

fact, as being revolutionary. These claims have provoked an enormous amount of historical debate and have stimulated large numbers of researchers to undertake further work on the topic. As a result, the 1530s are possibly the most researched period in English history. Although the focus of the debate has shifted somewhat over the decades as the emphases of interpretations have been amended, the controversy continues to provoke widespread interest and attention – as well as a considerable amount of heat and animosity.

Rise to prominence

The precise date of Thomas Cromwell's birth is uncertain, but is unlikely to have been after 1485. Very little is known about his early life in Putney apart from his own declaration to Archbishop Cranmer much later as to what a 'ruffian he was in his young days'. He may even have been imprisoned for a time. Whether it was his own bad behaviour, an argument with his father, or some other reason which prompted his decision, Cromwell left England to travel the continent. Accounts of what he did and where he went are both sketchy and contradictory, but it is likely that he first joined the French army and fought in the battle of Garigliano, Italy, in December 1503.

At some point after this he left the French army, settled in Italy and entered the household of the merchant banker Francesco Frescobaldi. On leaving Frescobaldi's service Cromwell journeyed to the Netherlands where he worked as a cloth merchant. There he learned his trade living among the English merchants and was able to develop an important network of business contacts, as well as learning several languages. He returned periodically to Italy where he may have received some training in the law.

Some time after 1515 Cromwell returned to England where he married Elizabeth Williams with whom he had his only surviving son, Gregory. By 1520 Cromwell was firmly established in London's mercantile community as a business agent, a role which included legal work and moneylending. It was while acting as a legal agent for Charles Knyvett, formerly surveyor to Edward Stafford, third Duke of Buckingham, that Cromwell came to the attention of Cardinal Wolsey.

In 1523 Cromwell entered the House of Commons for the first time which was followed a year later by his being appointed Wolsey's legal adviser. Throughout the 1520s his enormous energy allowed him to do all that his master asked of him as well as building up a thriving private legal practice on his own account. Between 1526 and 1529 Cromwell had risen to become one of the cardinal's most senior and trusted advisers. His instinct for survival ensured that he left Wolsey's service before his master's sudden fall from power in 1529. Indeed, Cromwell revealed a great deal about himself by his reaction to Wolsey's fall. He behaved in a very different manner from most of those around him. He neither became dispirited and inactive nor attempted to distance himself from the calamity by joining in the general attacks on his former master. He summed up the

Key question

What factors promoted Cromwell's rise to prominence?

Key question

In what ways did Cromwell serve king?

situation rapidly and acted decisively by busying himself to secure his nomination to a currently vacant seat in the parliament that was about to gather at Westminster. His intention in doing so was two-fold.

- He wanted to advance his own claims to preferment by bringing himself to the attention of the king and whoever were to be the new leading figures at Court.
- He also wished to be in a position to defend the interests of his former master.

This display of loyalty to Wolsey during the cardinal's last months, as well as the skill with which he conducted the business involved in disentangling many of the fallen favourite's complex legal affairs, resulted in his coming favourably to the notice of Henry VIII, who was soon pleased to recruit him directly into his service.

Clearly, Cromwell was not a meek and mild yes-man who was content to be a back-room boy merely carrying out the instructions that were handed down to him. In short, he was anything but a passive conformist.

Serving the king

Despite all the research that has taken place in recent decades, it has still not been possible accurately to chart the stages by which Wolsey's legal adviser became Henry's leading minister. There is just not sufficient evidence for it to be done. But however it happened, it was certainly not a rapid process, for it was not until the spring of 1533 that the major influence over the king was clearly his. Nevertheless, because it is known how the rise to prominence was not achieved, it is possible by a process of elimination to make informed guesses about the way in which it came about. Cromwell did not secure his promotion by successive appointment to a series of important state offices. In fact, at no point during the whole period of his ascendancy did he acquire any of the major offices of state, and during the years in which he was manoeuvring himself into power all he managed to acquire was a selection of minor offices which brought him no more than a modest income and the opportunity to find out exactly how the existing administrative system worked (however badly) in practice.

Thus Cromwell's rise must have been by informal means, much as Wolsey's had been 20 years earlier. It is very likely that he won the king's favour by showing that he could think his way through problems and come up with solutions where more senior advisers (in terms of both experience and social status) could not. Of course, the seemingly insoluble problem of the time was how to bring the king's marriage to Catherine of Aragon to an end so that Anne Boleyn could become his second wife. It seems that Cromwell's emergence was the result of his ability to propose a realistic way forward and his possession of the administrative skills needed to put the policy into practice.

However, Cromwell was a very shrewd politician. He recognised that while his position relied entirely on the good opinion of his

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monarch, he was extremely vulnerable to the political in-fighting with which the court was rife. One serious mistake, or even the appearance of one, could bring his official career to a premature close unless he had influential friends to protect him or a power-base from which he could mount an effective counter-attack.

There was little prospect of securing the former, as Wolsey, his long-standing patron, had recently died in disgrace and he had no relatives in high places to whom he could attach himself. He did make attempts to win the favour of the rapidly emerging Boleyn faction, but it was not surprising that his approaches were not warmly welcomed by a group that was deeply suspicious of anybody who had been connected with the cardinal, and which in any case wanted followers rather than additional leaders. So Cromwell set about the task of establishing a stronger position for himself.

Although there is no direct evidence to indicate that this was so, it seems likely that he was the first person to recognise the massive potential of the minor post of Principal Secretary to the king, which was at the time little more than a highly confidential clerical position. Certainly he seems to have worked very hard to obtain his own appointment to the post. At first he substituted on a voluntary basis for the existing secretary who was on business for the king abroad, and he then elbowed aside others who aspired to the position and prevailed upon Henry to dismiss the current incumbent and to appoint him in his place. As the appointment depended entirely on a word of mouth instruction from the king – there was no documentary evidence to confirm what had happened – there can be no certainty about when this took place, but the most probable date is April 1534.

Cromwell in power

Cromwell utilised his position at the centre of affairs, with so much information and so many instructions literally passing through his hands, to create a situation in which anybody who wanted a favour from the king or who wanted something to be done was more likely to be successful if he gained the Principal Secretary's support first. Although he was never able to secure a stranglehold on the channels of royal patronage and decision-making of the type that Wolsey had established, he was able to build up a position in which hundreds of people depended on his good will for the furtherance or maintenance of their ambitions. This was especially the case in the years following the disgrace of the Boleyn faction in the spring of 1536, by which time he had secured the appointment of many of his own servants to key positions throughout the administration.

Some sign of his increased dominance came in July 1536 when he was raised to the peerage as Baron Cromwell followed by his appointment as Lord Privy Seal. The latter appointment meant that a large majority of the king's most legally binding instructions only took effect once he had endorsed them. But the significance of the change should not be exaggerated. Most people had already become used to accepting that when

Key question
Can Cromwell be fairly described as architect of the Henrician Reformation?

Key term
Machiavellian
Cleverly deceitful and unscrupulous. Named after an Italian political writer and thinker.

Cromwell appointed master of the king's jewels: 1532

Cromwell appointed Chancellor of the Exchequer: 1533

Cromwell appointed Henry VIII's Principal Secretary: 1534

Cromwell appointed Lord Privy Seal: 1536

Key dates

Key question
How powerful was Cromwell?