

A GLIMPSE INTO TUDOR TIMES – ANNE BOLEYN’S DAD

Who were the Boleyns?

We generally associate the Boleyns with the court of Henry VIII, but in fact they had been established for over 450 years before Henry’s time, having probably come over with William the Conqueror. They settled in Norfolk as mercers, traders in finer quality woollen cloth, and they must have done well because by the fifteenth century they were seriously wealthy. In the early 1400s they acquired Blickling Hall in Norfolk, and in 1426 Hever Castle in Kent, the latter probably to provide a substantial residence nearer London. They rose not only in wealth but socially too. In 1454, Geoffrey Boleyn (grandfather of the Thomas Boleyn of this article) was elected Master of the Mercers’ Company, and in 1457 Lord Mayor of London, for which he was knighted. Marriage helped their steady ascent in society. Sir Geoffrey Boleyn married the daughter of a baron; his eldest son, William, married the daughter of an earl; and William’s eldest son, Thomas (our Thomas) married the daughter of a duke.

Sir Thomas Boleyn – courtier and diplomat

Thomas was born in 1477. We know little of his upbringing or education but he probably studied at Cambridge University, and probably then at Lincolns Inn. By repute he was exceptionally clever and a talented linguist too. At court he served first under Henry VII: although we don’t have much detail, we know that in 1497, aged twenty, he fought alongside his father in quelling a rebellion against Henry in Cornwall. In 1503, at twenty-six, Thomas escorted the king’s sister, Margaret, to Scotland for her wedding to King James IV, and a year later he escorted Henry’s daughter, Mary, to France for her wedding to King Louis XII. For a relatively young man, being appointed to undertake two lengthy and hazardous journeys in charge of high-born ladies was a signal honour.

In 1509 Henry VII died. On the day his successor, Henry VIII, was crowned, Thomas was appointed a Knight of the Garter – further evidence of the esteem in which he was held. For seventeen years Thomas was Henry’s Ambassador to the Low Countries (then controlled by Spain, one of England’s two great political rivals) and later Ambassador to France (the other rival). Later still, Thomas led embassies to the Holy Roman Emperor in pursuit of Henry’s divorce from Catherine of Aragon. He was thus a well-rounded and highly regarded diplomat.

It was the French whom Thomas handled most adroitly. To deter invasion, Henry liked to keep France and Spain at loggerheads with each other, allying first with one, then with the other, then back again. Thomas thus had to pull off repeated diplomatic about-turns, and he did so with aplomb. Despite the untrustworthiness of his master, both courts gave him a warm and enduring welcome. The role of diplomat is often under-valued in history, but it seems to me that Thomas deserved much credit for helping to damp down hostilities against England during the difficult 1520s.

Thomas as husband and father

In 1498 Thomas married Lady Elizabeth Howard (Howard was the family name of the Dukes of Norfolk). He was then twenty-one and she eighteen. Here they are, both in sixteenth-century portraits by unknown artists:

Sir Thomas Boleyn, 1477-1539



Lady Elizabeth Boleyn, 1480-1538



The marriage produced five children, of whom three survived. The eldest, Mary, was born in 1499, followed by Anne (1501) and George (1503). Thomas took his daughters' education – not just their social position – seriously. In this respect he was arguably well ahead of his time. He had seen how sophisticated the French and Spanish courts were compared with Henry's, and he reasoned that if Mary and Anne could be educated there, they would have an edge when they returned to England. Accordingly, Thomas secured positions for his daughters as ladies-in-waiting at the two courts.

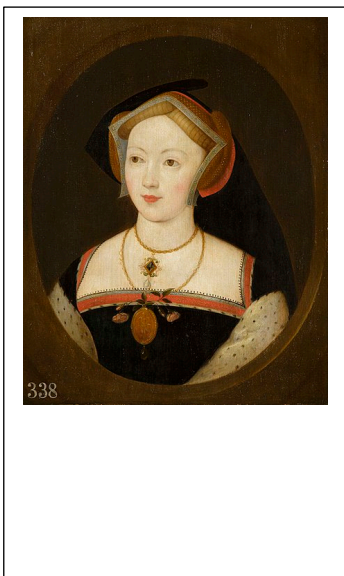
He packed Mary off to Paris in 1515, when she was sixteen, and already a noted beauty. She stayed for almost five years, acquiring, it has to be said, a reputation for promiscuity. She became first the mistress of King Francis I, then of others; when he tired of her Francis uncharitably described Mary as "that most infamous of whores". How much say a sixteenth-century sixteen-year old girl had in her various relationships is, of course, hard to know, so the sobriquet might be wholly unfair. On her return to England in 1519, Mary married wealthy courtier Sir William Carey, and went on to produce two children. However, at the same time she was also occupying Henry VIII's bed, so rumours got about that the children were.....well, you work it out.

