

Factsheet

Female Prisoners of The Tower of London

Some of the most famous and intriguing prisoners of the Tower of London throughout history have been the women of the 16th and 17th centuries. Be they adulterous queens, heretics, rivals to the throne, or merely victims of circumstance, they each have a legacy surrounded by conspiracy and often ending in tragedy....

Sixteenth Century

Anne Boleyn

- Henry VIII's second queen, Anne Boleyn, was famously imprisoned, tried and executed at the Tower of London.
- Anne had been unable to provide Henry with the male heir he so desperately sought; by 1536 Henry's patience had run out and Anne's enemies at court took advantage, accusing Anne of adultery. She was accused of 'following daily her frail and carnal lust' for four men and of committing incest with her own brother, George Boleyn, Viscount Rochford.
- On her arrival at the Tower, Anne is reported to have asked 'Shall I go into a dungeon?'. 'No madam' came the reply, 'You shall go into the lodging you lay in at your coronation.' This would have been part of the royal palace that once lay to the south of the White Tower, and which Henry had renovated for his new Queen just three years earlier.
- She was tried in the Lieutenant's lodgings on the site of today's Queen's House (built just after the event in 1540). Her judge was her own uncle, Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk. Anne always denied the charges against her, and the evidence was circumstantial to say the least. Nonetheless, (and unsurprisingly), guilty verdicts were passed.
- Her brother and the other four men accused of having carnal knowledge of the Queen were executed on Tower Hill on 17 May.

- As befitting royalty, Anne was beheaded in privacy near the White Tower on 19 May 1536 and she rests in the Tower of London today, as her remains are buried in the Chapel Royal of St. Peter ad Vincula.

Margaret, Countess of Salisbury

- Margaret Plantagenet Pole, Countess of Salisbury, was the 68-year-old niece of Edward IV.
- She was imprisoned in the Tower in 1539 for being part of a protest known as 'The Pilgrimage of Grace'. Her son, Cardinal Reginald Pole, was the one who led the Catholic opposition against Henry VIII's break with Rome and it is believed that she was accused and imprisoned for that reason alone.
- She was later executed on Tower Green 27 May 1541.

Anne Askew

- Anne Askew was tortured at the Tower to find out what she knew about prominent Protestants at court.
- Despite Henry VIII's break with Rome, much of England, including the king, still adhered to Catholic theology, and reformers such as Askew were considered a threat to the religious status quo. Some suspected Queen Kateryn Parr herself of being a subversive and reforming influence on Henry.
- Despite the pain she was subjected to, Anne did not reveal a word and Queen Katherine would outlive her husband.
- Anne was eventually released from torture upon the order of the king. Too weak to walk, she was carried by chair to Smithfield, where she was burned at the stake for heresy on 16 July 1546.

Lady Jane Grey

- The Protestant Edward VI declared his heir as the Protestant Lady Jane Grey and upon his death she became Queen on 10 July 1553.
- As Queen, she took temporary residence in the royal apartments at the Tower. Just nine days later, on 9th July, she was removed from the throne by Edward VI's sister, the Catholic Mary I. Jane remained at the Tower whilst Mary and her councilors decided what to do with her.

- It wasn't until 13 November 1553 that she was tried and found guilty of high treason. Despite political pressure, Mary was reluctant to sign her death warrant, and instead, she was returned to her royal apartments at the Tower.
- The involvement of Jane's father, the Duke of Suffolk, in the Wyatt rebellion against Mary that winter forced the Queen to give in and condemn Jane to death. On 12 February 1554, the sixteen year old Lady Jane Grey was beheaded on Tower Green.

Princess Elizabeth

- When the future queen of England, Princess Elizabeth, arrived at the Tower in 1554 she exclaimed, 'I never thought to have come in here as a prisoner...bear me witness I come in no traitor but as true a woman to the Queen's majestic as any is now living.' Her charge was high treason and she was incarcerated by her reigning half-sister, Mary I, only weeks after the execution of their cousin, Lady Jane Grey. Religious tensions were high and Elizabeth's popularity, along with her Protestant convictions, threatened Mary's power.
- Elizabeth was confined to the royal lodgings inside the Tower of London and was kept under strict supervision so as to not alert the public and give reason to stir up controversy.
- The government conducted a series of investigations and interrogations in search of evidence against the princess. The primary goal was to implicate her in Sir Thomas Wyatt's conspiracy to stop the marriage of Mary I and Prince Philip of Spain and instead instate Elizabeth as queen. No proof was found that Elizabeth was involved and she was released from the Tower 19th May 1554. She spent the remaining four years of Mary's reign under guard at the royal manor near Oxford, then at Hatfield House in Hertfordshire before she succeeded the throne.

Lady Catherine Grey

- Lady Catherine Grey (1540 – 1568) was the sister to Lady Jane Grey, and led almost as tragic a short life. In 1554, she learnt that her father, sister and brother-in-law had been executed after the ill-starred attempt to place her elder sister on the throne.

- Under Queen Elizabeth I, Catherine's position as the rival claimant (she was the granddaughter of Henry VIII's younger sister Mary) rose once again to the surface. Her clandestine marriage to Edward Seymour, Earl of Hertford, in 1560 did not help. Queen Elizabeth found out when Catherine's pregnancy became too obvious to disguise, and both husband and wife were sent to the Tower in September 1561.
- Catherine gave birth to a son, and, more scandalously, managed to conceive again. Catherine and Edward were meant to be kept apart, but the Lieutenant of the Tower, Edward Warner, had allowed the young couple to meet in secret. Freed from the Tower into house arrest in 1563, she died from tuberculosis in 1568, still separated from her husband.

Seventeenth Century

Lady Beth Raleigh

- Elizabeth Raleigh, wife of Sir Walter Raleigh, was never a prisoner of the Tower of London. She did, however, live with her husband for a time during his incarceration in the Bloody Tower with their two children – one of whom, Carew, was born in the Tower in 1605 and baptized in the Chapel of St. Peter ad Vincula. They were allowed many luxuries and maintained a rather comfortable lifestyle complete with servants and frequent visitors.
- In the later period of Raleigh's imprisonment, after the death of Prince Henry from typhoid in 1612, James I began to apply restrictions to the family's luxuries. Elizabeth and her children were forced to leave the Tower and had to live on the reduced income resulting from the re-appropriation of Sir Raleigh's estates by the king. Her husband was later executed in October 1618 in Old Palace Yard, Westminster.

Lady Arbella Stuart

- Supported by conspirators as a rival to the throne of her cousin James I, Lady Arbella Stuart was arrested in 1611, along with her husband William Seymour, for marrying without the King's permission. They were each able to escape from their holdings and had arranged to meet at Blackwall and sail to

France. Arbella arrived in Blackwall, but Seymour was delayed for so long that she was forced to sail to Calais without him.

- Upon her arrival there, news of her escape had already spread and she was arrested and taken back to England. She was confined to her room within the Queen's House, where the strict and rigorous guard caused malnourishment and a loss of sanity, and she died there in 1615.
- Arbella was buried, without ceremony, in a vault with Mary, Queen of Scots in Westminster Abbey. Her husband, William, was able to flee to Ostend without her and there he remained until James I gave him permission to return unharmed in 1616.