

## Henry VIII, Thomas Cromwell and the Church

Thomas Cromwell was not a courtier, he was a royal servant. But he became the victim of court politics and in particular a victim of those who had easy access to the king.

Nevertheless in 1533, while being received in a formal audience by Henry VIII, Eustace Chapuys, the Imperial Ambassador noted to his surprise, that the man whom he knew only slightly as 'Mr Secretary', was standing among the magnates, close to Henry. This signified to Chapuys that Cromwell was a man with real influence, a man to be taken seriously when approaching the monarch, and he was right. The symbolism of the placing of courtiers on such an occasion was significant, because Henry was more than simply the head of the executive, he had 'majestas', and that involved the taking of counsel, so the placing of his counsellors was important. The context in which this observation took place was that of the Chamber, where all the business of the court was transacted, and in which the majesty of the king was constantly celebrated. At the end of Henry's reign the Chamber numbered about 200 servants, and was under the control of the Lord Chamberlain, who licensed their comings and goings and had *ex officio* jurisdiction over any offences which they might commit within the boundaries of the court.

The other main aspect of the court was the Household, which will not much concern us here but must be noted. The Household consisted of those service departments which supplied the needs of the court, from the kitchen and the scullery to the Porters and Cart takers. There were twenty-four such departments and each was controlled by a sergeant, and varied greatly in size from the kitchen with over forty to the spicery with half a dozen, and at the end of the reign the servants numbered about 450 overall. Socially they were not significant, and the king had no normal contact with them. Richard Hill the Clerk of the kitchen was a favourite dicing companion of Henry's, but that was an individual eccentricity. The sergeants ranked as yeomen, and only the Harbingers and the Almonry were under heads of gentle rank, because of the external nature of their duties. The whole Household was supervised by the Board of Greencloth, otherwise known as the Counting House, the duties of which (as the name suggests) were primarily financial. The officer responsible for the household was the Lord Steward assisted by the Controller, and they were supposed to consult regularly with the Board of Greencloth, although by the end of the reign such consultations had become sporadic, and the Board was largely under the leadership of the Cofferer.

The household was largely bureaucratic in its administration, and in its system of recruitment. Servants were very seldom dismissed, and then only for major misconduct, although quite a number died in harness. When a replacement was called for, the appointment theoretically belonged to the Lord Steward, although the initiative normally lay with the relevant sergeant. The whole system worked more or less automatically, and the household was very little disturbed by the political crises of the reign, or even by the change from one ruler to the next. Edward's household was virtually identical with that which had served Henry VIII in his latter days.

The politics of the court therefore related exclusively to the Chamber, where the king was always present, and was largely about access to the monarch.. how to approach him.. Henry VII had kept a magnificent Chamber, celebrated for its hospitality, but towards the end of his life he had taken to withdrawing from its noise and bustle into his 'secret chamber'. By 1501 neither the Esquires of the Body nor the Gentlemen Ushers were admitted to these rooms, where

'..the groom of the stool, with a page with him, or such as the king will command ought to wait in the King's secret chamber especially and no one else....'

Formal levees – that attending the king when he got up in the morning - had been discontinued, and the king's private life was conducted in the presence of menial servants only, except for those chosen few whom Henry invited to share his withdrawal. His Queen, Elizabeth of York, had her

own Chamber of course, and whether she chose to share Henry's reclusiveness is not known. However, she died early in 1503, and her death cast a deepening pall of unhappiness over the last years of Henry's life.

Henry VIII, as is well known, blew away this gloom at the beginning of his reign. Lord Mountjoy celebrated the departure of avarice and the advent of a king, who was not interested in money, but only in the acquisition of glory. The new king, however, left the Chamber of his father's court largely untouched, and the secret chamber also, although he soon added an additional element to the latter in the shape of his 'mignons', or bosom pals. These at first had no place in the formal structure of the court, being simply the king's chosen jousting partners such as Charles Brandon who later married the king's sister Mary Rose, and became Duke of Suffolk, or other companions, but this changed with the arrival of a mission from France to sign the Treaty of London in 1518. Francis I had recently created a category of attendants known as the 'gentilshommes de la chambre' to cope with a rather similar situation, and when these gentlemen arrived they had to be paired with their equivalents at the English court for ceremonial purposes, and their obvious partners were the king's friends. In the following month, October 1518, Henry returned the compliment, and four of his companions accompanied the earl of Worcester to France under the informal name of 'chamberlains'. Soon after, following the French model, they were known as the Gentlemen of the Privy Chamber, and became an important route of access to the king. As such, and particularly because they were young men, the members of the king's council were disturbed. A fully developed Privy Chamber, on the lines of that of Francis I, would inevitably become an alternative channel for patronage and political influence. This particularly disconcerted Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, who since about 1514 had been Henry's right hand man, and had grown accustomed to controlling such patronage himself.

