

Henry VIII



Thomas Wolsey - Master or Servant?

Thomas Wolsey was referred to as 'Alter Rex' or 'Second King'. This traditional interpretation suggests that Wolsey held real power at court, that he was the master, Henry the puppet. It is certainly true that Henry trusted Wolsey unequivocally after the perceived victory in France in 1513. But is the 'puppet-master' description accurate? It has been challenged by modern historians who prefer to describe their relationship as more a 'political partnership' - Henry was willing to give Wolsey space to make decisions (especially early on when Henry was preoccupied with other activities) but that the King always made the final decision, especially on key issues. Wolsey would not be allowed to make key decisions of domestic or foreign policy without the King's approval.

Source F

Ye are so puffed with pride
That no man nay abyde
Your high and lordely lokes
Ye caste up then your bokes
And vertu is forgotten . . .
Ye boost, ye face, ye crake,
And upon you take
To rule Kynge and Kayser.
And yf ye may have layser,
Ye wyll brynge all to nought.
And that is all your thought.

John Skelton, *Collyn Clout*, 1522

You are so puffed up with pride
That no man can like you
Your arrogant and lordly looks
You then take upon your books
And virtue is forgotten.
You boast and taunt and laugh
And take it upon yourself
To rule over King and Emperor
And if you have your way
You will bring it all to nothing
And that is what you want.

John Skelton was a satirical writer at this time.

- Underline all of the phrases that suggest that it was Wolsey who made policy at this time
- Why might historians believe Wolsey held all the power if they use sources like this?

What do the Historians think?

Read through the sources below and complete the table - how have different historians views Wolsey?

<u>Name of Historian</u>	<u>Key points about Wolsey made</u>	<u>What do you think?</u>
G.R. Elton		
J Guy		
J.J. Scarisbrick		
S.J. Gunn and P.G. Lindley		

Source 1

"Anyone could see that Wolsey tried to do the impossible, to rule as King when he was not the king, to ignore the legal and constitutional traditional of England and substitute them for his own self-confident judgement to do a highly professional job in a very amateur manner. He had lasted so long because in two things he was not amateur at all: he knew how to promote himself and for most of the time he knew how to keep Henry satisfied"

- G R Elton *England under the Tudors*, 1955

Source 2

"it is true that Wolsey enjoyed exceptional favour and for a while his position was different. Between 1515 and 1525, it can be argued that Henry treated him more as a partner than a servant. Wolsey enjoyed a uniquely privileged access to the king. They walked arm-in-arm together and were intimate confidante to the exclusion of others"

- J Guy *Wolsey, Cromwell and the reform of government, C20th*

Source 3

"for much of his career as Chancellor, it was Wolsey alone who guided English affairs. His quick strong hands grasped everything because Henry seemed unable or unwilling to make the smallest decision himself...Wolsey must be servant and master, creature yet impresario; he must abase himself and yet dominate, playing a part which only a man of superlative energy, self-confidence and loyalty could have endured... There is no doubt that at times Henry was involved in public business and in commanding partnership with Wolsey..."

Source 4

The king took a more consistent and informed interest in foreign policy than in most other areas of government, and this both eased and complicated Wolsey's task. King and cardinal could work as a very effective double act, using audiences with the king 'simple and candid by nature' to encourage ambassadors frustrated by the cardinal's obstructiveness. Wolsey could use the king's disapproval as an excuse for refusing to contemplate concessions, or win goodwill from an ambassador by stressing the trouble he had in persuading Henry to accept a proposal. Henry enjoyed lecturing envoys on such themes as the benefits of universal peace, but was equally happy to leave the grind of detailed negotiation to his minister.

Finally...

What is your view? Using what you have read today, go away and research a little more about Thomas Wolsey and then try to answer this question - remember to use the sources and explain using your own knowledge in your answer.

"Henry VIII was the master - Wolsey only the servant" - How far do you agree with this statement?