Anne had been sent abroad even earlier: she was only eleven when, in 1512, she left England and her family. By the time she returned, in 1523, she had become thoroughly Frenchified in speech, dress and manners. At Henry's court she sparkled, and of course she soon caught the king's eye. While Henry's attraction to her must have been primarily sexual, it turned political when Henry persuaded himself that Anne would be the one to give him the male heir he so desperately wanted. However, to marry Anne Henry needed first to divorce Catherine of Aragon, his staunchly Catholic wife of over twenty years, who had produced only a single daughter. The Pope, in response to Henry's plea for an annulment, dallied and dallied, and while he did so Anne stubbornly resisted Henry's attempts to bed her: having seen her sister casually discarded, Anne wanted first to be certain that Henry would marry her. To cut a long story short, the Pope eventually refused Henry an annulment, so Henry broke with Rome, established himself as head of the Church in England and was thus able to secure his own divorce. In late 1532 Anne and Henry married in secret, and Henry finally took her to his bed.

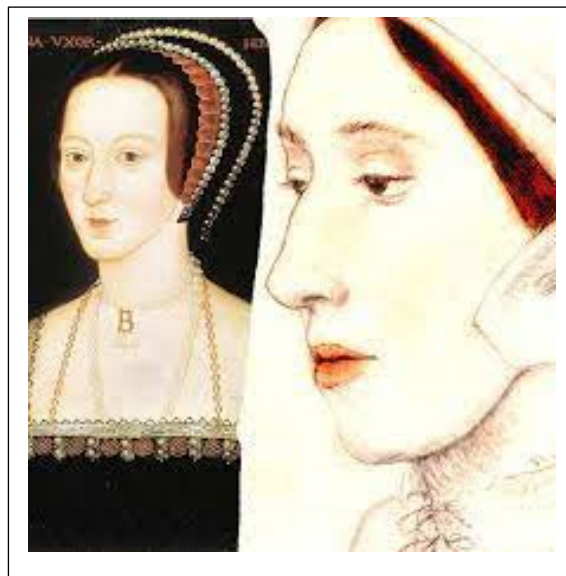
In 1533, Anne was publicly crowned queen, already visibly pregnant. Thomas Boleyn participated prominently in the gaudy and costly procession that accompanied his daughter to her coronation ceremony.

As regards Thomas' third child, George Boleyn, we know little of his life before he came to court. By his twenties he was seen as a rising young man, intellectually ahead even of his clever father and much admired as writer and translator. He was a passionate advocate of religious reform, persistent and persuasive in denouncing the corruption of the Catholic church. In this, George was very close to his sister Anne, and their closeness later had fatal consequences for both.

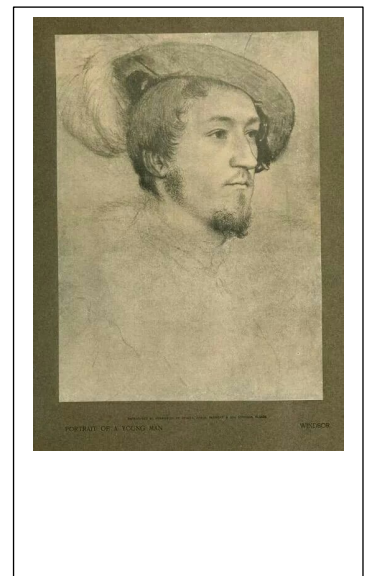
Here are contemporary images of the three Boleyn children. We have two images of Anne: the one on the left is by an unknown artist, but the sketch on the right, much livelier, is known to be by Hans Holbein. The image of George Boleyn cannot be authenticated as such, but the facial similarity to Thomas Boleyn is quite striking.



Mary Boleyn
1499-1543



Anne Boleyn
1501-1536



George Boleyn
1503-1536

Thomas at his zenith

By the early 1530s Sir Thomas Boleyn was riding high as a succession of honours were heaped upon him. In 1525 he was ennobled as Viscount Rochford, and in 1529 as Earl of Ormond, both lapsed peerages from his mother's side. Also in 1529, and most significantly of all, Henry appointed Thomas 1st Earl of Wiltshire, a new earldom created specifically for him. This was unalloyed success, verging on stardom. At the same time, Thomas was garnering multiple appointments, especially as magistrate, in both Norfolk and Kent. His reputation, locally as well as at court, stood high.

But not everybody rejoiced. To the old nobility, the Boleyns, for all their newly-acquired titles, remained jumped-up commoners, low-born cloth traders. Thomas' most hostile foe was the 3rd Duke of Norfolk, whose aunt Elizabeth had unforgivably married a Boleyn, thereby allowing that damned family to creep in over the wall. Norfolk eventually, and cruelly, got his own back.

It all unravels

In 1533, Anne gave birth, not to the male heir that Henry hoped for but to a daughter, later Queen Elizabeth I. During the following two years Anne suffered miscarriages, and Henry's disappointment grew to discontent. In return Anne unwisely gave vent to shrewishness and a vile temper. We do not know if Thomas attempted to reconcile the warring spouses, but if he did he was unsuccessful. By late 1535, less than three years into the marriage, Henry wanted to be rid of Anne because he had his eye on Jane Seymour, one of Anne's ladies-in-waiting, as prospective wife number three. To bring it about he looked for help to his closest advisor and fixer, Thomas Cromwell.

