

lavatory). The holder of this office became increasingly important politically as Henry VIII's reign progressed.

By 1517 Henry VIII's identification with these young gentlemen was complete. In that year a nickname was given to them: 'the minions' or the 'young favourites'. In 1518 Wolsey was so worried by their influence on Henry that he infiltrated his own man, Richard Pace, both to be a gentleman in attendance on the King and to deal with the royal correspondence. In 1518 Wolsey struck. The minions were expelled from Court for their bad influence on the King and were given jobs away from the centre of power. Hitherto, Wolsey had kept power by encouraging the King in his pleasures, now he hit on another tactic. This was to propose suddenly to reform government. Everything from the Royal Court to government departments and the economy would be affected. The programme caught Henry VIII's interest and he agreed to the expulsion of the minions and their replacement by more serious, middle-aged careerists. However, once he had achieved his objectives, Wolsey dropped the programme of reform.

Soon afterwards, Henry VIII began to re-admit the minions to royal favour. In 1520 they were given the formal title of Gentlemen of the Privy Chamber and, thereafter, Wolsey had to work to diminish their influence with the King in other ways. From 1521 to 1525 they were increasingly used as ambassadors abroad and to take command of military and naval expeditions in the war against France. This too took them away from Court and perhaps helped to maintain Wolsey's influence with the King. However, the peace with France in 1525 meant that Wolsey had to find some other means of continuing to reduce the gentlemen's influence. The turmoil caused by the Amicable Grant in the same year meant that Wolsey also had to find means of countering the influence of his fellow-councillors. They had been complaining that Wolsey had disregarded their advice over levying the Grant, although in practice the dukes of Suffolk and Norfolk and the remainder had gone along with it.

In order to counter his enemies, both on the Council and at Court, Wolsey came up with yet another plan of reform – the Eltham Ordinances of 1526. With these proposals Wolsey dealt with the Privy Chamber by reducing the number of gentlemen from 12 to six. He removed his chief enemies there, such as William Compton, the Groom of the Stool, who was replaced by the politically neutral Henry Norris and others who were no threat to his power. This was done in the name of economy, increasingly necessary due to the expense of the recent war and the failure of the Amicable Grant. In regard to his fellow-councillors, Wolsey came up with the idea of the Council Attendant on the King which would be made up of 20 councillors. In practice, Wolsey used the small print of the Eltham Ordinances to see that these councillors carried out their duties elsewhere, leaving the King once more sparsely attended. By means of his still unrivalled influence over Henry, Wolsey had maintained his power, but the onset of the problems surrounding the King's divorce from 1527 were to undermine the Cardinal's influence at Court.

What were Wolsey's relations with the nobility like?

Thomas Wolsey had risen to high office due to his ability to meet the demands which Henry VIII had placed on him, but the King and Court were not the only source of power on which he had to keep a careful eye



1. Re-read the extract from John Skelton's poem on page 91. Explain what it tells you about the poet's view of the relationship between Henry VIII and Wolsey.

2. How important was Wolsey's use of pageantry and display in helping to remain chief minister between 1515 and 1529?

3. To what extent was the King's Court the real centre of power between 1515 and 1529?

after 1515. The nobles who were on the Council had re-asserted themselves after the death of Henry VII (see section 3.1) and had been supporters of Henry's war policy. The King was dependent on them as war leaders between 1511 and 1514, and in 1522 when there was once again war with France. Similarly, effective control of the outlying regions of the kingdom depended on the cooperation of the nobility. Effective rule in the borders with Scotland depended on the cooperation of noblemen such as Lord Dacre and the Earl of Northumberland. In the north Midlands and the North-West effective rule depended on the local power of the earls of Derby and Shrewsbury. In the West the power of the nobles, such as the Earl of Devon and the Marquis of Dorset, was important in the effective maintenance of royal power.

It has often been suggested that the relations between Wolsey and the nobility were poor, and that these great men resented the rise of the butcher's boy from Ipswich. While there was some resentment of Wolsey, especially his show of wealth and his accumulation of power, he was in the tradition of powerful clerical ministers, which had been a feature of English government since the time of the Norman Conquest. On a personal level, the evidence would suggest that the Cardinal and most of the nobility could tolerate one another and generally worked well together, especially where the control of the localities were concerned. However, at the highest political level, relations could at times be frosty. There were significant differences between Wolsey and the Howard family, especially the Earl of Surrey who succeeded his father as Duke of Norfolk (the victor of Flodden) in 1524. They were to play an important part in Wolsey's fall from power after 1527 (see section 3.5). Also, relations with the Duke of Suffolk were, on occasion, strained. Like Norfolk, he too played a role in Wolsey's downfall. Certainly, there seems to have been no intention on Wolsey's part to destroy the nobility, just to bend it to his master's will.

