# Historic Royal Palaces Podcast The Stolen Tudor Crown with Tracy Borman

## **Show Notes**

What is the story we think we know about the Elizabethan succession? Was it a smooth transition to the Stuarts, or was it a stolen Tudor crown?

In this first episode of our four-part series, Chief Historian Tracy Borman will talk us through why Elizabeth I never named an heir, and what repercussions that had for the end of the Tudor dynasty.

Find out more about [**Elizabeth’s brush with death**](https://www.hrp.org.uk/blog/elizabeth-i-and-smallpox-at-hampton-court-palace-1562/?utm_source=HRP_Podcast&utm_medium=Show_Notes) in 1562.

Read more about [**the reign of Elizabeth I**](https://www.hrp.org.uk/hampton-court-palace/history-and-stories/elizabeth-i/?utm_source=HRP_Podcast&utm_medium=Show_Notes).

For a signed copy of Tracy Borman’s new book The Stolen Crown, visit our [**online shop**](https://www.historicroyalpalaces.com/books/the-stolen-crown-book.html).

## **Transcript**

### [Moody, wintery music fades in. Footprints crunch on frosty earth. Tracy’s voice comes in over the top. She dramatically narrates the story.]

### **Tracy Borman** [00:00:05]

On the 10th of October 1562, Elizabeth I walks briskly in the gardens of Hampton Court Palace. [Heavy, shivering breaths.] Having just taken a bath, she hopes a walk will shake the aches in her limbs and the feelings of fever that are beginning to linger. [Breathing and footsteps fade out.] After all, she has letters to write and state business to attend to. A queen doesn't have time to be ill.

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It's just four years into her reign. And from the beginning, the 29-year-old Elizabeth has tenaciously declared her intention to remain unmarried. Her privy council believe that they have time to persuade her otherwise, but it soon becomes apparent that they don't.

[00:00:52]   
In spite of her best efforts, Elizabeth falls perilously ill with smallpox, one of the deadliest diseases of the time. [The background music becomes more dramatic.] The whispers at court are reporting that it won't be long until she draws her last breath. Many are already in mourning. The Queen's Privy Council gathers in a panic as a succession crisis looms over them. Elizabeth has no heir. So who will take the crown?

[A soft boom in the music. Pause. Then the music comes back in.]

### [00:01:23]

Elizabeth I did not die at Hampton Court in 1562. She went on to reign for another 40 years, but her brush with death early in her reign brought her succession to the foreground, and once there, it would not recede to the shadows. It would dog her entire reign, causing treachery, deceit, and death. And yet, in 1603, the Tudor dynasty peacefully gave way to the Stuarts when James VI of Scotland took the English throne. [Music builds.] But was this succession really the done deal we have been led to believe, or were there other forces at play here? Why was it James who succeeded Elizabeth when there were other, arguably stronger blood claimants? And how did James' succession shape the end of the Tude dynasty? I'm Tracy Borman, chief historian here at Historic Royal Palaces. And in this four-part series, we're going to explore all these questions and more. So join me as we dive into the Elizabethan succession and the stolen Tudor crown. [Music fades out.]

### **Tracy Borman** [00:02:48]

[Tracy speaks more casually and excitedly now, her voice echoing slightly from the Council Chamber at Hampton Court Palace.]

Hello and welcome to episode one of this brand-new series! And can I say it's one that I am particularly excited about. I always loved doing these HRP podcasts, but this one is inspired by my brand-new book, ‘*The Stolen Crown’*. And so much of the action in that book, the characters that I cover in the book were right here, at Hampton Court. So, recording in situ is always a real shivers down the spine moment. So, I'm here at Hamton Court and more precisely I'm standing in the Council Chamber, which is just off the Haunted Gallery on the Tudor Processional Route. And really this was key to the events of 1562 when Elizabeth, the last Tudor monarch, was staying at the palace and she fell very, very dangerously ill with smallpox, and had the brush with death that would set the precedent really for her entire reign. The issue of the succession came to the fore at that moment, and it would never, ever go away.

### [00:04:00]

But Hampton Court, of course, is also very closely associated with her successor, James VI, who became James I of England when Elizabeth died in 1603, and he celebrated his first Christmas as King of Scotland and England right here at the palace. So you can say that it's where it all began and where it almost ended.

[00:04:28] But what ***is*** the story of the Elizabethan succession that we have always understood? Certainly, when I was studying history at school and then university and then in the three decades since that I've been a historian, I have been led to believe that it was all a done deal. From a very early part of Elizabeth's reign, she decided that James would be her heir and then that was confirmed, although she hadn't actually named him throughout her long reign, she did at the last gasp say, 'yes, James of Scotland will be my successor'. And then what followed was a very peaceful transition from the Tudors to the Stuarts. And actually, that is based on evidence in terms of a strong relationship between Elizabeth and James. She did seem to show him favour that she didn't show any of the other blood claimants to her throne. They had this ***astonishingly*** long correspondence, almost 30 years! And during that correspondence, you get the sense that Elizabeth is sort of shaping James, as her future heir, as a future King of England. So I guess it's understandable that we've then just believed this account of what happened on her deathbed when at the very end she finally confirmed to all her subjects that yes, their new King would be James of Scotland.

