



TUDOR AMBITION: HOUSES OF THE BOLEYN FAMILY PROFESSOR SIMON THURLEY CBE

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My lectures this year will look at four families and their estates: The Churchills who built their family fame and fortune out of military service; the Cecils who constructed theirs in administration; the Scotts who rose through illegitimate royal blood and the Boleyns whose success was based on trade. Until the advent of the industrial revolution, other than law and the church, these were more or less the only routes to great wealth and honour.

What all these families had in common is that they consolidated their wealth and honour in land and buildings. Land, of course, brought with it status, and a great deal of land, with a fine residence, brought great status; but before the advent of the national debt and the mortgage market and, despite the ups and downs of the economy, land was also the safest and most sensible place to invest disposable income.

The families I have chosen could all be called dynasties, because the estates that they owned were the most powerful cogs in a dynastic machine where marriage consolidated landholdings, brought in new money and secured old. Families that had been enriched by trade bought into the landed aristocracy and aristocrats who had become impoverished revitalised family fortunes by marrying into trade.

This is an excellent place to start this evening as the Boleyns were a family who invested money from trade in land and consolidated it by stunning marriage alliances, eventually reaching the pinnacle of social status and influence through marriage into the royal family.

The story needs careful introduction as I'm about to mention a dozen people and we have to understand their relationship to each other fully. So here goes: we start with the man who effectively founded the dynasty - Sir Geoffrey Boleyn. The Boleyn family had been landowners in and around Salle in Norfolk from the mid-thirteenth century. Geoffrey Boleyn was a Norfolk gentleman who had a spectacular career in the City of London. How he got there we do not know, but he was at first a hatter and then a mercer and as a merchant he was very successful. As a citizen he was capable and ambitious, becoming a Sheriff in 1446-7, MP for London in 1449, London elector in 1450, an Alderman in 1452, Master Mercer in 1454, and Lord Mayor of London in 1457.

The second person I need to introduce to you is Anne the daughter of Thomas Lord Hoo and Hastings of Hertfordshire. Thomas Hoo, (d.1455) was a leading Lancastrian courtier whose extensive family estates were in Bedfordshire and Norfolk; his first marriage was to Elizabeth Wychingham of Norfolk gentry stock and their daughter was Anna Hoo born c.1424. There was a second marriage and three more daughters, but no son. So Anne was co-heir to great estates. How Lord Hoo met Sir Geoffrey Boleyn we do not know but, in 1437 or 38, Boleyn married Hoo's his eldest daughter to Anna.

So we have a hugely wealthy city merchant marrying an aristocratic heiress. Their first son named Thomas died in 1471 and their second son, William, became the heir and he is the third person we now need to meet. Sir William Boleyn made a brief appearance in the city of London but was set up as a wealthy landowner in Norfolk where he was much involved in county affairs. Like his father he made a spectacular marriage to Margaret, the daughter of Thomas Butler the earl of Ormond. Butler, like Hoo had not succeeded in producing a son and so, like Sir William's mother, Margaret was the co-heir to great estates.

So two generations of Boleyns had married aristocratic heiresses vastly aggrandising their wealth and, of course, by association, with these great families, their status. But to return to the dramatis personae we have to introduce Sir William and Margaret's son and heir Thomas Boleyn who was born in 1477. I will have a lot to say about this man who became one of Henry VIII's closest friends and the father of Anne, queen of England, but for now we need to introduce Elizabeth Howard the the eldest daughter of Thomas Howard, earl of Surrey, heir to the Dukedom of Norfolk. She married Thomas in around 1497. Unlike the spectacular marriages of his father and grandfather, this marriage, brought no great fortune, but bought Thomas a father-in-Law who was a Duke.

To complete the family tree I just need to mention that Sir Thomas and Elizabeth had three children Mary, Anne and George. Anne, who became the star of the show, was thus descended from a former Lord Mayor of London, but much more importantly from dukes, earls and barons. This was a classy ancestry and, as we now need to understand, an extremely wealthy one with huge estates and a number of impressive houses.

