

CHAPTER 3

1515–29: What were the main achievements of Cardinal Wolsey's ministry?

OVERVIEW

Thomas Wolsey worked very hard indeed. He had a tremendous capacity for work. He dominated the government of both Church and State for some fifteen years, which was particularly impressive given that his master was the moody and changeable Henry VIII. No Englishman below the rank of king had ever wielded so much power for so long. Under Henry VII, John Morton was Chancellor, Cardinal and Archbishop of Canterbury, but he did not dominate the age in the way Wolsey did.

Wolsey upheld law and order and governed with a firm hand, but without the arbitrary and oppressive harshness of Henry VII. During the Cardinal's ministry, there were no serious internal problems or rebellions, such as those that had dogged England from 1455 to 1499. Of course, there were still many problems and tensions in English society. Taxes were high and the poor remained poor. Wolsey also made mistakes and was a vain and arrogant man. Yet if we look at Wolsey's career as a whole, and appreciate the problems and opposition that faced him, we cannot but marvel at the scale of his achievement. Wolsey got things done.

KEY POINTS

Wolsey's achievements fall into a number of areas.

- He took a serious interest in upholding law and order, acting as a judge in central law courts.



A portrait of Cardinal Wolsey by an unknown artist.

- He attempted reforms in financial policy, which proved insufficient to keep pace with the king's increasing demands for money.
- He attempted to curb the illegal enclosure of land.
- He implemented Henry VIII's foreign policy in peace and war with some assurance and not a little ingenuity.

KEY TERM

The **Lord Chancellor** was the country's senior judge, who sat in the Court of Chancery. He presided over the House of Lords and kept the Great Seal, which authorised important government documents.

WOLSEY'S ACHIEVEMENTS IN THE LAW COURTS

The Court of Chancery

Unlike Henry VIII, Wolsey showed a genuine concern for how the people were governed. As **Lord Chancellor**, he presided as judge in the Court of Chancery. This was not a common law court, which was fortunate as Wolsey had little or no legal training. Instead, the court operated

according to the law of 'equity', where the Chancellor could give his own judgement according to his own sense of justice. It dealt with cases where common law did not apply or was uncertain.

Chancery was a civil not a criminal court, and dealt with matters of property, wills, trusts and such like. The office of Lord Chancellor was thus not especially glorious for the ambitious power-seeker. It involved a lot of work and sittings (during the legal terms) and Wolsey could often be seen involving himself in fairly trivial cases. He did not reform the system, nor did the number of cases before the court increase significantly. Critics have claimed that Wolsey's vanity was fed by his ability to give judgements, but many of these were not in high-profile cases.

The Court of Star Chamber

In addition to Chancery, Wolsey revived the Court of Star Chamber. This was where members of the **King's Council** sat as a law court. Medieval legal theory proclaimed that the king was the fountain of justice. Star Chamber was a natural extension of this principle, with the King's Councillors acting as deputies for their master. This is clear from the court's official title: 'The Lords of the Council in the Star Chamber at Westminster'. The name 'Star Chamber' was used because there were gold stars painted on the blue ceiling in the room where the court met.

Unlike Chancery, this was a criminal court. It used to be thought that Wolsey used Star Chamber to humble members of the nobility, making them bend to the will of the low-born butcher's son from Ipswich. Naturally, some of those convicted in the court were from the upper classes. The Earl of Northumberland, Sir Robert Sheffield and Sir William Bulmer were all found wanting and were punished by Wolsey. However, this was hardly a campaign against the rich and famous. What these cases do show is that Wolsey would enforce the law impartially against high and low. Wolsey fined three Surrey JPs for corruption; the law enforcers, above all, must act according to the law.

In fact, most of the cases heard in Star Chamber were brought by the **litigants**, not by the king or Wolsey.

KEY TERM

The **King's Council** was a group of officers of state and other officials appointed by the king. They offered advice on matters of policy and government. It was not a fixed body in terms of personnel and did not yet have fixed meeting times.

KEY TERM

Litigants is the official term for those bringing legal cases.

If Wolsey's social origins do not explain his zeal as a judge, perhaps they do explain his concern with poor men's cases. Hearing these cases was very worthy, since there was no glory or political advantage to be won here. Under Wolsey, the number of such cases heard each year in Star Chamber may have increased by as much as tenfold, from 12 to 120.

