

Thomas Wolsey

Commonly called the 'Glorious Peacock'. He was born the son of an Ipswich butcher. He was trained to become a priest and he later became the Chaplain to Henry VII and made such a positive impression that on the death of Henry VII, Henry VIII took him on as one of his ministers. Henry VIII and Wolsey became good friends. Both were ambitious, with Wolsey ultimately wishing to become Pope. Henry on the other hand wanted to be one of, if not the most powerful monarch in Europe.

- In 1514, Wolsey became the Bishop of Lincoln, the Bishop of Tournai and the Archbishop of York.
- In 1515, he was elected a cardinal and allowed to wear the famous red cap.
- In 1518, he was made Bishop of Bath and Wells and also the Papal Legate in England. This made him head of the English Church, even above the Archbishop of Canterbury.
- In 1521, he was elected the Abbot of St. Albans, England's richest monastery.
- In 1523, he was made Bishop of Durham,
- In 1528, he became Bishop of Winchester.

These positions gave him enormous wealth that enabled him to be very extravagant with his money which he spent on pleasure and in building the enormous and spectacular Hampton Court Palace and also Cardinal College, Oxford.

Wolsey was a brilliant organiser and in the early years of Henry VIII reign whilst Henry was 'living it up', it was Wolsey who efficiently ran the country, organising military expeditions, the Field of Cloth of Gold, Foreign policy and state finance.

Ultimately it was Henry's divorce of Catherine of Aragon that was to lead to his downfall. Henry VIII expected Wolsey to do a deal with the Pope. Wolsey was in a 'catch 22' situation, or as they say he was 'stuck behind a rock or a hard place'. He didn't want to upset the Pope because it might damage his chances of becoming Pope later and the situation was further complicated by the fact that the Pope was under the control of Charles V, Catherine's nephew. Add to this scenario the fact that there was no love lost between Wolsey and Anne Boleyn and the venture was doomed to failure.

Having failed to get a divorce, Henry used Wolsey as a scapegoat. Wolsey was dismissed as Chancellor. Wolsey was getting desperate and clearly felt frustrated and also in fear for his safety. He sent messages to the Pope and Francis I of France asking them to speak to Henry on his behalf. This was just the evidence that Wolsey's enemies wanted. They drew up a list of 44 charges against him including the charge of 'praemunire'. In 1529, he was found guilty. The King intervened and he retained some of his possessions and positions and he was sent back to York. Wolsey tried to bribe back Henry's favour by giving him Hampton Court Palace. His enemies feared a return to power for Wolsey and they persevered with their charge of treason. He was summonsed to London, but died at Leicester, on the journey south, thereby undoubtedly cheating the executioner's axe!

At his death, Wolsey, was one of the most powerful individuals in Europe. The fact that Henry was able to ruin him shows Henry's enormous power, which ironically Wolsey had helped to establish.

Thomas Cromwell 1485-1540

He was the son of a blacksmith/brewer. He was a skillful lawyer and businessman who hated nobility and the monasteries. He was a secret Protestant. He came to notice whilst working for Thomas Wolsey and took over much of his power when Wolsey was dismissed. Cromwell soon proved to be the ideal man for Henry to carry through his plans for the Reformation of the Church in England. Cromwell cleverly controlled and manipulated Parliament to get what he or Henry VIII wanted, particularly when it came to the divorce question with Catherine of Aragon.

- In 1533, he became Chancellor of the Exchequer,
- In 1534, he became Henry's principal advisor and Vicar- General. He was also made Earl of Essex.

Cromwell is best known for his role in the Dissolution of the Monasteries 1536-39 which he led and probably suggested the idea to Henry VIII.

Cromwell was undoubtedly a ruthless man who made many enemies during his meteoric rise to power. However, so long as he had the support of Henry VIII, he was untouchable. His downfall came with his suggestion and arrangement of marriage between Henry VIII and Anne of Cleves. Although the idea behind the marriage was sound, i.e. to strengthen England's support in Europe, Anne was so ugly that Henry was never able to consummate the marriage and called her 'The Mare of Flanders'. Cromwell's anti - protestant enemies at the King's Court grabbed their chance to turn the tables on Cromwell. The beautiful and young Catherine Howard was brought on the scene. Anne of Cleves was quickly divorced, and Cromwell was arrested for treason and heresy and quickly executed. This was the act of a suspicious, reckless, old King and poor reward for great loyalty and service.

Thomas Cranmer 1489 –1556

A Cambridge University scholar and priest. He held Protestant beliefs. He became Henry VIII's Royal Chaplain and in this capacity Henry VIII approached him for advice on the divorce issue with Catherine of Aragon. After the demise of Wolsey it was Cranmer who went to visit the Pope to attempt to get a divorce for Henry. Cranmer also visited universities throughout Europe to get advice on how Henry might be able to resolve his divorce problem. A timid, unambitious man he preferred to read and study rather than get involved in politics. Cranmer was made Archbishop of Canterbury. He then married Henry and Anne Boleyn having declared the marriage of Henry and Catherine illegal. It is highly probable that Henry bullied and intimidated the timid Cranmer into action.

In 1549 and 1552, Cranmer was responsible for the first and second English Prayer Books. As Archbishop of Canterbury Cranmer led the Protestant reformation of the Church of England under Edward VI.

When Mary Tudor (Bloody Mary) came to the throne in 1553, Cranmer was immediately arrested. Mary blamed him for the bad treatment that she and her mother, Catherine of Aragon had received in the reign of Henry VIII.

Cranmer refused to return to the Catholic faith and was burnt at the stake. He did waver for a while and apparently signed a recantation claiming to return to the Catholic faith. He believed this would save him from being burnt. Once he realised that he was going to die anyway, he withdrew his claim and thrust the hand with which he had signed the recantation, into the fire. He is one of the three 'Oxford Martyrs' the other two being Latimer and Ridley.

Sir Thomas More 1477-1535

He was the son of a judge. First, he trained as a monk but later became a lawyer. A devout Catholic, Thomas Wolsey introduced him to Henry VIII with whom he became great friends. More was a great scholar, writer and witty conversationalist. Henry VIII and Thomas More spent a lot of time together at each other's houses.

Thomas More wrote a book called 'Utopia' which was about life in an ideal but imaginary world.

He worked for Henry first as a speaker, then Senior Minister and finally, Lord Chancellor in 1529.

Sadly, Henry's divorce of Catherine of Aragon was to bring a tragic end to their relationship. Thomas More disagreed with the divorce and could not accept Henry as he head of the Church of England. He refused to sign an oath of loyalty to Henry and accept the Act of Supremacy. He resigned from his post as Lord Chancellor. He was charged with treason imprisoned in the Tower of London and later beheaded in 1535. Henry's message was clear to all. - 'Obey or die!' Thomas More was later canonised as a saint

He is the subject of the book, 'A Man For All Seasons' written by Robert Bolt.

Interview recorded during Sir Thomas More's trial. 1535

Sir Richard Rich: "Master More, you are learned in the law. Pretend that an Act of Parliament said that I was King. Would you accept me as King?"

Sir Thomas More. "Yes"

Rich: "Suppose an Act of Parliament said that I was Pope. Would you accept that?"

More: "Master Rich, Parliament may well meddle with the state of princes and make you King. As to your second question: suppose Parliament made a law that God was not God. Would you accept that?"

Rich: "No parliament can make such a law."

More: "No more that Parliament can make the King, Supreme Head of the Church"