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Department of Medical History

Why did the 5th Earl of Derby die?

Dr William Jeffcoate FRCP ^a 

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Summary

The unexpected death of Ferdinando Stanley, 5th Earl of Derby, on April 16, 1594 was an event of major political importance in the later years of Queen Elizabeth I of England. When he had succeeded his father at the age of 38 he became head of one of the most influential families in the country. He also had a claim to the throne if Elizabeth died without naming a successor. Yet within seven months of entering into his inheritance, this previously fit man was suddenly taken ill and died a fortnight later. His death was so significant that the historian John Stow recorded his illness in great detail ([figure 1](#)).¹ Stow's remarkable account is compatible with a sinister interpretation of the cause.



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