

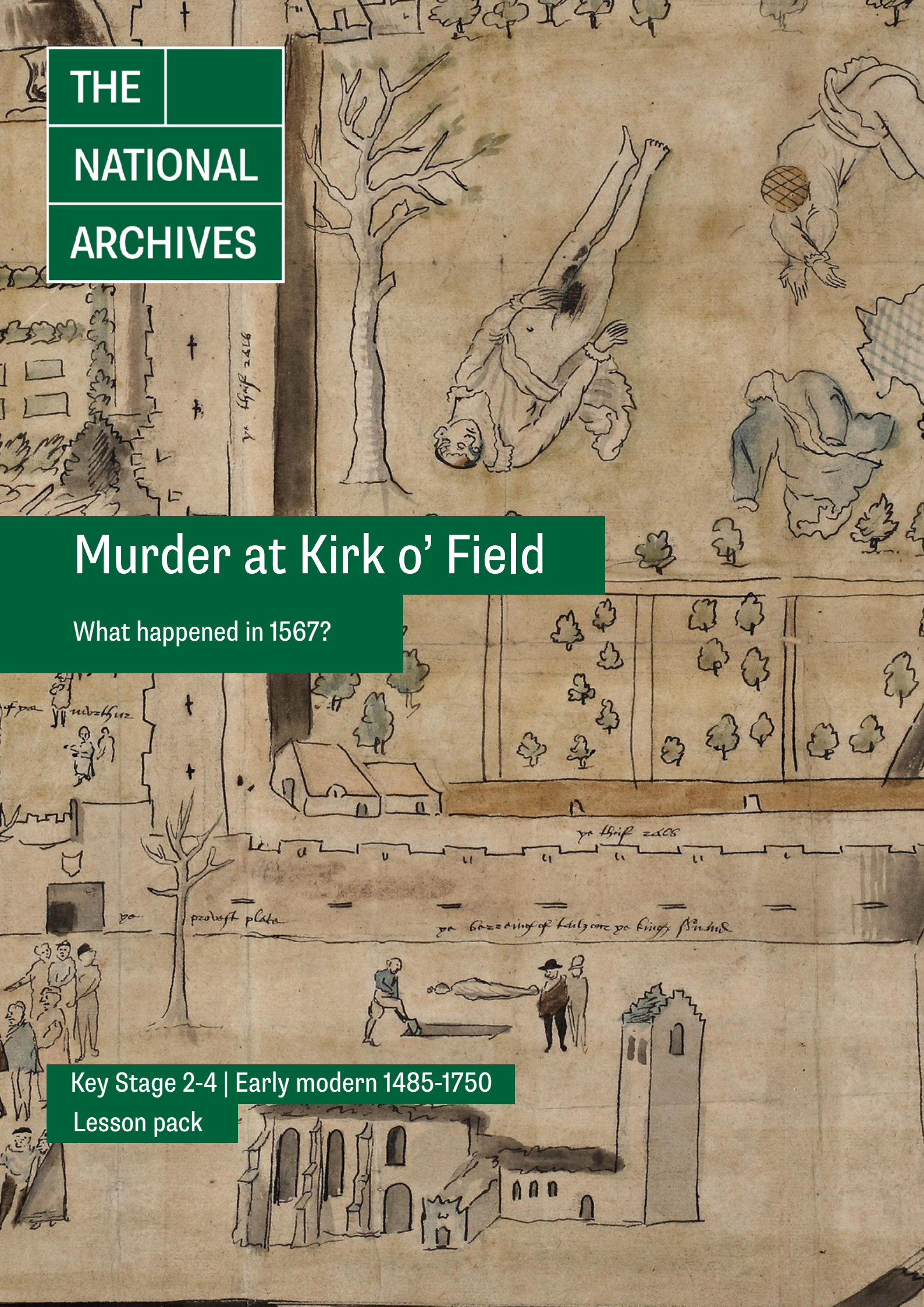
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# Murder at Kirk o' Field

What happened in 1567?

Key Stage 2-4 | Early modern 1485-1750

Lesson pack





# Introduction

Early in the morning of 10 February 1567, Kirk o' Field house in Edinburgh was destroyed by an explosion. The partially clothed bodies of Lord Darnley, the second husband of Mary, Queen of Scots, and his servant were found in a nearby orchard, apparently strangled but unharmed by the explosion.

