

## The truth about Thomas Cromwell

For most of the five centuries since Henry VIII sent his chief minister to the scaffold on 28 July 1540, historians have cast Thomas Cromwell as a scheming, rapacious vulture. But does this characterisation really do him justice? Diarmaid MacCulloch investigates

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Poor Thomas Cromwell. He has rarely been given a good press – even in the triumphant island story as told by the champions of Protestant England, in which the pope’s deluded followers were repeatedly put in their place so the British empire could flourish and spread Christian civilisation far and wide. In that telling, Henry VIII receives all the credit for leading Tudor England in walking tall – and he had the glamour that his most effective minister notoriously lacked.

The various surviving copies of Hans Holbein’s portrait of Cromwell – showing him as pudgy and watchful, expensively but plainly dressed – are distinctly unflattering to this busy royal minister, to the extent that I wonder if vengeful Catholics in Queen Mary Tudor’s reign destroyed any pictures that presented him in a kinder light.

Cromwell has long been unpopular among many Roman Catholics. Curiously, he has also been derided by many

Anglicans who have turned away from their Protestant Reformation heritage and waxed sentimental about England's monastic ruins – Cromwell's central role in the destructive Dissolution can't be denied. In his days, many politicians and notables hated him out of sheer snobbery: how, they must have felt, could talent and efficiency possibly be allowed to snatch power from good breeding and ancient pedigree? So, from several different points of view, Cromwell ends up being seen as a thug in a doublet, doing the bidding of Henry VIII, the Tudor Stalin.

## **Learning from letters**

In two brilliant novels, with another to come, Hilary Mantel has worked to alter this dismal picture. She has done in semi-fictional style what I seek to do, first in an hour-long television documentary, then in a full-scale historical biography: recapture the complexity of this fascinating, self-taught man.

Cromwell emerged from the back alleys of rural Putney (his father really was a thug) to become Earl of Essex, one of the oldest noble titles in the realm – yet in the moment of this greatest triumph, he was destroyed.

There is a difficulty in ever writing Cromwell's life story properly. His papers survive in abundance, thanks to a political accident: at his arrest they were seized from his filing system, and have stayed in government hands ever since – but they amount to the contents of his in-tray, rather than letters he wrote himself. I suggest that this is the result of a quick decision made by his household when he was arrested: they burned the out-tray because that is where the incriminating material would be. It would, they believed, be much harder for Cromwell's enemies surrounding the king to build an accusation on letters written by others.

Once we try to penetrate the silence, a rather different Cromwell emerges. His intimate friendship with thoughtful, carefully candid Thomas Cranmer, archbishop of Canterbury, is telling: I have deduced from surviving archives that in the 1530s they were so much a team that Cranmer kept a special file just for their exchanges of letters, separate from other correspondence. During his service to Cardinal Wolsey in the 1520s, Cromwell became a quiet friend to the Thames Valley Lollards, a group of religious dissenters that questioned the established church.

Over the following decade, when Henry VIII effectively granted him Wolsey's powers in the church, he became a busy and effective promoter of the new religion and its enthusiasts. And in his latter years, he became a discreet organiser of contacts with the most radical European mainstream Reformations, in Zurich and northern Switzerland – far beyond anything the king could have approved, and highly dangerous for him. That was not the action of a political cynic.

My very humble good love in my most humble heart I commend  
 me unto your Lordship and desire as I render thanks that yo  
 Lordship at my request hath not only exhibited the humble  
 I sent unto you, to the King's Majesty, but also hath obtained  
 of his grace that the same should be allowed by his authority to  
 be served and used now in his realm. My Lord for this  
 your request taken in this behalf I give unto you my most  
 hearty thanks. Assuring your Lordship for the contentment  
 of my mind you have showed me more pleasure than  
 if you had given me a thousand pounds, and I doubt not,  
 but that hereby first fruits of good knowledge shall increase  
 that it shall not appear greater now at high and low  
 table. But you have done unto God and the King, no less  
 shall I ever endeavor to your good. That, beside God's reward  
 you shall enjoy perpetual memory for the same from his  
 Majesty, and as for me, you may receive me your bondman  
 and I shall be sold to you, if may be to my Lord of Newcastle  
 Thus my Lord ever hartely mine you shall / I'll  
 afford the 20<sup>th</sup> day of Auguste

