

Anne Boleyn

Anne Boleyn's involvement with King Henry VIII of England helped to change the course of history. Such a remarkable role would not have been foreseen at her birth. Historians can only conjecture that she was born between 1501 and 1509, with a likely date of 1507. Her father, Thomas Boleyn, was a member of the Privy Council and an important diplomat who served his king. It was Thomas' travels to France that earned Anne, and her older sister Mary, a place at French court. Both of them spent time as lady's maids to royal members of the French court. Upon her return to England, her father had arranged for her to marry James Butler. This would have been politically advantageous to her father as well as King Henry VIII. The wedding never took place, however, due to Anne's attraction to Lord James Percy. Anne was sent back to her father's native country of Ireland, only to be summoned back in 1522 to the English court as a lady in waiting to Henry's first wife, Queen Catherine. While serving Catherine in about 1526, Anne caught the eye of King Henry, who had already had an affair with her older sister Mary. Anne long resisted Henry's pressure to become his mistress, preferring marriage. His desire for Anne increased his efforts to secure an annulment from his marriage to Catherine of Aragon. During their eighteen-year marriage, Catherine had failed to give Henry a male heir to the throne of England, only producing a daughter, Mary. Henry wanted a male heir to prevent a civil war, like the Wars of the Roses which his father, Henry VII had won to become king. So in 1527 Henry asked the pope for an annulment of his marriage, similar to other annulments the pope had granted kings and princes. Catherine on the other hand had many sympathizers and supporters, including her nephew, Emperor Charles V, whose armies threatened the pope in Rome. After theologians argued that the pope lacked freedom to make a decision on the matter, in January 1533, Henry secretly wed Anne who was already pregnant with the couple's first child Elizabeth.

Three months before Henry and Catherine's marriage was officially declared invalid by the Archbishop of Canterbury. Anne was only twenty-six years old and Henry was forty-two. Still, Anne was an educated and independent woman. Many have compared her and the recently deceased Diana, Princess of Wales (see below). While many Roman Catholics despised her, many Protestant Reformers hailed Anne and praised her. Anne's protection helped the Protestants further their cause. Henry crowned her queen on June 1, 1533. As a result of his marriage problems, Henry and his Parliament passed the Act of Supremacy in 1534, which proclaimed the king as head of the Church of England. Although Henry VIII himself was a religious conservative, England slowly began to create the branch of Christianity known as Anglicanism, which often considers itself to have taken a middle road between Luther's and Calvin's Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. It also closely involved Parliament in the key decisions, including the Act of Succession, allowing representatives of the people a vital role in choosing the next dynastic monarch.

This change did not help Anne, though, since after three years of marriage she had not provided a male heir (after two stillbirths). Henry began to be disenchanted with Anne and took on another mistress, Jane Seymour. The ex-queen Catherine had also died on January 7, 1536. On May 2, the king had Anne arrested. The king made a barrage of charges made against Anne, including that she was a witch. Henry devised a plot with the assistance of Thomas Cromwell. Anne was charged with adultery, including an incestuous relationship with her brother George. Many researchers have argued, however, that these charges were false. Her alleged suitors confessed to the charges under torture, leaving doubt that Anne was really guilty. The charges of adultery brought against Anne were merely an excuse to have Anne executed so that Henry would be free to marry Jane Seymour. She was executed primarily because she did not produce a surviving male heir to the throne. Despite Anne's attempt to persuade the court to give her a fair trial, she was found guilty, her marriage dissolved and her daughter Elizabeth a bastard.. Anne Boleyn was beheaded on May 19, 1536. Henry married Jane Seymour soon following, and never spoke of Anne ever again.

Jane Seymour gave Henry his long-desired male heir, but she died after childbirth. Henry would go on and marry three other women: Anne of Cleves, Anne's cousin Katherine Howard, and Katherine Parr, who outlived Henry. Jane's son reigned a few years as King Edward VI, but he died young. Catherine's daughter Mary became queen, and England did not suffer a serious civil war as Henry had feared. But Queen Mary gained a notorious reputation and also died after a few years. So, Anne's daughter Elizabeth inherited the throne to become the great Queen Elizabeth I, who, ironically, was a more successful ruler than most monarchs, male or female.