

King Henry VIII



King of England

When Henry VII died in 1509, this popular eighteen-year-old prince, known for his love of hunting and dancing, became King Henry VIII. Soon after he obtained the papal dispensation required to allow him to marry his brother's widow, Catherine of Aragon.

In the first years of his reign Henry VIII effectively relied on Thomas Wolsey to rule for him, and by 1515 Henry had elevated him to the highest role in government: Lord Chancellor.

In 1521 Pope Leo X conferred the title of Defender of the Faith on Henry for his book 'Assertio Septem Sacramentorum', which affirmed the supremacy of the Pope in the face of the reforming ideals of the German theologian, Martin Luther.

Military might

Henry VIII's early military campaigns began when he joined Pope Julius II's Holy League against France in 1511. Wolsey proved himself to be an outstanding minister in his organisation of the first French campaign and while the Scots saw this war as an opportunity to invade England, they were defeated at Flodden in 1513. However war with France ultimately proved expensive and unsuccessful.

Henry VIII is known as the 'father of the Royal Navy.' When he became king there were five royal warships. By his death he had built up a navy of around 50 ships. He refitted several vessels with the latest guns including the Mary Rose, which sank in 1545.

Henry also built the first naval dock in Britain at Portsmouth and in 1546 he established the Navy Board. This set up the administrative machinery for the control of the fleet.

A male heir

Henry was acutely aware of the importance of securing a male heir during his reign. He was worried that he had only one surviving child, Mary, to show for his marriage to Catherine, who was now in her

40s. So the king asked Cardinal Wolsey to appeal to Pope Clement VII for an annulment and it soon became clear he wanted to marry Anne Boleyn, who had been a lady-in-waiting to his first wife. But, unwilling to anger Catherine of Aragon's nephew – the most powerful ruler in Europe, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V – the Pope refused. Thomas Wolsey's ascendancy was cut short by this failure.

In 1533, Henry VIII broke with the church and married the now pregnant Anne Boleyn in a secret ceremony. Henry was excommunicated by the Pope. The English reformation had begun.

Head of the Church

After Wolsey's downfall, [Thomas Cromwell](#) became Henry's chief minister and earned the confidence of the King by helping him to break with Rome and establish Henry VIII as head of the Church of England. This act also brought him much needed wealth through the dissolution of the well-funded monasteries. Over four years Cromwell ordered that 800 monasteries be disbanded and their lands and treasures taken for the crown.

The cultural and social impact was significant, as much of the land was sold to the gentry and churches and monasteries were gutted and destroyed. Henry's personal religious beliefs remained Catholic, despite the growing number of people at court and in the nation who had adopted Protestantism.

The King's Wives

Considered most properly [Henry VIII of England](#) only had three wives, because three of his 'marriages' were annulled. Unlike a divorce, where a married couple chooses to end their union, [annulments](#) essentially declare that a true marriage never took place^[1]. However, in common parlance, the so-called wives of Henry VIII were the six [queens consort](#) wedded to Henry between 1509 and 1547. The six women who were married to Henry VIII were, in chronological order:

1. [Catherine of Aragon](#) (marriage annulled, mother of [Mary I](#))
2. [Anne Boleyn](#) (beheaded, mother of [Elizabeth I](#))
3. [Jane Seymour](#) (died 12 days after giving birth to [Edward VI](#))
4. [Anne of Cleves](#) (marriage annulled, outlived the rest of the wives)
5. [Catherine Howard](#) (beheaded)
6. [Catherine Parr](#) (widowed at death of Henry VIII, remarried to Thomas Seymour)

Henry's first marriage lasted nearly 24 years, while the remaining five totaled less than 10 years combined.

Later life and Death

As a middle-aged man, Henry became covered with pus-filled boils and possibly suffered from gout. It was a jousting accident that opened a violent wound in his leg. The wound ulcerated and left him unable to play sports. His eventual obesity required that he be moved with mechanical inventions. His habit of binge-eating highly fatty meats was perhaps a symptom of stress. A recent and credible theory suggests that he suffered from untreated type II diabetes.

On January 28, 1547, at the age of 55, King Henry VIII of England died in London. He was interred in St. George's Chapel in Windsor Castle alongside his deceased third wife, Jane Seymour. Henry's only surviving son, Edward, inherited the throne, becoming Edward VI. Princesses Elizabeth and Mary waited in succession.