

About the Tudor wage book

The wage book is held in the Devonshire Collection Archives at Chatsworth.



The most important archives are held in our Muniment Room (formerly the Servants' Hall, shown above). They fill over 6,000 boxes and contain material dating from the medieval period to the 21st century. They record the history of the Cavendish family – descended from Bess of Hardwick and her second husband Sir William Cavendish in the 16th century – along with other families who married into the Cavendish line; they also document the history of the family's many properties and estates, and the people who have lived and worked on them over the centuries.

The wage book which forms the focus of our transcription project is part of a collection known as the 'Hardwick Manuscripts' – one of our most important archives which includes a series of highly significant documents relating to Bess of Hardwick (c.1527-1608). It has the reference HM/4.

We don't yet have an online catalogue of this collection, but thanks to some funding from the Archives Revealed Cataloguing Grants scheme, an archivist will be producing a detailed catalogue to be published online in 2022. Our volunteer project to transcribe the wage book is running alongside this cataloguing project. These are both exciting initiatives for us, aimed at making more information about these important archival sources freely available online.



Chatsworth House today

Our Project

We want to rescue all the names recorded in the wage book and record them for posterity in our online [Historic Servants and Staff database](#). This resource was created because many family historians and other researchers are interested in tracing named individuals they believe worked at Chatsworth or one of the Cavendish family's other properties in the past. Over many years, staff, students and volunteers have worked to extract information about named individuals from documents in the archives and record them in the database.

We will be using your transcriptions to augment this database: we will record the name of each person listed in the wage book; the earliest and latest dates on which an individual's presence is recorded in the book; what work they were undertaking, where this information is supplied in the book; what they were being paid; and any notes or further information we believe will be useful for researchers. Currently the earliest entries in the database are from the eighteenth century, so the new entries from our wage book will extend its coverage by over a century.

We will also publish the completed digital transcription of the book on our website. This will be useful to researchers working in a range of different areas, and could be drawn on by those interested in topics like the development of Elizabethan Chatsworth; gender roles – for instance, the different types of work that men and women were engaged in (women represented in the wage book are generally paid for tasks associated with the gardens), and the role of Bess in overseeing and organising her predominantly male workforce; social and economic issues, such as rates of pay for specific types of work, and how rates might vary based on the skill or reputation of the individual; and the history and development of financial accounting in the early modern period. Several initiatives – notably [Bess of Hardwick's letters](#), other projects led by Alison Wiggins at the University of Glasgow, and the digitisation of material at the Folger Library in the USA – have resulted in some of the key surviving archival documents relating to Bess of Hardwick being made freely available online, and we hope that the fully transcribed wage book will contribute to this larger endeavour.

Bess of Hardwick and Chatsworth



There is some debate over the year of Bess's birth, which has been suggested as either c.1521/22 or c.1527, but we know she died in 1608, having risen from a family of minor gentry status in Derbyshire to become Countess of Shrewsbury, as well as being one of the richest and most successful women in the country. Her son William Cavendish was made 1st Earl of Devonshire in 1618, and the 4th Earl was granted a dukedom in 1694. Currently Chatsworth is home to the 12th Duke of Devonshire and his wife.

Detail from a portrait of Elizabeth Hardwick, Countess of Shrewsbury (better known as Bess of Hardwick), by Hans Eworth, c.1560s. Courtesy of The National Trust.

Bess, the founder of this dynasty, tends to be associated with Hardwick Hall: she was born at the Hall, then a medieval manor house, and she was responsible for building both its original replacement Hardwick Old Hall (now a ruin) and in the 1590s the magnificent new Hardwick Hall, which dominates the skyline for miles around.

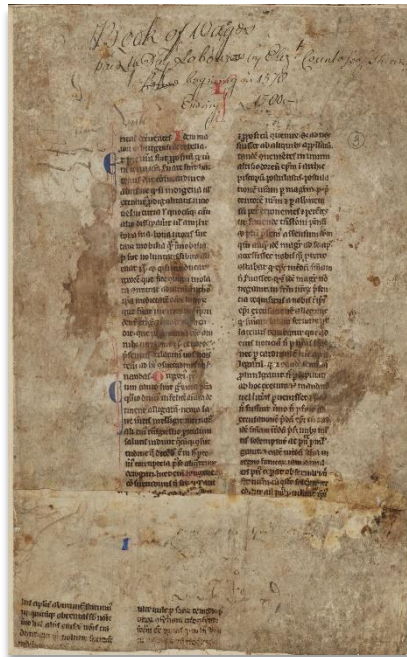
However, her first building venture was at Chatsworth. Her second husband, with whom she had all her children (eight, of whom six survived childhood), was Sir William Cavendish (1508-57), who accumulated considerable wealth as part of his role in the dissolution of the monasteries. In 1549 Bess persuaded her husband to buy Chatsworth and other land in her home county of Derbyshire, and in 1552, they started building a new house at Chatsworth. It wasn't completely finished for another thirty years, and Bess spent a lot of time on site overseeing the work to ensure it was carried out to the high standards she expected.