Suspicion immediately fell upon Mary and James Hepburn, Earl of Bothwell, one of her closest and most trusted noblemen. Although Bothwell was considered to be the lead conspirator, he was found not guilty at his trial in April, 1567. Mary married Bothwell the following month, just three months after Darnley's murder.

Darnley's death remains an unsolved historical mystery. Use this lesson to see if you can work out from the original documents what happened to Lord Darnley.

## Suitable for:

KS 2 -4

## Time period:

Early modern 1485-1750

## Connections to the Curriculum:

Key stage 1 & 2:

Significant People, Elizabeth I & Mary Queen of Scots

Key stage 3:

The Elizabethan religious settlement and conflict with Catholics (including Scotland, Spain and Ireland)

Key stage 4:

Edexcel GCSE History Early Elizabethan England, 1558–88: The problem of Mary, Queen of Scots

OCR GCSE History: The Elizabethans, 1580–1603: Mary Queen of Scots

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## Teacher's notes

This lesson contains a History Hook starter video to hook students into the lesson.

This lesson allows students to explore three crucial sources about the murder of Lord Darnley the husband of Mary Queen of Scots. The first source is a plan of the murder scene at Kirk o' Field church drawn for William Cecil shortly after the murder. The murder aroused obvious interest in England. Darnley had once been Elizabeth I's suitor and was her cousin.

The second source is an extract from the longest of the "casket letters" written sometime between 1566 and 1567. Produced by the Earl of Moray as evidence of Mary's complicity in the murder of Darnley, the originals of the letters have always been doubtful. This document is a copy made in 1568 to present before a commission set up at Westminster to investigate the case. It is poor copy, roughly translated from French and giving only excerpts from the original. Currently, historians believe the Casket Letters were fakes – a botch job of various letters, some perhaps written by Mary, others fabricated.

The third source is an extract from a letter written to Mary by Elizabeth I in June 1567, after her marriage to Lord Bothwell. The letter itself was heavily edited by William Cecil, however the tone of contempt and disgust is undoubtedly that of the Queen. She felt that Lord Bothwell was guilty of the death of Lord Darnley, and despite Mary having held an inquest and exonerated him, she should have devoted more time to catching the killer(s) of her husband. Elizabeth was also unhappy about Mary's marriage to a divorcee, and was concerned for the upbringing of Mary's son.

All documents are provided with transcripts. Students can work through the questions individually or in pairs and report back to the class.

Here are some further details about some of the characters involved in these events.

**David Rizzio:** Private Secretary to Mary, murdered by Lord Darnley at Palace of Holyrood, 9 March 1566. It was felt he was getting too close to the Queen.

**William Cecil:** English statesman, chief advisor for Queen Elizabeth I for most of reign.



## Teacher's notes

**Lord Bothwell:** James Hepburn was the 4th Earl of Bothwell. Mary, Queen of Scots' third husband following the death Lord Darnley.

**Earl of Moray:** Moray was the illegitimate son of King James V of Scotland and Lady Margaret Erskine, daughter of John Erskine, 5th Lord Erskine. He was Regent of Scotland from 1567 until his assassination in 1570 and Mary's half- brother.

## Sources

Sources 1a-d: A plan of the murder scene at Kirk o' Field church. Catalogue ref: MPF 1/366

Source 2: Extract from the longest of the "casket letters" written 1566- 1567. Catalogue ref: SP 53/2

Source 3: Extract from a letter from Elizabeth I to Mary. Catalogue ref: SP 52/13/71

## Background

The story of Mary Queen of Scots and her marriage to Lord Darnley shows both the romantic and the brutal side of politics in the 16th century.

In 1565 Mary married Lord Darnley, a Catholic, and great-grandson of Henry VII. Although handsome and elegant, Darnley was weak, vain and spoilt. He soon made himself very unpopular among the Scottish nobles and Mary soon grew to hate his bullying ways. She began to spend most of her time with David Rizzio, her secretary, and this stirred the jealousy of Darnley.

On 9 March 1566 Mary was having supper with David Rizzio when her husband burst in. Rizzio was dragged from the room and killed. Over 50 dagger wounds were counted on his body. Meanwhile Mary was held captive by her husband and forced to make him king in his own right. Mary had few people to turn to during this time except James Hepburn, the Earl of Bothwell.