Assessment

Wolsey's involvement in the law led to a real revival and reinvigoration of the courts concerned. Historians used to say that this revival upset the common lawyers in the common law courts and that Wolsey deliberately tried to undermine these common law courts by taking cases from them, having them heard instead in Chancery or Star Chamber. This view is largely bogus. The volume of cases appearing in Wolsey's courts was indeed increasing, but this trend had been evident before Wolsey appeared on the scene. Star Chamber and Chancery had a simpler procedure that was attractive to litigants and there were clear boundaries between the areas of jurisdiction of the different courts. The old idea that common lawyers became increasingly hostile to Wolsey and joined a chorus of opposition to the Cardinal is now largely discredited. John Guy, for example, has argued that all these law courts were seen as complementary, not competitive.

As the volume of cases increased and as his other commitments multiplied, so Wolsey had to set up semi-permanent committees to deal with the backlog of cases. This was typical of Wolsey's pragmatic approach to problems. It did not impress the historian G. R. Elton, who wanted to compare Wolsey unfavourably to his hero, Thomas Cromwell, 'chief minister' in the 1530s. But it should impress the impartial observer. With all his other duties, it was surprising that Wolsey took his legal work so seriously. Furthermore, the energy and commitment he brought to his work as Chancellor compares more than favourably with the work of his clerical predecessor, William Warham, and his lay successor, **Sir Thomas More**.

KEY PERSON

Sir Thomas More

(1478–1535) was a leading lawyer and humanist who became Lord Chancellor in 1529. He opposed the king's divorce from Catherine of Aragon and was executed in 1535.

WOLSEY AND FINANCE

No one likes a tax man. As the king's chief minister and therefore the man who made Henry's dreams of diplomatic triumphs come true, Wolsey had to take on the role of tax man. He did this with some success. The English Crown had never been very wealthy – just about able to pay for the government of the country without going into debt, provided it did not engage in active or aggressive foreign policy. As Henry VIII clearly wished to 'cut a dash' in Europe, Wolsey would need to give the taxes a lift.

Subsidies

Wolsey is credited with introducing a new parliamentary tax, the **subsidy**. Until now, Parliament had been called upon to grant taxes only on special occasions, usually for war. The parliamentary grant of money was called the **Fifteenths and Tenths**. The problem with this tax was that the amount granted was fixed during a time of rising prices and each shire had to find the amount as best it could. In 1513, to meet the expenses of war, Wolsey brought in his new tax, the subsidy. This was a tax based on income: the more you earned, the more you paid – it was all terribly modern! The subsidy was used once more in 1523, when war was again declared on France.

Forced loans

Another option open to Wolsey and the king in order to raise extra revenue was the tried-and-trusted **forced loan**. These loans, which the king could ask for periodically, were not usually repaid. In 1522, Wolsey launched a major inquiry into England's financial and military capacity. The military side of the inquiry came to little, although it demonstrated the nation's military weakness, but the information about financial matters could now be used to help with future loans. In 1522–3, Wolsey collected one such forced loan from the wealthy.

The Amicable Grant

During March to April 1525 Wolsey tried for a further loan, euphemistically known as the Amicable Grant. With high levels of extraordinary taxation having been levied earlier in the 1520s, the announcement of this friendly

KEY TERMS

The **subsidy** was the main direct tax under the Tudors, imposed occasionally with the agreement of Parliament either on land or on goods.

Fifteenths and Tenths had been the main parliamentary tax since the fourteenth century. It was granted occasionally and was based on landed property. Towns represented in Parliament paid a tenth of the value of their property; the rest paid a fifteenth. By Henry VII's reign the amount of the tax was fixed and fairly low.

A **forced loan** was an occasional tax that could be demanded without Parliament's consent. Although it was supposedly a loan, it was not usually repaid and was therefore always more unpopular than parliamentary taxes.

KEY PEOPLE

The **third Duke of Norfolk** (1473–1554) was Thomas Howard. He became Earl of Surrey in 1514 when his father (also Thomas) became second Duke of Norfolk. He succeeded his father as Duke in 1524. He was a conservative during the Reformation, supporting the king's Supremacy but opposing changes in beliefs and rituals.