Now let us return to the founding father of the dynasty, Sir Geoffrey and ask ourselves what was the architectural taste of such a man? He had a house in the City in Bassinshaw ward and presumably a manor house in his home county of Norfolk. But, as his wealth grew and he became an elder statesman in the city, it was time to invest in land. Indeed, this is what he did, buying estates in Norfolk in 1452 and Kent in 1461. What is fascinating is that the two principal houses in these estates were remarkably similar: they were both moated castles built in the 1380s or 90s by former soldiers and royal servants.

Geoffrey was an exceptionally wealthy man who could afford to lend the king £1,246 at a time when it was almost certain that he would never get it back. So he could have afforded to buy an estate with a modern house, or perhaps an estate where he could build anew, but his choice must have been deliberate and reflected a taste for a military style of architecture. This could have partially been because of the political instability and violence of the Wars of the Roses, but equally could have reflected a desire to present himself not as an arriviste, but as an establishment figure and as a knight.

In 1452 Sir Geoffrey purchased one of North Norfolk's most valuable manors, Sir John Fastolf's Blickling. Fastolf, famous to history as the inspiration for Shakespeare's character (although the real man was nothing like the man in the play), was immensely rich and had invested the profits of his military exploits in land and buildings especially in Norfolk. He spent some £24,000 buying and improving his manors, amongst which was the house at Blickling which he bought in 1432. Fastolf, without heirs, sold it to Boleyn for a cash sum and an annuity.

Blickling Hall, in my view one of the most gorgeous sights in England, we are told, was built by Sir Henry Hobart (pronounced Hubbard) from 1618, but investigation by a series of historians have shown that Hobart in fact modernised and modified an existing house and, the core of what we see today, already existed when he bought the property in 1616.

What is certain is that features of the house, such as the long gallery some C16th century windows and areas of brickwork date from the Boleyn's ownership. Fastolf's Blickling had been built and subsequently owned by military men and courtiers; perhaps Geoffrey hoped that some of their lustre would wear off on him.

Geoffrey's second country house at Hever was bought in 1461 from William Fiennes Lord Saye and Sele. Hever Castle as it stands today is the castle built in 1383 by John de Cobham and was one of a number of moated stone castles built in the years around 1380 in reaction to the violence and uncertainty of the age. Hever's square plan was the norm for the time and paralleled in contemporary examples all over England perhaps also including Blickling. It was driven by the needs of domesticity rather than defence. Hever's plan was completely standard with the great hall on the opposite side of the courtyard from the gatehouse. The three room domestic unit on the first floor of the west range (plan) was also a standard expectation for the late fourteenth century.

Hever was a small, neatly planned, fortified house, the residence of a wealthy landowner not a great magnate. So why did Geoffrey buy it? Two reasons, I think: the first is that he needed a country house much closer to London than Blickling, which, and I live in Norfolk so I can say this, is in the middle of nowhere! and secondly because it was sited in the heavily wooded Weald which was good for hunting.

Although Geoffrey may have been happy with the external appearance of Hever he wanted to modernise the interior as new large north facing windows were punched into the hall, and a large bay window was built to light the dias end. There was only a single ground floor reception room and so Geoffrey divided the great hall to create, not only a smaller, warmer, hall but a ground floor parlour behind it suitable for receiving guests in private. The room was given a prestigious new bay window, a fireplace and a privy.

All this can be worked out from the surviving fabric at Hever and I'm extremely grateful to the present owners for the opportunity to examine the building in detail. To get to this level of knowledge at Blickling will take more work, although I think it could be done. Disentangling what changes might have been made by Geoffrey, his son William and his grandson Thomas might never be possible, but what is clear is that the original fourteenth century fortified manor was hugely extended by the Boleyns into a two courtyard house, the courtyards divided by the great hall. This was not an unusual plan for the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century, but such two-courtyard houses were extremely prestigious properties.