On 16 June Mary gave birth to a son: James. Mary and Darnley seemed to have made up. Their son's birth was very important because not only was he heir to the Scottish throne, but he was also the heir to the English throne.

Early the following year, Mary managed to persuade Darnley that she had forgiven him for the murder of Rizzio. Darnley was sick and decided to stay at Kirk o' Field House in Edinburgh. On the night of 10 February, Mary left to attend a wedding party while Darnley stayed at home. At about two am, a massive explosion reduced Kirk o' Field House to rubble. Darnley was killed, but not by the explosion. He was found half-naked – not in the rubble of the house, but in the garden outside the town walls. Something had frightened him so badly that he had escaped from the house before it exploded, but someone saw him fleeing, caught up with him, and strangled him.

The list of suspects was long, because Darnley had many enemies. However, many people suspected that Mary and her friend Earl Bothwell had arranged the murder. When Mary married Bothwell three months later it looked as though the suspicions were right. The Scots rose in rebellion. Mary was driven out to England and her infant son James was made



## Background

king. Elizabeth I took her prisoner – and a prisoner she stayed for the next 19 years.

Meanwhile, in 1568, a group of Scottish Earls 'found' a number of letters in a silver casket, supposedly written by Mary to Earl Bothwell. The letters seem to show that Mary was in love with Bothwell and was planning to murder her husband.

## External links

[Mary, Queen of Scots](#)<sup>1</sup>

More documents on Mary Queen of Scots from National Records of Scotland

[Mary Queen of Scots Report: Horrible Histories](#)<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/research/image-gallery/hall-of-fame/mary-queen-of-scots>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ls0AE0GNE8E>

## Tasks

1. Source 1a: Closeup of Lord Darnley and Servant from a plan of the murder scene at Kirk o' Field church. Catalogue ref: MPF 1/366

This section of the plan shows the bodies of Lord Darnley and his servant in the garden.

- Why are the men half naked?
- How did the bodies get there?
- What might the chair have been used for?
- Are there any obvious marks on the bodies?
- Who do you think the dagger belonged to?
- How do you think they died?

2. Source 1b: Closeup of Lord Darnley's body being removed on the plan of the murder scene at Kirk o' Field church. Catalogue ref: MPF 1/366

This section shows Lord Darnley being carried away and the funeral of his servant.

- Where are the men taking Lord Darnley's body?
- Why do you think the soldiers were there?
- Where is Lord Darnley's servant being buried?

3. Source 1c: Closeup of the scene of the explosion on the plan of the murder scene at Kirk o' Field church. Catalogue ref: MPF 1/366

This section shows the site of Darnley's death.

- Judging from the ruin, how big was the explosion?
- The ruins of Kirk o' Field House have been labelled the site of the murder – do you think this is really where he was killed?

4. Source 1d: Closeup of James as a child on the plan of the murder scene at Kirk o' Field church. Catalogue ref: MPF 1/366



## Tasks

This is the Infant James – Lord Darnley's son and heir to the throne.

- The infant James is saying 'Judge and revenge my caus, O Lord' – what do you think this means?
- James would have only been a one year old baby at this time. What is the artist trying to suggest about the death of Lord Darnley?
- From what you have found out so far, how do you think Darnley died?

5. Source 2: Extracts from a letter allegedly from Mary to Earl Bothwell. Catalogue ref: SP 53/2

This is a letter allegedly from Mary Queen of Scots to Bothwell.

- If the letter is really from Mary to Bothwell, who is the 'he' Mary keeps referring to?
- What does Mary want Bothwell to do with the letter?
- What warnings does Mary give Bothwell?
- Who is his 'humble and faithful lover'?
- What could Mary mean when she says 'who shortly hopes to be another thing unto you'?
- Does the letter show Mary plotting with Bothwell to kill Darnley (give reasons to back up your answer)?
- Why do you think Bothwell did not burn the letter as Mary asks?
- Do you think we can trust this letter as evidence?

