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Hampton Court and the Perception of Cardinal Wolsey

Hannah Goode

The rise to power in Tudor times was hard if one was not of noble birth, but Thomas Wolsey somehow took that challenge and achieved greatness rising from a poor boy of Ipswich to the owner of four splendid residences, one of which was Hampton Court. Thomas Wolsey was a proclaimed self-made man who rose to power through his relationship with Henry VII and Henry VIII – power he illustrated through Hampton Court. While Wolsey portrayed himself as a self-made man, he did not really see himself as such. After Wolsey rose to greatness in King Henry VIII’s court, he used Hampton Court as a symbol of his prominence and wealth. This rise to power shows up in every aspect of the Cardinal’s life, especially in the vastness of Hampton Court. Hampton Court has 1,300 rooms, though some were added after Wolsey’s time, and the palace and grounds spread over six acres. Architect John Summerson thought that Hampton Court showed “the essence of Wolsey – the plain English churchman who nevertheless made his sovereign the arbiter of Europe and who built and furnished Hampton Court to show foreign embassies that Henry VIII’s chief minister knew how to live as graciously as any cardinal in Rome.”

Thomas Wolsey wanted to show that he belonged, and Hampton Court was his way of demonstrating that.

Thomas Wolsey came from the small village of Ipswich, Suffolk, England. His father may have been a butcher, but sources show that this could have been a lie created either to bring Wolsey down or created by...
Wolsey himself to show how high he had ascended in the King’s Court. George Cavendish asserts that the young Wolsey was not the poor boy he lead Henry VII to believe he was “in fine, upon a new and strict inquiry, several gentlemen in Suffolk are of opinion that Wolsey’s father was in truth a reputable grazer in the town of Ipswich, and not a poor butcher and as many have asserted.” Therefore, the Cardinal either never corrected anyone about the wealth and status of his family, or he just made the story up to look better in the eyes of Henry VII. The kitchens at Hampton Court attest to Wolsey’s humble beginnings as Wolsey most likely spent a fair amount of time in this area of his home growing up—especially if he was from a poorer home. Therefore, he created large kitchens at the palace. He also needed vast kitchens because he had over five hundred people working at Hampton Court. The kitchens show his wealth and how far he had risen to achieve the splendor of Hampton Court Palace.

Thomas Wolsey attended Ipswich School and Magdalen College School before studying theology at Magdalen College, Oxford. T. W. Cameron writes that “Wolsey told him he had taken that degree at fifteen, which was a rare thing and seldom seen, and won him the honorable nickname of the boy-bachelor.” Therefore, Wolsey was eleven when he started school there. He always asserted that he had done this on his own and that his success was his and his alone. Wolsey never had anything handed to him so he had to make it on his own. This drive for something greater motivated Wolsey to try his best and never give up in his struggle for the things he wanted even if it meant lying, cheating, and stealing his way to the top. The only way for Wolsey to move forward was to

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3 Ibid.
gain “admission to the university and entry into the Church [that] would open up unlimited possibilities.” The Church offered a career for Wolsey who as a scholar and could do little more than become a priest with his education. Wolsey had what was necessary to become a priest, and “within [the] priesthood, there was fierce competition for the higher prizes which were there to be won by the priest with the necessary qualities—ability, energy, ruthlessness, and the knack of making useful friends.”

These qualities drove Wolsey’s decision to become a priest as he had all of these and more to add to the list, and they allowed him to become one of the most powerful men in King Henry VIII’s court.

In 1498 Wolsey was appointed Junior Bursar of Magdalen College; he was in charge of collecting funds to build a tower, but after some time he was released from this office for breaking the regulations. Wolsey’s tendency to cut through the red tape to get things done became one of his trademarks later in life. It was not long into Wolsey’s rise to power before he reached the king’s court. By 1502 he had became a chaplain to Henry Deane, Archbishop of Canterbury, who died the following year. He was then taken into the household of Sir Richard Nanfan who trusted Wolsey to be the executor of his estate. George Cavendish asserted how important it was for Wolsey to serve Nanfan: “this knight he served, and behaved him so discreetly and justly, that he received the special favor of his said master; insomuch that for his wit, gravity, and just behavior, he committed all the charge of his office to chaplain.” Wolsey had an ability to make people trust him, leading him to the king after Nanfan’s death in 1507.

Wolsey gained the trust of King Henry VII because the king

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5 Ibid.
had introduced measures to curb the power of the nobility and favored those from more humble backgrounds. This played right into Wolsey’s advantage at the king’s court. Wolsey won favor with Henry VII “through his instant labor and especial favor his chaplain was promoted to the king’s service, and made his chaplain.” Wolsey was not promoted just because of his cunning ways; he was promoted because he was a hard worker and could accomplish the hard tasks at hand. Henry VII appointed Wolsey royal chaplain, and in this position Wolsey was secretary to Richard Foxe who recognized Wolsey’s innate capability and commitment and appreciated his diligence and enthusiasm to do anything that was asked of him. Wolsey’s remarkable rise to power from humble origins can be attributed to his high intellect, his extremely diligent nature, his driving ambition for power, and the connection he was able to attain with the king. He was approachable and welcoming when it came to the king, and his relationship with Henry VII was crucial in his rise to the Archbishopric of York and the control that Henry VIII would later give him.