Your bondman and  
 A. Cantuariey

## Talented upstart

When members of the Catholic aristocracy persuaded Henry VIII that Cromwell should die, the clincher for the king was the accusation that Cromwell was a heretic. So in Henry's mind, Cromwell was executed for the right reason – heresy. But he also died because members of the English nobility were affronted that this talented upstart usurped what they regarded as their natural place in government.

By 1539–40 Cromwell was increasingly unwell and his political judgment faltered, giving his enemies the opportunity that they had lacked in his brief period of unrivalled power just a couple of years earlier.

Cromwell made four terrible mistakes in his last year of life. One is very well known, two are less so, and one has previously been missed altogether. First, and famously, it was Cromwell's idea to marry the widower king to the German princess Anne of Cleves, believing that it would draw England closer to the German Reformation – religion again! But it would also stop Henry marrying an English nobleman's daughter – and the upstart feared the toffs.

If only Cromwell had listened to Archbishop Cranmer's opposition, and not placed his faith in over-ingenious portrait-painters and the arts of the Tudor advertising industry, who had exaggerated the bride-to-be's charms. As it was, when the king met Anne of Cleves, it was a disaster: he could not bear the sight of her (couldn't get an erection, his lawyers claimed).

## **Fatal mistakes**

That was a ghastly error, but worse was to come – the element in the story previously forgotten. Thetford Priory in Norfolk was the family burial place of the dukes of Norfolk. Thomas Howard, the third duke, was a crusty old religious traditionalist who wanted to save the priory from dissolution and refound it as a college of priests, singing masses for his family's souls for ever.

Thetford hung on longer than almost any other monastery in England but eventually, in February 1540, it closed – and there was no college in the offing. Cromwell, absurdly over-confident, had made sure that the priory was simply shut down, and the duke's plans were frustrated. Howard had to move some of his family tombs and ancestral bones 35 miles to Framlingham in Suffolk. Imagine the feelings of England's senior nobleman at this insult to his family.

Two dark coincidences then made matters even worse. First, in March 1540, came the death of Henry Bouchier, 15th Earl of Essex – an aristocrat of equal standing to the Duke of Norfolk. Cromwell decided that it would be agreeable if he himself became Earl of Essex, one of the oldest titles in England – and so, within a few weeks, he was.

A week after Bouchier's death came that of John de Vere, the 15th Earl of Oxford, another ultra blue-blood who had been hereditary Great Chamberlain of England, one of the oldest royal offices in the land – which Cromwell hoovered up, too. Again, imagine how the Duke of Norfolk felt – that Putney boy does it again!

So the Duke of Norfolk had both the motive and, with Henry's marriage to Anne of Cleves, the opportunity to strike back. The king felt humiliated, and Cromwell was to blame. Henry was always easy to influence, if one knew how, and became very ready to listen to those who gave him a reason to cut Cromwell down to size – not least the fact that his chief minister had pushed ahead with religious change behind his back. The king was easily persuaded that Cromwell was a heretic and a traitor.

It was a time of wild swings of fortune, with religious conservatives and Protestants both being imprisoned in turn. The wildest swing of all came on 10 June 1540 when Cromwell was arrested as he turned up for a routine meeting of the Privy Council. (The arrest was performed with relish by the Duke of Norfolk, who personally tore the Garter badge of St George from Cromwell's clothing.)



## The upstart's legacy

Cromwell was sent to the Tower of London and never saw the king again. If he had, he might have been saved, but his letters begging for an audience were ignored – perhaps Henry never saw them. Parliament voted him legally dead (even Cranmer voted for that), and soon he was actually dead, executed on Tower Hill on 28 July 1540.