Our wage book opens in 1577. At this time, Bess was married to her fourth (and final) husband, George Talbot, 6th Earl of Shrewsbury (c.1522-1590). The couple married in 1567, and while originally happy, by 1577 the marriage was under strain – which was compounded by the Earl's duty as custodian of the captive Mary, Queen of Scots – which began in 1569 and lasted until 1584. In summer 1577, Gilbert Talbot – the Earl's son, who was married to Bess's daughter Elizabeth – was trying to mediate between the couple, who spent much of their time apart; Bess's focus was very much on completing her work at Chatsworth. The couple had essentially separated by 1583 and Bess spent much of the rest of her life at Hardwick, which became her next major building project – the New Hall occupying her attention through the 1590s.

The wage book in context

Our wage book dates from January 1577 to December 1580, and its original title is given as 'Book of Wages paid the Day Labourers by Elizabeth Countess of Shrewsbury beginning in 1578 ending 1580.' The date given in the title is wrong, but the book does record payments to many individuals who were working for Bess at Chatsworth during this period – both for one-off elements of building work, but also for ongoing maintenance (e.g. of the gardens), and wider estate activities such as ploughing and threshing. As well as payments to individuals, it records expenditure on some of the essential materials needed for their work, such as blackstone for making fireplaces, baskets for carrying mortar, ropes, items for carts, halters for horses, ashes which were used for laundering cloth, and much more besides.

We have only included the inside pages recording payments in our transcription project. The book itself was bound with a hard binding in the 20th century, but its original covers still survive within the volume: these were soft wrappers made of repurposed vellum (calfskin) pages from a medieval manuscript – it was common to reuse earlier manuscripts or printed material in this way, and it occurs in other account books of Bess's.



One of the original wrappers of the wage book.

We don't know who wrote the accounts – possibly a steward or secretary. This writer often totalled the fortnight's payments at the end of each list of fortnightly outgoings, but this didn't happen in every single case. Bess without fail totalled the payments (either confirming the steward's calculations, or providing the total where it was missing), and signed off the accounts at the end of each fortnight.

Chatsworth was very much Bess's project, and she was managing affairs with autonomy from her husband. Women of her social class would be taught accounting, as well as reading and writing, as part of their basic education, and Bess clearly had a high level of proficiency in account keeping; many of her accounts were kept entirely in her own hand, and even when they weren't, she would always total them and sign them off. The fact that some of the fortnightly outgoings in the wage book were tallied up by Bess, rather than by her steward, reflects her competence in this area.

To set the wage book in context, this was a period when Chatsworth had already been transformed by Bess, who with her second husband William Cavendish began building work in 1552/3 to replace an older house on the site with a new house, constructed around an inner courtyard, with a gatehouse and towers. Whilst this first phase of work was nearing completion by 1564, Bess wasn't satisfied and in the earlier 1570s another major phase of work began, with an extra storey being added. Although work on the house and gardens was largely complete by 1577, clearly some work was still required to finish this off. Robert Dudley, the 1st Earl of Leicester, visited Chatsworth in the summer of 1577, and our wage book reveals, for instance, that sawyers were being paid to cut wood – presumably for fittings in the house; plastering work was being carried out; screens were being carved for the hall; outside, a new orchard was walled, and new ponds were dug. It was a hive of activity in the run-up to Leicester's visit, as shown in the increased number of workmen being paid each fortnight. During the likely time of his visit in June, more domestic activities are recorded, such as the necessary laundering of linen.



This is the only image we have of Chatsworth dating from Bess's lifetime. It is an embroidery originally worked as a cushion panel and is believed to date from the 1590s.

Some of the names which appear in the wage book are known to us from elsewhere: for instance, Thomas Accres was a skilled stone and marble carver, who later did much work for Bess at Hardwick. The wage book records him working for Bess at Chatsworth in both 1577 and 1580. In fact in 1580, it seems that Bess and her husband, the Earl of Shrewsbury, were vying for Accres's services; the Earl was engaged in building Worksop Manor and in October 1580, wrote to his wife asking her to send Accres back to Worksop as he couldn't spare him any longer.

However, other names which appear in the book have been lost to history, and it is our aim to rescue and record them.



Detail of a painting of Chatsworth by Richard Wilson, c.1640s, which is based on an earlier painting of Chatsworth. The house as shown here is essentially the Elizabethan house of Bess's day.