

The Last Days of Henry VIII

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Extract

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Prologue

'The Pope has news from France confirming the death of the king of England and attaches great importance to it, saying this opportunity must not be allowed to slip without endeavouring to bring the country to submission again.'

JUAN DE VEGA. SPANISH AMBASSADOR IN ROME, IN A CONFIDENTIAL
DISPATCH TO HIS EMPEROR, CHARLES V, 19 FEBRUARY 1547.¹

Henry VIII – 'by the grace of God, King of England, France and Lord of Ireland, Defender of the Faith and of the Church of England ... on earth the Supreme Head'² – finally departed his long, troubled life, friendless and lonely, at around two o'clock in the morning of Friday 28 January 1547.³ The golden glory of his spry, gallant youth had years ago faded away and the radiant European prince of the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520 had decayed into a bloated, hideously obese, black-humoured old man, rarely seen in public during his last months. The bloody-handed tyrant now lay lifeless in the magnificently carved walnut great bed in his opulent secret apartments in the sprawling Palace of Westminster. His unpredictable, dangerous moods and Tudor low cunning had at long last been neutralised by the omnipotent hand of Death. After thirty-seven years, nine months and five days of absolute

power, ruthless and rapacious government and the judicial murder of up to 150,000⁴ of his hapless subjects – some his wives, best friends and distant relatives – Henry expired dumb and helpless, his cruel belligerence ultimately silenced. The royal hand firmly squeezed that of the faithful and obsequious Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cranmer, the only sign that he died ‘in grace’, secure in the faith of Christ. The ‘old fox’, as one French ambassador called him, was aged fifty-five years and seven months, a good age for those times⁵ – particularly considering the king’s known fondness for gin,⁶ his latterly sedentary existence and persistent overindulgence in entirely the wrong kinds of food.

Later that morning, as the huge, stinking corpse stiffened and grew cold, the members of Henry’s turbulent Privy Council, led by Cranmer; Thomas Wriothesley, his scheming Lord Chancellor; Sir William Paget, the king’s Chief Secretary and Sir William Paulet, Lord St John, Lord Steward of the Household, filed thoughtfully through the silent, darkened bedchamber, primarily to confirm formally that the royal life really had expired. They were also there to pay their respects to the monarch they had feared, maybe loathed, but to whom they certainly owed much for their considerable lands, income and status. These strutting dignitaries had all survived a precarious existence at Henry’s court, always living under the cosh of his erratic temper and overdeveloped ego. Dread of sudden disfavour had pervaded every corner of his many magnificent royal palaces and houses like an ever-present but invisible contagion. One moment, perhaps, they could be riding high in the king’s esteem; the next, arrested by the captain of the guard, accompanied by a file of halberdiers, on a trumped-up charge of treason or heresy. Life or death, poverty or wealth, could all hang merely on the irascible whim of a king both stricken with pain and frustrated by the immobility and limitations imposed by old age and his several ailments – or on the outcomes of the devious plots hatched by the politico-religious factions at his court in furtherance of their own quests for power and influence. As the always realistic courtier Sir Anthony Denny later told his friend Roger Ascham, tutor to Princess Elizabeth:

The court ... is a place so slippery that duty never so well done is not a staff stiff enough to stand by always very surely; where you shall many times reap most unkindness where you have sown greatest pleasures and those also ready to do you much hurt, to whom you never intended to think any harm.⁷

Watching the hushed figures as they moved slowly around the bed were Denny and Sir William Herbert, the two powerful Chief Gentlemen of the Privy Chamber who had efficiently guarded Henry's isolation from the bustling world of his court and realm over the last years and months of his life and ministered even to the most intimate needs of his malodorous and diseased body.

Whether in sixteenth-century England or 500 years on in today's sleazy authoritarian states, a change in regime is an uncertain, perilous time for those accustomed to the ample pleasures and comforts of authority. The small government of largely self-seeking men that Henry had left behind him now moved swiftly to sustain their precarious grip on power and to secure the person of his successor, the precocious and intelligent nine-year-old Prince Edward, the long-awaited legitimate son and heir provided by Queen Jane Seymour.