- Traditional historians argue that Wolsey was an 'Alter Rex' - a second King. They suggest he held real power at court which meant Henry had a passive role. This suggests Wolsey was a master and Henry was a puppet. Evidence to support this would be Wolsey's influential decisions with regards to domestic policy in his role as Cardinal and Lord Chancellor from 1515. Wolsey's use of the Court of Star Chamber to challenge the power of the nobility is one example of his power, another is his use of the Court of Chancery where he made important decisions like establishing a permanent judicial committee to hear cases brought by the poor. His revolutionary new 'Tudor Subsidy' in the tax system was also progressive. His role in Enclosures was also significant. His new Edict of the Eltham Ordinances has been argued by some historians to prove his central role in government.
- Recent historians argue that Wolsey's role was more a partnership with the King. Henry may have been willing to give Wolsey space to make decisions when he was more worried about hunting and having fun. But the King always made the final decision on key issues. Henry was content to allow Wolsey to get on with mundane matters of domestic policy but when it came to more important matters of foreign policy or bigger domestic decisions the King was at the centre of decision making (e.g. think about Wolsey's downfall in failure to get an Annulment). The fact that Henry relied on Wolsey to make exercise the affairs of government does not mean that Henry was not in overall charge.
- Wolsey's **wealth** served to further his political power. His court was magnificent and often described as 'quasi royal'. Thus he used the trappings of political success to set himself up as the most important man in the country next to the king. He had the largest disposable income in England and he was probably 10 times richer than his nearest rival. His income came from his multiple bishoprics of York, Tournai, Bath, Wells and Durham and Winchester. He was also Abbot of St Albans which was the richest Monastery in England. He also gained money from holding ecclesiastical courts and through the prestige of building places like Hampton Court and Cardinal College Oxford.
- In 1528 Henry fell out with Wolsey over the seemingly trivial matter of Wolsey's appointment of an abbess to a nunnery. Henry disapproved of the appointment but Wolsey had ignored him. He was forced to make a grovelling apology.
- Henry disapproved of Wolsey's surprise attack on the French Navy in 1522
- It was not until Wolsey's failure to secure an annulment of Henry's marriage to Catherine of Aragon that the Cardinal was dismissed from his post
- Wolsey's inevitable wealth and power created resentment amongst the nobility but Henry never yielded to criticism of his leading minister because Wolsey served him loyally and effectively
- Many historians argue Wolsey was not ruthless and did consult other nobles. They argue his reputation stemmed from Jealousy and the fact that he clearly decided on policy in private with Henry before presenting it before Council. Wolsey and Henry had a partnership whereby it was hard for anyone to criticise Wolsey's policies because essentially they were the King's policies.

- Wolsey maintained his power through ruthlessness. There were many complaints of his mistreatment of nobles. Polydore Virgil (The Humanist) was put in the tower of London for failing to give support for Wolsey's request to become a Cardinal. Wolsey was also implicated in the execution of Buckingham. But much of these accusations were to do with jealousy from contemporaries.

Reading List

Key texts for classroom and individual study

- C Lee, *Britain, 1483-1529*, Nelson Thornes, 2008
- R Carpenter, *The Church in England and the Struggle for Supremacy, 1529-1547*, Nelson Thornes, 2009
- M Tillbrook, *The Triumph of Elizabethan Britain 1547-1603*, Nelson Thornes, 2009
- I Dawson, *The Tudor Century*, Nelson Thornes, 1993

Useful books for students

- D Murphy (ed), *England 1485-1603*, Collins, 1999
- N Fellows, *Disorder and Rebellion in Tudor England*, Hodder, 2009
- R Lockyer & D O'Sullivan, *Tudor Britain 1485-1603*, Longman, 1993
- K Randall, *Henry VIII and the Government of England*, Hodder, 2001
- K Randall, *Henry VIII and the Reformation in England*, Hodder, 2001
- J Warren, *Elizabeth I: Meeting the Challenge*, Hodder, 2008

Reference books

- G W Bernard, *The Kings Reformation*, Yale, 2005
- C Carpenter, *The Wars of the Roses*, CUP, 1997
- C S L Davies, *Peace, Print and Protestantism*, Paladin, 1995
- S Doran, *Princes, Pastors and People*, Routledge, 1991
- E Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, Yale, 1992
- G R Elton, *England Under the Tudors*, Routledge, 1991
- A Fletcher & D MacCulloch, *Tudor Rebellions*, Longman, 2004
- Griffiths (ed), *The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England*, Macmillan, 1996
- S Gunn, *Early Tudor Government*, Macmillan, 1995
- J Guy, *Tudor England*, OUP, 1998
- C Haigh, *The Reign of Elizabeth*, Macmillan, 1984
- C Haigh, *English Reformations*, Clarendon Press, 1993
- J Loach, *The Mid Tudor Polity 1540-1560*, Macmillan, 1980
- D Loades, *The Mid-Tudor Crisis, 1545-1565*, Palgrave, 1992
- D Loades, *Politics and the Nation 1450-1660*, Blackwell, 1999
- D M Palliser, *The Age of Elizabeth*, Longman, 1992
- A J Pollard, *The Wars of the Roses*, Macmillan, 1988
- J Scarisbrick, *The Reformation and the English People*, Blackwell, 1984
- A G R Smith, *Emergence of A Nation State*, Pearson, 1997
- P Thomas, *Authority and Disorder in Tudor Times 1485-1603*, CUP, 1999

Biographies and first-hand accounts

- S Chrimes, *Henry VII*, Yale, 1999
- D Cook, *Sixteenth Century England Documents and Debates*, Macmillan, 1980

- D Cressy & L Ferrell, Religion and Society in Early modern England A Sourcebook, Routledge, 1996
- R Horrox, Richard III, CUP, 1991
- D Loades, The Reign of Mary Tudor, Longman, 1991
- J Loach, Edward VI, Yale, 1999
- D Starkey & L Wooding, Elizabeth, Vintage, 2001
- L Wooding, Henry VIII, Routledge, 2009

Visual sources and websites

- www.johnguy.co.uk
- www.history.ac.uk
- www.activehistory.co.uk
- www.bbc.co.uk/history
- www.tudorplace.com
- The Six Wives of Henry VIII, Elizabeth DVDs - D Starkey
- A History of Britain DVD - S Schama