What makes me suspect that much of the extension of Blickling was undertaken by Thomas or his brother James who, as we shall see, lived at Blickling after his mother's death, is that it contained a long gallery, a fashionable addition only commonly seen from the 1520s onwards. By this time Geoffrey and William were dead. If I am right this would suggest that at Blickling, like Hever, Geoffrey was content to modernise a fourteenth century castle and sit at his fireside in baronial splendour as a knight rather than as a merchant. Architecture, you see, holds a mirror to self-image.

Substantial parts of Blickling and Hever remain to tell us something of Geoffrey's tastes, but we know nothing of the third house in his family, this was Luton Hoo in Bedfordshire the house his wife, Anne, inherited as her portion of the estates of her father Thomas Lord Hoo and Hastings, who had died in 1455. It must have been a big place as Lord Hastings was a major figure and the Boleyns used the house as a base close to London.

This neatly brings us on to the second generation of the family: to Sir William Boleyn. William was extremely active in county matters occupying most of the senior posts in Norfolk at one time or another. In 1502 he was made 3rd baron of the exchequer, a prestigious post that required his term time attendance at the law courts in Westminster. It is possible that during this period William made use of Hever because, as well as being a Justice of the Peace in Norfolk continuously from 1483 to his death in 1505, he also appears in the Kent lists in 1502 and 1505 suggesting his active participation in county matters there. He was also High Sheriff of Kent in 1489. From the early 1460s he was also renting Hoo as well he might, it being only 30 miles from London.

Yet Norfolk was still the base for the family and Sir William's son and heir Thomas Boleyn, was probably born at Blickling in 1477. When at the age of 20, in 1497, he married Elizabeth Howard it is likely that his father William moved out of the ancestral seat and made his principal residence Hoo leaving his son and her new wife to preside at Blickling. When Henry VII went on his Norfolk progress in the following year it was Thomas who received the king at Blickling and not his father. Thomas lived at Blickling most of the time between 1497 and 1505 and it was there that, in around 1500, his daughter Anne was born.

One of the features of English country aristocratic life was the centrality of the parish church. English aristocrats did not want to be buried in distant abbeys or cathedrals like their French counterparts, they wanted to be buried, and baptised, in their own proprietary churches which were adjacent to their houses. It was thus in this font in St Andrews church next to Blickling Hall that Anne Boleyn was almost certainly baptised, in a church that contained the burials of her ancestors.

In 1501, the aging Sir William granted Hever and his two other Kentish manors, Sele and Kensyng to five trustees for him to use during his lifetime and for his daughter-in-law, Elizabeth, after his death. So, in 1505, when Sir William died, Elizabeth Boleyn, Thomas's wife owned Hever and Thomas owned Hoo. Thomas was also left eight manors in Norfolk subject to him paying his mother a pension and allowing her to live at Blickling for life. As his mother outlived him Thomas's residence at Blickling was over.

In 1505 Thomas, 28 years old, was already a figure at the court of Henry VII and was well positioned in 1509 to rise rapidly in the service of Henry VIII. He became a favoured companion in the tiltyard and hunting field and, in due course, one of the king's most trusted diplomats and, in this role, spent considerable periods abroad. He lived in Brussels at the Court of Margaret of Savoy in 1512-3, and then in the summer of 1513 he accompanied Henry on his invasion of France. In 1519 he spent a year at the court of Francis I followed by attendance at the Field of Cloth of Gold in which he was an important figure. He was in France again in 1521 and 1527. In 1522-3 he was in Spain as the king's ambassador.

