

# The Reign of King Henry VIII

Henry, the second son of King Henry VII and Elizabeth of York, was born on 28 June 1491 at Greenwich Palace. After the death of his elder brother Arthur in 1502, Henry became heir to the English throne.

## King of England

When Henry VII died in 1509, this popular eighteen-year-old prince, known for his love of hunting and dancing, became King Henry VIII. Soon after he obtained the papal dispensation required to allow him to marry his brother's widow, Catherine of Aragon.

In the first years of his reign Henry VIII effectively relied on Thomas Wolsey to rule for him, and by 1515 Henry had elevated him to the highest role in government: Lord Chancellor.

In 1521 Pope Leo X conferred the title of Defender of the Faith on Henry for his book 'Assertio Septem Sacramentorum', which affirmed the supremacy of the Pope in the face of the reforming ideals of the German theologian, Martin Luther.

## Military might

Henry VIII's early military campaigns began when he joined Pope Julius II's Holy League against France in 1511. Wolsey proved himself to be an outstanding minister in his organisation of the first French campaign and while the Scots saw this war as an opportunity to invade England, they were defeated at Flodden in 1513. However war with France ultimately proved expensive and unsuccessful.

Henry VIII is known as the 'father of the Royal Navy.' When he became king there were five royal warships. By his death he had built up a navy of around 50 ships. He refitted several vessels with the latest guns including the Mary Rose, which sank in 1545.

Henry also built the first naval dock in Britain at Portsmouth and in 1546 he established the Navy Board. This set up the administrative machinery for the control of the fleet.

## A male heir

Henry was acutely aware of the importance of securing a male heir during his reign. He was worried that he had only one surviving child, Mary, to show for his marriage to Catherine, who was now in her 40s. So the king asked Cardinal Wolsey to appeal to Pope Clement VII for an annulment and it soon became clear he wanted to marry Anne Boleyn, who had been a lady-in-waiting to his first wife.

But, unwilling to anger Catherine of Aragon's nephew – the most powerful ruler in Europe, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V – the Pope refused. Thomas Wolsey's ascendancy was cut short by this failure.

In 1533, Henry VIII broke with the church and married the now pregnant Anne Boleyn in a secret ceremony. Henry was excommunicated by the Pope. The English reformation had begun.

## Head of the Church

After Wolsey's downfall, [Thomas Cromwell](#) became Henry's chief minister and earned the confidence of the King by helping him to break with Rome and establish Henry VIII as head of the Church of England. This act also brought him much needed wealth through the dissolution of the well-funded monasteries. Over four years Cromwell ordered that 800 monasteries be disbanded and their lands and treasures taken for the crown.

The cultural and social impact was significant, as much of the land was sold to the gentry and churches and monasteries were gutted and destroyed. Henry's personal religious beliefs remained Catholic, despite the growing number of people at court and in the nation who had adopted Protestantism.

## Anne Boleyn

In September 1533 Anne gave birth to a daughter, Elizabeth (the future Queen Elizabeth I). Henry had grown tired of her, and after two further pregnancies ended in miscarriages, she was arrested in 1536 on trumped up charges of adultery and publicly beheaded at the Tower of London.

Henry's third marriage, this time to lady-in-waiting, Jane Seymour, finally produced the son he so desperately desired with the birth of Edward in 1537. Jane Seymour died after childbirth and Henry ordered that she be granted a queen's funeral.

In an attempt to establish ties with the German Protestant alliance, Thomas Cromwell arranged a marriage between the king and German princess Anne of Cleves. The marriage was a disaster and Henry divorced Anne a few months later. Henry blamed Cromwell for this mismatch and soon afterwards had him executed for treason.

## Final Years

The final years of his reign witnessed Henry VIII's physical decline and an increasing desire to appear all-powerful. Henry continued with fruitless and expensive campaigns against Scotland and France.

In 1540, the aging King married the teenage Catherine Howard. Their marriage was short lived. It was alleged that she had a previous relationship with Henry's courtier Francis Dereham and an affair with another courtier Thomas Culpeper. Catherine was executed for adultery and treason in 1542.

Henry's final marriage to Catherine Parr, who acted like a nurse, was more harmonious and she would go on to outlive him.

Henry VIII died on 28 January 1547 and was succeeded by his son, Edward VI. He was buried next to Jane Seymour in St. George's Chapel at Windsor Castle.