

Why was Wolsey able to rise to power and how powerful was he?

It seems incredible that the son of an Ipswich butcher could rise to become the king's principal advisor and the second richest man in the country. His rise to pre-eminence angered the nobility. They resented his wealth, seen most clearly in his palace of Hampton Court, and his jobs and close relationship with Henry, which had traditionally been their preserve. What was it that allowed someone from such low birth to rise to the top?

It is likely that it was a combination of factors, most notably luck, but also Wolsey's considerable talents and ability for hard work. There is no doubt that Wolsey was incredibly talented – after all, he had gained a degree from Oxford at fifteen. Wolsey was also quick to recognise opportunities for promotion and was a great flatterer, something that would be of great benefit in his relationship with the king. He was also an extremely hard worker and this appealed to a king who was less interested in the day-to-day running of the kingdom and more interested in sport, fun and courtly life.

It is often forgotten that Wolsey had already made his mark under Henry VII as his chaplain, and later Dean of Lincoln, and this had led to him being sent on diplomatic missions for the old king. However, Wolsey first came to Henry VIII's notice as a member of Fox's entourage, but he realised that backing Fox's peace party would not endear him to a monarch who wanted war, or a more aggressive or 'forward' policy. Wolsey therefore gave the king the advice he wanted to hear. He was also aided by the fact that many of Henry VII's old advisors, such as Dudley, had either been removed, or like Warham and Fox wanted political retirement. The opportunity for Wolsey to make his mark was the 1513 expedition to France. Wolsey took on the organisational tasks, which many of the more experienced officials did not want because of the obvious difficulties in arranging such a venture. However, Wolsey overcame both the logistical obstacles in supplying the army and opposition from those in authority, whose rights he ignored so that the king's wishes were met. Complaints to the king from those he annoyed served only to reinforce his value to the king, who saw in Wolsey a man who could overcome obstacles and ensure his wishes were carried out.

Although there is no clear date as to when Wolsey became Henry's chief advisor, it appears that by the middle of 1514 the king was referring nearly all matters of business to him. This influence was initially not reflected in any official position of power, but this soon followed and by 1515 he had become Lord Chancellor and a cardinal. This rise continued and in 1518 he was appointed **papal legate** and in 1524 this was confirmed for life.

Historians have debated how much power Wolsey actually wielded. As Lord Chancellor he had direct control over the legal system, but although some have tried to portray him as a virtual dictator, it must not be forgotten that he could be over-ruled by the king. Although Wolsey was vindictive towards those who went behind his back to secure the king's support, some, such as George Cavendish, Wolsey's gentleman usher, have argued that:

All his endeavour was only to satisfy the king's mind, knowing well right that it was in the very vein and right course to bring him to high promotion. He took upon him to disburden the king of so weighty a charge and troublesome business, putting the king in comfort that he shall not need to spare any time of his pleasure for any business that should necessary happen in the council as long as he being there, having the king's authority and commandment doubted not to see all things furnished and perfected.

(Life of Cardinal Wolsey, 1554–58)

There is little doubt that Wolsey wielded great influence. As the historian Steven Gunn has argued: 'His authority as Henry's chief minister was so great, and his apparent responsibility for all areas of government policy so sweeping, that politicians and political commentators alike had either to be entirely for Wolsey or against him' (S. Gunn and P. Lindley, *Cardinal Wolsey, Church, State and Art*, 1991, page 2). However, the idea that Wolsey directed policy is probably incorrect; as Eric Ives has suggested: '[Wolsey] could effectively propose a policy but he was always careful to ensure that Henry owned it' ('Henry VIII, the Political Perspective' in D. MacCulloch's *The Reign of Henry VIII, Politics, Policy and Piety*).

The relationship between king and minister was close, with John Guy arguing that 'It is true that Wolsey enjoyed exceptional favour and for a while his position was different. Between 1515 and 1525 it can be argued that Henry treated him more as a partner than a servant. Wolsey enjoyed a uniquely privileged access to the king. They walked arm-in-arm together and were intimate confidantes to the exclusion of others.' ('Wolsey, Cromwell and the Reform of Government', *ibid.*, page 36.) However, despite this, Wolsey was aware that his position and security depended upon pleasing the king. This was even more important given his humble background and the unpopularity of many of his policies with the nobility (see pages 64–5).