

ANNE BOLEYN – THE LAST MYSTERY

With his wife, Anne Bolyen, in the Tower, Henry VIII considered every detail of her coming death, pouring over plans for the scaffold. As he did so he made a unique decision. Anne, alone amongst all victims of the Tudors, was to be beheaded with a sword and not the traditional axe. The question that has remained unanswered until now is - why?

I am the historian Leanda de Lisle, uncovering the Tudors and Stuarts behind the myths

Historians have suggested that Henry VIII chose the sword because Anne had spent many years in France, where the nobility were executed this way, or because it offered a more dignified end. But as I researched ‘Tudor’, my biography of the Tudor family, it became evident that Henry didn’t care a jot for Anne’s feelings. Anne was told she was to be beheaded on the morning of 18 May, and was then kept waiting until noon before being told she was to die the next day. At the root of Henry’s decision was not Henry thinking about Anne, but about himself.

When Henry VIII fell in love with Anne in 1526, he represented an ideal of chivalric kingship come to life: handsome, pious, and martial. In Europe it was said ‘his great nobleness and fame’ was ‘greater than any Prince since King Arthur’.

There could have been no greater compliment for Henry: the legend of Thomas Mallory’s, ‘King Once and King to Be’ was woven into the Tudor family myths. The first Tudor king, Henry VII, had claimed the Welsh blood-line of the Tudors made them the heirs to King Arthur. He even gave the name to his eldest son. Only when the boy died, shortly after being married to Katherine of Aragon, did Henry VII lose his enthusiasm for the Arthurian myths.

For Henry VIII, however, these myths became increasingly important.

As early as 1516 Henry VIII had the round table hanging in the Great Hall of Winchester Castle, and which it was believed dated back to Camelot, painted with the figure of Arthur bearing Henry’s own features and an Imperial crown. It was Henry’s

belief that England was, historically, an empire, and he Arthur's heir, that later became the basis for his claim to an imperium, or 'command' over Church as well as State. It justified the break with the Papacy that allowed him to marry Anne in 1533. But like Katherine of Aragon, Anne failed to give Henry the son he wanted and when she miscarried in January 1536, he lost hope that she ever would.

He began complaining that Anne had seduced him into marrying her – an accusation carrying suggestions of witchcraft – and he showed a growing romantic interest in her maid of honour, Jane Seymour.

Nevertheless, on 30 March 1536, the king's chief Minister, Thomas Cromwell, assured a foreign ambassador that that 'notwithstanding that the King was still inclined to pay attention to ladies [such as Jane Seymour]' he believed the marriage to Anne would continue'.

Dissolving the marriage to Anne was a complex issue for Henry, who feared it would re-confirm 'the authority of the Pope'. But Anne was also making an enemy of Cromwell, with whom she quarreled over the burning issue of what to do with the money raised from the monasteries Henry was closing down. Anne hoped to see the money go to charitable enterprises, while Cromwell intended to pour it into the King's pocket.

On 2 April, the chaplain in charge of Anne's charitable giving delivered a sermon at court that suggested a comparison between Cromwell and the biblical figure Haman, the corrupt minister of an Old Testament King. The sermon noted threateningly that Haman had died on the scaffold.

Anne's anger with Henry was also evident during these weeks. Her brother, George had let slip that she had complained Henry had 'neither talent nor vigour' in bed. Some wondered if she had a lover, a view encouraged by her sometimes outrageous flirting – and it was to be this flirting that triggered her downfall.

On Saturday 28 April, when the King's body servant, Sir Henry Norris, came to her household, Anne asked him why he had not yet married the maid of honour he kept visiting. When Norris shrugged that he preferred to 'tarry a time', Anne joked, 'You look for dead men's shoes, for if ought came to the king but good, you would look to have me'. Imagining the death of the King was a treasonous offence, and Norris, replied, aghast, 'if he should have any such thought, he would [wish] his head were off'

The next day a young court musician called Mark Smeaton, who had been seen moping after Anne earlier on the Saturday, was taken secretly to Cromwell's house for questioning. Anne's conversation with Norris gave Cromwell a means of accusing her of treason. But Norris was unlikely to confess to adultery and so make a charge of plotting the King's murder plausible. A weaker man was required if Anne's chastity was to be besmirched – and Smeaton was to fill that role.

Before that evening Henry had learned that Smeaton had confessed to adultery with the Queen. He postponed, but did not cancel, a trip he had planned to take with Anne to Calais in June. He could not be certain what else Cromwell might uncover. The next morning, May Day 1536, he attended a joust with Anne at Greenwich Palace.

As the tournament ended a message was passed to the King. Abruptly, he rose from his seat and left for Westminster by horse, taking a handful of attendants. Norris was called to join him, while an astonished Anne was left to oversee the closing of the competition.

As the King's party rode off Henry asked Norris if he had committed adultery with the Queen, offering to pardon him if he confessed. Norris, a fellow member of the Order of the Garter, Henry's equivalent of the Knights of the Round Table, found himself cast in the role of Lancelot to Anne's Guinevere.

He angrily – desperately – asserted his innocence. It did him no good. He joined Smeaton in the Tower that night. Anne was taken there the following day along with her brother, accused of adultery with his sister. Two further courtiers would also be convicted at trial of plotting Henry's death with the Queen.

As Henry's sexual inadequacies were paraded during the trials, he responded by advertising his virility, staying out all hours, banqueting with beautiful girls, seemingly full of 'extravagant joy'. In private, however, he comforted himself in a different way, obsessing over the details of Anne's coming death. In Thomas Mallory's *Death of Arthur*, the King sentenced Guinevere to death by burning, (although it was never carried out).

Henry decided Anne would be beheaded with a sword – the symbol of Camelot, of a rightful King, and of masculinity. Historians argue over whether Anne was really guilty of adultery, and if Henry or Cromwell was the more responsible for her destruction. But the choice of a sword to kill Anne reflects one certain fact: Henry's overweening vanity and self-righteousness.

'I heard say the executioner was very good and I have but a little neck', Anne said the day before her execution, and laughing, she put her hands round her throat. It was, at least, to be a quick death: her head fell with one blow, her eyes and lips still moving as it landed on the straw.