During some of the time when Thomas was abroad it is possible that Elizabeth and her children stayed at Hever close to the coast and to London. This is speculation but it does seem that in the early sixteenth century there were some improvements made at Hever that would have made it more comfortable for Elizabeth and her young children. The medieval house and open-work crown posts roofs, which looked handsome but by the reign of Henry VIII were very old fashioned. Therefore the family rooms at Hever were ceiled in with decorative plaster ceilings making the house more modern and presumably much warmer.

But it has to be remembered that Hever was very small. The castle had a single principal first floor suite a small suite below. By the time Elizabeth inherited Hever she had three young children: Mary born in 1499, Anne born in c.1500, and George in c. 1504.

The children of noble families were often farmed out to wet nurses and later put into the households of their social superiors, as indeed was Anne in 1513; but in 1505, Anne was five, Mary six and George only one and they all can be expected to have been living with their parents with nurses and other attendants. Together with the household servants of Thomas and Elizabeth, it is extremely problematic to regard Hever as being large enough to be the family home.

And, indeed, it need not have been, because in 1515, the Boleyns finally came into Thomas's mother's estates. If you remember Sir William had married co-heir of Thomas Butler seventh earl of Ormond and when he died in 1515 two of the largest houses in Essex fell into the Boleyn property portfolio: New Hall near Boreham and Rochford Hall in Rochford near Southend.

The manor of Rochford had been owned by James Boteler earl of Wiltshire and Ormonde who had forfeit it after being attainted and executed after the battle of Towton in 1461. Thomas Boteler, his brother, succeeded in getting his brother's title and estates restored to him in Henry VII's first Parliament. Boteler had a successful career at court serving as Elizabeth of York's Lord Chamberlain and then, in 1509 Chamberlain to Katherine of Aragon. He used Rochford Hall extensively and was a JP in Essex.

Rochford Hall was a substantial house with a double moat and extensive accommodation. Today it is a golf club and visiting it made me almost want to take the sport up. It is in a beautiful situation and, as at Blickling, and Hever, the church can be seen from the windows of the hall. Thomas Botler rebuilt the west tower of the church in monumental form together with his arms. This obviously proclaimed the status of the church but also provided a fine view from the windows of his house.

The surviving house has been cruelly defaced by fires, bombs and philistines and despite an imaginative restoration in 1987 working out what we have is not easy. I think that most of the house that remains today post-dates the Boleyns and was built by the fabulously wealthy and appropriately named Richard Rich in the 1550s. It is just possible that this very charming private chapel in the church was built by the Boleyns as after the Reformation a separate chapel with a squint to the altar would have been very unusual. Perhaps we can fantasise that Anne knelt in this chapel at her prayers. But there are earlier remains on the site of the house including parts built by the Butlers and the irregularity of the surviving remains might suggest that Rich's house was incorporating older sections, perhaps including these corner towers. Though the Boleyn house would have been smaller than this reconstruction of the house in the 1550s shows, it was nevertheless a place of some size and importance.

Thomas had been made a Knight of the Garter in 1523 and, in 1525, his stock rising further, he was created Viscount Rochford. His title was not Blickling, Hever or Hoo, but taken from his grandparents' estate in Essex. It was his grandparents' lineage that led to the title, as his grandfather on his mother's side, 7th earl of Ormond, had an Irish peerage, but sat in the English parliament with the title Thomas Ormond de Rochford, chevalier. This wasn't a proper English title and so Thomas's creation as Lord Rochford was the first usage of it in the English peerage. The title was a stepping stone to his elevation in December 1529 to the earldom of Ormond a title which he had envied and contested for a decade or more.

Thomas Boetler had also been granted the former royal estate of New Hall, Boreham, in Essex by Henry VII and, in 1491 he was granted a licence to rebuild it. Exactly what he built we don't know, but when he died in 1515 New Hall passed to Thomas Boleyn through Margaret his mother. This was another very substantial house and we have a plan of it in the 18th century. You will see that by that time it had five courtyards – certainly the core of this mansion existed in Thomas's time and we can speculate that New Hall was bigger than any of the houses the Boleyns had yet inherited.