### [00:06:02]

James has other advantages as well, apart from his bloodline through to the Tudor Crown. He's male, and depressingly that really does matter in this period where there has been a succession of female monarchs. The people see this as an anomaly because it should be a man on the throne, not a woman. So James has that strongly in his favour. He also has a proven track record. He's an experienced king. He became King of Scots when he was just months old. So he has many years to his credit and he has a dynasty. He has a wife, Anne of Denmark, and they have children. So there's going to be no question of an unmarried monarch on the throne next. So he really does have many different advantages.

[00:06:51]   
Well, what are the sources for that crucial deathbed scene that many of us know so well? Well, the primary source actually is William Camden's 'Annals of Elizabeth'. This was really the earliest published account of Elizabeth's reign and of her death. Now Camden was writing his account during Elizabeth's lifetime but then finished it after her death. The first instalment was published in 1615 and the second and final one 10 years after that, and it's always been considered a reliable source. Certainly I have! [Tracy laughs.] I've quoted it at length in the all of my books about Elizabeth, and I'm not alone, really. It stood for 400 years as really the last word on Elizabeth and her reign. And Camden talks of how 'they adored him', that's James, 'as the sun rising and neglected her,' Elizabeth, 'as now ready to set.' So there's this sense that Elizabeth is being deserted by those who had served her throughout her long reign, as all eyes are turning north to James. And I think there is quite a lot of truth in that.

### [00:08:10]

But setting aside what Camden said about that deathbed speech for a moment, there are also accounts of how, when Elizabeth was pressed on who was going to succeed her and they said, 'will it be the King of Scots?', she raised her hand to her head, which was taken as assent. But then nobody, who was there around her deathbed, actually testified that she spoke at all. In fact, one ***very*** reliable source, the French ambassador who was ***meticulous*** in his reports, claimed that days before Elizabeth died, she was incapable of speech. So, that does raise a few alarm bells when it comes to Camden's account where he says very firmly that Elizabeth ***spoke*** the words naming James her successor. And now there is quite dramatic new evidence courtesy of the British Library. Now they've had a research project going for a number of years on the original manuscript written by William Camden. That still survives, there are several volumes of it in the collections of the Britain Library. In fact, in the Cotton Manuscripts, which were first collated by Robert Cotton, a friend of William Camden, and that's quite significant. And the new analysis of Camden's original manuscript is quite earth shattering because it shows that ***actually***, when Camden first wrote his account of the succession, he made no mention of Elizabeth verbally naming James as her heir. In fact, he then goes back once James ***is*** king, and he rewrites the succession in James's favour to make it look much more predetermined than actually it really was. Now that is quite extraordinary, and we will be going into that research in much more detail in a later episode. But really, it was the premise for my book is the premise of this podcast series, because it changes everything! That we thought we knew about this apparently smooth transition of power from the Tudors to the Stuarts. And in fact, what it seems is that far from naming James her heir, Elizabeth was the only monarch in history ***not*** to make provision for the succession.

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Well, why would Camden have doctored his account in this way? It was undoubtedly James who pressured Camden to take up his quill again, and to finish that history of Elizabeth that actually Camden had put to one side when she died. And by the time James commissioned Camden to do this in 1608, he was ***clinging*** to power in England by his fingertips. There had been plots and rebellions against him, most notably, of course, the Gunpowder Plot of 1605. So he desperately needed this sort of posthumous approval from Elizabeth, from beyond the grave, for his accession.

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Well, to understand further why James needed to shape history in this way, we have to go back to the beginning of the story. And what a fascinating story it is. We have to ask why Elizabeth never named an heir at all. Well, for starters, of course, Elizabeth was famously the Virgin Queen. She was very resolved from the beginning of her reign that she did not wish to marry, which was shocking, can I say, to contemporaries. It's quite natural choice today, nobody would raise many eyebrows about it, but they ***did*** in 1558 when Elizabeth came to the throne and, in her first parliament the following year, declared that she had an intention to live and die a virgin. Surely the first duty of any monarch was to produce an heir, but no. Elizabeth was determined, as she put it, 'to have one mistress here and no master.' And I very much doubt that anybody there believed a word she said. They probably thought 'it's just propaganda.’ You know, she's just increasing her value in the international marriage market by saying she doesn't want to take a husband, because 'of course she must take a husband'!. Quite apart from the need to secure the succession. Why wouldn't she? [Scandalised] She's a woman, she needs a man to direct her, particularly as she's queen. She can't hope to govern a country without a man at her side! So I think that they took Elizabeth's words with a very healthy pinch of salt, [amused] and she alone knew that she meant it. And of course that would become apparent as her reign went on. So it was obvious from the outset of Elizabeth's reign that the succession was always going to be an issue, because there was no other Tudor left after Elizabeth. She was the last of Henry VIII's children. There was nobody else who could be a direct heir to the throne. So of course, it's going to a topic of concern.