The king was not diligent in his application to any business, except that of his own amusements, and Wolsey, who had a formidable work rate, had undertaken most of that responsibility himself. The Cardinal was not a courtier, but he had secure control of the Council and that gave him oversight of the regular means of access to the king. So Henry's habit of choosing his own friends without reference to him was a worrying development. He therefore took advantage of the fact that two of these minions, Carew and Bryan, had misbehaved themselves in France by throwing eggs at the crowd which had assembled to greet them (which was not conducive to the king's honour) to arrange a formal complaint from the council

'that certain young men in his private chamber, not regarding his estate or degree, were so familiar and homely with him and played such light touches with him that they forgot themselves...'

This clearly did not refer to the egg throwing episode, but was no doubt correctly observed, and cast further doubt upon the respect that the minions were deemed to have for the king's honour. Henry may have been unobservant, but he was extremely sensitive on the question of his honour, and agreed to the removal of four of his companions in the May of 1519. Four older men were drafted in with the title of Knights of the Body, and the institutional organisation of the Privy Chamber was then rapidly completed. The Knights and the two remaining gentlemen were 'put into wages' by being given life annuities of £100 and 50 marks respectively. The Privy Chamber then became recognised as the king's most intimate environment.

As such, it showed a natural tendency to expand, and by 1525 it had grown to a staff of twenty-two, eight of whom were not in wages. Carew and Bryan had been reinstated by the end of 1519, and the whole situation was rapidly getting out of control again. Consequently Wolsey returned to the charge, and in the spring of 1526 persuaded the king to accept the Eltham Ordinances for the regulation of the Chamber. These projected a Privy Chamber establishment of fourteen, of whom six were gentlemen, the remainder being Ushers and Grooms, and at that level the Privy Chamber theoretically stayed. However it was not long before the inflation of numbers began again. By 1530

there were nine gentlemen and twenty overall, and by 1539 sixteen and twenty eight, although of these last nearly a third were not in wages, and should be classed as super-numeraries. The king was wholly responsible for this increase, because he was quite likely to send off his gentlemen in all directions on a variety of missions, and then to complain that there was no one to wait on him.!

By the time that this happened, however, Wolsey was long since dead, having been overthrown in a court coup in 1529, and died the following year. The Cardinal was the victim of his own success, because he was not a courtier, and controlled events through his own servants placed about the king. These servants were not always reliable, and in any case were not of sufficient stature to manipulate men such as the Duke of Suffolk, or the Earl of Wiltshire, let alone women such as Anne Boleyn. As long as there was a chance that Wolsey's legatine commission would succeed in detaching the king from Catherine, Anne was scrupulously polite to him, but when the Blackfriars court was adjourned without reaching a decision, she fell upon him bitterly. Aided by the members of her family based faction, particularly her father Lord Rochford (soon to be Earl of Wiltshire), she set out to turn the king against his Wolsey.. In this she was supported also by nobles who resented the Cardinal's power, notably the Dukes of Norfolk and Suffolk, and Wolsey had no one to defend him within the Chamber. It is even alleged that she persuaded Henry into taking a hunting trip in order to frustrate the Cardinal's bid to have a private interview with the King, and thereby turn aside Henry's wrath. As a result, Wolsey lost the Great Seal in October 1529, and was rusticated to Esher, losing many of his great possessions in the process. In April of 1533, as Archbishop of York, he was permitted to withdraw to his see which he had never visited, but became ill-advisedly involved in discussions with the papacy over his European status. This was construed by the king as treason. At the beginning of November he was arrested, and died at Leicester Abbey on his way south. He famously said:

'If I had served my God as I served my king he would have deserted me in my grey hairs'.

The only man to seek to protect the Cardinal's interests during these last months of his life was his long time servant and secretary, Thomas Cromwell. It was a dangerous position to take. Cromwell could reasonably have expected to lose his position when his master fell. The king was likely to have known him by sight but Cromwell was not important enough to approach the king himself. Instead he acted – initially - through the Duke of Norfolk wondering if the king would be happy to see him in the forthcoming parliament. The result was positive but Cromwell preferred to go it alone and set about finding a seat. It was a struggle but eventually he found the seat of Taunton with a day to spare before that Parliament sat. A Parliament we refer to as The Reformation Parliament and which saw important changes in the way the king, church and parliament worked together. Perhaps one of the great 'ifs' in history is what would have happened if Cromwell had not gained Taunton.!

