

'The Eldest Daughter'

Blickling Hall, one of England's greatest Jacobean show-piece mansions, lies not two miles north-west of Aylsham in Norfolk. It is a beautiful place, surrounded by woods, farms, sweeping parkland and gardens – gardens that were old in the fifteenth century, and which once surrounded the fifteenth-century moated manor house of the Boleyn family, the predecessor of the present building. That house is long gone, but it was in its day the cradle of a remarkable dynasty; and here, in those ancient gardens, and within the mellow, red-brick gabled house, in the dawning years of the sixteenth century, the three children who were its brightest scions once played in the spacious and halcyon summers of their early childhood, long before they made their dramatic début on the stage of history: Anne Boleyn, who would one day become Queen of England; her brother George Boleyn, who would also court fame and glory, but who would ultimately share his sister's tragic and brutal fate; and their sister Mary Boleyn, who would become the mistress of kings, and gain a notoriety that is almost certainly undeserved.

Blickling was where the Boleyn siblings' lives probably

began, the protective setting for their infant years, nestling in the broad, rolling landscape of Norfolk, circled by a wilderness of woodland sprinkled with myriad flowers such as bluebells, meadowsweet, loosestrife and marsh orchids, and swept by the eastern winds. Norfolk was the land that shaped them, that remote corner of England that had grown prosperous through the wool-cloth trade, its chief city, Norwich – which lay just a few miles to the south – being second in size only to London in the Boleyns' time. Norfolk also boasted more churches than any other English shire, miles of beautiful coastline and a countryside and waterways teeming with a wealth of wildlife. Here, at Blickling, nine miles from the sea, the Boleyn children took their first steps, learned early on that they had been born into an important and rising family, and began their first lessons.

Anne and George Boleyn were to take centre-stage roles in the play of England's history. By comparison, Mary was left in the wings, with fame and fortune always eluding her. Instead, she is remembered as an infamous whore. And yet, of those three Boleyn siblings, she was ultimately the luckiest, and, unlike her sister, the most happy.

This is Mary's story.

Mary Boleyn has aptly been described as 'a young lady of both breeding and lineage'.¹ She was born of a prosperous landed Norfolk family of the knightly class. The Boleyns, whom Anne Boleyn claimed were originally of French extraction, were settled at Salle, near Aylsham, before 1283, when the register of Walsingham Abbey records a John Boleyne living there,² but the family can be traced in Norfolk back to the reign of Henry II (1154–89).³ The earliest Boleyn inscription in Salle church is to John's great-great-grandson, Thomas Boleyn, who died in 1411; he was the son of another John Boleyn and related to Ralph Boleyn, who was living

in 1402. Several other early members of the family, including Mary's great-great-grandparents, Geoffrey and Alice Boleyn, were buried in Salle church, which is like a small cathedral, rising tall and stately in its perpendicular splendour in the flat Norfolk landscape. The prosperous village it once served, which thrived upon the profitable wool trade with the Low Countries, has mostly disappeared.

The surname Boleyn was spelt in several ways, there being no uniformity in spelling in former times, when it was given as Boleyn, Boleyne, Bolleyne, Bollegne, Boleigne, Bolen, Bullen, Boulen, Boullant or Boullan, the French form. The bulls' heads on the family coat of arms are a pun on the name. In adult life, Anne Boleyn used the modern form adopted in this text. Unfortunately, we don't know how Mary Boleyn spelt her surname, as only two letters of hers survive, both signed with her married name.

The Boleyn family had once been tenant farmers, but the source of their wealth and standing was trade. Thomas's grandson, Sir Geoffrey Boleyn, made his fortune in the City of London as a member and then Master of the Worshipful Company of Mercers (1454); he was Sheriff of London from 1446–7; M.P. for London in 1449; and an alderman of the City of London from 1452 (an office he held for eleven years). In 1457, he was elected Lord Mayor.⁴ By then, he had made his fortune; his wealth had enabled him to marry into the nobility, his wife being Anne, daughter and co-heiress of Thomas, Lord Hoo and Hastings, and she brought him great estates. Stow records that Sir Geoffrey 'gave liberally to the prisons, hospitals and lazar houses, besides a thousand pounds to poor householders in London, and two hundred pounds to [those] in Norfolk'. He was knighted by Henry VI before 1461.

In 1452 (or 1450), Geoffrey had purchased the manor of Blickling in Norfolk from his friend and patron, Sir John Fastolf.⁵

The manor had once been the property of the eleventh-century Saxon king, Harold Godwinson,⁶ and the original manor house on the site had been built in the 1390s by Sir Nicholas Dagworth, but it was evidently outdated or in poor repair, because – as has recently been discovered – it was rebuilt as Blickling Hall, ‘a fair house’ of red brick, by Geoffrey Boleyn.⁷ Geoffrey also built the chapel of St Thomas in Blickling church, and adorned it with beautiful stained glass incorporating the heraldic arms of himself and his wife, which still survives today; in his will, he asked to be buried there if he departed this life at Blickling. In the event, he died in London.

