

**THE MASKED HISTORIAN'S GUIDE TO**



**THOMAS CROMWELL**



**The Life of Henry VIII's Chief Minister.**

**Useful to knowledge for writing essays about a  
Government Minister.**

## Thomas Cromwell. His Life.

Thomas Cromwell served as Henry VIII's chief minister from 1533 to 1540. Cromwell gained a reputation as an unscrupulous politician who, like Cardinal Wolsey, would do anything to advance himself and the power and wealth of Henry. Thomas Cromwell is most associated with the dissolution of the monasteries and the controversy that surrounded this event. However, whether he deserved his negative reputation is open to debate.

Thomas Cromwell was born around 1485. He was the son of a brewer and blacksmith. He spent much of his early adult life abroad, be it as a soldier in Italy or a merchant in Antwerp. Cromwell trained as a lawyer and by the 1520's he was working for Cardinal Wolsey as a general manager. When Wolsey fell from royal favour in 1529, Cromwell managed to stay faithful to his old employer but also to remain in favour with Henry VIII. There is little doubt that Cromwell learned a lot from Wolsey and the way he conducted business. It was also a quirk of history that Henry was served by two such able men; fifteen years by Wolsey and eight years by Cromwell. He entered formal royal service in 1530 and by November 1530 he was a member of the Royal Council. Within a year, Cromwell was part of Henry's inner circle of advisors - men who had ready access to the king.

Like Wolsey, Cromwell came from a non-noble family - though his father had been related to minor nobility in Nottinghamshire. He was not tied to old traditional ideas as many of the king's advisors were. Cromwell was an intelligent man who read well. He had not only experienced life abroad as a younger man, which gave him experience of European commerce and business, he also tried to work out how politics might develop in Europe and how and why power might shift. He

was influenced by the writings of political theorists such as Marsiglio of Padua. Very few in the Royal Court would have had such an insight. Cromwell was also influenced by the writings of Martin Luther.

Between 1532 and 1536 Cromwell gained numerous offices. He was made Master of the King's Jewels (1532), Clerk of the Hanaper (1532), Chancellor of the Exchequer (1533), Principal Secretary (1534), Master of the Rolls (1534) and Lord Privy Seal (1536). The 1530's was a decade of great change in England and Wales and Cromwell would have been involved in a great many day-to-day decisions. Cromwell handled all the greatest issues of the day - the divorce of Catherine of Aragon, the marriage of Henry to Anne Boleyn and the dissolution of the monasteries. These were very 'visible' issues. However, Cromwell was also very much involved in major reforms to government administration. Some historians saw these changes as being so important that they were seen as revolutionary. Government bodies such as the Royal Council, the Council of the North and the Exchequer were all modernised. Five new revenue courts were established. Cromwell oversaw the incorporation of Wales into the English system of government. He also had a major input into the Tudor Poor Law. To what extent Cromwell initiated these changes and was the 'brains' behind the ideas is open to debate and dispute but it is accepted that he was the creative drive behind the actual mechanics of change and the historian E N Williams has referred to Cromwell as being a "managerial genius".

Cromwell was greatly worried by England's isolation after the Protestant Reformation had taken hold in northern Germany. He was concerned that the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, would cast aside his differences with the king of France, Francis I, to form an alliance directed at any state that had turned its back on Rome. Cromwell had little choice but to

direct his attention to forming some kind of alliance with the north German princes. He also did what he could to improve the country's southern coastal defences, as there was a real fear of an attempted invasion. Between 1538 and 1539, there were a series of meetings between Charles V and Francis I. Cromwell became convinced that they were planning to invade England. He urged Henry to form alliances with the north German Lutheran princes but it came to nothing. Henry refused to bend to the will of the German princes who wanted him to convert to the Lutheran faith before any alliance was discussed. Henry was also very wary of getting England involved in a war in mainland Europe against the might of the Holy Roman Empire and France. None of the north German states at the time looked as if they were able to hold out against the Emperor. Henry wanted England to steer clear of what he assumed would be defeat for the princes. This failure in foreign policy also gave Cromwell's enemies a great deal of ammunition to use against him.

One of these enemies was the influential 3<sup>rd</sup> Duke of Norfolk whose niece was Catherine Howard. Norfolk accused Cromwell of foisting Protestantism onto England via the Act of Six Articles. He also introduced Catherine to the Royal Court almost certainly in the knowledge that Henry would fall for her.