Within a few months, Henry was lamenting that his courtiers had deceived him, saying, according to the French ambassador, that “on pretexts of some trivial faults... they had made several false accusations to him, as a result of which he had put to death the most faithful servant he had ever had”.

Too late for Cromwell the man, but not too late for his legacy. The young Protestant bureaucrats that he had trained in the 1530s went on to rule Reformation England: Nicholas Bacon and William Cecil lived until 1579 and 1598 respectively, becoming the statesmen who steered the triumphant Protestantism of Elizabethan England.

That is the measure of Cromwell's greatness, and of the way in which he shaped the future of these islands. We need to put Cromwell back in the centre of Tudor England's picture. We should question if he really was “an ambitious and totally corrupt statesman... an opportunistic jack-the-lad, a ruffian on the make,” as his recent biographer, Robert Hutchinson, labelled him.

I must emphasise that, though there's much that seems modern in Cromwell's story – high political infighting in a Tudor version of the satirical comedy *The Thick of It* – we should realise that the Tudors viewed politics through two lenses that have been removed from the eyes of modern British politicians. We don't do God, while they did God all the time. And we don't worry too much about family trees and heraldry; Cromwell's story illustrates that the Tudors were obsessed by them both.

So Cromwell died first for being a man of the Protestant Reformation, and second for not having an ancient pedigree – effectively insulting and upstaging those who did, just because he existed and flourished. He was the victim of the blue-bloods who found it insufferable that a man should govern just because he had talent.

So I present to you Thomas Cromwell: a cool, self-contained idealist who wanted to shape the kingdom of England in the name of a new religion – the remaker of this realm. I have given you a taste of some of the revelations to be found in the archives, but you will discover many more in my BBC Two documentary. And you may be most surprised by some of the locations at which we chose to shoot. For example, did you know that a complete Tudor palace hides in

the middle of Croydon?

Well, you do now!

## **Thomas Cromwell: a timeline**

**c1485:** Cromwell is born in Putney. His father is a tradesman – a pub landlord – and an aggressive drunk

**c1501:** Cromwell travels to France, Italy and the Low Countries, from where, after a strangely hidden 10 years, he returns with as good an education as any nobleman, plus a handy ability to get things done

**1524:** He enters Cardinal Wolsey's service full-time. Among his many duties is dissolving monasteries to fund Wolsey's educational projects

**1530–31:** Wolsey falls from power, and Cromwell is notably loyal to his old master. After Wolsey's death he enters the king's service, offering his experience of parliament as the means to gain national consent for a break with the pope so that Henry can marry Anne Boleyn

**1535:** Henry grants Cromwell a unique title: 'Vice-Gerent in Spirituals' – royal deputy in the church, effectively re-creating Wolsey's power without the pope. He plans the first major monastic dissolutions

**Spring 1536:** Increasingly at odds with Anne Boleyn, Cromwell ensures her arrest and execution

**1536–7:** Cromwell secures royal approval for publication of a Bible in English. His power reaches its height

**Late 1539:** Cromwell (in the face of Cranmer's opposition) arranges Henry's marriage to Anne of Cleves. It leads to a royal humiliation – she sexually repels the king

**Early 1540:** Ill and losing his political instincts, Cromwell infuriates the Duke of Norfolk by closing Thetford Priory, Norfolk's family mausoleum, and angers other nobles by taking the ancient title Earl of Essex

**June–July 1540:** Cromwell is arrested as a heretic and traitor. On 28 July he is executed before he can plead his case before the king

**In next month's issue of *BBC History Magazine* (September 2014), Tracy Borman explores the volatile relationship between Cromwell and Henry VIII. Plus, we speak to *Wolf Hall* author Hilary Mantel about the Cromwell of fact and fiction. To find out more about the issue, [click here](#).**

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