Ten years later, in 1462, Geoffrey bought the manors of Hever Cobham and Hever Brokays in Kent from William Fiennes, Lord Saye and Sele,⁸ as well as thirteenth-century Hever Castle from Sir Thomas Cobham. Sir Geoffrey now moved in the same social circles as the prosperous Paston family (Norfolk neighbours who knew the Boleyns well, and whose surviving letters tell us so much about fifteenth-century life), the Norfolk gentry and even the exalted Howards, who were descended from King Edward I, and at the head of whose house was John Howard, first Duke of Norfolk; the friendship between the Boleyns and the Howards, which would later be cemented by marriage, dated from at least 1469.⁹

When he died in 1463,¹⁰ Geoffrey was buried in the church of St Lawrence Jewry by the Guildhall in London. His heir, Thomas Boleyn of Salle, was buried there beside him in 1471,¹¹ when the family wealth and estates passed to Geoffrey’s second son, William Boleyn, Mary’s grandfather, who had been born around 1451; he was ‘aged 36 or more’ in the *Inquisition Post Mortem* on his cousin, Thomas Hoo, taken in October 1487.¹²

The Boleyns had arrived; they were what would soon

become known as new men, those who had risen to prominence through wealth, wedlock and ability. William Boleyn, who – like his father – had supported the House of York during the Wars of the Roses, was dubbed a Knight of the Bath at Richard III's coronation in July 1483, became a Justice of the Peace, and made an even more impressive marriage than his father, to Margaret Butler, who had been born sometime prior to 1465,¹³ the younger daughter and co-heiress of Thomas Butler, 7th Earl of Ormond.¹⁴

The Butlers were an ancient Anglo-Norman family, whose surname derived from the office of butler (an official who was responsible for the provisioning of wine), which their ancestor, Theobald Walter, had borne in the household of the future King John in 1185. They too were descended from Edward I, and had been earls of Ormond since 1329.¹⁵ Thomas Butler was one of the wealthiest peers; he had inherited a fortune of £40,000 (£20 million), and was lord of no fewer than seventy-two manors in England. He sat in Parliament as the premier baron and served as English ambassador to the courts of France and Burgundy. His wife was Anne, daughter and heiress of a rich knight, Sir Richard Hankeford.¹⁶

Before he had come into his inheritance in 1477, Butler had been chronically short of money, and Sir William Boleyn and his mother had continually come to the rescue;¹⁷ Butler repaid his debts with the hand of his daughter, and a dowry that would handsomely enrich the Boleyn family.

Lady Margaret Butler bore Sir William Boleyn eleven children, of whom there were four surviving sons: Thomas, James, William and Edward. Thomas was the eldest,¹⁸ born in 1477,¹⁹ when his mother was probably quite young, although perhaps not as young as twelve, as her mother's Inquisition Post Mortem suggests. After Richard III, the last Plantagenet monarch, was killed at the Battle of Bosworth

in 1485, the Boleyns prudently switched their allegiance to the new Tudor dynasty; in 1490, Sir William was appointed Sheriff of Kent, by which time he was probably dividing his time between Blickling and Hever. King Henry VII, the first Tudor sovereign, demonstrated his trust in him by making him responsible for keeping the peace in his locale, delivering prisoners to the assizes, and placing and guarding the beacons that would herald the approach of the King's enemies; he gave William a commission of array against an invasion by the French, and appointed him Sheriff of Norfolk in 1501. The next year, William was made the third of only four Barons of the Exchequer, who sat as judges in the Court of the Exchequer.²⁰

In 1497, Sir William Boleyn and his son Thomas, now twenty, fought for Henry VII against the rebels of Cornwall, who had risen in protest against excessive taxation. Again and again the Boleyn family would demonstrate its solid loyalty to the Crown, and in so doing would win the notice and favour of the Tudor kings, Henry VII and Henry VIII, who valued 'new men' who had risen to prominence through trade and the acquisition of wealth, as opposed to the older nobility, whose power, hitherto boosted by private armies, they strove to keep in check.

The detail in Thomas Boleyn's tomb brass suggests that some attempt was made to reflect his true appearance. It is the image of a dignified man with the long face, high cheekbones and pointed chin that were inherited by his daughter Anne and his grandson, Lord Hunsdon. He has strong features, wavy hair cut straight at chin level, and the hint of a close-cropped beard. His coat of arms, sporting three bulls' heads, while being a play on his name, also symbolised his valour, bravery and generosity. In the case of the latter, it was little more than flattery.

Thomas was a gifted linguist, more fluent in French than