As it was Henry knew a good lawyer when he saw one, and was probably consulting him over the Supplication against the Ordinaries in 1531. By May 1532 he was a member of the king's council. It was probably under his guidance that Henry turned from the law to parliament and enacted the Conditional Restraint of Annates in the summer of 1532, which was the first unequivocal intrusion into the papal power. By that time Cromwell had elbowed aside the Dukes of Norfolk and Suffolk, and the king's secretary, Stephen Gardiner, and had entered into an alliance with the Boleyns to bring about Henry's marriage to Anne. For the next two years this alliance was extremely effective. Thomas Audley, who was a friend of Cromwell's, became Keeper of the Great Seal on Thomas More's resignation as Chancellor in May 1532, and the Earl of Wiltshire (Anne's father) had been Lord Privy Seal since January 1530. However it was Cromwell who persuaded the king to action and may well also have persuaded Anne that marriage was now a real possibility. Something had certainly changed her attitude when she agreed to sleep with Henry during the Calais trip in October 1532, and became pregnant as a result. By the beginning of 1533 Cromwell

was the king's right hand man, occupying the same position that Cardinal Wolsey had filled ten years earlier. Like Wolsey, Cromwell was not a courtier. He held no office at the court and was not a member of the Privy Chamber. His influence over the king was that of a councillor, which was reinforced when he replaced Stephen Gardiner as the King's secretary in May 1533. Like Wolsey also, he took the Privy Chamber seriously as a means of access to the king. However, instead of trying to reduce it, he took care to ensure that friends of his own were appointed, men like Sir Anthony Denny whose influence would always supplement his own rather than run contrary to it. The king was always the master, and made his own decisions, so whereas it is proper to speak of Cromwell's influence, it would be incorrect to describe it as control. No one controlled Henry VIII, not even Anne Boleyn at this stage in their relationship. At some point before February 1533 Henry married Anne, and soon after the Act in Restraint of Appeals, which has Cromwell's fingerprints all over it, cleared the way for the court of the new Archbishop, Thomas Cranmer, to declare Henry's first marriage to be null and void. Anne was crowned as Queen on the 1<sup>st</sup> June, and this event signalled the high water mark of Boleyn influence at court. The Duke of Norfolk managed to avoid attending because he was abroad on mission at the time, but the Duke of Suffolk and all the other significant peers were there with their ladies. The Duchess of Suffolk was not present. Her opposition to the Boleyns was well known, but she was ill at the time, and died shortly after, so her absence was not commented upon. Apart from the Imperial ambassador, who boycotted the occasion, the other notable absentee was Sir Thomas More, who apparently resisted Thomas Cromwell's blandishments in deference to his conscience.

Three months later, in September, Anne was delivered of a child. Unfortunately, that child was a girl, who was named Elizabeth – the future Elizabeth I who I frequently refer to her as the third Boleyn girl!. Henry was deeply chagrined. The courts of Europe were uncharitably amused, because the king of England had broken with the church, putting his immortal soul in jeopardy, for the sake of another daughter. However neither Anne's influence nor that of her family was broken by this misfortune, and Cromwell's power continued undiminished. More significant in this respect was the fact that Anne's second pregnancy ended in a miscarriage in the summer of 1534, which seems to have aroused doubts in the king's mind and drove him in search of other company. No one took these philanderings very seriously, except Chapuys, who was a sworn enemy of the Boleyns on account of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V's relationship to Catherine, and Anne herself. She is alleged to have denounced Henry to his face, but their relationship was always a highly charged one, and if she took that liberty, it was quickly followed by a passionate reconciliation.

Meanwhile, Cromwell was in charge of the king's legislative programme, preparing among others the first Succession Act, the Act of Supremacy, and an Act tidying up the administration of justice in Wales, the last being an example of that centralising tendency which was characteristic of his influence. The king knew perfectly well what he was about, and approved of his actions, but lacked that application to detail which his secretary possessed so abundantly.

By this time, Cromwell's relations with the Boleyns were becoming strained. He and Anne were allies when it came to exercising evangelical influence on the King, or supporting such preachers as Hugh Latimer, but they were rivals in foreign policy. Anne, because of her background and position, naturally supported a French alliance, while Cromwell was concerned to mend fences with the Emperor. He entered into friendly relations with Chapuys - who never knew quite what to make of him - and professed the warmest support for Charles's actions.

