

# 1.4 Why did Queen Elizabeth kill her cousin?

By 1568, Elizabeth had been queen for ten years. She hadn't married and had no children. This meant that if she died, her cousin, Mary, Queen of Scotland, would become Queen of England and Wales too.

## Objectives

- Examine the threat posed by Mary, Queen of Scots.
- Discover the events surrounding the Babington Plot.

### Mary in France and Scotland

Mary had been Queen of Scotland from the age of six days old, after her father (James V of Scotland) died in 1542. She was too young to rule so her mother and other important Scottish nobles ruled in her place. She was brought up as a Catholic and married several times – firstly to a French king in 1558 (who died tragically young), then to an English lord in 1565 (who was strangled to death and blown up) and then, in 1567, she married the man (Earl Bothwell) who was suspected of being involved in the murder of her second husband!

### Mary in England

Many Scots were suspicious of Mary's connection to her second husband's death, and some rebelled against her. She was forced to give up the throne and her young son (James VI) was made King of Scotland. In 1568, she ran away to England, perhaps hoping that her cousin Queen Elizabeth would take pity on her.

Mary immediately caused problems for Elizabeth. For a start, she was Catholic, and made no secret of the fact that she thought she should be Queen of England if Elizabeth died. Some English Catholics agreed with Mary. Elizabeth's solution was harsh – she kept Mary a prisoner until she could decide what to do with her. Mary was imprisoned in various houses and castles for the next 19 years, and the two women never actually met. Eventually, Elizabeth was forced to take action against Mary when she discovered that Mary was involved in a plot to kill her.

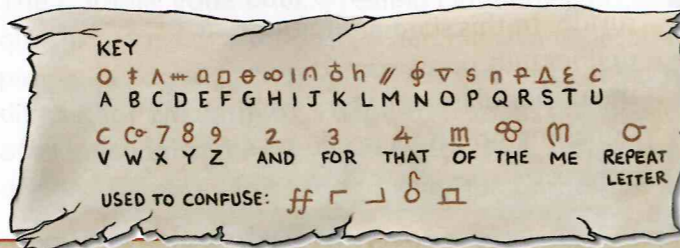
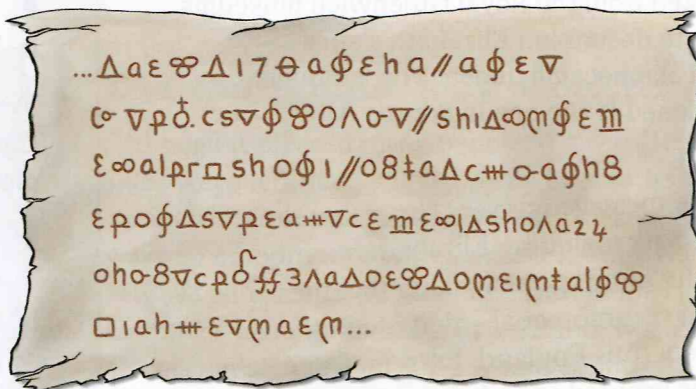
### The Babington Plot

In 1586, a young, rich Catholic called Anthony Babington came up with a secret plan to kill Elizabeth. He would organise six men to kill her, rescue Mary from her prison and make her the new Queen of England. However, Babington needed to know if Mary liked the idea. He needed to contact her in prison.

### Secret letters

Babington managed to get Mary's servants to hide secret letters in beer barrels that were taken to her room. The letters were written in code. Mary wrote back saying she agreed to the plan (see A). However, Mary's servants worked for England's chief spy, Sir Francis Walsingham, who took the letters straight to Elizabeth. When the code was broken, the message was clear: Mary was supporting a plan to kill the queen. This was **treason**.

▼ **A** This is the part of Mary's letter that led to her **execution**. It was written in code, but Walsingham had the key to break it. This has been included here – can you work out what she wrote? What does she mean?



Key Words death warrant execution treason

### Killing her cousin

Despite all the evidence against Mary, Elizabeth didn't want to execute her cousin. Eventually, in February 1587, her secretary William Davison slipped the **death warrant** in among some papers she had to sign. Elizabeth pretended she didn't really know what she was signing, signed it, changed her mind, then tried to stop the execution. But she was too late. Mary, Queen of Scots, had already been executed (see B and C).

▼ **SOURCE B** A 1589 picture of the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, in February 1587.



▼ **SOURCE C** Adapted from a report sent to Elizabeth's ministers by Robert Wynkfield, who witnessed the execution in 1587.

'After her prayers, the executioners asked Mary to forgive them her death. She said "I forgive you with all my heart, for I hope you shall make an end of all my troubles.'

Then, one of the women placed a cloth over the Queen of Scots' face. Mary knelt down on a cushion, without fear, and said a prayer out loud in Latin. She quietly laid down her head and stretched out her arms and cried "Into thy hands, O Lord" three or four times.

One of the executioners held her and she endured two strokes of the axe from the other executioner. She made no noise.

The executioner lifted up her head and said "God save the Queen". The wig fell off, showing that her hair was as grey as someone of 70 years old. Her lips continued to move for a quarter of an hour after her head was cut off. Then one of the executioners noticed her little dog hidden under her clothes. Afterwards, it would not leave the body and lay down between her head and her shoulders and was stained with her blood.'

### Over to You

- 1 Create a timeline to show the main events in Mary's life.
- 2 Why did Elizabeth imprison Mary in England?
- 3 a Explain how Elizabeth found out about the Babington Plot and arranged to trap Mary.  
 b Why do you think Elizabeth hesitated over her decision to have Mary executed?
- 4 Using the code in A, write out three facts about Mary's life. Make each one short and simple. Pass your coded facts to a friend and see if they can work out what you have written.

### Source Analysis

- 1 Look at Sources B and C.
  - a Describe in detail the scene shown in Source B.
  - b Make a list of words you might use to describe Mary.
- 2 How useful are Sources B and C to a historian studying the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots?