

THE MASKED HISTORIAN'S GUIDE TO



CARDINAL THOMAS WOLSEY.
HENRY VIII'S LORD CHANCELLOR.



Useful to knowledge for writing essays about a
Government Minister.

The Life of Cardinal Thomas Wolsey.

Cardinal Thomas Wolsey was born in c1473 and died in November 1530. Wolsey was Henry VIII's most important government minister who acquired much power which ended only after he failed to secure for Henry a divorce from Catherine of Aragon.



Cardinal Thomas Wolsey

Wolsey was the son of a butcher and cattle dealer. He had a relatively comfortable upbringing and was educated at Magdalen College, Oxford University. Wolsey decided on a life devoted to God and he joined the church. He held a number of private chaplainries but he soon came to the attention of Henry VII as Wolsey was quickly identified as a man who had excellent managerial skills with a very good grasp of detail. Wolsey was also a very keen worker. In 1507, he was appointed Henry VII's chaplain.

Wolsey continued to serve at court when Henry VIII succeeded his father in 1509. Wolsey received support at court from William Warham who was Archbishop of Canterbury from 1503 to 1532 and Chancellor from 1504 to 1515.

However, Wolsey quickly outgrew this support and he became the unofficial royal secretary. This position gave him almost

daily contact with Henry VIII who rewarded the hard work and dedication Wolsey showed towards him by giving him numerous religious titles that were to finance the luxurious lifestyle Wolsey was to have. He was appointed a bishop for Lincoln, Bath and Wells, Durham and Winchester; an abbot for St Albans and Archbishop of York. He was also appointed Chancellor in 1514 and held that position until 1529. In 1515, Wolsey was appointed a cardinal and in 1518 he became a "Legate a latere" which made him a special and permanent representative of the pope. This position gave him huge power of the church in England at the time - far more power than Warham had as Archbishop of Canterbury.

When in London, Wolsey lived in York Place (now gone but where Whitehall now stands) and he also owned Hampton Court as a country residence. His luxurious lifestyle made him many enemies at court but he remained safe because of the support of the king.

As Chancellor, Wolsey dominated the Royal Council. He got to know who could be trusted and who could not. The nobility had been severely weakened under Henry VII and tried, at times, to resurrect their old power in the early years of Henry VIII's reign. Wolsey ensured this did not happen and he used his position to tame the aristocracy. Such loyalty and devotion brought its rewards. Wolsey was, at times, the government of the country. Henry VIII had little time for the boredom of day-to-day government business as he was too busy hunting etc. This was left to Wolsey. The king decided on policy and Wolsey enforced and shaped it. However, from Wolsey's point of view, he was always the servant to his master, Henry VIII.

Wolsey did a great deal to reform the legal system in England. It was modernised and, ironically, the power of the Church courts was reduced as the power of the Star Chamber and the

common law courts was increased. The government was run effectively as would be expected from such a man.

However, despite being Chancellor, Wolsey had a poor knowledge of financial issues. He failed to use his position to develop England's overseas trade and he failed to ensure that royal revenue increased at the same rate as the king's spending. The economy of England was changing in the early Sixteenth Century - the so-called Price Revolution - but Wolsey failed to understand the complexities behind this change.

In foreign affairs, Wolsey supported Henry's campaigns against France. He also had as a priority the security of England from European threats. However, he failed to be Europe's great power-broker simply because England did not have enough financial power to have this position.

Wolsey's fall from grace was over his inability to persuade the pope that Henry should have a divorce from Catherine of Aragon. Henry believed that Wolsey, as "Legate a latere", had the necessary influence in Rome to secure his much wanted divorce. When Wolsey failed to do this, his position at court was doomed.

On September 22nd 1529, Wolsey was dismissed as Chancellor. By the end of October, he was sacked from his bishopric in Winchester and as Abbot of St Albans. The influential Boleyn family - Henry wanted to marry Anne - persuaded Henry that Wolsey should be removed from London. In April 1530, Wolsey arrived in York as Archbishop of York. He had been appointed Archbishop of York in 1514. Sixteen years later he visited the city for the first time!

Henry's anger at Wolsey's failure to get a divorce became more intense and he ordered his arrest which happened in November 1530. Wolsey was meant to be locked up in the Tower of

London. However, he died during the journey from York to London at Leicester Abbey on November 29th 1530.



Hampton Court Palace. A "Des Res" on the Thames that Wolsey built. The bricks came from Nettlebed in Oxfordshire. The bricks were painted bright red and the palace stood out like a beacon in the countryside. Henry VIII loved the building and quickly accepted it as Wolsey's "gift" to him just before he died.

Wolsey and Power.

Cardinal Wolsey acquired great power during the reign of Henry VIII. Wolsey's power extended to both legal and religious issues and effectively gave Wolsey the opportunities to influence just about most decisions in the kingdom. While he had the support of Henry VIII and while 'all was well', Wolsey was the most powerful man in the kingdom seemingly with unlimited power.

"It has often been maintained that Wolsey was in practice a dictator." (Randall)

While this may not be the modern version of a dictator, there can be little doubt that Wolsey amassed huge power. However, this power barely affected the majority in the country as they had been brought up to do as was required. When this broke down as in the *Pilgrimage of Grace* (after Wolsey's death) the state took the appropriate action. Those who would have been at the sharp end of Wolsey's power were those men and noble families that had instinctually considered that they had a right to be involved in decision-making at the highest level. If any of the senior nobility crossed Wolsey - if only by making a comment about his less than noble background - he pursued them with vigour and financial ruin was the ultimate weapon Wolsey could use. He also used the law courts - which he dominated - to enforce his wishes. This power and the fear of what might happen if an individual crossed Wolsey, ensured that few challenged the Lord Chancellor.

"By the early 1520's an established fact of political life in England was that you did not incur the cardinal's displeasure if you held any aspirations for the future." (Randall)

For a number of years Henry gave Wolsey what seemed like a free hand to run the country. This would have fitted in with the way Henry believed a country should be run. He believed that the people did not want to see their king engaged in matters of state all the time (as Henry VII seemed to do) but wanted him to act like a king - hunting, jousting, displaying manly qualities etc. Wolsey had done what he could to encourage such a belief. Henry also believed that it was perfectly acceptable to leave men to run the country on his behalf once he had briefed them on policies. These would be men he could trust, who would work for the king with total loyalty. Such a belief gave Wolsey the freedom he needed. Here was a king who only involved himself in matters of state when he felt the need to do so and who was prepared to allow men to govern on his behalf. However, for 'men' Wolsey read 'man'. His huge work rate and his ability to get things done - as in 1513 with the expedition to France - was sufficient proof to Henry that he was right. Wolsey was a safe pair of hands who took care of the nation while the king could engage in other activities.

In religious terms, Wolsey's title as 'legatus a latere' made him the most powerful religious figure in England. When he gained this title for life, the only way of defeating any ecclesiastical decision Wolsey made was to make a direct appeal to Rome. This had two problems. First, it was an extremely difficult process to carry out with little or no guarantee of success. Second, Wolsey, who would not be likely to look on such a move with charity, would quickly know the person who made the appeal. While the whole ecclesiastical body gave Wolsey great scope to act, he kept his work on two fronts - appointments to offices and the levying of fees for services. Wolsey gave himself the right to appoint anyone he wished to any ecclesiastical position when it became vacant. He either appointed his own men to these posts when they became vacant

or gave them to the highest bidder. Wolsey also claimed that as 'legatus a latere' he had the right to decide on all cases of inheritance when disputes. Few were willing to argue with the cardinal over this point. This gave Wolsey the opportunity to make great sums of money as he introduced what was essentially a 10% inheritance tax on all his decisions.

One area that gave Wolsey great power was his capacity to carry out huge amounts of work. He worked tirelessly to find out as much as he could about the great noble families of England and Wales. He wanted to know about their financial status; whether they could really be trusted; whether they were the legitimate holders of whatever title they had etc. This required him to put in a great deal of work and Wolsey was not lacking. This knowledge also enhanced his power as he found out about a noble family's weak points and could exploit these accordingly. To do this he employed men to spy on noble families. These spies were well rewarded and seemingly loyal to their master. However, the unscrupulous nature of Wolsey and his use of the law as he interpreted it, made him many enemies

Wolsey and Government.

Cardinal Wolsey was Henry VIII's chief minister for fifteen years. During this time Wolsey seemed to be more concerned about developing his wealth as opposed to ensuring that the country had effective government in place. If Wolsey concerned himself with government reform, there was little opportunity for him to expand his authority, personal power and income. Therefore, any attempt to modernise the government of England and Wales so that both benefited came to nothing under Wolsey and was left to Thomas Cromwell. However, Wolsey's approach found favour with the majority of the nobility at the time. They believed that the 'smaller' royal government was the better that was for them. They had little desire to see government trespass on their lives within the areas they controlled. Therefore, while Wolsey many very many enemies for other reasons, on this one he found that his approach was supported by the bulk of the nobility.

Wolsey had no great love for Parliament. He viewed the House as a place where men set out to criticise him, and in effect, Henry himself. Wolsey saw MP's especially as rabble rousers. For this reason Parliament was very rarely called while Wolsey was the government's driving force and he did little to disguise his contempt and dislike for it. Wolsey's belief in his own power was bound to bring him into conflict with Parliament. The only time that Wolsey recognised its power was when a considerable sum of money had to be raised to pay for Henry's foreign ventures. This happened in 1523 - but it only served to deepen his dislike of Parliament as it was capable of solving something that he could not. While Wolsey was good at developing his own revenue, he did not have the legal authority of Parliament to raise taxes.

One area that Wolsey did try to reform was England's legal system. England had mainly used 'common law' since the time of William the Conqueror. However, civil law was seen as being more modern and was more favoured in Southern Europe. It was used in the King's Council when it acted as a court of law. There were many differences between the two but the fundamental one was the common law used precedents as a basis for legal decisions while civil law used natural justice. Common law did force judges to give a reason for their decisions based on past legal cases but it also led to unjust verdicts when no-one questioned the validity of past verdicts. Civil law allowed a judge to come to a verdict based on what he thought was just and fair regardless of cases held years in the past. Wolsey did favour civil law above common law as he believed that justice was better served by civil law. He also believed that civil law gave the common man a better chance of success, whereas the chance of success in a common law court was minimal.

As Lord Chancellor, Wolsey was in charge of the country's secular legal system. He devoted a great deal of his time to this position but only so that he could further his own interests. Wolsey also used the courts to get back at those nobles who he felt had insulted him by making references to his background. One man who did insult Wolsey was Sir Amyas Paulet. He had put the arrogant young Wolsey in the stocks in an effort to cut him down to size when he arrived at his first benefice. As Lord Chancellor, Wolsey ordered Paulet to court and kept him waiting in daily attendance for five years - he was threatened with having all of his property confiscated if he failed to attend, thereby showing his contempt of Wolsey's court. Some historians believe that Wolsey made up this story to frighten off potential enemies but even if it has been exaggerated it would certainly have been in Wolsey's character to have done this.

While it would be easy to concentrate on Wolsey's desire to gain vast wealth and power, it would be easy to miss out his strong belief in natural justice as was gained, in his mind, through civil law. He knew that the common law courts were controlled by money. Large legal fees made these courts impossible for the poor to access. It does seem that Wolsey was genuinely concerned that the poor should have access to some form of court and as common law courts did not allow for this, he supported civil law courts. It was not that unusual for Wolsey to call into one of his civil law courts a case that had been heard in a common law court and a decision had been made that had offended Wolsey as it had gone against natural justice. He seemed to take particular pleasure if a case had a 'David and Goliath' aspect to it as Wolsey was quite happy to use the law courts against over mighty nobles and prosecuted those who enclosed land at the expense of the poor.

When speaking to a senior legal official Wolsey said:

"I counsel you and all other judges and learned men (of the king's council) to put no more into his (Henry's) head than law that may stand with conscience; for when you tell him: this is the law, it were well done ye should tell him also that although this is the law, yet this is conscience; for law without conscience is not mete to be given to a king by his council to be ministered by him nor by any of his ministers."

However, it would be a gross exaggeration to state that Wolsey championed the legal rights of the poor. He almost certainly took up their cause simply as a way of getting back at the nobility that had consistently treated him with contempt because of his background. The poor were a convenient lever to doing this. He also did what he could to ensure that his position was never threatened. In 1526 the Eltham Ordinances were

introduced to reform the finances of the Privy Council. These were seen as proof that Wolsey was a reformist whose desire was to see a more modern office administration. However, the ordinances were quickly allowed to lapse as no-one ensured that they were enforced and they left the Privy Council no better off and probably in a worse state. This suited Wolsey perfectly as it ensured that those who could influence the king were discredited and Wolsey was put into a position where he could put his own men into the Council to give it more 'credibility'.

Henry VIII, Wolsey and the "King's Great Matter".

Before Henry VIII married Catherine of Aragon he received a Papal Bull from the Pope agreeing that Henry could marry his dead brother's (Prince Arthur) wife. When Henry and Catherine married in June 1509 both were Roman Catholics. Everybody in England was - the penalty for heresy (being found guilty of being a non-believer) was death. Though Henry is portrayed as a powerful king who dominated his land, such was the tie to Rome and the Roman Catholic faith, that he felt it necessary to effectively get Papal permission to marry Catherine. In 1509 it would have been inconceivable that anyone would think that a break would occur with Rome and the power of the Papacy. However, within 25 years this is exactly what happened.

No one is sure when Henry decided that his marriage to Catherine had to end simply because the evidence does not exist that can pinpoint an exact date. There were rumours in court of Henry wanting a divorce as early as 1520 but this was probably nothing more than mere court gossip based on no fundamental facts. Physicians, either in 1524 or 1525, told Henry that Catherine was unlikely to give birth again - so these dates may be correct. By 1527, he had become infatuated with Anne Boleyn - so this year may be when he decided that a divorce was needed. The truth is that historians simply do not know. What can be stated is that when Henry decided that his marriage to Catherine should end, he was not a man who was willing to change his mind.

However, the beliefs within the Catholic Church were clear and simple. Only the Pope could annul a marriage and as the Church believed in the sanctity of marriage and family, this was a reasonably rare occurrence. In many senses, royal families in Western Europe were expected to set the standards that

others should follow. Therefore, Henry's belief that he should have a divorce simply because as king of England and Wales he wanted one was not shared by the Papacy.

Henry used his knowledge of the Bible to justify his request for a marriage annulment. Henry use the Old Testament (Leviticus Chapter 20 Verse 16) where it stated:

"If a man shall take his brother's wife, it is an impurity; he hath uncovered his brother's nakedness; they shall be childless."

Henry argued that his marriage to Catherine had been against God's law from the start despite the Pope's blessing for it to go ahead in 1509. He was therefore living in sin and that the Pope had to annul his marriage so that he could rectify this. As 'Defender of the Faith' - a title bestowed on Henry for his 1521 attack on the work of Martin Luther - Henry believed that such an annulment was almost a foregone conclusion. Whether Henry actually believed this is open to question especially as he was simply lusting after Anne Boleyn at the time, which clearly was not a sin in his mind despite his marriage. Henry gave a masterful speech to the country's nobles at Bridewell, London, in November 1528, explaining that Catherine was noble and virtuous and that in other circumstances he would marry her again. But because of what had happened he lived in "detestable and abominable adultery". Edward Hall, who wrote about the speech, stated that it was made with great passion. However, Henry also knew how to address an audience so to what extent this was 'acting' will never be known.

