

School resource

History of Hampton Court Palace

Palace People



Cardinal Thomas Wolsey

Born c1475, died 1530
Lord Chancellor
Builder of Hampton Court

Thomas Wolsey was a priest from relatively humble beginnings, who was blessed with academic brilliance and rapacious ambition. It's a matter of opinion which of these was more responsible for his rise to become Henry's first minister, and chief political confidant, but once he'd got to the top, he has a lot to offer. He was perhaps the finest ministerial mind England had ever had until at least the 19th century.

He collected ecclesiastical titles and properties like stamps. He went from being a royal chaplain to Bishop of Lincoln, then Archbishop of York, finally Lord Chancellor of England. He also became Cardinal Wolsey, Papal Legate, whose authority in some respects therefore went beyond that of King Henry VIII himself.

Wolsey leased Hampton Court in 1514 and began building work a year later. He carried on making improvements throughout the 1520s. Descriptions record rich tapestry-lined apartments, and how you had to traverse eight rooms before finding his audience chamber. He was accused, after his death, of imagining himself the equal of sovereigns, and his fall from power a natural consequence of arrogance and overreaching ambition.

Yet Wolsey was also a diligent statesman, who worked hard to translate Henry VIII's own dreams and ambitions into effective domestic and foreign policy. When he failed to do so, most notably when Henry's plans to divorce Katherine of Aragon were thwarted by Katherine herself and the Pope, his fall from favour was swift and final.

Thomas Wolsey died at Leicester Abbey in 1530, on his way to a possible final and fatal meeting with the royal wrath.





Kings Henry VIII

Born 1491, died 1547

Reigned: 1509-1447

Henry VIII and his part in the history of Hampton Court Palace are momentous stories in the history of Britain.

For many people today, Hampton Court Palace is Henry VIII. It is indeed Henry's royal standard that flies over the gatehouse. But it wasn't always so. Early on in Henry VIII's reign, Thomas Wolsey, one of the chaplains in Henry's court, first acquired a relatively small manor house here in 1514, and constructed a magnificent palace around it.

Henry was married to Katherine of Aragon for almost 24 years. They shared a similar education and a love for court entertainment and learning. But, somewhere between the private tragedy of miscarriages and stillbirths and the public political and dynastic ambitions of Henry VIII, their marriage failed.

When Henry VIII wanted a divorce from Katherine, Cardinal Wolsey, in his unique position as papal legate and chief minister, was in a fantastic position to pull it off. Or fail.

Katherine resisted, and the Pope refused. Wolsey was helpless. His titles and properties were confiscated and the Cardinal died in 1530, after his arrest for treason. When Wolsey fell from power and influence Henry acquired Hampton Court, and began his own ostentatious building programme.

Hampton Court now truly became Henry VIII's favourite palace. He spent more time here than at any other of his residences during the second half of his reign, building new apartments for himself and his new wives. And the palace survived to witness many of the most important events in the chequered political and matrimonial history of the 1530s and 1540s.

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Katherine of Aragon

Born 1485, died 1536

First wife and queen to Henry VIII

Katherine was sent to England by her parents, Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile, to marry the heir to the English throne, Prince Arthur. Accounts of the little fifteen-year-old princess describe her as 'fair-coloured' with a neat, regular oval face, and thick reddish-gold hair. 'There is nothing wanting in her that the most beautiful girl should have', wrote Thomas More.

She was pious, well-educated and politically aware. Even when Prince Arthur died, a few short months after their marriage, she remained in England, committed to her English destiny, and eventually married Arthur's younger brother, Henry, when she was 23. Katherine and Henry VIII remained married for 24 years.

It was Katherine's tragedy that, despite many pregnancies, only one of her children, Princess Mary, survived. As she reached 40, Katherine began to turn increasingly to religion - 'Why had God not granted her a son?' - as Henry began to look elsewhere for a solution to his dynastic quest. But, when Henry asked for an annulment to their marriage, Katherine summoned up every drop of pride and determination to protect her status as English queen.

She failed. Henry got his divorce - eventually - and married again. Katherine, separated from her daughter, and exiled from court, died, probably from cancer, aged 49.

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Catherine Howard

Born 1485, died 1536

Fifth wife and queen to Henry VIII

Accused of adultery

On 2 November 1541, Henry VIII arrived to celebrate mass in the Holy Day Closet at Hampton Court. Waiting for him was a letter from the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer. This letter told Henry the alarming and intimate news that his young wife, Catherine, had been accused of adultery.

