

THE BOLEYN'S OF HEVER CASTLE

By Dr Owen Emmerson 9 March 2023

For just 77 years, the Boleyn family was at Hever Castle, yet the legacy of the name Boleyn, through Queen Anne Boleyn, second wife of King Henry VIII, has lent considerable significance to the fortunes of these islands up to the present day. Henry craved a male heir, but that son, Edward (by Jane Seymour, his third queen), had a very brief reign, while his daughter, by Anne Boleyn, was to grace the throne for 45 years as Elizabeth I (or 'Gloriana'), enjoying lasting fame and a reverence matched only by our late Queen Elizabeth II.

Dr Emmerson took us through the various stages of ownership of Hever, from William de



Hever in 1271, who owned lands and a manor, to John de Cobham, who fortified Hever, and then Geoffrey Boleyn Senior, a land worker who progressed to be a tenant farmer, appearing in criminal records for petty crimes which enabled him to 'get by'. His son, Geoffrey Boleyn Junior, altered the family fortunes, moving away to London to be a hatter's apprentice, later attaining the post of Lord Mayor of London

and gaining a knighthood. He married Anne Hoo, an heiress, acquired lands in Norfolk, and purchased Hever in 1462. His son, William Boleyn, married Lady Margaret Butler, a second great marriage for the Boleyns, their son Thomas, who inherited Hever in 1505, becoming father to George, Mary, and Anne, these three being the great-grandchildren of Geoffrey senior.

In order to understand the position held by Hever Castle, we were given various details of the layout of Hever Castle, with its three imposing portcullises and gatehouse, and the division, by social class and functionality, of its floors. There was grandeur in the Great Hall, enhanced by a crown-post roof, and a peephole enabled the family to look down onto the Great Hall unobserved. Hever was a significant property, the Boleyns being a family of some standing, and Anne a well educated, cultured young lady, living in splendour. She later went to the Netherlands and to France, serving the Queen of France in a country more free than the England of the day, espousing renaissance ideas and religious reform.

In 1522, Anne was engaged to be married, but this was broken off. She went to Court and became a maid of honour to Queen Catherine of Aragon, but suffered the breaking off of a second betrothal in 1523, the Earl of Northumberland refusing to let her marry his son. Returning to Hever in 1524 with a heavy heart, she was pursued by Henry VIII two years later, although she steadfastly refused to enter into carnal relations with him, unlike her sister, Mary, who had already been the royal mistress. Henry failed to obtain an annulment of his existing marriage, took great pains to declare that the king's authority outweighed that of the Pope and so broke the power of the church, marrying Anne secretly in late 1532 and formally in early 1533, a few months before the annulment of his earlier marriage was achieved.

Sadly for Anne, she did not produce the son which Henry so earnestly desired, presenting him with only the one daughter, Elizabeth, and having the misfortune to suffer three miscarriages thereafter. By early 1536, Henry had turned his attentions to Jane Seymour, and forced on Anne a trial for High Treason, leading inevitably (albeit entirely unjustly) to her conviction and subsequent execution (some commentators deem it a 'martyrdom') by sword on Tower Hill and burial in an unmarked grave at St Peter ad Vincula nearby.

Hever passed to the king in 1539, who gave it to his fourth wife, Anne of Cleves, by way of a settlement on the annulment of their marriage. Henry died in 1547, only a few years later, and in 1558 Anne's daughter acceded to the throne as Elizabeth I, ushering in a Golden Age. She ensured that her mother was not forgotten, Anne's emblem, motifs, relatives' portraits, etc. being prominent and powerful reminders of the mother of the queen regnant.

There were just 77 years' occupation of Hever by the Boleyns, the family's rise unthinkable and its end unspeakable, yet it is commonly held that the Boleyns have never left Hever, their memory abiding in every aspect of this lovely castle and its grounds. Despite Henry VIII's machinations, deriving from an obsession to have a strong, worthy son to succeed him, the irony is that poor, despised Anne left, in her little daughter, someone destined to become a great queen, the symbol of her age, and a benchmark for all of our country's monarchs to this day.

Stefan Gatward