What happened between Henry and Norfolk and his faction remains somewhat mysterious. On April 18<sup>th</sup>, 1540, Henry made Cromwell the Earl of Essex and on April 19<sup>th</sup>, 1540, he was made Lord Great Chamberlain of the Household. Therefore, as late as Spring 1540 Cromwell was presumably in favour with Henry. Yet on June 10<sup>th</sup> 1540, he was arrested in Westminster by the Captain of the Guard and sent to the Tower of London. An Act of Attainder convicted him of heresy and treason

(June 29<sup>th</sup>) - but it also denied Cromwell the right to a proper trial where he could defend himself.

Thomas Cromwell was executed at Tyburn on July 28<sup>th</sup> 1540.

*Thomas Cromwell, Earl of Essex,  
as painted by Hans Holbein.*



## Thomas Cromwell and Government.

Thomas Cromwell, chief minister for Henry VIII from 1533 to 1540, gained a reputation for being a ruthless politician who stopped at nothing to succeed. Some historians of old portrayed Thomas Cromwell as an unpleasant man who in 1540 got his just reward - execution.

However, in recent years, largely as a result of extensive research done by Sir Geoffrey Elton, a new view has emerged - that Thomas Cromwell was a very capable politician who brought in what was termed a 'revolution' in government. Elton contended that Cromwell brought in a series of reforms at government level that moved Tudor government from being steeped in medieval practice, which a man like Cardinal Wolsey could exploit, to a modern form of government. Elton believed that the work of Thomas Cromwell with regards to government reform was in the first three major turning points in English politics. Elton was very clear about the specifics of medieval government - a financial administration that was based on the king's chamber; the extended use of the king's seal; the use of individual advisors as opposed to a council. A modern form of government was based on a bureaucracy staffed by capable people who worked to a series of rules and procedures. Departments were created that dealt with the specifics associated with that department and only those specifics. Cromwell believed that if this system ran well, it would end the dominance of any one person, as no single person would be able to control a properly run bureaucracy that was governed by procedures and rules. Elton believed that Thomas Cromwell introduced a modern form of government based on the above.



*I could not find a picture of Sir Geoffrey Elton. So Here is a picture of Sir Elton John.*

Cromwell was credited with two reforms of major importance. Whereas in the past, individuals who were never systematically audited and bound by procedures had received the king's income, Cromwell introduced a bureaucratic model. In the Thomas Cromwell model, departments received money from pre-specified sources - there was meant to be no overlapping - and paid out money for reasons that had to be sanctioned first. Each department was rigorously audited. They were run the same way as the Duchy of Lancaster was. This had been set up to administer the lands and rights that had come to the crown from the house of Lancaster. The two most famous departments (the Court of Augmentations and the Court of First Fruits and Tenths) were created to look after Henry's income from the Church following the dissolution of the monasteries. Because they had legal status to adjudicate over disputes, they were given the title 'court'.

The second major reform introduced by Cromwell was the Privy Council. Previous to this, a council had existed that was made up of up to 100 men to advise the king. However, very few of them ever attended and the system usually ended up with one strong man dominating, such as Wolsey. The Privy Council was made up of twenty men who were specifically chosen to have responsibility for the day-to-day running of government. The ability of these men and the exclusivity of the Privy Council meant that, in theory, no individual could dominate it, as the

men in the Council should have been more than able to 'hold their own'.

Elton believed that these reforms swept away the old medieval system of government and introduced a system that survived with few changes for another 300 years. Those in government after Cromwell were meant to be able men whose sole intention was to do their best for the government - as opposed to their own self-advancement.



*Here is another picture of Sir Elton John. For some odd reason he is wearing a Donald Duck suit....*

## Thomas Cromwell and his Relationship with Henry VIII.

What was the relationship between Thomas Cromwell and Henry VIII? It would be natural to view the relationship as a failure in view of the execution of Thomas Cromwell in 1540. However, while it is difficult to argue against this in terms of the final aspect of their relationship, it was not always so. Henry VIII was lucky that he had, in the aftermath of Cardinal Wolsey, a man who was highly talented and it was Cromwell who attempted to modernise the government of the king - something that could only benefit the reign of Henry.

