

Thomas Cromwell: Radical of the Reformation?

Jenni Hyde

Thomas Cromwell was Henry VIII's right-hand man. As Vicegerent in Spirituals, he oversaw Henry's religious policies, but recent research by Diarmaid MacCulloch suggests that in Cromwell, Henry had unwittingly welcomed a religious radical to the centre of power.

As the son of a Putney blacksmith, Thomas Cromwell (Figure 1) was not the sort of man you might expect to find at the centre of Tudor politics. Most who held high office in Henry VIII's reign were nobles. Nevertheless, for 10 years, Cromwell was probably the person closest to the king, before rivalry at the king's court finally brought him down.

Little is known about Cromwell's youth, but we do know that he worked his passage across Europe, returning to London by the 1520s. He became an MP in 1523, but it was his legal work which brought him to the attention of Cardinal Wolsey (Figure 2), and he entered the cardinal's service in 1524. Wolsey was in the process of building a new college at Oxford University, and to finance the project, he dissolved around 30 monasteries, selling their lands and goods. Cromwell was responsible for the legal paperwork and became one of Wolsey's trusted advisers.

Wolsey failed to secure the **annulment** of Henry's marriage to Catherine of Aragon and fell from the king's favour. He could not stop the case being decided by the Pope in Rome, who was certain to rule in Catherine's favour. During this time, Cromwell acted as messenger between the king and the cardinal. Although he secured a pardon for Wolsey in February 1530, he also used the connections he made at court to his own advantage. By June, he was working for the king, and by the end of the year he had joined the king's council. Soon after, he was drafting the laws that would secure the end of Henry's marriage and enable him to marry Anne Boleyn (Figure 3) – the first steps in the English Reformation.

The Break with Rome

Cromwell put together a team of scholars to collect medieval sources which they claimed showed that England had always been an 'empire'. This was important because emperors had complete authority over both the church and the state. In other words, they argued that the Pope had no authority in England and could not decide the fate of Henry's marriage. Henry insisted that the clergy should acknowledge him as supreme head of the English church, and it was up to Cromwell to persuade the leading English clergyman, the archbishop of Canterbury, William Warham, to accept Henry's authority.

As the Reformation progressed, it was Cromwell who drafted much of the legislation. He ensured that the House of Commons would support it by managing the elections. For example, he persuaded the House of Commons to petition the king to take action against the ecclesiastical courts and clerical abuses in the Petition against the Ordinaries, which in turn forced **convocation** to accept the Royal Supremacy over the church.

By 1533 the matter of the king's marriage could wait no longer – Anne Boleyn was pregnant and the king needed to make sure the unborn child would be a legitimate heir. He married Anne in a secret ceremony in January, but the marriage would only be valid if Henry's marriage to Catherine were annulled. Cromwell drafted the Act in Restraint of Appeals, which prevented people asking the pope to overturn decisions made in English church courts. This meant that Catherine could no longer ask the pope to rule that her marriage was legal. Instead, the case would be tried by the new archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, who was sympathetic to the king. Within weeks, Cranmer had declared that Henry's marriage to Catherine was illegal and therefore his marriage to Anne was lawful. There followed not only a raft of legislation to undermine all the pope's remaining powers in England, but also a vicious propaganda campaign which attacked the papacy. Cromwell was at the heart of both.

The Oath of Succession

In April 1534, Cromwell was appointed the king's secretary and chief minister, making official a position he had held in all but name for some time. His priority was to secure obedience to the Act of Succession, which declared Henry's marriage to Anne Boleyn valid. Cromwell made all of Henry's subjects swear the Oath of Succession, acknowledging that the Boleyn marriage was legitimate and thereby implicitly forcing them to accept the break with Rome.

Foreseeing that not everyone would take the oath willingly, Cromwell organised the execution of Elizabeth Barton and five of her supporters for opposing the king. Barton (Figure 4) had predicted that terrible things would happen if Henry married Anne, and her visions had been publicised by religious conservatives such as the monk Edward Bocking. Cromwell realised that through her public execution, he could terrify the population into taking the oath – they would be afraid that if they refused, they too would be executed. Howard Leithhead argues that these executions were 'a turning point in the Reformation' – from here on, Cromwell was prepared to bulldoze all opposition, even making 'public examples of men and women who had become unwittingly caught up in events.' Although Barton had been an outspoken critic of the king, some of the men executed with her had simply accepted her as a mystic – after all, before she began attacking the Boleyn marriage, their trusted archbishop, Warham, had said that her visions were genuine.

The Dissolution of the Monasteries

In January 1535, Cromwell was appointed **Viceregent in Spirituals**, a position which allowed him to act as the king's deputy in religious matters. That summer, he commissioned a survey of church land and wealth known as the Valor Ecclesiasticus. The following March, he introduced a parliamentary bill to close monasteries with an income of less than £200 per annum. He persuaded MPs to support it by sharing reports that monks were corrupt and prone to vice, even though the commissioners had exaggerated the monks' luxurious lifestyles and poor behaviour. An act to close the larger monasteries followed in 1539.

The fact is that monasteries were very wealthy. By taking their assets and selling off their land, Henry's income doubled, just when he needed money to fund his foreign policy ambitions. Moreover, monasteries presented a visible reminder of the Roman Catholic

church, and their primary function, to pray for the souls of the dead, was no longer needed in post-Reformation England. Nevertheless, their dissolution did not go unopposed: it provoked one of the most serious Tudor rebellions, the Pilgrimage of Grace (Figure 5).

A Religious Radical?