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Well, it was one thing for Elizabeth to be determined not to marry, but why didn't she name a successor? Surely she could have just resolved that question from the outset and stopped all the pressure that she would be under from her ministers to name her heir. Well, actually, in Elizabeth's defense, [warm] and you know I will always defend Elizabeth, she had good reason. Because she knew what it was like to be a named heir. During her sister Mary's reign, it was very obvious that if Mary didn't have children, the throne would pass to the last of Henry VIII's children, Mary's half-sister Elizabeth. And that had immediately placed Mary in danger. There had been a large-scale rebellion in Elizabeth's name, trying to put her on the throne before Mary was even dead. Elizabeth didn't want that happening to her. And she was very vocal about that fact. This is not just me surmising what Elizabeth may have felt. She said on a number of occasions, ***'look*** what happened in my sister's reign. I don't want the same happening to me.' And as well I think there was an element of Elizabeth wanting to be Queen Bee in the hive. She didn't want any attention on anybody else. It's bad enough that she had these various blood claimants all sort of jostling for power and position. She wanted the focus to remain on her and she wanted the power to remain in her hands. Naming a successor would destroy all of that.

### [00:15:10]

But why was the succession such a contentious issue, well for very good reason. It was still fresh in people's minds that there had been a disputed succession after Henry VIII's son Edward VI's reign. So Edward had ***altered*** the succession on his deathbed away from his natural heir, who was his elder half-sister Mary, and towards his cousin Lady Jane Grey because she was Protestant and he didn't want Catholic Mary on the throne. And he also disinherited his other half-sister, Elizabeth, for good measure. But then the people of England didn't like that. They knew that Mary Tudor was the rightful heir and there was huge support for her when she wrested the throne back from Lady Jane Grey after just nine days. And so that would have been fresh in people's minds. And actually, the Wars of the Roses were still talked about very much. In fact, I was astonished when researching my book as to how many times people talked about the Wars of the Roses, even towards the very end of Elizabeth's reign when, you know, it was over a hundred years before, well over a hundred years. The country had been ***torn apart*** by this bloody civil conflict. And I think in this 30-year period in the 15th Century, the crown had changed hands six times! So ***nobody*** wanted a repeat of that. And you might say that the Tudors had also come to power thanks to a succession crisis. [Tracy laughs] I mean, it was, the Tuder crown had been won on the battlefield. It wasn't a peaceful transition from the House of York to the House of Lancaster in the form of Henry VII. He'd had to fight Richard III at Bosworth to the death. So people were very aware of how dangerous, of how ***turbulent*** it could be if there was anything other than a very clear, a very direct succession, ideally from father to son. But with Elizabeth, you know, mother to son would be the next best thing. But then we have this queen who has declared she's going to be a virgin, she's not going to marry. And gradually people begin to realise she means it. So of ***course***, the succession is going to be the number one issue of the day. And so it remains. It dominates pretty much every meeting Elizabeth has with her council. It dominates the meetings of Parliament. There's some analysis been done of Elizabeth's parliaments. And actually it's been proved that about 85% of Elizabeth's parliaments were concerned solely with the succession. That's how much it mattered to people. And you can really understand that.

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So given the history of disputed successions and the turbulence that always came with that, you can understand why James wanted his own accession to the English throne to appear predetermined from the start, a done deal with Elizabeth, a smooth transition from one dynasty to the next.

### [00:18:26]

So when Elizabeth lay dying here at Hampton Court, just four years into her reign, who were those people who her counsellors put forward as the potential successors? Because we know that as Elizabeth was ***fighting*** for life in her bedchamber here at Hampton Court, there was an ***urgent*** meeting of the council held in the chamber where I'm standing right now. And of course they were trying to decide 'who's going to reign after our queen, because of course she's gonna die'. And I should point out as well, that Elizabeth's three immediate predecessors had only managed 11 years between them [amused] on the throne! So nobody thought Elizabeth was going to last any longer. You know, they were used to short reigning monarchs. So it was natural that the council would meet to try to just thrash this out between themselves. Well, believe it or not, [Tracy laughs] according to the Spanish ambassador, there was no shortage of candidates. He said, 'out of the 15 or 16 of them, that are there,' i.e. on the council, 'were nearly as many different opinions about the succession to the crown'. And as ever in this period, of course, religion played a prominent role. Half of the council were pro-Catholic, half were Protestant. And of course the claimants to the throne fell into those two camps as well.