6. Source 3: Extract from a letter from Elizabeth I to Mary. Catalogue ref: SP 52/13/71

- Do you think Elizabeth was happy with Mary's marriage to Bothwell?
- What do you think was the Queen's mood when she wrote this?
- Why do you think the letter has been crossed out and changed so much?
- Who do you think might have made the changes?
- Do you think Elizabeth herself would have written this letter, or would someone have done it for her?

## Tasks

7. Based on the evidence you have looked at, write a statement summing up how Lord Darnley died and who you think was responsible.
8. What do you think about the evidence you have? Do you think a conclusion based on this evidence can be trusted - if not, why?



# Source 1a: Closeup of Lord Darnley and Servant.

Catalogue Ref: MPF 1/366





# Source 1b: Closeup of Lord Darnley's body being removed.

Catalogue Ref: MPF 1/366





## Source 1c: Closeup of the scene of the explosion.

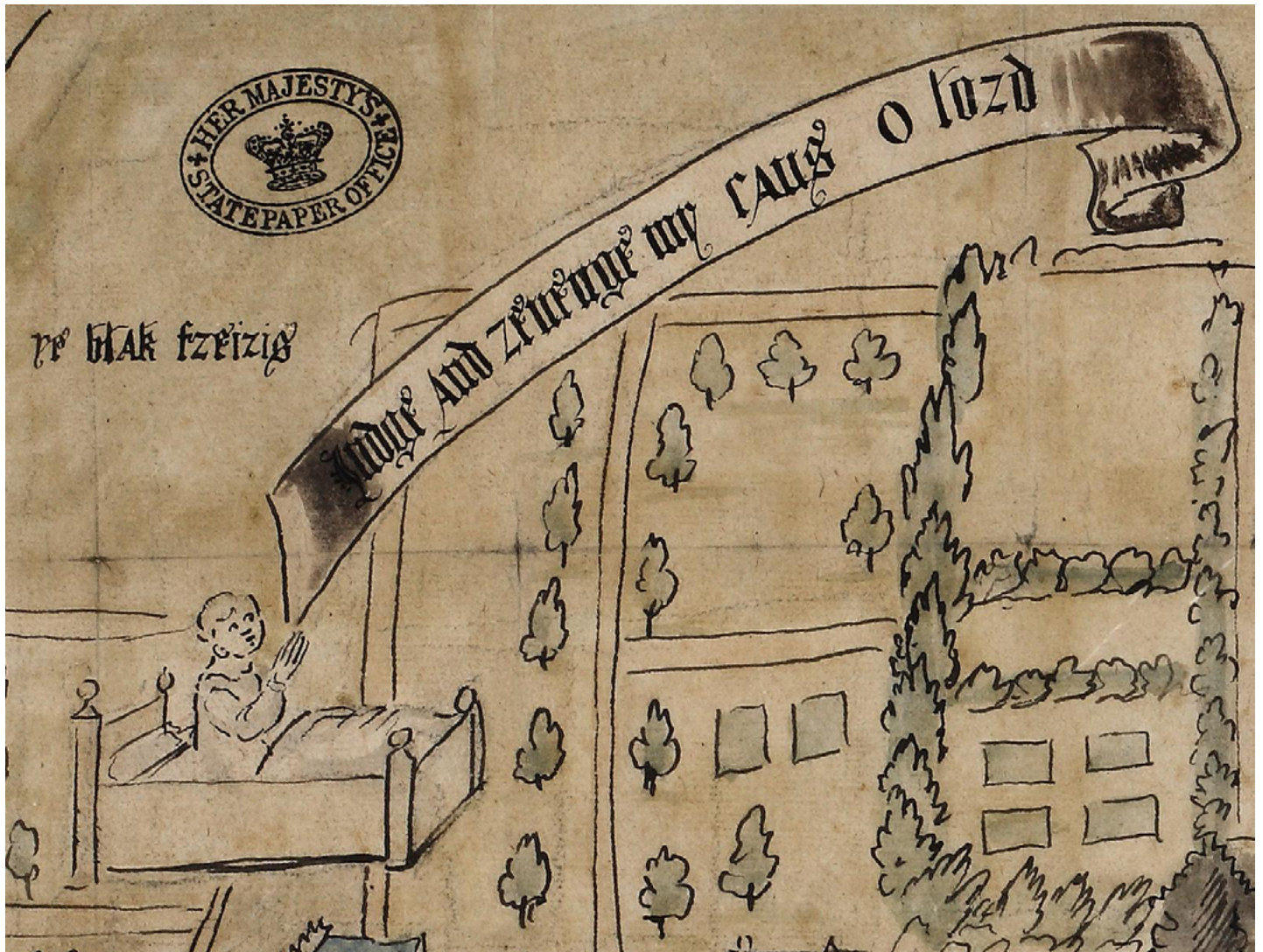
Catalogue Ref: MPF 1/366





# Source 1d: Closeup of James as a child.

Catalogue Ref: MPF 1/366





Source 2: Extracts from a letter allegedly from Mary to Earl Bothwell. Catalogue Ref: SP 53/2

