

Chapter 2

The Tudor Dynasty: Perfecting Absolutism in the Era of Renaissance and Reformation, 1485–1603

2.1 The Renaissance and the Reformation

As the sixteenth century dawned, extraordinary changes affected the whole of Europe. For some 200 years, the Renaissance had driven thought in Italy. Now, it flourished in a revival of the traditions of ancient Greece and Rome (Churchill 1956, p. 3). Literature, philosophy, and art opened up under classical inspiration and a new era of questioning and critical thinking emerged. The development of printing from 1450 onward facilitated the spread of this new knowledge.

During middle ages, education largely had been confined to train clergies. Now it was extended to lay scholars and well-informed gentlemen. Already by 1500 A.D., nearly 60 universities were spanned across the Western world. Their numbers began to increase and the depth and breadth of their curricula too expanded dramatically.

It was an age marked not only by striking achievements in the fields of arts and architecture, but also the beginning of revolution in science, associated with the insights of Copernicus. Critically, Copernicus conclusively proved, and Galileo later forcefully asserted that the planet earth, moved around the sun and not vice versa. This insight was not well-received by the Catholic Church, whose scriptures resolutely advanced that the earth was the center of the universe.

This urge to inquire, to debate, and to seek new explanations spread from the field of classical learning to that of religious studies. Texts written in Greek, Latin, and Hebrew were closely scrutinized and reinterpreted. Predictably, scholars began to question long-held religious beliefs. In this sense, the Renaissance bred the Reformation. In 1517, at the age of 34, a German priest, Martin Luther, denounced the sale of Indulgences by the Catholic Church, and nailed his thesis on this and related matters on the door of Wittenberg Castle Church. What began as a protest against corrupt Church practices became a fundamental challenge to Church doctrine.

Within a decade, Luther's doctrinal challenge would spread across the continent of Europe, under the general title of the Reformation. It took different forms in different countries. Switzerland fell under the influence of Zwingli and Calvin.

Charles K. Rowley is deceased.

Calvinism swept across France to the Netherlands and to Britannia, where it established itself as most powerful in Scotland.

Luther adhered rigorously to the principle of “salvation by faith, not works.” Under this doctrine, eternal salvation could neither be earned by living a good life on earth, nor could it be purchased from the Church in the form of Penitence and Indulgences. Belief in the Christian revelation was essential. Martin Luther believed in predestination, noting that Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden because Almighty God made him to do so. The Catholic Church, and the popes who led that Church, were outraged by the Reformation and sought to eliminate such blasphemy from the populations over which they ruled supreme.

The Catholic Church would not easily sacrifice its dominion. Strengthened spiritually by a revival known as the Counter-Reformation and physically by the activities of Inquisition, the Catholic Church held its ground through a long series of religious wars. By the middle of the sixteenth century, the Calvinists formed the spearhead of the Protestant attack and the Jesuits formed the shield and sword of Catholic defense and counterattack (Churchill 1956, p. 6). Only after a century of strife, would the Peace of Westphalia of 1648 finally terminate a struggle that had changed the map of Europe and had wrecked much of Central Europe.

In the meantime, European explorers, traders, and missionaries, circumnavigating the planet confirmed that the planet is round and global. The old world of landlords and peasants began to shrink as a new world of traders, merchants, and bankers seized opportunities that signaled the emergence of a new middle class that was destined to play an increasingly influential role in the governance of nations.

Such was the new century that heralded the arrival of the Tudor dynasty in England.

2.2 King Henry VII (1485–1509): Securing the New Dynasty and Reimposing Absolutist Governance

The Tudor dynasty spanned the period 1485–1603, and was composed of five monarchs, namely Henry VII (1485–1509), Henry VIII (1509–1547), Edward VI (1547–1553), Mary I (1553–1558), and Elizabeth I (1558–1603). The Tudor dynasty is the most heavily researched of all English and British dynasties, and we deal with it only briefly in this book, focusing attention primarily on how well the public choice model holds up in predicting and explaining the behavior of the Tudor dynasty.

