livorno and built a palace in the heart of Florence for his family.

Since he was a boy, Robert had been fascinated by everything to do with the sea and exploration so I was not surprised to learn he had written notes about navigation and seamanship intending them to be published as a book but I never imagined the scale of it. 'Dell Arcano del Mare' (Secrets of the Sea) was published in 6 parts in 1646-7. Within a couple of years, a friend of the family had a copy and I was invited to go and see it. It is a book of wonders, starting with the size of it - there are over 600 pages. I have to admit that the Italian explanations and drawings of navigation instruments were too difficult for me to follow and although I was curious to see the five different sized ships that Robert had designed, it was the maps he had created that really impressed me. It was as if I was a bird flying over distant seas observing the coastline and seeing tiny ships and sea creatures far below.

I couldn't help feeling sad when I heard that Robert died at about that time and, after those short years we were together having our children, I never saw him again. However I do have to admit that he did more good for the world in his chosen life than he would have done remaining in Warwickshire with me.

## 4 *Independence*

As the years rolled by, my girls found their own lives. Alice was betrothed to be married but sadly died before the date. I wanted her memory to be cherished and therefore I commissioned a monument to be placed in Stoneleigh Church of her effigy and decided that my own memorial would be created above her.

The other girls all married men of distinction and in 1622 Charles, Prince of Wales, obtained a special Act of Parliament so that I could act as a 'femme sole' to determine the states of my property in my own right. This meant that I could finally dispose of my holdings in Kenilworth Castle. I was doubly grateful for this when my father died three years later.

I now had more than enough money for myself and my household so I followed my parents footsteps in trying to help those less fortunate than myself. Just before I was born they had founded a row of Almshouses in Stoneleigh which housed ten single people, five men and five women. I wanted to donate things of quality to the churches I was associated with and I have to admit that I wanted to give things which would keep my name alive for generations. I chose Church Plate and donated different sets to Ladbroke and other Warwickshire and Northamptonshire churches at different times. The Ladbroke set comprised a paten with a cover for the communion bread, a tall flagon and a chalice, all embossed with flowers and fruit, cherubs' heads and depictions of St John. I gave it when my cousin Edward Brounker was the Rector at Ladbroke Church but a few years later, in 1632/33 my daughters and I passed the holdings in Ladbroke over to William Palmer for the sum of £8250 and so our links with that village ended.

By this time I had relocated here to St Giles-in-the-Fields outside London. At the reformation King Henry 8th had granted my husband's

grandfather (John Dudley, Duke of Northumberland) the church property at St Giles. So, just as my grandfather had made Stoneleigh Abbey our home, Robert's grandfather had created Dudley House here. This is my home now. When I arrived it St Giles was a small community of about 300 people but it was becoming a wealthy suburb of London with other people like myself building properties here.

I became very involved with St Giles church which had become unsafe and had been demolished. I donated large sums of money to help with the building of a new church and in 1631 it was consecrated by the Bishop of London. I also arranged for a Great Bell to be hung and gave money each year for the sexton to ring the bell when condemned men and women passed by on their way to execution. I wanted those poor souls so know that their lives meant something. I also paid for the rector's house and gave money for his stipend.

Two of my daughters married supporters of the King in the Civil War. What a terrible time that was! I was so sad to hear the Parliamentarians deliberately drained the beautiful lake at Kenilworth Castle. They wanted to destroy the Castle as a Royalist stronghold.

In 1644 I was amazed to receive a letter from the Royal household. It contained these words from King Charles '*...Whereas our dear father, not knowing the truth of the lawful birth of the said Sir Robert (as we piously believe) granted away the titles of the said Earldoms to others and holding ourselves in honour and conscience obliged to make reparation; and also the said great estate which the Lady Alice had in Kenilworth, and sold at our desire to us at a very great undervalue... we do... give and grant unto the said Lady Alice Dudley the title of Duchess Dudley for life*'. I felt that at last, I had overcome the ignominy of my abandonment and had become a Duchess in my own right.

## 5 *Disasters in London*

There had always been outbreaks of The Plague from way back. So when news started coming in of one or two people apparently suffering from it in the slum parts of St Giles, nobody took too much notice. To put you in the picture about these slum dwellings. As more and more people travelled to London when work in the country was getting scarce, they were crammed into makeshift structures. There was no sanitation and open sewers ran down the centre of the winding streets. Particularly in Summer the stench was appalling and if I ever had to get near those parts I always carried a nosegay against the smell.