Luck was on Cromwell's side as rumours began to surface of Anne's infidelity with at least five men. One of them was her lutenist, Mark Smeaton. He was arrested and questioned, possibly under torture. He confessed to having had sex three times with Anne, and he alleged that four others had enjoyed her favours too. Three – William Brereton, Henry Norris and Francis Weston – were all courtiers and friends of the king. Most shockingly, however, Smeaton suggested that Anne had committed incest with her brother George. In spring 1536, on Henry's orders, Anne and all five men were arrested on charges of treason. All were imprisoned in the Tower of London and put on trial.

The trials took place over the three days May 10-12 1536. There are conflicting accounts as to whether Thomas attended. A contemporary source suggests that he did, while a detailed 19th century study suggests that he didn't. If Thomas were present, he would have seen his children facing prosecution without access to defence: the accused were allowed to speak for themselves but no more.

Smeaton's confession, truthful or otherwise, first sealed the fates of the three courtiers and himself; all were found guilty and sentenced to death. Next came the trial of George Boleyn and then, separately, of Anne. Both trials were presided over by the Duke of Norfolk, the Boleyns' most implacable foe, a man entirely unversed in law or court process. Despite his determination to secure guilty verdicts, Norfolk didn't have it all his own way. George Boleyn gave him a hard time as he deployed his impressive skills of language and argument – so compellingly in fact that some wagered he could not be found guilty. He emphasised time and again that the prosecutors had no shred of evidence to support the charge of incest. But to no avail: he was condemned to death. When Anne came to trial, she denied all the allegations against her, in particular that of incest. She asserted also that she had not been at the places where she was accused of having committed adultery on the dates claimed. But Smeaton's assertion that he had had sex with her was sufficient to undo her. She too was condemned to death.

The votes against all the accused were unanimous. So if Thomas were present at the trials, he must have voted guilty. If that was the case, what agony of mind must he have been going through? Our modern morality would surely condemn him, but what choice did he have? He knew of Henry's unforgiving nature, and he knew that he and his whole family would pay dearly if he dissented. His condemned children too would have known that.

Although the guilty men could lawfully be hanged, drawn and quartered, and Anne burned at the stake, Henry "by his great mercy" decided that they should all be beheaded, the five men by the axe and Anne by a French swordsman as she knelt upright. The executions took place within the Tower in front of several hundred invited people. Smeaton, Brereton, Norris, Weston and George Boleyn were beheaded on May 17 1536, and Anne on May 19. It is unlikely that Thomas was at the executions, and one can only hope that he wasn't.

Thomas' final years

Despite his children's disgrace, Thomas was not banished from court. The year after the executions, he went north to fight for Henry against the rebels in the so-called Pilgrimage of Grace, a bloody but short-lived resistance to Henry's dissolution of the monasteries. (Some of the rebellion took place around Skipton and Grassington.) That same year Thomas attended, presumably at the king's invitation, the christening of Prince Edward, later Edward VI, Henry's son by Jane Seymour. But such celebration as there might have been was cut short when Jane died a few days later. Thomas was invited to her funeral too. It is ironic, surely, and painful too, that Thomas was summoned both to the christening of the son that Anne had failed to produce and to the funeral of the woman whose position as queen had been made possible by his daughter's execution?

In 1538 Thomas' wife Elizabeth died at age 58, and in 1539 Thomas died at age 62. His steward at Hever reported to Thomas Cromwell that, "My good lord and master is dead. He departed this transitory world I trust to the everlasting Lorde, for he made the end of a good Christian man, ever remembering the goodness of Christ." On hearing the news, the king paid generously for masses and prayers to be said for Thomas' soul – a touch of conscience perhaps?

We may wonder at length about Thomas' failings, but if there is a villain in this piece, it is surely Henry himself?

For library users

If you would like to know more about the snake pit that was the court of Henry VIII, an immense amount of literature is at your disposal. For details of Thomas Boleyn's life I relied heavily on a 2018 PhD thesis by Lauren Mackay for the University of Newcastle in Australia. See: <https://nova.newcastle.edu.au/vital/access/manager/Repository/uon:34371>. Although Dr Mackay's piece is academic in nature, it is highly readable. Thomas Boleyn also appears, though less prominently, in David Starkey's *Six Wives – the Queens of Henry VIII* (Chatto & Windus, 2003), in Eric Ives' *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn* (Blackwell, 2004), and in Diarmuid McCulloch's *Thomas Cromwell – A Life* (Penguin 2018). Of these, David Starkey's book is easily the most engaging. All are available from NYCC libraries.

In fiction, Alison Weir and Philippa Gregory have written volumes too numerous to list here, so do look them up on the NYCC library website. For me, however, the doyenne of fiction writers on the court of Henry VIII is Hilary Mantel, with her trilogy on the life of Thomas Cromwell – *Wolf Hall*, *Bring Up The Bodies*, and *The Mirror and the Light* (Fourth Estate, 2009, 2012 and 2020, and all available in NYCC libraries). Take it from me: they are simply breath-taking.

Bob Young
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