The **Duke of Suffolk** (1484–1546) was Charles Brandon, one of the king's close companions. He was created Duke of Suffolk in 1514 and in the next year he secretly married the king's widowed sister, Mary. Like his friend Norfolk, he was a conservative and opposed the Reformation.



A portrait of Thomas Howard, third Duke of Norfolk, painted by Hans Holbein.

donation, which did not have parliamentary approval, was greeted with hostility, as Source 1, written anonymously in 1525, indicates.

Source 1

In 1525 King Henry, claiming that he was about to invade France at the invitation of the Emperor, desired of his subjects a tax, which he called an amicable grant. But the commons pleaded their poverty, saying that they had no money. They said that they would not give anything by Royal letters but only by Act of Parliament, which King Henry took unkindly. The **Dukes of Norfolk and Suffolk** wrote to Cardinal Wolsey that the commons laid all the blame on him and that, if insurrection should follow, the quarrel would be against him. The Cardinal wrote back to them that it is the custom of the people, when anything discontenteth them, to blame those that be near about the king. When they dare not use their tongues against their king, they will not fail to give evil language against his chief adviser.

Adapted from a letter written anonymously in 1525.

Interestingly, Source 1 indicates that the initiative for the tax came from the king, not Wolsey. Nonetheless, Norfolk and friends, jealous of Wolsey's power, clearly hoped that Wolsey would be in trouble and they were right. The subsidy granted by Parliament in 1523 was still being collected and now the king was demanding more money. In Suffolk, Wolsey's home county, there was serious opposition, with some 10,000 men gathering around Lavenham.

In the end, the king decided to withdraw the tax and to use Wolsey as scapegoat for the popular hostility towards it. The leaders of the uprising in Suffolk were brought before Wolsey and he had to ask for their pardon and pay the expenses incurred during their imprisonment. While Wolsey had clearly miscalculated, it should be remembered that the demand for money came from the king, who needed extra funds for the war he was contemplating

against France. This plan was later dropped, so the tax was not needed.

Wolsey's financial achievement

As chief tax-gatherer, Wolsey was unlikely to be a popular figure. However, in the fifteen years of his authority, he had brought in a more effective parliamentary tax, the subsidy, and had maintained higher levels of taxation for longer than normal without provoking serious unrest. If the Crown remained short of money, this was because of Henry VIII's unwillingness to cut down on his expenditure. As a Renaissance prince, he wanted to be at the centre of a cultured court, to be a builder of great palaces and to be respected on the European stage. He would not be a miser like his father. One of Wolsey's most important achievements was his funding of Henry's dream.

Some have argued that Wolsey was too arrogant and demanding in his handling of Parliament and thus missed the chance to gain further taxation. The truth is, however, that Parliament still believed that the king should govern the country from his own resources and should resort to Parliament for extra taxes only when the realm was threatened with invasion. Wolsey did not manage a wholesale reform of Crown finances, but it is hard to see how anyone, except the king himself, could have achieved more. Ultimately, Henry was not interested in the means by which money was acquired, only in spending it!

WOLSEY AND ENCLOSURES

The problem of illegal enclosures

An impressive feature of the Cardinal's work was the range of activities with which he concerned himself. As well as legal and financial matters, he took an interest in economic problems facing the realm in general and the poor in particular. He launched a campaign against the illegal enclosure of land by landowners. This was not a huge problem at the time, but it was believed that enclosing landlords acted against the interests of tenant farmers by destroying common land, increasing rents and dismissing tenants to bring in sheep.



A portrait of Charles Brandon, Duke of Suffolk.

KEY TERM

'**Utopia**' was a book written in 1516 by the humanist scholar Thomas More.

Utopia is a fictional island meaning 'no place', but the book is actually a critique of aspects of contemporary society.

Sir Thomas More made reference to this problem in his famous book of 1516, *Utopia*. This book highlighted many problems and evils in contemporary society. More claimed that sheep had 'turned into man-eaters', by which he meant that men were being driven off the land and into poverty by landowners who changed from arable to sheep farming.

