

that by this stage Wolsey was intent on destroying the power base of those he perceived as rivals for the King's favour.

### Conclusion

Faction was an inevitable part of any European court, but the sheer monopolisation of political power by Wolsey for fifteen years meant that latent faction was not really in evidence. One can be sure that Wolsey guarded his position and status fiercely and made sure that he was well informed of any political manoeuvring by ambitious young men. The extent to which Wolsey purposefully isolated these nobles has been keenly debated but it is indisputable that power rested on the will of the King. As we have established already, Wolsey's pre-eminence could last only as long as Henry saw fit. As long as Henry believed that Wolsey was serving his interests effectively, the Cardinal was effectively untouchable. What Wolsey did in terms of building up his wealth and adding to his titles and positions merely confirmed his status. It must be remembered that Henry made Wolsey and Henry had the capacity to break him also.

### Key text: *The King's Cardinal*, by Peter Gwyn

Published in 1990, Gwyn's work attempts to rehabilitate Wolsey's reputation in history. Gwyn views Wolsey as a loyal servant of the Crown who did not go out of his way to antagonise nobles nor ruthlessly monopolise power at the expense of other courtiers. Gwyn believes that Wolsey served the King diligently and effectively until circumstances conspired against him in 1529. Some historians criticised Gwyn for taking a rather rosy view of Wolsey's political dealings.

### Did Wolsey carry out any meaningful reform of the Church?

*What was the impact of the Hunne Affair?*

The 1515 parliamentary session was dominated by the Hunne Affair (see page 20), and the anti-clerical backlash from this controversy impacted upon Wolsey. Richard Hunne was a prosperous London merchant, who had challenged the Church through the law courts over the high rate of mortuary fees that he had been forced to pay on the death of his infant son. In response the Church had allegedly trumped up charges of heresy against Hunne and he was imprisoned while awaiting trial. Hunne was subsequently found dead in custody and his demise caused uproar in the City of London. The case fuelled anti-clericalism in London, as the Church was accused of making up charges of heresy, murdering a well-to-do merchant and then convicting him of all charges after his death in order to seize his property. The case is widely cited by historians as evidence of widespread dissatisfaction with the Church, and subsequently one of the reasons why Catholicism crumbled under Henry's later attacks.

### Taking it further

Polydore Vergil's description of Wolsey

*Soon he began to use a golden seat, a golden cushion, a golden cloth on his table, and when he went on foot, he had his hat – the symbol of the cardinal's rank – carried before him by a servant, and raised aloft like a holy idol, and he had it put upon the very altar in the king's chapel during divine service.*

Find another description or an image of Wolsey that you think best portrays the cardinal's pomp and vanity.

### Definition

#### Probate courts

Ecclesiastical courts dealing with wills left by the laity that often included monetary donations to the Church.

In reality this was not the case and many remained loyal and devoted to the Catholic Church. However, within the confines of London the Hunne Affair was notorious and it did nothing to convince Wolsey that parliament was a force for good.

At the same time a friar named Henry Standish attacked the legal precedent of benefit of the clergy. Benefit of the clergy allowed members of the clergy to have any criminal cases heard in ecclesiastical courts rather than secular courts where it was assumed that they would gain a more lenient hearing. Not only that, but benefit of the clergy had been widely abused over the course of the late-medieval period, to the point that any educated and literate man might be able to claim immunity from secular trial. An Act of 1512 restricted benefit of the clergy and in the 1515 session the principle was once more raised, adding further to the anti-clerical atmosphere. The Act was not renewed but Wolsey had to swear to Henry personally that royal authority held sway over ecclesiastical power.

The anti-clericalism of 1515 perhaps explains why the next parliament did not meet until 1523. Only Wolsey's desperate need for money to fund Henry's foreign policy explains why parliament met in 1523 and, as we have seen, Wolsey was forced to compromise his policy against enclosure in order to get extra cash (see page 43).