A sinful past and a questionable present

Henry was reluctant to believe Cranmer's report, that his young and virtuous wife could have been unfaithful. Truth was, however, that rumours about Catherine's less than innocent qualities had circulated since her marriage to the King earlier in the year. Catherine's past apparently included an adolescent dalliance with her music teacher and her present a queue of flirtatious and ambitious courtiers.

Henry left Hampton Court and the interrogations to find out the truth began. Confessions from past lovers soon emerged and Catherine was confined to her lodgings at the palace. At first, she denied everything, but then confessed to her past, while insisting that she had been a dutiful wife since her marriage.

Eventually it emerged that Catherine had - at the very least - held illicit nocturnal meetings with a junior member of the King's Privy Chamber called Thomas Culpepper. What actually went on behind Catherine's bedroom door was never proved: but the intent to commit adultery and to deceive the King was enough.

The end for Henry's fifth queen

On 13 November, Sir Thomas Wriothesley, one of the King's principal secretaries, summoned Catherine's household to the 'Great Chamber' at Hampton Court. This may have been the Great Watching Chamber which still survives today.

All were dismissed, and the Queen herself ordered out of the palace to house arrest at nearby Syon. She left the next day. Her jewellery that she had left behind at Hampton Court was inventoried: never a good indication of future prospects.

Culpepper and another confessed lover of Catherine, Francis Dereham, were executed in December. Catherine herself had only one journey left to make.

Leaving Syon for the Tower of London on 7 February 1542, Catherine faced five more days of bleak imprisonment before, at dawn on 13 February, like Anne Boleyn before her, she was beheaded. Catherine was 20 years old.

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Queen Mary I

Born 1516, died 1558

Reigned: 1553-8

Remembered as 'Bloody Mary', the Roman Catholic queen who attempted to reverse the Reformation and return England to Catholicism: around 300 men and women lost their lives for their faith.

Mary I at the palaces

Mary and her Spanish husband, King Philip II, took their honeymoon at Hampton Court Palace in 1554. Mary returned the following year, believing she was pregnant, but no child was born and the couple remained childless until Mary's death in 1558.

Mary imprisoned her half-sister Elizabeth (later Elizabeth I) at the Tower of London in 1554. She suspected her of involvement in a plot against her, led by the traitor Sir Thomas Wyatt.

It soon became clear that there was not enough evidence against Elizabeth, and she was released into house arrest in the country.

Though known as 'Bloody Mary', historians have frequently claimed that Mary I was no more naturally malevolent than her half-siblings Edward VI and Elizabeth I, but as Protestants, English history has been kinder to them.

Certainly, executions for heresy or treason were a common feature of Tudor England. Henry VIII and Elizabeth I sent men and women to the Tower of London for no other reason than for their religious beliefs. Many others were executed.

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King James I

Born 1566, died 1625

Reigned as King of England: 1603-25

Guy Fawkes and his co-conspirators in the Gunpowder Plot failed in their famous attempt to blow up the King and Parliament.

James I at Hampton Court Palace

In December 1603, the English aristocracy gathered at Hampton Court Palace for a fortnight of festivities: everyone was keen to get a glimpse of the new king as he hosted his first English winter court.

Behind the scenes, four Puritan ministers were summoned to appear, to make their case for further reform of the Church of England.

James was a Protestant monarch, but he also believed in the divine right of kings, and the Hampton Court Conference would witness a three-day debate to determine the direction the Church would follow under the Stuart dynasty.

James was a 'walking library' who wrote lengthy books on the art of being king and presided over the Hampton Court Conference and the commissioning of the 'King James Bible'.

James himself was pilloried for being vulgar and gained a reputation for fawning over young men in public, pampering his favourites with money and titles. The whispers about his private behaviour ripened accordingly: he was not only accused of being decadent, but of being decadent without style.

His son Charles I would bring many glorious artworks to Hampton Court palace.

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King Charles I
Born 1600, died 1649
Reigned: 1625-49

The king was gallant and brave, but his wife Queen Henrietta Maria would sometimes countermand her husband's military orders!

Charles I at the palaces

Charles I loved art and brought the world-famous *Triumphs of Caesar* by Andrea Mantegna to Hampton Court Palace.

Charles I used to have tremendous rows with his wife, the French princess Henrietta Maria, at Hampton Court Palace. She thought that France was better than England and that as a French princess she was more important than as an English queen.