The one outstanding exception to this policy was the case of Edward Stafford, third Duke of Buckingham (1478–1521). Buckingham was one of England's greatest noblemen, the owner of vast estates and a remote descendant of King Edward III. It would appear that Buckingham, although not without ability, did not find the role of courtier and servant to the Crown entirely to his liking. He wished Henry VIII to allow him to exercise the hereditary office of **Constable of England**. In spite of the legal judgements in his favour the King insisted that the position remain unfilled. In 1519, after a Star Chamber attack on one of his servants for wearing the duke's livery in the king's presence, Buckingham was reported to be grumbling about the royal councillors. Also, since 1509, the Duke had done nothing to build up support at Court and positively despised the minions around the King. So Buckingham was a reactionary, who did little except talk himself into Henry VIII and Wolsey's disfavour. As the historian David Starkey wrote in his book on the reign of Henry VIII:

Whatever form of politicking the duke resorted to, he was bad at it. He talked too much and did too little and words and actions alike served only to provide Henry and Wolsey with plausible charges to undo him.

In February 1521 the Duke of Buckingham asked for a licence to visit his Lordships in Wales with a force of armed men. This alarmed Henry VIII, who wrote to Wolsey: 'I would you should make good watch on the Duke of Suffolk, on the Duke of Buckingham, on my lord of Northumberland,

Constable of England: Principal officer in the Royal Court who commanded the royal army in the king's absence or illness.



'The hostility of the Tudor nobility to Wolsey as Henry VIII's chief minister is the invention of historians.' How far do you agree with this statement?

on my lord of Derby, on my lord of Wiltshire, and on others which you think suspect.'

That there was a noble plot against Henry is unlikely, but the King was thoroughly alarmed. Buckingham's royal blood, however remote, worried him. As later in his reign, when he struck against the Pole family in 1541, so he moved against Buckingham in 1521. Wolsey's role in the downfall of Buckingham is uncertain but no doubt he was carrying out his master's wishes. In April 1521 the Duke of Buckingham was summoned to Court and arrested. The next month he was tried for high treason and, after a trial of four days, found guilty and executed. No doubt, the trial was 'rigged', but in reality Buckingham was guilty of the basic offence with which he was charged and was largely the author of his own downfall.

The Buckingham case was untypical of Wolsey's relations with the nobility. The Duke's fall probably owed more to Henry VIII's paranoia than to any malice from Wolsey himself.

How important was Wolsey's work as a legal reformer?

Wolsey's preoccupations as Henry VIII's chief minister were foreign policy, and very probably keeping himself in power. Due to his massive energy and capacity for hard work, he has enjoyed a reputation as a legal reformer. The historian Geoffrey Elton, who is in many respects no great admirer of Wolsey, wrote of him in *England under the Tudors* (published in 1955): 'Wolsey gloried in the majesty of a judge, and though he had no legal training that we know of he possessed a remarkable natural ability for the task.'

Most other historians would largely agree with this judgement. As Lord Chancellor, Wolsey had to oversee the whole legal system. He sat in the Court of Chancery as a judge, but according to the historian John Guy his impact there was limited, as there was only a slight increase in the number of cases brought before the court from the days of his predecessors, John Morton and William Warham. This may have been because of Wolsey's other duties, including Star Chamber. Other judges often deputised for him.

If Wolsey's impact on the Court of Chancery was limited, the same was not true of the Star Chamber. In 1516 the Cardinal put forward a plan to improve the legal system, which would ensure that it worked much more efficiently, as well as providing justice which was both fair and cheap. The power house of these reforms was to be an enhanced Star Chamber. It was in future to contain the traditional powers of both the Council and the other statutory tribunals of the reign of Henry VII, to both enforce the law and to see that the delivery of justice was fair. This reformed Star Chamber was a success, if it is to be judged by the caseload which it undertook after 1516. The caseload rose from 12 a year under Henry VII to some 120 a year during Wolsey's time in power.

Under Wolsey's presidency, Star Chamber took on the powerful and did much to curb their abuse of the legal system in their own localities. There were several cases of the court dealing vigorously with the highly-placed, including royal councillors, in pursuit of justice. One case was that of Sir Robert Sheffield, a Royal Councillor and former Speaker of Parliament, who was imprisoned in the Tower of London as an accessory to felony (a serious crime, usually connected with violence), as well as being heavily fined by the Court. In his pursuit of justice, Wolsey encouraged ordinary subjects to bring cases against the mighty – which they were quick to do. Also Wolsey