It does seem that Henry VIII had a very good eye for highly talented minister. However, Henry was also a very unforgiving man and while Wolsey died in Leicester, he must have known that he had little chance of survival once he reached London. One of the foremost employees of Wolsey was Thomas Cromwell. When Wolsey was out of favour (1529 to 1530), Cromwell managed to bring himself to the attention of Henry but did not engage in the actions of others who openly vilified the man who had once been England's most powerful person after the king. A natural assumption for Cromwell would have been that those who had worked for Wolsey would have also been disgraced. But Cromwell had gained reputation for working very hard and energetically and to good effect. Despite his association with Wolsey, he came to the favourable attention of Henry when he skilfully disentangled Wolsey's highly complex business and legal affairs. Henry took Cromwell into his service.



*Cardinal Thomas Wolsey. Thomas Cromwell's unfortunate boss.*

How Cromwell became Henry's chief minister is not clear. What Cromwell actually did for the king between November 1530 and 1533 is difficult to clearly establish with any authority. For a man who was to be so keen to keep notes once he was chief minister, Cromwell did not do the same pre-1533. While it is not clear why Cromwell, especially with his non-noble background, came to prominence, intelligent guesses can be made. It is known that Cromwell was a very able man, but this by itself may not be enough to explain his rise, as the Royal Chamber would have had capable men in it regardless. However, his ability would have stood Cromwell in good stead. We do know that Henry considered himself to be an intellectual; though he was not the "universal genius" that Erasmus labelled him! It may well be that also in Cromwell's favour was the fact that, unlike very many in the Royal Court, he knew about the lifestyle of continental Western Europe as he had lived there in his youth. Therefore, unlike many in the court, Cromwell must have been more interesting to listen to and to develop philosophical arguments with - something the intellectual Henry would have relished and boosted even more his belief that he was an academic. Henry gave Cromwell a number of posts between 1532 and 1533 and by the end of the year it was assumed that Cromwell was the king's chief minister. Therefore, at the start

of Cromwell's time as chief minister, the relationship between him and Henry must be seen as being positive and constructive.

The skilful way in which Cromwell took care of the divorce of Catherine of Aragon therefore allowing Henry to marry Anne Boleyn certainly won him favour with Henry. He became the king's Principal Secretary, probably in April 1534, which effectively put him at the centre of all the issues that revolved around the king. Cromwell started to put his own men in positions that broadened his own power base and his status with Henry was such that in July 1536, he was appointed Lord Privy Seal. This has to be seen as another sign of the huge confidence Henry had in Cromwell, as he would never have got this important position if Henry had little faith in him.

Cromwell's fall from grace was swift and decisive. He was arrested while at work in June 1540 and executed in July 1540. Why was there such a disastrous end to the relationship? Few historians believe that Cromwell was involved in treasonable activity - the crime he was arrested for. So what happened? It may well be that Cromwell was simply the victim of a man who was becoming more and more unpredictable. Henry had been deeply angered by the farce of his marriage to Anne of Cleves that was orchestrated by Cromwell who wanted a closer alliance between England and the Protestant princes in Northern Germany. The marriage was meant to be part of this. If Henry felt publicly humiliated by this marriage, then it would have been entirely blamed on Thomas Cromwell. Yet after this marriage fiasco, Henry made Cromwell the Earl of Essex - so he was either very forgiving, and recognised the huge amount of work that Cromwell had done for him, or the marriage/divorce didn't really matter to him. Yet we do know that Henry was a very proud man and his wedding day to Anne could not have held any great memories for him.



*Henry VIII's fourth wife, Anne of Cleves...Oooops!*

The key to Cromwell's swift fall seems to have been the Duke of Norfolk. His family had a long noble lineage and he would have been greatly angered that a commoner had been made an earl. In fact, the elevation of Cromwell (born into a non-noble family) was extremely rare then. But what would have caused him even more anger was the fact that Cromwell was the most dominant man at court and not himself or members of his family. Norfolk's plan to push Cromwell off his pedestal was simple. He knew that Henry could not resist a pretty young girl. For this reason he introduced his nineteen year old niece, Catherine Howard to court. Her beauty beguiled Henry.



*Catherine Howard...she was nineteen, Henry was forty-nine. Urrrgh!*  
Catherine gave Norfolk the opportunity to have the ear of the king - something that the Principal Secretary could have controlled if Catherine had not been at court.