I go to my bedchamber. You make me  
 dissemble so much that I am afraid to trust you  
 and you make me almost to playe for god of a way to. I  
 understande that if it were not for your obeying you  
 I had rather be dead. My first desire for yet, to be  
 forth, he will not saye out no resolution that I shall give  
 to be in your true service at bed and board, & that I shall  
 shall forsake you no more, and I hope my word you will see  
 I will, and will say, but you have prayed me to hurry till  
 after to morrow.

I understande my body. but I commit my self wholly to you  
 and send me word what I shall doe, & what shall chuse to me  
 I will obey you.

To be short, his bearer shall deliver unto  
 you the rest, and if I shall receive any thing, I will make  
 my self a memoriall thereof. He shall tell you the cause of my stay.  
 I knowe he is true. soe it is to dangerous, my selfe is for my selfe  
 well knowing it, for I feare to saye nothing and saye grace if you  
 be not Embroiled

forgive me, and give you my only friend for good luck & prosperitie of all yo  
 humble & faythfull & lovinge doer will be sent to you, w goe straighte to the  
 my offer beinge unto you for the reward of my paynt.



## Transcript: Source 2

... I go to my tedious talk. You make me dissemble so much that I am afrayd therof with horroure, and you make me almost playe the parte of a traytor. Remember that if it weare not for obeyeing you I had rather be dead. My hart bleedith for yt. To be shorte, he will not come but with condition that I shall promise to be with him ane heretofore at bed and bord and that I shall forsake him no more; and upon my word, he will do whatsoever I will, and will com, but he hath prayed me to tarry till after to morrow. ...

... Alas, I never deceavid any body; but I remitt myself wholly to your will And send me word what I shall doe, and whatsoever happen to me, I will obey you. ...

... To be short, this bearer shall declare unto you the rest; and if I shall learne any thing, I will make every night a memorial thereof. He shall tell you the cause of my stay, Burne this letter for it is to dangerous, neyther is thar any thing well said in it, for I think upon nothing but upon greefe if you be at Edinburghe. ...

... God forgive me and give you my only frend the good luck and prosperitie that your humble and fathyfull Lover doth wisshe unto you, who hopith shortly to be an other thing unto you for the reward of my paynes. ...

## Glossary

dissemble : put off

afrayd : afraid

horroure : horror

traytor : traitor

yt : that

ane : even

heretofore : as before

bord : board

forsake : abandon

remitt : give

greefe : danger





## Transcript: Source 3

Madame, to be plain with you, our grief has not been small that in this your marriage so slender consideration has been had that, as we perceive manifestly, no good friend you have in the whole world can like thereof, and if we should otherwise write or say we should abuse you. For how could a worse choice be made for your honour that in such haste to marry such a subject, who besides other and notorious lacks, public fame has charged with the murder of your late husband



## Why do our hyperlinks come with footnotes?

Our resources are designed to be printed and used in classrooms, which means hyperlinks aren't always accessible digitally. We include the full link at the bottom of the page so that you can type in the address without distracting from the main text of the lesson materials.

## Did you know?

The National Archives Education Service also offers free workshops onsite in Kew and online in your classroom.

Our [Onsite Workshops](#) are available for free here at The National Archives and allow students to experience genuine original documents reflecting over 1000 years of history. From Elizabeth I's signature to the telegrams of the sinking Titanic, students love the wow-factor of being able to see real history on the desk in front of them.

Our [Online Workshops](#) allow our Education Officers to teach through your projector, leading discussions and guiding students through activities based around original documents. All you need is a computer with a projector, webcam and microphone. We'll arrange a test call before your session to check the tech is working.

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