Commissions of inquiry

Statutes passed through Parliament in 1489 and 1514–15 attacked enclosures and prohibited new ones. In 1517, 1518 and 1526, Wolsey appointed commissioners to inquire into illegal enclosures and these reports resulted in a couple of hundred successful prosecutions. Once again, this was Wolsey the innovator, acting against wrongdoing and corruption. He was well meaning and, if he failed to tackle the underlying social and economic problems of the day, that is because such problems were by their nature insoluble. In addition, Wolsey, like the rest of the 'political nation', recognised that the rights of property owners were of great importance.

HOW SERIOUS WAS THE OPPOSITION TO WOLSEY?

If Wolsey made enemies, we should not be surprised. All powerful men make enemies. All decisions by chief ministers will leave groups disgruntled about what is happening and about what they fear will happen. Reformers in the 1530s and some historians since have often exaggerated Wolsey's unpopularity because they wanted to see it as a major cause of the Reformation after Wolsey's death. It is important, however, to realise that Wolsey contributed enormously to more than a decade of internal peace and stability, and that the opposition to Wolsey never came close to removing him from office because he retained the king's favour. The Amicable Grant episode humiliated him, but it could not unseat him. Henry knew when he was on to a good thing.

WOLSEY'S FOREIGN POLICY 1515–27

What were Wolsey's aims in foreign policy?

Although the government and administration of the realm took up much of Wolsey's time, his real passion, as for Henry himself, was foreign affairs. Here he could bestride the European stage and he could play out the role of peacemaker, statesman and honest broker in the company of the most powerful men in the world. For example, in 1521, when **Francis I** and **Charles V** were falling out, as they often did, it was Wolsey who met up personally with both men and tried to patch up peace. Wolsey, it seemed, could shape the fate of nations. Of course, Wolsey was an arrogant man and he enjoyed this role hugely, but the crucial thing is that, behind the pomp and circumstance, Wolsey's main aim was to stop England from going to war in Europe.

Wolsey was concerned that England should have an active foreign policy, but one that stopped short of warfare. Ultimately, the hostility between France and Spain meant that England had no fears of invasion and every chance of being treated with respect, possibly even deference, by both sides as they looked for an ally. The French were desperately worried by the fact that, after his election as Emperor of Germany in 1519, Charles V's territory seemed to encircle France. Meanwhile, the Emperor was very worried about French expansion in Italy.

Under these circumstances, Wolsey hoped to win peace and glory for England. He was partially successful in this endeavour. After its success in France in 1513, England did play a prominent part in European affairs in a way that was quite different from the defensive days of Henry VII. England was now a power to be reckoned with.

Relations with France after 1514

In 1514, England made peace with France, and Henry seemed bent on peaceful coexistence with the old enemy. To seal the new friendship, Henry's younger sister, Mary, was married to Louis XII of France. However, in 1515 the ageing bridegroom died and a new, young and ambitious man, Francis I, became King of France. This event

KEY PEOPLE

Francis I (1494–1547) was the Valois King of France from 1515 to 1547. There was intense personal rivalry between him and Henry VIII. His foreign policy was increasingly concerned with conquests in Italy in order to prevent France being surrounded by Hapsburg territory.

Charles V (1500–57) was the Hapsburg King of Spain from 1516 and elected as Holy Roman Emperor (ruler of Germany) in 1519. He also ruled over the Low Countries and was seen as a natural ally by Henry VIII. He was also the nephew of Henry's wife, Catherine of Aragon.



England's place in European diplomacy.

undermined England's new peace policy, as Francis was keen to strengthen his position as king by avenging the English invasion of his country in 1513.

Francis started with the usual French trick of stirring up the Scots against the English. Henry VIII naturally began to think in terms of a new English invasion of France, but Wolsey persuaded him that the time was not ripe for such a venture. He pointed out that England now had no credible ally to divert French attention elsewhere. The wily Ferdinand of Aragon, who had double-crossed Henry so often in the past, was dead but his successor Charles (the future Emperor Charles V) was too busy establishing himself in his new and foreign kingdom of Spain. The Emperor Maximilian was usually impoverished and not a great commander by any means, so he too was unlikely to prove a useful ally.

KEY PERSON

The **Emperor Maximilian** was the Hapsburg Emperor of Germany 1493–1519. Luther's protest against the Catholic Church began while he was Emperor. He was Charles V's grandfather.

