

## The Annulment

On Thursday 8<sup>th</sup> May 1533 a Court assembled in the Lady Chapel at Dunstable Priory that was to alter the course of English history. The court consisted of Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, John Langland, Bishop of Lincoln and also Henry VIII's Confessor, Dr. Bell, the Bishop of Winchester Dr. Claybroke, Dr. Trygonnell, Dr. Hewis, Dr. Olyver, Dr. Brythen and Gervase Markham the Prior of Dunstable. Thomas Bedyll was the clerk and Dr. Leigh arrived on Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> May. The Court was to consider the king's 'great and weighty cause', whether he was legally married to Catherine of Aragon. She was the youngest daughter of King Ferdinand of Aragon and Queen Isabella of Castille.

Henry VII, the victor at the battle of Bosworth in 1485, endeavoured to portray his new Tudor dynasty as unifying the houses of York and Lancaster, which had campaigned against each other in the wars of the Roses. To this end, he made a political alliance with Ferdinand and Isabella and betrothed his eldest son, Arthur, to Catherine. Arthur was so named to try to align the Tudors with the kings of ancient Britain. The couple were married on 14<sup>th</sup> November 1501. He was just 15 years old and she was nearly 16. Less than five months later, Arthur was taken ill and died on 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1502. It was a matter of vital importance, later on, as to whether or not the marriage had been consummated. As Henry VII was reluctant to lose either the alliance or the dowry Catherine had brought with her, she was betrothed to her late husband's younger brother, Henry, on 25<sup>th</sup> June 1504. Dispensation was sought from Pope Julius II, who duly granted it. Henry VII died on 21<sup>st</sup> April 1509, still anxious to prove the legitimacy of his reign.

Henry VIII and Catherine were married on 11<sup>th</sup> June 1509 and she was crowned Queen at his coronation ten days later. Catherine proved to be a loyal and loving wife for the rest of her life. She bore Henry six children in nine years, three sons and three daughters. Only one, Mary, survived into adulthood. The next longest-lived, Henry, survived less than two months. Henry VIII was also desperate to prove the legitimacy of his rule and to have a male heir to succeed him. There were male descendants of York and Lancaster who might challenge a daughter for the throne.

It was in 1526 that Catherine first heard the gossip that there were moves afoot to separate her from the King. Scholars were telling Henry that the bible said in Leviticus, chapter 20 v 21 that his marriage was not valid because Catherine had been married to his brother. They carefully failed to tell him that this is contradicted by Deuteronomy, chapter 25 v 5 and by Matthew chapter 22 v 23-33. For the marriage to be annulled it was necessary to obtain the Pope Clement III's approval. In 1529 Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, Archbishop of York, was ordered to achieve this. Wolsey's eventual downfall was caused by his inability to bring this about. George Cavendish, a respected resident of Dunstable, was Wolsey's Gentleman Usher and wrote the first, separate biography in English – *The Life and Death of Thomas Wolsey*. In 1530, Thomas Cranmer, a Cambridge cleric, suggested to the king that the opinions of the Universities be sought. Henry liked the idea and Cranmer was ordered to proceed. He consulted not only the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge but also those of Bologna, Padua, Paris, Orleans, Toulouse and Angers.

Cranmer made such a good impression that, when William Warham the Archbishop of Canterbury died on 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1532, the king appointed Cranmer in his place. Henry secretly married Anne Boleyn on 25<sup>th</sup> January 1533 even though he knew the pope would never agree to the annulment. Catherine, with a few of her ladies, was moved to Ampthill in early March. Cranmer took up his appointment on 30<sup>th</sup> March 1533 and on 13<sup>th</sup> April Henry wrote to his new Archbishop commissioning him to assemble a Court to try his case and conclude the matter. Dunstable was chosen as the venue because it was near Ampthill. The Queen was very popular and had the Court met in London there was the likelihood of rioting. The Court convened on 8<sup>th</sup> May and the following day a deputation visited Catherine at Ampthill, ordering her to attend. She refused to come because she did not recognise the Court and would only abide by a ruling of the pope. Catherine was declared 'contumax' ie in contempt, because she refused to appear. Cranmer and other members of the Court later wrote to their friends and it is from these letters that we learn what happened. Attempts were made to get Catherine's friends to testify against her but they refused. Cranmer was determined that the Court proceedings should be completely watertight as he did not want to suffer the same fate as Wolsey, hence the length of time taken. The verdict was in no doubt as Henry had instructed Cranmer of the desired outcome and no further word came from Clement III.

Finally, Cranmer wrote a letter which began, 'To the King's highness from the Archbishop of Canterbury at Dunstable the 23<sup>rd</sup> day of May.' It advised Henry that the his marriage to Catherine was null and void and that he was free the marry. He also sought Henry's views on a coronation for the new Queen. With this letter, not only was the King's 'great and weighty cause' resolved but, as the decision was reached without the pope's agreement, it signalled the final break with Rome.

Anne was crowned Queen Consort on 1<sup>st</sup> June 1533 and gave birth to a daughter, Elizabeth on 7<sup>th</sup> September 1533. Catherine died on 7<sup>th</sup> January 1536 at Kimbolton and was buried in Peterborough Cathedral.

The Proceedings of Archbishop Cranmer's Court, held in the lady Chapel of Dunstable Priory, John Lunn 1991

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