In January 1536, Catherine died. Henry and Anne both expressed their joy, but Thomas Cromwell was the man with the main cause to rejoice. One great obstacle to an Imperial reconciliation had now been removed, leaving Anne exposed, and when she miscarried of a son in February, he began to consider the possibility of removing her. Henry was deeply distressed by this miscarriage, and began to pay attention to Jane Seymour. He got nowhere, but that was not really the point; Anne reacted badly and the king became offended. By late April he was being fed stories of his queen's infidelities, and called upon Cromwell to investigate. This gave the Secretary his

chance, and by interrogating members of the court he built up a case which convinced Henry sufficiently to charge his Anne with multiple adultery. To what extent any of this was true is still debated, but one of the musicians, Mark Smeaton, confessed, and that was sufficient. The Boleyns, however were fighters and in order to destroy Anne, Cromwell had to remove the whole family from the court. This he did by arranging that her brother George Rochford should be charged with incest with her, and this charge also stuck. So both Anne and her brother were executed in May 1536, and Cromwell emerged triumphant, ditching his temporary alliance with Catherine's friends, which he had used to bring about their downfall. In the summer of the same year, he managed the reconciliation between the Princess Mary and her father, by persuading her to accept the Royal Supremacy, and took over the office of Lord Privy Seal from the disgraced Earl of Wiltshire. By the end of that year his ascendancy in Court and Council seemed absolutely assured.

However, it was not so. Henry was still very much his own man, and he demonstrated that in 1539 by promoting the Act of Six Articles, reasserting many conservative religious doctrines. This was not at all to Cromwell's taste, and although he did not venture to oppose it, it was prepared without his careful hand on the helm. Such opposition as there was came from his friend and colleague, Thomas Cranmer, who was allowed to withdraw from the House of Lords while it was in passage. Cromwell gritted his teeth, and left it mainly to the bishops to enforce, which was not done with any great diligence. Meanwhile he performed another great service to the crown in masterminding the dissolution of the monasteries. Henry had never had much time for monks and nuns, even in his most zealous catholic days, and now he was persuaded by the scandalous tales emerging from the religious houses, to approve the rationalisation which Cromwell proposed. This took its original form in a statute of 1536, dissolving the smaller houses, and vesting their property in the Crown. This played a large part in creating the Pilgrimage of Grace, that great northern rising which was dispersed with great difficulty in November 1536. Several of Catherine's former friends, notably Lords Darcy and Hussey were involved in this, but it did not greatly affect the court, where the most notable feature was the low profile kept by Thomas Cromwell while it was in progress. He and Thomas Cranmer being the particular hate figures presented by the Pilgrims, so he left the negotiations to the Duke of Norfolk, who was only too pleased to recover the King's good opinion. The other crucial factor was the loyalty to the crown displayed by some of those nobles to whom the Pilgrims had looked for support, notably the Earls of Shrewsbury and Derby, who effectively kept Robert Aske's agents out of their countries, and thus nullified the appeal of the rising. It had been a close run thing, but Cromwell emerged from it with his influence intact, and soon began to steer the greater religious houses in the direction of surrender. This he did, partly by persuasion and partly by planting sympathetic heads in such houses whenever the opportunity arose. Henry was converted to the idea of total dissolution when he realised how much he had to gain from the process, a fact which was made clear by Cromwell's survey of the Church (the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* which you and I would call a tax return) which had been completed in 1535. Cajoled by the Cromwell, Lord Privy Seal, and daunted by the cold atmosphere of the court, the Abbots, Abbesses, and Priors surrendered to the Court of Augmentations between the beginning of 1537 and 1540. The capital value of the lands which thus passed to the Crown has been estimated at £1,800,000, and Cromwell's patronage connections went into overdrive.

Meanwhile, Henry's dearest wish had been fulfilled when his Queen, Jane Seymour, presented him with a son in September 1537. He was named Edward, but his mother did not long survive his birth, dying at the beginning of October. However, her family did survive, and between Edward's birth and Jane's death her brother, Sir Edward Seymour was created Earl of Hertford. Seymour was not a newcomer to the court, but his new status gave him additional influence, and he quickly allied himself with Cromwell on most important issues, notably those of religion and the king's marriage. As before, Cromwell was anxious to use the latter negotiations as means of building bridges to the Emperor, and when it became clear that none of Charles's female relations was on offer, he entered into discussion with the Duke of Cleves. The duke had issues with the Emperor, but was on the