Oliver Cromwell
Born 1599, died 1658
Lord Protector of
England: 1653-8

Cromwell emerged as the Lord Protector of England after leading the Parliamentary side to victory. Although he'd fought to get rid of the Stuart kings, he ended up being rather like a king himself.

Cromwell at Hampton Court Palace

As Lord Protector, Oliver Cromwell moved into Hampton Court Palace where he used the former queen's bedroom for himself. He travelled down from London to spend quiet weekends here.

He enjoyed looking at Charles I's art collection, and also had several beautiful statues moved into the Privy Garden. One of these was the lovely statue of Diana that ended up in the middle of the Round Pond in Bushy Park.

In 1660 Charles II was invited back to England to become King.

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Kings Charles II

Born 1630, died 1685

Reigned: 1660–85

He was invited to come back to England after years spent wandering round Europe to sit on his father's throne in 1660. The country had had enough of the disruption caused by not having a king.

Charles II at Hampton Court Palace

Charles II installed one of his retired mistresses, Barbara Villiers, as Keeper and Chief Steward of the Mansion and Honour of Hampton Court Palace. He also spent his honeymoon with his official wife, Katherine of Braganza, at the palace.

Charles II made wig-wearing fashionable in London. The most popular ones were long, dark and curly, like the King's own natural hair.

Although he recognised no fewer than 14 illegitimate children as his own, he never had a legitimate son or daughter to inherit his kingdom. His catholic brother reigned for three years before being removed from power and replaced with Protestants William III and Mary II.

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William and Mary

Reigned: 1689–1702

Builders of a new palace at
Hampton Court

Soon after their accession to the English throne, King William III (r 1689-1702) and Queen Mary II (r 1689-94) commissioned Sir Christopher Wren to rebuild Hampton Court.

William liked both the pleasant site and the good hunting at Hampton Court, but thought the buildings needed replacing. He decided to go ahead with improvement work, because he didn't care for the monarch's principal residence at Whitehall Palace, and needed a substitute.

Grand designs

Wren's original plan was to demolish the entire Tudor palace, except for the Great Hall. Neither the time nor the money proved available for this ambitious undertaking. Wren had to be content with rebuilding the king's and queen's main apartments on the south and east sides of the palace, on the site of the old Tudor lodgings.

Work began in May 1689. William wanted rapid results, but in December, because of the excessive speed of building and the poor quality of the mortar used, a large section of the south range collapsed, killing two workmen and injuring eleven.

The subsequent inquiry deteriorated into bitter squabbles. It soon became apparent that the real cause was the speed of the work.

When building was resumed, it proceeded with less haste and more care. Between April 1689 and March 1694, £113,000 was spent on the new apartments.

A bit late, but under budget

William was devastated in late 1694 when Mary died. Work stopped, leaving the new buildings as an empty brick shell with bare walls and floors.

No further construction was undertaken until 1697. William's European wars had ended by then, and he could once more devote his thoughts and money to palace building.

As Whitehall Palace burned down in 1698, William stepped up his efforts to finish the new palace. Instead of accepting Wren's estimate for finishing the work, however, the king appointed Wren's deputy. William Talman, who had offered a lower price, eventually finished William's new King's Apartments under budget

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Kings George II

Born 1683, died 1760

Reigned: 1727-60

George II made Kensington Palace the centre of his court life
George II fell out with both his father and his son

He was the last monarch to lead his troops into battle in 1743
at the Battle of Dettingen

George II at the palaces

As Prince of Wales, George felt that he was unfairly treated by his father – not given enough money and not entrusted with the regency when his father returned to Hanover. Relations between father and son were so sour that George and his wife Caroline were thrown out of court by George I and even, for a time, kept from their own children. In retaliation, they set up their own rival court filled with opposition politicians.

History was doomed to repeat itself. After George became King in 1727 (Handel's *Zadok the Priest* was composed for his Coronation), George and Caroline's glamorous son, Prince Frederick, arrived in England and in turn became embroiled in a battle of wills with his parents; he was eventually banished from court in 1737.

In the first ten years of George II's reign, Kensington Palace was the glittering centre of court life where politicians, intellectuals and fashionable people vied for favour. George and Caroline used Hampton Court Palace regularly after their accession in 1727, especially during the summer when the palace would be alive with the flirtations, scheming and bickering of courtiers.

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