It was as Vicegerent in Spirituals that Cromwell could make the most significant changes to the church. As well as putting together reformist guidelines for the church, the Act of Ten Articles, Cromwell ordered that a copy of the Bible in English should be placed in each church and instructed everyone to learn the **creed**, Lord's prayer and ten commandments. By the end of 1537, he had even managed to undermine the doctrine of **transubstantiation** and renumber the ten commandments so that they emphasised the rule against worshipping images. These changes were similar to those introduced by the original Protestant reformer, Martin Luther. The following year, Cromwell launched a campaign against images in church, pilgrimages and relics. He even encouraged Henry to ally with the Protestant German princes – a foreign policy intervention which would culminate in Henry's ill-fated marriage to Anne of Cleves.

It seems that Cromwell's personal religious beliefs were evangelical. Diarmaid MacCulloch showed that Cromwell had links to Swiss reformers and suggested that his beliefs were so radical that even most Protestants would have found them unacceptable. Henry, of course, went to his grave claiming to be a Catholic, so it is unlikely that he would have tolerated Cromwell's beliefs had he been aware of them. Cromwell certainly does not appear to have been following a coherent programme of religious reform. Instead, as with so much else in his life, he grasped opportunities as they appeared, moving the church towards Protestantism little by little. In the end, it was these reforms that allowed his enemies at court to bring him down when the Cleves marriage fell apart. Cromwell was charged not only with treason, but also with rejecting the miracle of transubstantiation. Both were punishable by death, and Cromwell was executed in July 1540. It is perhaps a mark of his influence that after his death, English religious policy moved back towards a more conservative position.

Keywords:

Annulment - Legal cancellation of a marriage. Unlike divorce, annulment means that the marriage never legally existed

Convocation – a large-scale meeting of the clergy.

Vicegerent in Spirituals – a post Henry created to enable Cromwell to reform the English church

Royal Supremacy – The 1534 Act of Supremacy gave Henry VIII the title Supreme Head of the Church of England

Creed – a statement of faith.

Transubstantiation - the belief that a miracle changes the bread and wine of Communion into the real body and blood of Christ

Chronology:

1524 Cromwell enters the service of Cardinal Wolsey

1529	Cardinal Wolsey dismissed from the king's service for failing to get Henry VIII's marriage to Catherine of Aragon annulled
1530	Cromwell begins working for Henry VIII
1532	Henry marries Anne Boleyn in secret and she becomes pregnant
1533	Act in Restraint of Appeals prevents the Pope deciding on Henry and Catherine's marriage Archbishop Cranmer declares Henry's marriage to Catherine invalid and pronounces his marriage to Anne legal
1534	Act of First Fruits and Tenths allows Henry to tax the English church Act of Supremacy gives Henry power to reform the English church
1535	Cromwell appointed Vicegerent in Spirituals Commissioners begin valuing monastic lands (Valor Ecclesiasticus) and evaluating monks' moral standards
1536	Act for the Dissolution of the Smaller Monasteries closes all religious houses valued at less than £200 per annum Execution of Anne Boleyn Pilgrimage of Grace spreads from Lincolnshire across the north of England
1539	Act for the Dissolution of the Larger Monasteries closes the remaining monasteries
1540	Court of Augmentations established to handle the proceeds of the dissolution of the monasteries Cromwell executed for treason and denial of transubstantiation

Who's Who:

Thomas Cromwell

- commoner who rose through service in Cardinal Wolsey's household to become Henry VIII's chief minister and Vicegerent in Spirituals.
- responsible for the dissolution of the monasteries,
- fell from power in 1540
- was executed for heresy.

Anne Boleyn

- second wife of Henry VIII
- mother of Elizabeth I
- executed for treason in 1536

Thomas Cranmer

- archbishop of Canterbury
- annulled Henry VIII's marriage to Catherine of Aragon
- supported the Royal Supremacy

Elizabeth Barton

- known as the nun of Kent
- predicted that the king would die if he divorced Catherine of Aragon

- her visions were publicised by religious conservatives
- arrested in September 1533
- executed in April 1534

Further Reading

Many UK public libraries allow users to access the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <https://www.oxforddnb.com>. Howard Leithhead's article on 'Thomas Cromwell, earl of Essex' is a good starting point.

The best biography of Cromwell is Diarmaid MacCulloch's *Thomas Cromwell: A Life*, (Allen Lane, 2018)

David Coast interviews Diarmaid MacCulloch about Thomas Cromwell and 1530s religious policy: <https://youtu.be/QbTfGmVoyZY?si=kmXsLcr4CTwotcgw>

Discussion points:

- What was Cromwell's biggest contribution Tudor government?
- How far was the religious policy of the 1530s more Cromwell's than Henry VIII's?
- Did Cromwell try to move religious policy too far, too fast?

Exam Links

AQA 1C The Tudors: England, 1485–1603

Edexcel 1B: England, 1509–1603: authority, nation and religion

Edexcel 31: Rebellion and Disorder

OCR Unit Y106: England 1485–1558: the Early Tudors

OCR Unit Y306: Rebellion and Disorder under the Tudors, 1485-1603

About the author

Jenni Hyde is Lecturer in Early Modern History at Lancaster University and a Trustee of the Historical Association.

Captions:

Figure 1 – Thomas Cromwell in 1532

Figure 2 – Cardinal Wolsey

Figure 3 – Anne Boleyn

Figure 4 – A nineteenth-century engraving depicting Elizabeth Barton having a vision

Figure 5 – Ruins of Whalley Abbey, one of the centres of the Pilgrimage of Grace