There is little doubt that Cardinal Wolsey gave Henry assurances that an annulment was simply a matter of course. Wolsey, as a Cardinal, had also been appointed 'legatus a legere'

by the Pope - which made him the most powerful religious figure actually based in England. It is conveniently easy to imagine the scene of Wolsey convincing Henry that as he had contacts in Rome, what the king wanted would be easy to attain. Wolsey, of course, was willing to do anything to satisfy his master and he decided to use the argument that the original Papal Bull that sanctioned the 1509 marriage was invalid and that the marriage, to save an innocent King from eternal damnation, should be annulled to allow him to marry 'properly'. Wolsey was certain that the Pope would annul the marriage as he was in a vulnerable position and needed the support of every Christian monarch - especially as the advance of the Muslim Turks in the Mediterranean was unpredictable and highly threatening. Both Henry and Wolsey must have assumed that their 'campaign' for an annulment would be a simple and short affair.

Neither got what they expected. There was no quick fix and the most immediate result of this was the end of the influence of Cardinal Wolsey who was ordered to leave London and live in much lesser circumstances in York (where he was the archbishop).



*Henry's messengers deliver orders that Wolsey is to leave London.
A nineteenth century painting.*

The approach in Rome was to give the matter a great deal of theological thought, which explained the delay. The key was

dissecting what Leviticus had actually written. The argument was that you should not marry your brother's wife while he was still alive. As Arthur was dead, this was not an issue and certainly did not condemn Henry to eternal damnation by going against the will of God. Henry refused to accept this, as he believed that his interpretation was correct. He dragooned a large number of expert theologians to write essays that supported his view and they were well rewarded for doing so. The result of this was a series of essays written in Rome to support the Papacy's viewpoint. However, there were those in England who supported the Pope's viewpoint. One was the Bishop of Rochester, Bishop Fisher, who wrote seven books in support of Catherine and became her main defender in England.

As time moved on, both sides faced an obvious but challenging issue. If either side backed down, the loss of face would be immense. What had started as a king lusting after a young lady had now turned into a major issue with neither side being able to back down.

Wolsey's Part in the Divorce.

The part Cardinal Wolsey played in the divorce proceedings concerning Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon has divided historians. There is little conclusive evidence that proves one way or another that Wolsey tried to sabotage Henry's desire for a divorce or that he was actively campaigning for it. However, there seems to be a general agreement that Wolsey was not happy about the whole divorce situation. There could have been both religious and practical reasons for this.

As a Roman Catholic, Wolsey would have been brought up to support the whole concept of marriage and family. It is almost certain that he shunned the whole theoretical idea of divorce for this reason. However, Wolsey was also a very practical man and he believed that very few in England would tolerate the humiliation of Catherine so that Anne Boleyn would become queen. Did Wolsey fear some sort of public disorder at the removal of a queen many in England held in great affection? There can be no doubts that Anne knew of Wolsey's feelings towards her and Wolsey was certainly aware of Anne's meddling in political affairs even before she was queen. Wolsey had much to lose if Anne became queen and much to gain if Catherine remained as queen. Catherine essentially kept out of politics and this suited Wolsey well. If Anne became queen Wolsey would have faced a loss of power and authority - he possessed both while Catherine was queen.

Henry blamed Wolsey for slowing down all the proceedings surrounding the divorce. Wolsey was blamed for the failures surrounding the visit to England of Cardinal Campeggio who was sent to England by the Pope to give a Papal input into the proceedings. A man who had vast amounts of energy when it came to increasing his huge wealth did lack a lot of his characteristic energy when it came to the divorce. Wolsey

changed his mind over who should have the final say in the proceedings. Initially he believed that all matters could be settled in England with a Papal input - hence the visit of Campeggio. However, he then changed his mind and stated that only the Pope could make a final decision. Was this done out of his belief that the matter was so important that it could only be sanctioned at the top? Or was it because Wolsey knew that the whole bureaucracy of the Papacy would delay and delay any decision and that as a result Henry would lose interest in Anne?