By 1515 the Boleyns did not really need another vast mansion, they had Hoo, Hever and Rochford as well as a house in London. Thomas was at the king's side and must have suggested that he might be interested in seeing it. In fact the king already knew New Hall having stayed there with Botler in August 1510. But in June 1515 the king visited twice each time staying for a couple of days. It was not only a fine mansion but more importantly it had a large and well-stocked park and it was probably this that excited the king more than anything else.

In February the following year Henry bought the estate from Sir Thomas for £1,000 and immediately launched a campaign of rebuilding and furnishing. Turning the house into a royal palace was not the end of its history in the Boleyn fold because, in 1528, George Boleyn, Thomas's son and Anne's brother, was made keeper of the house giving him the right to live there when the king was not there.

Keeperships were one of the big perks of royal service and Thomas also won one in 1521 on the attainder of the Duke of Buckingham when Penshurst Place fell to the Crown. Henry VIII granted the keepership of the house to Sir Thomas. Henry visited in September 1538 but otherwise the house was left to Boleyn. It is likely that he resided there because a son, Thomas, was buried in the Sydney Chapel in St John The Baptist church Penshurst.

By 1521 the Boleyns had reached the pinnacle of their wealth. Let me just recap for a moment and you will see how they amassed an extraordinary number of important large houses and estates, one of which was good enough to be acquired by Henry VIII as a royal palace.

But all this land was very much the background to their lives. Their estates pumped money into their pockets, the great houses were places to entertain and hunt but Thomas, when he was not travelling the continent, was required to be continually at court. At Christmas 1514, for instance, the whole Boleyn family were involved in celebrations at court, including George, Thomas's eldest son who was then a page to the king. Thomas became Treasurer of the Household and to fulfil this duty had to maintain a household in London. This may have been his grandfather's house near the Guildhall or another purchased by Thomas or William nearer to Westminster. But Boleyn also had lodgings at court. In fact the royal building accounts make it clear that Thomas and Elizabeth had lodgings at Hampton Court, Richmond, Greenwich (where Thomas' rooms were beneath the king's privy chamber), Windsor, Woking, Woodstock and at Whitehall where the Boleyns were amongst the first courtiers to have lodgings (theirs had the luxury of a privy with a glazed window). In fact Thomas and Elizabeth had lodgings at whichever house the king was staying at.

So now we need to turn to Anne. Anne was no country bumpkin. When she made her entry into the English Court in 1521 she had lived in France for seven years. She had parents who had access to three very large houses, Hoo, Rochford and Penshurst, as well as their hunting lodge at Hever and lodgings at court. Her sister Mary was the King's mistress, her father one of the king's best friends. Fluent in French, a graceful dancer, she could play several musical instruments, knew about books, clothes, and art. She was also strong willed and opinionated. Added to this she came from an extremely worldly-wise family; we have seen that she was brought up by parents who were heavily engaged in property transactions, estate management and building projects. She was very used to moving from one house to another, different residences being used at different times of the year.

As the king's passion for Anne developed Katharine of Aragon held all the architectural cards. It was relatively easy for her to exclude Anne from the royal palaces. Nevertheless Anne soon acquired her own base inside Henry's houses. As early as May 1527, only a year after the king's infatuation had begun, Anne had her own independent lodgings in Greenwich palace, Henry's principal residence. By March 1528 she had her own rooms below the king's at Windsor Castle. In 1531 the king bought a farm near Greenwich for Anne, perhaps as a place for hoped-for trysts.

But this was all very unsatisfactory and Henry asked Wolsey to arrange for a separate residence for her. We don't what Wolsey suggested, but Anne, strong willed and clear minded did not like his suggestion preferring to make her own arrangements taking the house of another courtier. Again we don't know whose house this was but the king found it embarrassing and told her that it was not right that he should visit his lady lodged in the 'house of a servant'; nevertheless Anne was set up in an establishment of her own choosing in the city.

