

MARY I

by Diana Scarisbrick, FSA, historian specializing in jewelry and engraved gems. Author of several books, including *Rings: Jewelry of Power, Love and Loyalty* and *Tudor and Jacobean Jewellery, 1508-1625*.



In this portrait of the first Queen of England, painted soon after her coronation in October 1553, the Flemish artist **Hans Eworth** has indicated the sovereign status of Mary I by placing her in front of the red velvet Cloth of Estate, standing next to a classical column, wearing fine brocade and pearl-embroidered clothing and a rich dark fur wrap, matched by equally splendid jewellery including (on her left hand) the “espousal ring” with which she was married to her kingdom. A bilament, or chain, of coloured stones alternating with clusters of four pearls embellishes her French hood and the choker around her neck is composed of a similar sequence of iridescent

pearls combined with bright blue sapphires. While these and the girdle at her waist, the buttons clasping her sleeves and her solitaire rings are typical of Tudor court jewellery, two others have a more personal significance.

Her diamond headless Tau cross, emblem of St. Antony Abbot and a talisman protecting against the plague, was one of the jewels which Mary’s mother, Katherine of Aragon, was forced to return to the Treasury after her enforced divorce from Henry VIII, and the important Renaissance style pendant set with table diamond – described in the *Inventory of Henry VIII* as “holden by two antiques” (men dressed as Roman soldiers) – hung with a drop-shaped pearl and surmounted by a mask, came from the collection of his widow, Catherine Parr.

Whereas all these jewels indicate her religion, royal rank and devotion to the memory of her mother, it is the **round-hinged pendant hanging from her girdle** that is particularly of historical interest: reaching back to Henry V and his son Henry VI, it evokes the faith of her pre-Reformation predecessors. This medieval reliquary, made c. 1400 by one of the great Parisian goldsmiths and known as the “tablet de Bourbon”, was acquired as part of a ransom from a member of that family during the 100 Years War with France. Highly valued, it was pledged by Henry VI in 1424 against a loan from his great uncle Cardinal Henry Beaufort, Shakespeare’s “proud prelate”, who bequeathed it back to him in his will of 1447. Left to Eton College by Henry VI, it reappears in the Jewel book of Henry VIII in 1520, where it is described as a damaged tablet with the four figures of the Evangelists (Luke, Matthew, John and Mark) within the limbs of a cross crosslet potent set with sapphires and spinels, and containing a drop of the Precious Blood, a splinter of the True Cross and relics of Saints Nicholas and Katherine. On her accession, Queen Mary had it repaired, adding a new clasp from her father’s collection inscribed with the king’s word, “Dieu et mon droit”. A truly extraordinary survival, chosen to demonstrate her lineage, her veneration for sacred relics, and her determination to defend the Roman Catholic religion, this reliquary was to be outlawed in the next reign by her sister, Elizabeth I, and was presumably destroyed at that time.

Read more about this painting (and all the Society’s paintings) on [ArtUK.org](https://www.artuk.org).

Further Reading:

J. Franklin and P. Tudor Craig, *Catalogue of the Paintings in the Collection of the Society of Antiquaries London* (2015)

Ibid, quoting D. Starkey & P. Ward, eds. *Inventory of Henry VIII Vol. I, The Transcript* (1998) no. 2631

Ibid, Starkey & Ward , no. 2619

K.B. Macfarlane, *England in the Fifteenth Century* (1981)

J. Nicholls, *A Collection of Wills of the Kings and Queens of England* (1780)

S. Bentley, *Excerpta Historica*. (1833)

E. Trollope, (1884) *Henry VIII’s Jewel Book of the 12th Year of His reign, Reports and Papers*, 17, Part 2, p. 160 Lincoln Diocesan Architectural Society

The Statutes of the Realm 4 I (1819), 13 Eliz. C.2 (iv) 1571

E. Taburet-Delahaye & F. Avril, *Les Arts Paris 1400 sous Charles VI Exhibition Catalogue*,
Louvre (2004)

G.L. Harriss, *Cardinal Beaufort* (1989)

G. Loades, *The Tragical History of the First Queen of England, Mary Tudor* (2008)