same side religiously, and this gave him a kind of neutral status within Germany, which suited both Charles and Cromwell. Henry had views of his own on a matter which ‘touched him so nearly’, but gave a broad endorsement to his Lord Privy Seal’s efforts. He personally intervened from time to time, and Cromwell had to watch his step, but he was an old hand at that game, and brought the negotiations for the hand of Anne of Cleves, the Duke’s sister, to a successful conclusion in the autumn of 1539. Anne was a mistake, but not one for which the Lord Privy Seal was specifically to blame. Henry took a dislike to her the first time that they met, and began to seek a way out of his commitment. There was none, and they were duly married on the 6<sup>th</sup> January 1540. The wedding night was fiasco, and Henry was soon confiding his distaste to Thomas Cromwell, who began to seek for means of dissolving the union. There is no doubt that he would have succeeded in due course, but the politics of the court caught up with him first.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> June 1540 Cromwell was arrested at a council meeting, and charged with High Treason. The king was wholly responsible for this turn around. His confidence in his minister’s judgement may have been undermined by the Cleves marriage, but the real reason for his fall was his open support for the evangelicals, particularly Miles Coverdale and John Rogers, and his enthusiastic patronage of the English bible. Cromwell had organised visits by delegations from the Schmalkaldic League in 1538 and 1539, and although these came to nothing, and the king must have approved of them, retrospectively they further fuelled his suspicion. In April 1540 Cromwell gave up his position as King’s secretary, but since he was followed by two of his own men, Wriothesley and Sadler, this should not be seen as a sign of his impending fall. Indeed he was soon created Earl of Essex and Lord Great Chamberlain in what looks like a gesture of renewed confidence. Henry seems to have turned against his minister quite suddenly, probably because of the religiously conservative advice of Stephen Gardiner, ably supported by the Dukes of Norfolk and Suffolk, all of whom were Cromwell’s enemies. His only reliable supporter in the Council, Thomas Cranmer had obviously not been a party to these moves, and appears to have been as shocked by the outcome and his comment on Cromwell’s fall was -

‘Is this’ he is alleged to have said, ‘the just reward for years of faithful service?’.

Clearly it was not, but it was the king’s will, and that was sufficient. He was not tried, perhaps because his defence would have been all too effective, but condemned by Act of Attainder and executed on the 28<sup>th</sup> July.

Henry had no more Chief Ministers. For the last six years of his reign he controlled policy himself, and that involved the enforced submission of his sixth wife, Catherine Parr (according the John Foxe, author of the *Book of Martyrs*), and the burning of Anne Askew for heresy in 1546. The political struggle at court during these declining years was between reformers, inspired by Thomas Cranmer and led by the Earl of Hertford and Viscount Lisle – known to us as the Dukes of Somerset and Northumberland - and conservatives led by Stephen Gardiner and the Duke of Norfolk. The king’s sixth marriage in 1543 was a victory for the reformers, as was Henry’s decision to employ evangelical tutors for his son, while the campaign against heretics in 1546 marked a success for the conservatives. The reason why the king chose reformers to tutor Edward is not known, but he regarded the Royal Supremacy as his crowning achievement, and probably did not trust the conservatives to maintain it after he was gone. The Privy Chamber also remained full of men whom Cromwell had placed there, and continued to be an influence in support of the reformers. The crunch came in the last months of Henry’s life, with the rustication of Stephen Gardiner on the ground of an alleged reluctance to exchange lands with the king, and the arrest of the Duke of Norfolk and his son the Earl of Surrey on charges of High Treason.

These events were very much the king's personal doing, and it is questionable to what extent they should be described as victories for the reforming party. Henry was a sick and irascible man by this time, and no one could control, or even influence his actions. Nevertheless the will which he drew up on the 30<sup>th</sup> December left the reformers very much in charge of the body of executors whom he set up to see it duly discharged.

Edward VI succeeded as a minor, and the first task of the executors was therefore to set up a minority government, which they did on the 30<sup>th</sup> January by appointing Edward Seymour, Earl of Hertford and the king's maternal uncle, to be Lord Protector and Governor of the King's person. At the same time they constituted themselves as the Privy Council of King Edward VI. Whether this was in accordance with Henry's last wish is still fiercely debated. Did Henry succeed in ruling from the grave? The duke of Somerset's religious policy would suggest not, but Henry's will still decided the succession issue when Edward died without direct heirs in July 1553, and again in 1558. So the old king's personality loomed large over the decade which followed his death.

The structure of the court made access to the king paramount. But when Edward VI succeeded he was a child and access was by those who guided him. He was succeeded by Mary I. A queen was naturally surrounded by her ladies whose husbands became secondary. That continued after 1558 except that Elizabeth, the third Boleyn Girl, was a good judge of men and their loyalties. Those she appointed stayed with her for life.