#### *Ecclesiastical extravagance*

There is no hiding from the fact that Wolsey's exploitation of his ecclesiastical positions did bring him incomparable wealth in England. His appointment as *Legate a latere* merely enhanced his ecclesiastical authority and allowed him to establish his own **probate courts** through which his income was increased still further. Wolsey's wealth was there for all to see and unquestionably created jealousy and resentment.

Wolsey's pomp and magnificence opened him up to criticism and a certain amount of ridicule from contemporary satirists such as Skelton. Still, given the authority vested in him by the Pope as *Legate a latere* Wolsey was in a strong position to reform the Church, which as we have seen in the parliamentary session of 1515 was coming in for some criticism.

#### *Pluralism, nepotism and absenteeism*

Wolsey's reputation as a churchman has been widely criticised. He has been held up by subsequent Protestant historians as the embodiment of all that was wrong with the Catholic Church. It is undeniable that Wolsey held bishoprics in plurality (by 1529 he held the archbishopric of York, bishopric of Winchester and the abbey of St Albans) and used ecclesiastical patronage to support his illegitimate son, Thomas Winter. He also never actually visited his sees of Lincoln, Bath and Wells, and Durham. Indeed he only went to York after his fall from grace.

As the historian S.J. Gunn points out, senior churchmen across Europe indulged in simony, nepotism and pluralism, and these abuses were nothing new. In many ways they were viewed as part of the post and did not attract the level of contemporary criticism that we might think they would.

However, all of this adds fuel to the idea that Wolsey was only interested in exploiting the Church for his own personal financial gain. Wolsey did hold an **Ecclesiastical Council** in 1518 at York that discussed ways of improving the conduct and work of the provincial clergy. Yet the York Convocation said nothing new and could be seen merely as a means by which Wolsey could impress the Pope in light of his upcoming appointment as *legate*. As John Guy points out, 'it is hard to rate Wolsey's ecclesiastical policy as anything much beyond the level of good intentions'.

#### Monastic reform

Wolsey initiated legatine **visitations** of monastic houses in England, and his proposals for reform among the religious orders were constructive and positive. The visitors to some monastic houses reported that not all abbots and monks were observing the prescribed monastic lifestyle that they had sworn to, and as a result some were replaced, while statutes for the Benedictines and Augustinians were drawn up. By the end of his career Wolsey was proposing the creation of thirteen new **episcopal sees** based on dissolved monasteries to bring English dioceses into line with population change. Still such achievements were modest and not without opposition.

Many, such as Archbishop Warham, objected to the heavy handed way in which Wolsey tried to carry out reform. Moreover, Wolsey's additional dissolution of thirty religious houses to pay for the building of Cardinal College, Oxford, and Ipswich School upset defenders of the monastic way. Wolsey's promotion of education and humanism may sound worthy but again the principal reason behind the endowment of these two colleges was to further Wolsey's own reputation and standing within the Tudor court.

#### Pope or King?

Both the Pope and Henry hoped that they would benefit financially from Wolsey's appointment as papal legate. Despite being appointed *Legate a latere* in 1524 Wolsey did not deliver a subsidy to Rome, but he did succeed in taxing the clergy at a rate that was even greater than theavaricious Henry VII. Therefore, although there was an apparent conflict of interests between Pope and King, it was evident that Wolsey never forgot that Henry was his real master. Ultimately Henry expected Wolsey to be able to use his legatine influence in Rome to solve his Great Matter and, when circumstances turned against Wolsey, Henry turned on the Cardinal.

### Definitions

#### Ecclesiastical Council

A meeting of leading bishops to discuss the condition of the Church.

#### Visitation

Inspection of a church or religious house by Crown commissioners.

#### Episcopal see

A bishopric or the specific area over which a bishop has authority.

**Conclusion: did Wolsey weaken the English Church?**

The extent to which Wolsey actually weakened the Church has been much debated. Certainly his personal conduct is not impressive but, as we have established, his actions were not unusual at the time. To his credit Wolsey shielded the Church from monarchical attack in the period 1515-29. Over the issue of benefit of the clergy, Wolsey had tried to defend clerical privileges as best he could, and used his political position to assure Henry that the royal prerogative was not being undermined by appeals to Roman canons.

