

Wolf Hall: who was the real Thomas Cromwell?

Thomas Cromwell is the leading player in the brilliant new BBC adaptation of Hilary Mantel's Booker Prize-winning novels, *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies*.

In the TV version of *Wolf Hall*, Cromwell is played by Mark Rylance - but who was the real historical figure on whom Rylance's performance and Mantel's fictional portrayal is based?

In a sentence...

Thomas Cromwell was an intelligent, powerful and ruthless English lawyer and statesman who was born in Tudor England around 1485, in Putney, London and died on the 28th July, 1540.

Despite his low birth, Thomas Cromwell rose to become one of the pre-eminent political figures of his day.

Over a remarkable career, he served England's monarch Henry VIII in a number of influential roles, including the Lord Privy Seal, Lord Chamberlain, Master of the Rolls, Secretary of State, Chancellor of the Exchequer and Earl of Essex.

How did he become so powerful?

Cromwell was a brilliant lawyer and masterful political operator. After establishing himself in London's legal and mercantile world, he went on to gain a seat in the House of Commons as MP for Taunton and to serve in the household of Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, who was himself a formidable politician, statesman and diplomat.

In his subsequent political career, Cromwell played a key role in arranging the annulment of the king's marriage to his then queen, Catherine of Aragon, which paved the way for Henry to marry his mistress, Anne Boleyn.

As one of Henry's most skilfull and effective advisors, Cromwell helped to engineer both the rise and fall of Anne Boleyn, who was executed for treason in 1536 after she failed to give Henry a male heir.

However, Cromwell himself fell from grace after the marriage he arranged between Henry and a German princess, Anne of Cleves, ended in a disastrous annulment after just six months.



A letter written by Thomas Cromwell (top right) attempting to speed up Henry VIII's marriage to Anne of Cleves (bottom right)

What was his background?

Cromwell was born to Walter Cromwell, a blacksmith and brewery-owner, and his wife, Katherine. While little is known about his early life, it is believed that he grew up near Putney Hill, on the edge of Putney Heath: a dangerous area known to be frequented by highwaymen at night. Years later, Cromwell declared to Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cranmer that he had been a "ruffian ... in his young days".

As a young man, he left his family and travelled to Europe, where he may have spent time fighting as a mercenary in the French army, marching with them to Italy. After visiting the Low Countries, learning several languages and developing a network of contacts among the country's English merchants, Cromwell returned to Italy, where he is believed to have acted as an agent for the then- Archbishop of York, Cardinal Christopher Bainbridge. At some point during this period, Cromwell returned to England, marrying Elizabeth Wyckes in 1515.

Did he have a family?

Yes, Cromwell and his wife Elizabeth Wyckes had three children: Gregory, Anne and Grace. Elizabeth, Anne and Grace all died in 1528, victims of an epidemic of sweating sickness, a scene that is described with heart-breaking tenderness in Mantel's novel. Cromwell also fathered an illegitimate daughter, Jane.

What were his religious beliefs?

Most historians maintain that Cromwell was a committed Protestant, who encouraged Henry to split from the authority of the Catholic church, embodied by the Pope, and to assert in its place an independent Church of England. Legally and politically, he was among the driving forces and influential agents behind the English Reformation. However, it is thought that he attempted to keep his personal beliefs separate from his political roles, at least in public.

How did he die?

Cromwell was executed, without trial, for treason on the 28th July, 1540 – the same day that King Henry married his fifth wife, Catherine Howard. He was beheaded on Tower Hill and his severed head was exhibited on a spike on London Bridge.



Wolf Hall: Thomas Cromwell (Mark Rylance) shows off his archery skills to Henry VIII (Damian Lewis)

Cromwell on stage and screen

As well as appearing as a character in William Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*, Thomas Cromwell has been variously played by Leo McKern in the Oscar-winning film adaptation of Robert Bolt's play *A Man for All Seasons* (1966), James Frain in the bodice-busting TV drama *The Tudors* (2007), Kenneth Williams in *Carry On Henry* (1971) and Mark Rylance in the BBC's *Wolf Hall*. Read the Telegraph's [interview with Mark Rylance](#) about his portrayal of Cromwell

to find out more.

Was he related to Oliver Cromwell, who helped lead the Roundheads to victory in the English Civil War (1642–1651)?

Yes, though only just. Thomas Cromwell's older sister Katharine and her husband Morgan Williams, a Welsh lawyer, had a son, Richard, who later served in Thomas's household and changed his surname to Cromwell. Oliver Cromwell was Richard's great-grandson.



Hans Holbein's celebrated portrait of Thomas Cromwell (Alamy)

A historian's view

“Cromwell's a brilliant lawyer. He has been a freelance soldier (read: mercenary) on the continent, and speaks many languages. He is devoted to his master Wolsey. He is also a hard-nosed, ambitious politician and a brutalised tough-guy. But he loves his kids! Think Tony Soprano or Vic Mackey from *The Shield* and you're halfway there. Oh, and Cromwell's involved in religious reform.”

Read historian Dan Jones on Cromwell's character and other [Wolf Hall mysteries explained](#).

Was Cromwell a 'religious extremist'?

“Historians rarely agree on details, so a lot about Cromwell's inner life is still up for debate. But it is a truly tough job finding anything heroic in the man's legacy of brutality and naked ambition.”

Dominic Selwood claims that the [historical Thomas Cromwell could be considered the 'Islamic State of his day'](#).



Claire Foy as Anne Boleyn and Damian Lewis as Henry VIII