Wolsey’s rise coincided with the ascension of the new monarch, Henry VIII, whose personality, plans, and political mindset differed significantly from those of his father, Henry VII. The young Henry VIII was uninterested in the details of governing during his early years whereas under the tight, personal monarchy of Henry VII, Wolsey would have been unlikely to have obtained as much trust and responsibility. Wolsey was a man “whose head was full of subtle wit and policy. Perceiving a plain path to walk in towards promotion, he handled himself so politically, that he found the means to be one of the King’s council, and to grow in good estimation and favor with the King.”

7 Ibid.
8 Cavendish, 13.
his move, growing closer to the young King Henry VIII, and proved to be indispensable.

Thomas Wolsey’s relationship with Henry VIII became one of the pivotal stepping stones in Wolsey’s reaching prominence. One of the reasons for Wolsey’s rise was because Henry saw him as a “suitable instrument for his own ambitions – and when he ceased to be such, he was dismissed.” Wolsey tried to take advantage of the young king who knew little about how to rule since he had been raised for the Church. Henry VIII was Henry VII’s second son following his deceased elder brother, Arthur. Henry VIII was not prepared to become king, and Wolsey was more than willing to take advantage of a “young and lusty King” who was more than happy to place all the difficult business in Wolsey’s capable hands. Wolsey completely seduced Henry by distracting the young king with plans to turn Henry’s palace into a “temple of all pleasures.” At the same time, Wolsey turned his sights on his own palace, Hampton Court.

Wolsey’s Hampton Court possessed greatness that, in time, would surpass any dwelling the King had. Earnest Law asserts that “Wolsey had no sooner entered into possession of Hampton Court, than he began with characteristic energy to plan the erection of a vast and sumptuous edifice, commensurate with the dignity and wealth he had just attained to.” Hampton Court was a stage. Wolsey wanted his palace to be majestic and even more impressive than the King’s court. Cardinal Wolsey “made no serious attempt to suppress these verses which were secretly circulating in manuscripts in the court and elsewhere; instead, he bribed Skelton, by

10 Cavendish, 14.
11 Ibid.
gifts and patronage, to write several poems in which he praised Wolsey in the most fulsome style.” One of Skelton’s verses proclaimed, “Why come ye not to court? To which Court? To the King’s court, Or to Hampton Court? Nay, to the King’s court; The King’s court should have the excellence; But Hampton Court Hath the preeminence.” Hampton Court was also very menacing. Earnest Law asserts that “the palace was very Tudor, red brick, pinnacles, gargoyles, and heraldic beats, on gambles.” Wolsey wanted people to fear and respect him, and he also wanted to prove to the world that he belonged with the aristocracy. Wolsey needed to validate that he was not just that poor boy who rose through the ranks, but that he had become a man of true power.

Once firmly entrenched in the king’s favor, Wolsey wanted to keep the king out of the affairs of the state and leave it for him to run. By 1516 Wolsey had become “so proud that he considered himself the peer of the King’s.” Henry VIII chose Wolsey to be his leading man because he shared the king’s dreams, and Wolsey could turn them into reality through his forcefulness and desire to do the king’s will. Although Wolsey wanted to do the king’s will, he still yearned for the authority and affluence he could gain by keeping the king content. Earnest Law writes that “these were the earlier days of Henry’s reign, when he conceived nothing but implicit trust and respect for his faithful Wolsey, and regarded Katharine with nothing but tender love.” These days would end with the rise of Anne Boleyn.

Henry trusted Wolsey with his most important matter -- his divorce from Catherine of Aragon. In this matter, Wolsey failed the king.

13 Ridley, 16.
14 Ibid, 16.
15 Law, Cardinal Wolsey, 12.
16 Gwyn, 8.
17 Law, Cardinal Wolsey, 15.
for what was most likely the first and only time. Anne Boleyn never liked the Cardinal because he was Catholic and she was protestant, and she wanted to influence the King in removing England from the grip of Rome. Anne “utterly hated the Cardinal and got Henry to give orders that he was not to come henceforth within three miles of the Court unless expressly summons.”\(^\text{18}\) Anne also feared the Cardinal’s power over the King as “it was obviously potentially dangerous for him if someone else was exercising strong influence over Henry.”\(^\text{19}\) With Wolsey losing his touch with the people of England and with Anne Boleyn whispering in the king’s ear that he was slowing Henry’s divorce, the Cardinal was bound to fall from the king’s graces. James Gairdner states that “the king knew very well that Wolsey had only failed because success was impossible. The divorce was a business in to which he had been unwillingly dragged; but he had done the utmost that he could in it, well knowing that it would be his ruin at any time not to give the king satisfaction.”\(^\text{20}\)