Anyway in the Spring of 1665 we became aware that more people were dying each week and the authorities started to take more notice. There was no duty to report a death so a System of Searchers was created. Their role was to seek out the dead, establish the cause of death and report it to the clerk of the parish and ultimately to the Minister of State. However, many of the people chosen were illiterate, had scant knowledge of disease and were open to being bribed as no-one wanted it known that a member of their household had died of the plague so numbers were erratic. When there was a proven case of the plague, the whole house was put into quarantine and to make sure that the rules were kept, people were locked inside with a guard placed at the door. It had a big red cross and the words 'Lord Have Mercy on Us' painted on. One night just as they started doing this, we heard shouting and banging of tins and it was a huge group of people rioting in St Giles against these measures.

Ships coming from cities known to have plague victims were also quarantined in an effort to keep it out of this country. Businesses and most of the Alehouses were closed but even with all these restrictions nothing seemed to be able to stop the spread and men and women were

dying in the streets.

We could hear the dreadful call of the men driving the dead carts every evening 'Bring out your Dead'. St Giles graveyard was soon completely full and grave pits were dug such that as men were excavating at one end, bodies were being tipped in at the other. In Summer apparently there were 2000 deaths in one week and by September it had risen to 7,000 deaths in a week. However gradually things started to improve and the King and other nobles who had fled the city started to return. Somehow we people who had stayed through it all felt a greater sense of community afterwards as it was something we had all been through together.

Then just as we were beginning to think that life was going to get back to normal, when I woke up on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of September, I was urged to look out of the window. In the distance I could see red flames over the rooftops along a long line of houses. We couldn't take our eyes off it for three days as it spread nearer and nearer to my home and, worse still to the newly built church of St Giles which meant so much to me. At night, the whole sky was red and the air was full of the choking smoke. On the road was a steady stream of people, with as many possessions as they could carry loaded onto anything with wheels, leaving their burning houses. Samuel Pepys could be seen everywhere evacuating his own house, helping others and advising the King. When he had nowhere else to store his things, we heard that he and his friends dug a big pit in his garden and buried bottles of wine and a big Parmesan cheese! That made us all laugh. We could hear the explosions when houses were deliberately blown up in the path of the fire to stop its spread. All those beautiful buildings and churches, including the Mercers Hall where Katherine had got married, ruined. My heart ached. However just as we began to wonder if we ought to start putting things in boxes, the fire was brought under control.

At least so many of those dreadful slums had been burned away and architects were invited to submit plans for the complete construction of a new city.

## 6 *Preparing for the future*

By this time I was a very old lady by any standards and I began to make provision for after my death. I wanted to be buried back in Stoneleigh with my parents and other members of my family, which I still considered my home. I realised that this was quite an undertaking to transport my body from St Giles-in-the-Field to Stoneleigh so I asked that £5 should be given to each place we stopped at along the way and sixpence to any poor person whom we passed. I requested that my funeral be attended by as many widows as my age and that each one be given money for a gown, a kerchief and a shilling to buy their supper

I had been moved by hearing about the plight of English Christians imprisoned by the Turks so I wanted £100 to be taken from my estate for their redemption.

In St Giles parish, I arranged for £400 to be given to the hospital and a further £20 per year for ever. I wanted to help poor children gain skills so they can support their families in future so some of my estate will buy land and the rent from it pay for apprenticeships that their fathers cannot afford. As there will always be poor people in need of help, my will also instructs that £100 a year will be distributed among the poor in eight parishes of my choice.

It is now January 1669. I am feeling all of my 90 years and more and more frail each day. I'm not sure I will be here to see the spring flowers but I thank God every day for the life I have had.

*Duchess Alice Dudley died on 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1669  
at her home in St Giles-in-the-Fields.  
Her body was taken to Stoneleigh and buried  
there on March 20<sup>th</sup> in accordance with her wishes.*

## *Post script*

The story of Alice and Robert Dudley has been forgotten over the centuries but start looking and you will find many documents from different viewpoints.

### **Main sources for this work**

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- A Sermon Preached in the Parish Church of Stoneleigh Whitsunday June 4, 1854 by Vaughan Thomas Vicar, published with appendices, 1854

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**[www.ladbrokeheritage.org.uk](http://www.ladbrokeheritage.org.uk)**





**It is my great pleasure, dear reader**  
to recount to you the story of my long life.

My husband, Robert and I married in 1596.  
Both of us came from prestigious families  
with strong links to Warwickshire.

Perhaps when you have read our story you  
will seek out some of the places involved or  
reflect on what history may say about you  
and your times.