Those historians who believe that Wolsey actively pushed for the divorce claim that Wolsey knew that his whole future depended on Henry divorcing Catherine and marrying Anne. Letters that Wolsey wrote to his contacts in the Papacy clearly urge that the matter should be speedily dealt with. Between 1528 and 1529 Wolsey sent many letters to the Vatican. While not supporting the divorce at a personal level, it is claimed that Wolsey did all that he could at a professional level because he knew that his position was at risk if he did not get a result. Wolsey had spent many years becoming the most powerful non-royal in the land and he had got used to the many luxuries that he had in life. Was he really willing to give these up for the matter of a divorce?

Wolsey's Relationship with Henry VIII.

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Wolsey: Some final thoughts.

Cardinal Wolsey always maintained that he served Henry VIII to the highest levels. Wolsey's fall was primarily due to his failure to get Henry the annulment to his marriage to Catherine of Aragon that would allow Henry's marriage to Anne Boleyn. As the Pope's most senior officer in England, Wolsey had seemingly made it clear to Henry that the required annulment was an easy requirement as he had the necessary contacts in Rome. When he failed to deliver, Henry decided that his chief minister was no longer required. Wolsey always believed that he had served Henry to the best of his ability as this statement, made in 1530 shortly before his death, indicates.

Ordered to report to London from his home in York, Wolsey died at Leicester in 1530. Just before he died he said the following that was heard by his gentleman usher George Cavendish:

"Well, well, Master Kingston", quod he, "I see the matter against me how it is framed. But if I had served God as diligently as I have done the King, he would not have given me over in my grey hairs. Howbeit this is just reward that I must receive for my worldly diligence and pains that I have had to do him service, only to satisfy his vain pleasures, not regarding my godly duty. Wherefore I pray you with all my heart to have me most humbly commended unto his royal majesty, beseeching him in my behalf to call to his most gracious remembrance all matters proceeding between him and me from the beginning of the world unto this day, and the progress of the same. And most chiefly in the weighty matter yet depending (meaning the matter newly begun between him and good Queen Catherine) - then shall his conscience declare whether I have offended him or no. He is sure a prince of a royal courage, and hath a

princely heart; and rather than he will either miss or want any part of his will or appetite, he will put the loss of one half of his realm in danger. For I assure you I have often kneeled before him in privy chamber on my knees the space of an hour or two to persuade him from his will and appetite; but I could never bring to pass to dissuade him therefrom. Therefore, Master Kingston, if it chance hereafter you to be one of his privy council (as for your wisdom and other qualities ye be meet so to be) warn you to be well advised and assured what matter ye put in his head; for ye shall never pull it out again."

How someone interprets "worldly diligence" is up to the individual. Wolsey was very diligent and successful in expanding his own power base and he was very diligent and successful in expanding his huge wealth. He also used his own position to put his own men in important government posts. However, he did little to modernise the machinery of government, which historians view as remaining at a feudal level in a developing nation. If Wolsey had been diligent, he might have tackled this issue in the same way that Thomas Cromwell did. Whereas Thomas Cromwell wanted highly able men in government to ensure the smooth running of the government, Wolsey preferred to see one man dominate the whole process. Whereas Cromwell appointed able men, Wolsey appointed his own men or those who could best afford to pay the highest price for appointments. It can be argued that if Wolsey had spent less time on himself (though this was a classic feature of someone who led a feudal government structure) and more time on government, he could refer to himself as being diligent. For the number of years that Wolsey worked for Henry VIII, he must have known that if he failed to deliver, he would be held to account. This statement above, if it is accurate, hints at a man who failed to take into account that possibly Wolsey had got himself into the position he found himself in. This failure to see that he may have been at fault was almost certainly the

result of years of near total power. Travelling south from York, Wolsey must have known what his fate would be. At the very least, this would have been the confiscation of his wealth and property and it is widely known that Wolsey had got to love his lifestyle that involved lavish homes such as Hampton Court and York House alongside sumptuous banquets. However, Wolsey probably knew that he faced an accusation of treason, however trumped up that may have been, and that he faced execution. Unable to bear the thought of this, he died in Leicester in November 1530.



An aerial view of Christ Church College, Oxford. Wolsey created this college.