Another problem Wolsey faced was Henry’s decision to call his bluff. Henry VIII wanted to break from the Roman Catholic Church, and by doing so, he alienated Wolsey. The Cardinal did not even realize that his end was drawing near. In September he was visited by du Bellay who later stated, “I have less hope of his maintaining his influence, since my talk with him, than I had before, for I see he trusts in some of his own creatures, who, I am sure, have turned their coats. I am very shaken, for I should never have believed that they would have been so wicked; and the worst of it is that he does not realize it.”\(^\text{21}\) By 1529 the Cardinal’s failure to procure the divorce for Henry ultimately led to his arrest and seizure of

\(^{19}\) Ridley, 190.
\(^{20}\) Gairdner, 76.
\(^{21}\) Ridley, 217.
his property, including Hampton Court. Hampton Court is now known as Henry VIII’s palace; the Cardinal is barely recognized as its builder. The great and powerful Wolsey was removed from the King’s court, his most prized possession in the hands of the king. The king took residence at Hampton Court because it was even grander than the dwellings he owned. On his way to the Tower of London, to face the charge of treason, the great Wolsey fell ill and died. When the Cardinal fell from the king’s graces so did “the greatness and splendor of Henry’s reign.” No one could ever be compared with the great Cardinal and the legacy he left behind at Hampton Court.

Wolsey built Hampton Court to reflect the view he wanted people to have of him. He was ever the actor, and Hampton Court was his stage. Hampton Court embodies every aspect of what Wolsey wanted people to see in him when they looked at his palace. At times Hampton Court is very masculine and menacing, and other times there is beauty in the deep red Tudor brick and majestic grand halls. The Cardinal wanted to prove to the world that he belonged with the aristocracy and spared no expense building and upgrading the grand palace. It is proof of his power and greatness, and it is a reminder that power and glory came at a cost. Wolsey paid the ultimate price—he paid with his life. The image of the Cardinal is that of a brooding and powerful figure, a sinister string-puller who wanted nothing but to please his King and rise in power and riches. Hampton Court shows the longing Wolsey had for greatness employing “the best carvers, painters, and gilders in London... Sometimes he sent to Italy direct for decorative work. The terra-cotta medallion bust of the Roman Emperors surrounded with rich arabesque borders, which are affixed to the turrets in each side of the gateways of the courts, were
ordered by him.”23 The terra-cotta medallions still exist at Hampton Court, and they are one of the few things remaining from Wolsey’s reign in the palace. Not only did the outside of Hampton Court show his extravagance but the furniture and decoration inside did as well. Law writes that “rich as was the furniture of the Cardinal’s palace, and cast as was its extent, it only just adequate to meet the requirements of the enormous and splendid household which he maintained.”24 Wolsey spared no expense on the grand dwelling; for example, he installed tapestries in every room and would have them changed weekly. He had created a palace that was celebrated throughout Europe “for the quantity of splendid Arras hangings that it contained. For this form of artistic decoration Wolsey appears in fact to have had a perfect passion.”25 One room that remains of Wolsey’s is what is known as “Wolsey’s Closet.” It is a room that has been greatly reduced in size, but the dark carved panel walls still show the extent of Wolsey’s extravagance where “the whole decoration of this room, faded though it is by time, gives us that idea of splendor and richness without gaudiness, which was a characteristic of the artistic taste of the great Cardinal.”26 His motto can still be seen in Latin, which translated to English means “the Lord be my helper.”

Hampton Court was to Wolsey what the White House is to the President; it was a symbol of power. Whoever lived there held all the power necessary to rule the world. This is what Wolsey wanted Hampton Court to be, a status symbol which suggested that he was there to rule. Hampton Court is that and so much more. It tells the story of a man who rose from nothing to become the most important man in England next

23 Ibid., 21.
26 Ibid., 25.
to the king, though Wolsey did not want people to see him as such. He would have rather had people forget that he was once a poor boy and instead think of him as the all-powerful Cardinal who did the king’s bidding. On a plaque at Hampton Court it says, “Henry and Wolsey wielded architecture and interior decoration like weapons. Spending extravagantly, they deployed artists, architects and craftsmen from all over Europe in a never-ending cultural battle with the rival courts of France and Holy Roman Empire.”  

Wolsey loved showing his power and grandeur though his architecture; it was his way to display his wealth and status. It was said that his palace “lit up the eyes of the beholders, by reason of their sumptuous work.” Thomas Wolsey used Hampton Court to show his prominence and wealth, but not even that could save him in the end.

27 Historical Royal Palaces. Hampton Court Palace: July, 9 2011.
28 Ibid.