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On the Catholic side, The one with probably the strongest blood claim was Mary, Queen of Scots. She had a direct descent through to the first Tudor King, Henry VII. Another Catholic candidate was Lady Margaret Douglas. So she's also from the sort of Scottish side and both Mary, Queen of Scotts and Lady Margaret Douglas were descended from Henry VIII's sister Margaret, who married the King of Scots. On the Protestant side, we have Lady Katherine Grey. Now she's descended from Henry VIII's younger sister, Mary. And I should emphasise that again because it does get confusing with all of these different successors to the crown, or potential successors, to the crown. And actually ***most*** of them are either descended from Henry the VIII's elder sister, Margaret or his younger sister, Mary. I'm now going to break that rule by talking about the other candidate who everyone was discussing here at Hampton Court and he was Henry Hastings, Earl of Huntingdon. He wasn't related to the Tudors at all. In fact, his claim was probably stronger than the Tudors' claim to the throne [amused] because he could trace his descent back to the Plantagenets and the Pole family, who had quite a lot of royal blood flowing through their veins, and he had an awful lot of support because of course he was male. Well, even Philip II of Spain was discussed as a potential successor. Of course, he had been King of England during Mary I's reign because he was her husband, and he was rather keen to be King of English again.

### [00:21:38]

Well, against all the odds, Elizabeth recovered from this near-death experience. And when she found out that as she'd been battling for life, her council had been busy meeting to discuss who would take the throne once she was dead, boy, were they in trouble! But actually, the council weren't willing to let this matter go. They would continue to plague Elizabeth about the succession for the next 40 years, as would her parliament. And in fact, Elizabeth's council would play a crucial role in later years in deciding the course of history. Well, I've mentioned some of those candidates who were discussed here in the council chamber as Elizabeth battled for her life, and they would remain in the forefront for quite a few years and then they would be replaced by their heirs, and so the bloodline continued. And then there would be other candidates entering the fray.

### [00:22:42]

So, if the succession was never, in fact, as predetermined as we've been led to believe, what exactly were Elizabeth's intentions? That, in a way, is the million dollar question. Does it make Elizabeth a bad queen that she didn't name an heir? Or was this, in effect, a wily tactic from Elizabeth? I can't help but think it was definitely the latter. It was a wily tactic because it kept the focus on her. It stopped anybody focusing on a rival claimant whose power would be enhanced by having the status of being a named heir, and therefore someone who might rebel against Elizabeth in her own lifetime. So actually, it was a wily tactic, but it was ***risky*** one. And it depended very much on Elizabeth being long lived. Which is something that neither of her siblings had been. Well, as with her marriage candidates, it's possible that Elizabeth knew that her council would never be able to agree on a successor if she left it to them. And by always playing off the various candidates to her throne, she not only kept the focus on her and therefore retained power, but she also sort of divided and ruled amongst her council. She quite liked the fact that they all backed different candidates because if they all suddenly got behind one single candidate that could spell danger for her.

### [00:24:24]

So I hope you're getting a sense now of just how much the Elizabethan succession was a race to the finish line, not this predetermined smooth accession of James VI of Scotland. Not this done deal from the beginning. In fact, it was anyone's game. And as the reign of Elizabeth wore on, I think it was less a case of who dares wins than of survival of the fittest.

### [00:24:59]

So in this series, we're going to explore some of those key claimants for you and look at the front runners for Elizabeth's throne and what a ***dazzling*** cast of characters we have for you. It was such a revelation for me researching this story to come across people who'd really been just footnotes in books about the Tudor period, because of course they never did come to the throne. But ***at the*** ***time*** - they were front and centre, and they had such dramatic lives. This ***is*** a story of drama and deceit and treachery, and we're going to explore how James won the race, by fair means ***or*** foul, and what might have been different had another of the claimants managed to pip him to the post and take Elizabeth's crown for themselves. There's always a danger when we've understood a certain narrative for so long, as has been the case with the transfer from the Tudors to the Stuarts, that we'll use a healthy dose of hindsight and see it all as a foregone conclusion. But examining the race for Elizabeth's crown in the light of this dramatic new evidence ***really*** makes you realise how closely contested this battle for power really was and how it might easily have gone an entirely different way. So prepare yourselves for drama, for skullduggery, for backstabbing and intrigue aplenty. This is the story, not of a peaceful succession, but of a stolen crown.

[The podcast theme music fades in. It is gentle and curious.]

### [00:26:52]

Well, thank you for listening to this series on the stolen Tudor crown and the Elizabethan succession. If you enjoy these types of topics, please let us know by leaving us a review. Tell us what else you'd like to hear about. We really appreciate all your feedback. Thank you so much for supporting us, loyal listeners.