Yet at the same time Wolsey weakened the Church through his intensely centralising policies in all aspects of ecclesiastical affairs. Wolsey was personally involved in all important Church matters but he was first and foremost Henry's servant. Essentially Henry could use Wolsey as a loyal and effective civil servant in charge of the Church. Wolsey served to increase royal control over the Church and weakened its sense of independence at the same time. No one could foresee the events of the 1530s that lay ahead and the establishment of the Royal Supremacy, but it is tempting to argue that the Church was unable to withstand the attack that came under Henry in the 1530s as a consequence of Wolsey's legatary legacy.

**SKILLS BUILDER**

1 Using the sources and information in this unit, complete a table like the one below to organise your ideas about Wolsey's domestic policies.

Success or failure?	Evidence	Wolsey's policies	Church Nobility/Councillors Finance Justice Enclosure
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Sorting your ideas in this way will help you when you come to answer questions on Wolsey.

2 Below is an example of a b) type question on Wolsey's domestic policies. Make some notes on what you would include in your answer to this question. Then write your answer.

**Question (b)**

Use Sources T, U and V and your own knowledge.

Do you accept the view in Source V that Wolsey's domestic policies were disappointing? (40 marks)

was sent to Fleet Prison and in 1516 Lord Burgavenny was accused of legal retaining. Perhaps Wolsey also saw the law as a means of bringing the social superiors down to size.

Finally, it should be pointed out that Wolsey's achievements in the law did not outlast him. He used the existing machinery of the law to carry out his work and failed to carry out any lasting institutional reform. He may well have been active and energetic in his role as Lord Chancellor but it is also true that there was an enormous backlog of cases to be heard in Star Chamber by 1529 and much of the administration there was chaotic.

### Enclosure

The historians Scarisbrick and Peter Gwyn both place much emphasis upon the legal actions that Wolsey took against those nobles who enclosed land and illegally. Enclosure involved fencing-off common land for profitable sheep rearing, and this action was thought to be responsible for rural depopulation and poverty. Three statutes had been passed against enclosure before Wolsey became Lord Chancellor, but had been largely ignored. Wolsey went to work on enclosure in 1517, launching a national inquiry into enclosed land. Many of those brought to court were ordered to rebuild houses that had been destroyed and return land to arable farming.

Once more we can see Wolsey's drive and determination in bringing great men to justice, and to challenge the power of the aristocracy. At the same time one might question the long-term practical results of Wolsey's activities. Enclosure continued to take place and rural poverty continued to climb. Wolsey's actions furthered his unpopularity with the ruling classes. Indeed in a parliamentary session of 1523 Wolsey was forced to accept all existing enclosures demonstrating that he was not always able to exert his political power over the nobility.

### Finances

#### Source O

The ability to tax efficiently is a valid index of the strength of an early modern regime. Henrician government was so successful in this respect that it created a system of taxation which for its sophistication and attention to the principles of distributive justice was several centuries ahead of its time. To this achievement Wolsey made the greatest contribution. For the first time since 1334 the Crown was levying taxation which accurately reflected the true wealth of taxpayers.

John Guy, *Tudor England*, 1988

#### Source P

Wolsey's greatest weakness lay in the realm of finance . . . he was a bad financier because he could neither make do with the existing revenue nor effectively increase it. He had little understanding of economic facts . . . Wolsey's taxation made enemies of many whose hostility could be dangerous.

G.R. Elton, *England under the Tudors*, 1955

#### Question

Why do you think it was difficult to bring people to court in sixteenth-century England?

#### Source N

When embarking upon the enclosure inquiry of 1517, Wolsey wanted to do something for the common weal, and to that end some 260 people are known to have been brought to court. This in itself is remarkable, when one remembers how rarely anyone appeared in court

Peter Gwyn, *The King's Cardinal*, 1990

#### Questions

- 1 Explain in your own words what is meant by levying taxation which accurately reflected the true wealth of taxpayers.
- 2 Make a note of how Guy and Elton differ on their view of Wolsey's abilities as a financier. Why do you think they might hold different viewpoints?