

Imprisonment & Execution

The Tower of London under
Henry VIII (1509-47)

Notes:

About these notes

This background information was designed to support lessons or a visit to the Tower of London for teachers of Key Stage 2 History Unit 7 'Why did Henry VIII marry six times?'

Imprisonment during Henry VIII's reign

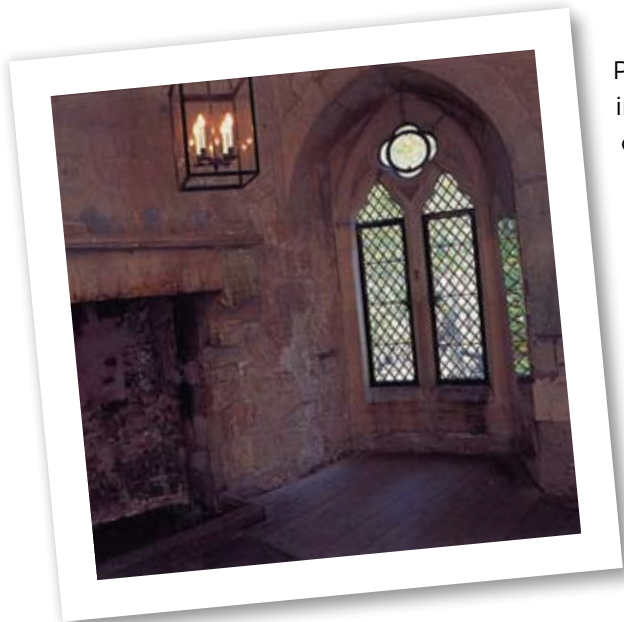
The Tower of London was not built as a prison. It did not have cells or dungeons. It was so secure from attack, however, that it was used to house prisoners, even from its very earliest years.

The Tower became more heavily used as a prison after 1534, during the reign of Henry VIII. The Tower housed potential rivals to the throne and prisoners associated with the king's marital problems and his break with Rome.

Notables locked up by Henry VIII

Important prisoners included:

- Sir Thomas More
- John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester
- Anne Boleyn
- Catherine Howard
- Thomas Cromwell
- Duke of Norfolk
- Duke of Buckingham
- Earl of Devon
- Earl of Surrey
- Members of the Pole family



The upper chamber of the Salt Tower held prisoners during Henry's day.

*Crown copyright:
Historic Royal Palaces*

Prisoners in the Tower during Tudor times were usually very important people, or those accused of high level political crimes. Ordinary people were very unlikely to be imprisoned in the Tower, let alone executed on Tower Hill.

A person would have been far more at risk were they acquainted with Henry VIII, as a friend, a member of his family or a minister in his government. Sir Thomas Wyatt, a poet at the time and a prisoner himself, wrote: 'It thunders round the throne'. The nearer one got to the king, in other words, the more precarious their situation.

Standards of imprisonment under Henry varied. Because of their importance, prisoners at the Tower usually enjoyed reasonably good conditions with servants, decent food, comfortable furniture and minor luxuries such as books. It was only if the king intended to break a prisoner's spirit, as he did with Thomas More and Bishop Fisher, were those comforts removed, and the prisoner was left in a bare stone cell with little food or water. Hardly any prisoners were tortured in the Tower.

Execution in Tudor times

Tudor London's usual execution sites were to the west of the city. Tower Hill, next to the Tower of London, was occasionally used for the execution of some of the fortress's prisoners. The Tower of London itself though was not generally a place of execution.



Margaret Pole - refusing to go quietly.

Prior to Henry's reign just one person - William, Lord Hastings - had been executed inside the Tower. Henry, however, ordered the executions of Anne Boleyn, Lady Margaret Pole, Catherine Howard and her accomplice Lady Rochford to be carried out on Tower Green. These executions were seen by just a few important nobles and officials, whereas executions on Tower Hill would have been watched by thousands of members of the public.

Anne Boleyn was beheaded by a sword, the other women by axe. Anne and Catherine Howard both made speeches, declaring their punishment just and in Anne's case asking for God's blessing on the king. Lady Rochford, however, was taken to the scaffold 'in a frenzy', while Margaret Pole refused to submit and was chased round the block by her executioner.

Notes:

Contemporaries, familiar with the ordeal, considered this manner of execution to be merciful, given the legal punishment for women committing treason was burning at the stake.

All those executed by Henry VIII were guilty according to law, not the whim of the king. Most had public trials. Thomas Cromwell suggested passing an act of Parliament, an Act of Attainder, so enemies could be executed without a normal trial. Ironically, it was Cromwell himself who became the first victim of the new process, followed by Margaret Pole and Catherine Howard.

Tower fact file:

State prison and execution ground (1509-1547)

While full records do not survive here's a few things we do know about prisoners at the Tower under Henry VIII.



Cuthbert Simpson, a Protestant, being tortured in the Tower during the Catholic Queen Mary I's reign. From John Foxe's Book of Martyrs (1563).

© Private collection/The Bridgeman Art Library

Prisoners

About 112 people were kept prisoner at the Tower...

- 11 women
- 101 men
- Four were known to have been tortured
- 11 were close members of Henry VIII's family (and 18 more were connected to those 11)
- 22 were lords or high-ranking churchmen
- Seven were Scottish prisoners of war
- All except four were either released or executed within a year. Of the others, one was held for two years, one for four years and another for seven years

Longest serving prisoner

Edward Courtney, Earl of Devonshire, was a cousin of the king and rival to the throne. He was imprisoned in the Tower aged 12 and stayed there for the next 15 years, most of which was under Edward VI. Imprisonment for long fixed terms was incredibly unusual in Tudor England.

Executions

During Henry's reign 69 Tower prisoners were executed.

- Four inside the Tower
- 20 on Tower Hill
- 45 elsewhere, mainly at Tyburn, west London

A narrow escape...

The Duke of Norfolk was held prisoner in the Tower for a year under Henry VIII, but was saved from execution by Henry's death. His sentence was served out under Edward VI.