The elaborate arrangements that had to be put in place for Henry and Anne to be together meant that they longed for a place of their own. In 1529 it became clear that this was going to be York Place, of course, renamed Whitehall after Henry VIII took it over. On 22 October 1529 Wolsey surrendered all his property to the king two days later Henry and Anne Boleyn, accompanied by her mother Elizabeth, arrived by barge at the York Place Landing stage. The king had obviously been to the house many times before as Wolsey's guest, but as it had only one suite of lodgings had only ever stayed the night there a couple of times. This meant that he had not fully appreciated the size and splendour of what Wolsey had built and he was taken aback at the magnificence of it all.

That December Henry and Anne were together at Greenwich. Summoned to their chambers was the royal architect James Nedeham; closeted away with the royal couple Nedeham helped them conceive an astonishingly ambitious building project. It was for a huge new palace which would contain not only vastly enlarged lodgings but a recreation centre and extensive gardens. Next to this would be a new hunting park that could be easily reached from the king's rooms. Set on one side of the park would be another satellite palace{ St James's, the future residence of the son and heir that they felt convinced that Anne would bear the king.

In October 1532 Henry and Anne went to France together to meet King Francis I. During that visit they probably slept together and, back in London, on 17th December, when Henry made a visit of inspection to Whitehall, he knew that Anne was pregnant. The royal lovers were at Greenwich for most of January but, early in the morning on 24th, Henry slipped into a specially prepared, and newly matted, barge with Anne and made for Whitehall. They disembarked on the landing stage and walked through the near-completed galleries to the gatehouse. In a room over the street and overlooking the new palace, the deed was done, and Henry and Anne were finally man and wife. The choice of Whitehall was deliberate and symbolic. It was a new start for the king and for the country: a new queen, a male heir and a modern up-to-date palace replacing the ancient Palace of Westminster.

Soon Anne was not just wife, she was Queen. This meant that she needed to be provided with a jointure, a portfolio of estates and houses that yielded an income and that she could use independently of the king. This was standard practice for a queen consort; the queen would establish a council or commission of advisors and they would manage the estates in her interest. Anne was given several grants of property and in April 1533 all the estates and houses of Queen Katharine. Anne now personally become a greater landowner than Katharine, or any of Henry's other Queens. Her income was probably greater than any member of her family so far.

Anne immediately appointed a council to survey her lands and review the terms of leases and rentals. She was no back-seat driver, this young woman was born into a family whose wealth and status was built on the careful husbandry of property. She personally considered the terms of many leases and we know that in 1534-5 they yielded her some £5,056 16s 11d, this was more than she spent that year putting her personal accounts into surplus.

This is the end of the story of the Boleyn estates, father, daughter, brother and uncle between them were now one of the richest families in the kingdom and had reached the pinnacle of the social order. Anne, as queen, lived up to the reputation of her ancestors as an acquisitive exploiter of land for wealth and status. She was also the last in the line of Boleyn women who made the running. Four generations of the family were made by marriage and by the estates, status and connections the wives brought. There is a real sense in which the Boleyn family was built by women.

But we end with the King. Up until he fell in Love with Anne Boleyn Henry was only marginally interested in building. It was with Anne at his side that he first embarked on a major architectural project and he later became one of the greatest royal builders ever. Whitehall, which became one of the largest palaces in Europe and was the headquarters of the English Monarchy for 150 years was conceived as much by Anne as it was by Henry. It became, in a way the greatest of all the Boleyn Houses.

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Further Reading:

Michael Clark, "Rochford Hall: The History of a Tudor House" (Stroud, 1990).

Architectural Drawings at Blickling Hall, *Architectural History Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain* Vol, 34:1991 p.75-135.

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David Loades, "The Boleyns: The Rise and fall of a Tudor Family" (Stroud, 2011).

Eric Ives, "The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn" (Oxford, 2004).