The Treaty of London 1518

So, instead of war, Wolsey devised a brilliant peace plan that would still bring Henry the glory he craved. In 1518, with great imagination and a little diplomatic daring, Wolsey hijacked a papal call for a crusade against the Turks and turned it to England's advantage. After many twists and turns in the complex world of European diplomacy, he brought together the great powers of Europe – including England, France, Spain and the Holy Roman Empire – to sign up to the Treaty of London.

This was a 'universal and perpetual' peace deal, complete with **collective security**. Long-term peace would be secured with France by the return of Tournai to France for 600,000 crowns and by a proposed marriage between Francis' son and Henry's infant daughter, **Princess Mary**. England was at the centre of affairs and it was Wolsey's triumph. This was duly noted by the Venetian ambassador. 'Nothing', he said of Wolsey, 'pleases him more than to be called the arbiter of Christendom.'

The Field of the Cloth of Gold 1520

Two years after the Treaty of London, Wolsey triumphed again. Once again it was peace with glory for England. In June 1520, Henry VIII led a huge expedition to France, but this time he was not going to war. He met Francis I in person amid two splendid entourages in a field near Calais, which, of course, England still owned. The venue became known as the Field of the Cloth of Gold because of all the magnificent pavilions and pageantry on display. It was all highly impressive and hugely expensive. There were feasts and revels and games, and peace broke out again between the ancient enemies. The episode has been seen as an empty Renaissance folly but, in Wolsey's eyes, it was better than being at war.

Renewal of hostility to France 1523

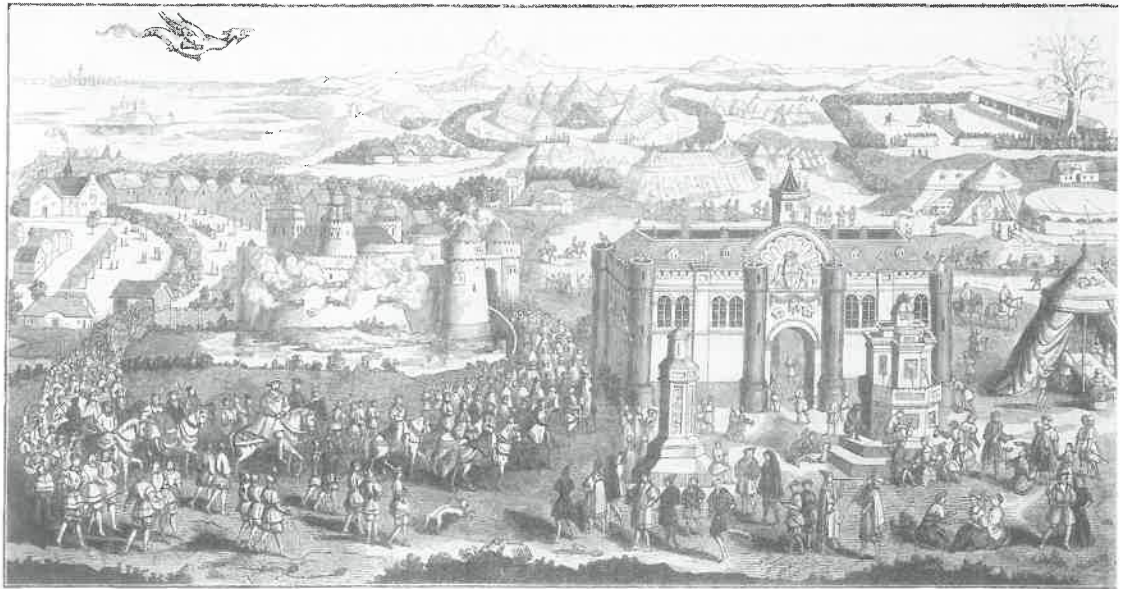
Not surprisingly, peace between Henry and Francis could not last, but Wolsey had done well to keep England out of war for ten years. War with France came again in 1523. In that year, France suddenly seemed weak and vulnerable, and it was too good an opportunity for Henry to miss.

KEY TERM

Collective security was a system designed to maintain peace in Europe. The idea was that all the countries signing the treaty would agree to go to war with any one or more countries that invaded a neighbour.

KEY PERSON

Princess Mary (1516–58) was Henry VIII's elder daughter. She remained a Catholic despite the Reformation and became Queen of England in 1553.



An engraving of the Field of the Cloth of Gold, by an unknown artist.