Norfolk convinced Henry that Cromwell was plotting to bring in a full version of Protestantism to England despite knowing that the king was adamantly against this. By now entranced by Catherine, Cromwell's fate was effectively sealed as the king listened seemingly with great eagerness to Norfolk. Therefore,

the relationship between king and Cromwell was destroyed over an ageing king's infatuation with a nineteen year old young lady - an infatuation that clearly blinded him of any commonsense while he chased after Catherine. An Act of Attainder denied Cromwell the chance of defending himself. He almost certainly would have presented a good case but it was not to be. Cromwell was executed at Tyburn on July 28th 1540.



*Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk. The man responsible for Thomas Cromwell's fall from the top!*

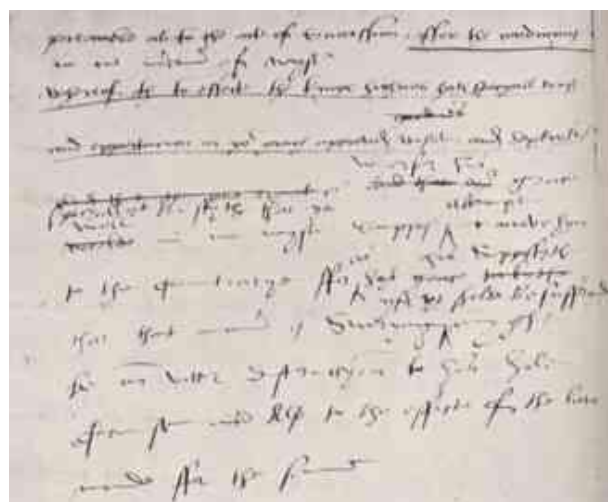
## Thomas Cromwell and Law and Order.

Thomas Cromwell gained a reputation for being a brutal tyrant when law and order was concerned. Cromwell's reputation suffered especially after his execution in 1540 when his detractors got to grips with his reputation. However, with regards to law and order, was this reputation justified?

After the death of Cromwell a rumour was spread that he had built up a huge spy network that informed on those who merely hinted at disloyalty to Henry VIII or made comments about the religious changes taking place. In fact, this was not so and was merely introduced to do what it did - tarnish Cromwell's reputation. With a few exceptions, Cromwell relied on the judicial system as it stood. Between 1533 and 1540, 883 people were arrested and charged with various serious misdemeanours. If Cromwell had been a tyrant, the majority of these would have had a show trial and been executed. This simply did not happen. Only 329 were executed and over 50% of this total was as a result of the Pilgrimage of Grace when thousands had openly committed treason against the king. Cromwell was an avid retainer of his notes (possibly why he was denied a trial after his arrest in 1540 when he could have used these notes to defend himself) and these clearly indicate that when someone got off of a charge on a legal technicality, he did not alter any decision despite his anger. Some of the 554 who were not executed were freed as a result of judicial incompetence. If Cromwell was a tyrant, there is every chance that he would have used his position to 'sway' a decision. A few examples do exist where Cromwell did do this but they were in cases where the king had shown an 'interest' - that the final outcome had to be a guilty verdict and execution.

However, the dissolution of the monasteries and the Reformation led by Martin Luther had created a difficult environment - as the Pilgrimage of Grace indicated. Therefore, Cromwell worked in a very difficult period in history and he adapted the law accordingly. Treason, as a definition, remained what it was except that any negative comment against the Church was now seen as a comment against its head - Henry. However, 'misprison' was also introduced whereby it became a crime not to report anybody heard criticising the king. The punishment for 'misprison' could be as draconian as life in prison and the confiscation of all property.

Cromwell took a great interest in law. He frequently interviewed himself those arrested for treason and kept many notes on such issues. Cromwell himself decided on which cases should be followed up and which should be discarded. Though he was seen as a tyrant by many after his death, there is little doubt that Cromwell concentrated the power of the law only on those he felt were a major threat to stability (hence the executions of the leaders of the Pilgrimage of Grace). His notes clearly show that he ordered the release of those he felt were nothing more than cranks - but harmless cranks who did not threaten either the king or stability, though in Cromwell's view the two were the same



*A pretty poor image of Thomas Cromwell's own handwriting, but the only one I  
could find.*