His uncle, Edward Seymour, the ambitious and conniving Earl of Hertford, and Sir Anthony Browne, Master of the King's Horse, with a force of 300 mounted troops, rode post-haste to Hertford Castle where Edward was staying, later moving the prince, under close guard, to Enfield, Middlesex, where his half-sister Princess Elizabeth was living. Both were then told of their father's death and due homage was paid to Edward as the new king.⁸ From here, at around three or four o' clock in the morning of 29 January, Hertford sent Paget the key to the small casket containing Henry's recently revised last will and political testament. In a covering letter, he agreed that the king's will

should [not] be opened until further consultation and that it might be well considered how much ought to be published. For diverse [reasons] I think it not convenient to satisfy the world [yet].

Hertford's letter was endorsed: 'Post-haste, with all diligence, for your life.'⁹ As an additional security measure, England was sealed off from Europe by closure of the ports and the roads around London were also blocked by troops by government order.

For three days, news of Henry's death was kept secret – even within the corridors of his own court – thereby maintaining the pretence of everyday normality. Francis van der Delft, the well-informed Spanish ambassador to London, wrote to his imperial master, the Emperor Charles V, on 31 January:

I learnt from a very confidential source that the King, whom may God receive in His Grace, had departed this life, although not the slightest signs of such a thing were to be seen at court, and even the usual ceremony of bearing in the royal dishes to the sound of trumpets was continued without interruption.¹⁰

The same day, a Monday, still under Hertford's close protection, Edward rode south through the City of London to the Tower, where he was publicly proclaimed king amid the roar of cannon firing salutes from the battlements and from ships moored in the River Thames. The arch-conspirator Wriothesley, his voice choking with emotion and insincere tears trickling down his cheeks, had that morning announced Henry's death to a genuinely grieving Parliament. Paget then read out the salient terms of the king's last will and Parliament was immediately dissolved.

Close by, as the power-broking and deals were done in countless behind-the-hand conversations in the galleries and darkened closets of the Palace of Westminster, the efficient bureaucracy was setting in train the elaborate arrangements for Henry's obsequies. In 1547, as in 2002 with the funeral of Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, the establishment knew how to put on a good show full of pomp and circumstance, splendour and pageantry. Every last detail of form and protocol had already been laid down in the Westminster *Ordo*¹¹ by the heralds of the College of Arms and according to rules established by the dead king's

domineering grandmother, Margaret Beaufort, before she died nearly four decades earlier.

The first priority was to stabilise Henry's body, already corrupted by the blood and pus of his ulcerated legs,¹² by 'spurging, cleansing, bowelling, searing, embalming, furnishing and dressing with spices'.¹³ Paulet ordered the royal household's gentleman apothecary, Thomas Alsop, to supply unguents – including cloves, oil of balm, tow, myrrh and sweet-smelling nigella and musk – either powdered and divided into seven lots for the surgeons to use in embalming, or contained in ten bags to put into the coffin,¹⁴ at a total cost to the exchequer of £26 12s 2d – more than £6,600 at today's prices. Alsop and the yeomen apothecaries of the royal household assisted the surgeons and wax-chandlers in the embalming process now under way. It must have been a thoroughly unpleasant and exhausting experience: at his death, Henry probably weighed more than twenty-eight stone¹⁵ and the 6 ft. 3 in.-tall obese corpse cannot have been easy to manhandle. None the less, the cleansing and purging were successfully completed and the royal bowels removed before the embalmed cadaver was wrapped in layers of waxed cerecloth, in turn covered with lengths of the finest velvet and finally trussed up with silken cords. A label, probably cast in lead, was secured to the breast with 'writing in great and small letters ... containing his name and style, the day and year of his death'. The king's serjeant plumber and carpenters were then called in to seal the body inside an anthropoid lead shell and to construct the 6 ft. 10 in.-long coffin's huge outer casing of solid elm.¹⁶

The king's entrails and bowels were buried in a lead box in the chapel of the Palace of Westminster amid solemn Masses and the weighty coffin set upon trestles within the presence chamber, resting beneath a rich pall of cloth of gold with a cross on top, surrounded by candles. Thirty of Henry's chaplains and the Gentlemen of the Privy Chamber took turns to mount their loyal twenty-four-hour watch over the body for five days.¹⁷

Above the coffin, as a reminder of the glories of the reign now ended, was the huge *Whitehall Mural*, painted ten years before, showing the

magnificent, imposing figure of Henry at the height of his powers. He stands proudly before the figures of his parents, Henry VII and his queen Elizabeth of York, the demure Jane Seymour – mother of the king's lawful successor – to his right.¹⁸ It was, and is, a powerful propaganda image. Many watching in that hushed room must have wondered what the future held for England and the uncertain Tudor dynasty.

Some conspirators already knew.