Charles de Bourbon, who was the Constable of France and leader of the French army, had rebelled against his king in alliance with Charles V. In addition, the main French army was pinned down in Italy, far from home, and French influence in Scotland was close to collapse, so there was no danger of interference from that quarter. It was too tempting for Henry. Late in the campaigning season, Suffolk was sent off to France. Boulogne was taken and the English force headed purposefully towards Paris. However, the expedition ran into bad weather and experienced serious supply problems as it moved further from the coast. In the end, it was forced to turn back in disarray.

Peace maintained 1524–7

Henry hoped for a further expedition the next year, but Wolsey managed to deflect him from that course. The king was again tempted to invade the year after that, in 1525, when the Emperor's forces routed Francis' army at Pavia in Italy. Francis himself had been captured at the battle and taken off to captivity in Spain. Surely now an English assault on France would lead to an English conquest. Henry would soon be King of France! He proposed that if Charles helped him in this endeavour, then he could marry Henry's only daughter Mary and later inherit France and England for himself. Sadly, Charles showed no interest in

the scheme and indeed opposed an English conquest of France.

Enraged by the unexpected rebuff, the king, with Wolsey in close attendance, now sought to return to peace with France in order to embarrass the Emperor. In 1525 the peace between England and France was signed. It had proved an exciting twelve years of constant and complex diplomacy. Henry had achieved little and learnt the hard way that England could not renew the Hundred Years War and reconquer France. Wolsey, by contrast, had achieved much. He personally was a key player in European diplomacy and, except for the brief and fruitless campaign of 1523, he had kept England out of war.

WOLSEY'S ACHIEVEMENT IN DOMESTIC AFFAIRS AND FOREIGN POLICY

The successes of Wolsey

Taken together, the many successes of Wolsey in domestic affairs and foreign policy are clear. It was a tremendous achievement to wield power in so many spheres for so long. He made sensible innovations in some areas, but stopped short of sweeping reforms that might have caused trouble. He ruled England with a steady hand, displaying neither cruelty nor vindictiveness, and he helped to enhance the nation's reputation abroad.

Of course, some traits of his character may seem rather offensive. He clearly enjoyed the exercise of power, not stepping out of doors without making it into a grand procession. He was always very well attended and he was at the centre of a household that rivalled the king's in terms of numbers and splendour. But perhaps we should excuse the butcher's son a certain pride and arrogance in his achievements and remember that pageantry and splendour were expected from such a powerful man. No minister had ever ruled the kingdom in the way he had. He exercised justice with equity, taking an interest in poor men's cases; he raised revenue as required by the king's expensive foreign policy; and he managed the difficult and temperamental Henry VIII with a tact and diplomacy that

KEY TERM

The **minions** were young men at court who were close to the king. The name came from their French counterparts.

none could match. The historian David Starkey suggests that this was because they were both big men!

Criticisms of Wolsey

Wolsey had enemies, such as the king's **minions** and some of the nobility, but there was little by way of the serious faction fighting that would disfigure the politics of the post-Wolsey court. Nobles like Norfolk and Suffolk might enjoy seeing the Cardinal embarrassed, as happened over the Amicable Grant, but they were not queuing up to bring him down, as they knew that he enjoyed the king's favour. The poet John Skelton might satirise Wolsey's power and arrogance, but his 1522 poem 'Why come ye not to court?' did nothing to undermine the Cardinal. The language and claims were so exaggerated that no one could take it seriously. Among other charges against Wolsey, Skelton claimed that the Cardinal had used black magic in order to win influence over the king.

So the Cardinal's position remained unchallenged. More sustained criticism of Wolsey would come later, but that was at the time of his fall from power or after his death when reformers, who had now found favour with the king, found him an easy target. Wolsey has been criticised because Henry VIII eventually dismissed him from office. However, Wolsey fell because of the king's frustration at being unable to annul his marriage with Catherine of Aragon. This was an utterly unique problem in the annals of English history and one that Wolsey was powerless to solve. In other words, Wolsey fell not because he was corrupt, not because he had failed in some way, but because the king suddenly asked the impossible.

SUMMARY QUESTIONS

- 1 Describe the problems Wolsey faced in dealing with enclosures and royal finances.
- 2 How successful was Wolsey's foreign policy?

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