To be sure, the Wars of the Roses did not end completely on Bosworth Field. Many of the supporters of Richard III refused to accept the adverse outcome of a single battle as final. The medieval political model would not so easily allow such a significant reversal in dynastic prospects. Even when King Henry VII strengthened his tenuous hereditary claim to the throne—by marrying King Edward IV’s elder daughter, Elizabeth, in January 1486—the prospect for the Yorkist counter rebellion was far from fully extinguished.

The quarrel between Lancaster and York, after all, had been fostered by a multitude of lesser family rivalries. Although the greatest families on both sides had been decimated and weakened by ongoing warfare—even the Stanleys could no longer make and remake kings as the Nevilles had been able to do—a multitude of lesser family quarrels persisted. So, dynastic faction still might hope to draw strength from local feuds (Meyer 2010).

The death of King Richard III left only one legitimate male Plantagenet alive: Edward, Earl of Warwick, the orphaned son of Richard's troublesome brother George, Duke of Clarence. Henry VII had imprisoned the Earl of Warwick in the Tower of London immediately following the battle of Bosworth Field. Warwick was but a 10-year-old boy. Yet, Warwick was a credible contender for the throne.

From Rome, Henry procured a papal declaration not only that he was the rightful king of England, but also that anyone who refused to recognize him as such would be subject to excommunication. This meant that England's bishops, with all their wealth and influence, could find no basis for opposing him. Henry then built his winning coalition from his most trusted and loyal supporters.

Henry VII proved to be a remarkably shrewd chooser of men. Few of his ministers came from the hereditary nobility. Many were churchmen. Almost all of them were of obscure origin (Churchill 1956, p. 21). Richard Fox, Bishop of Winchester, Chief Minister, and the most powerful man in England next to the king, had been a schoolmaster before he met Henry in Paris and they became companions in exile. Reginald Bray, Fox's second-in-command, was a layman. Together, they would administer to the king for 20 years.

The Earl of Oxford became admiral of England. John Morton, elevated to Lord Chancellor and Archbishop of Canterbury, was appointed as a cardinal by the pope. King Henry VII's winning coalition would be small indeed, and completely loyal, heralding the ruthlessness of his reign.

Yet, Henry remained vulnerable to Yorkist coups during the early years of his reign. Just 2 years after Bosworth, in 1487, a youth of lowly and obscure birth named Lambert Simnel was put forward as Edward, Earl of Warwick, and, therefore, as the boy who should be king (Meyer 2010, p. 20). Simnel was a stooge of John de la Pole, Earl of Lincoln, who had also been imprisoned after the battle, but who foolishly had been released by Henry.

Lincoln found support in Europe and Ireland, where Simnel was crowned King Edward VI. Lincoln then invaded England in the pretender's name. Henry's army met him at Stoke, defeated him, and killed him. Simnel was spared and served the king thenceforth in the royal kitchens. Henry shrewdly understood that barely 50% of his underpaid levies had joined the action in that fateful encounter with the Earl of Lincoln. He moved swiftly to reinforce loyalty by dispensing taxation revenues to his troops.

In the early 1490s, another Plantagenet pretender appeared, a young Frenchman, named Perkin Warbeck. He was selected by disaffected Yorkists to impersonate the younger son of King Edward IV—Richard, Duke of York (who had been murdered by King Richard III after Richard usurped the throne, but whose dead body had never been revealed), and this threat was very serious.

Warbeck found support in Ireland and was recognized as king by James IV of Scotland, by Charles VIII of France, by Maximilian, the Hapsburg king of Rome, and by Margaret, the embittered sister of Edward IV and widow of the Duke of Burgundy. When Henry VII raised taxes to provide for military operations in the north, the Cornish rose up against the crown and declared their support for the pretender.

Henry VII's army confronted the rebels at Blackheath and defeated them. Warbeck was captured and hanged. The innocent, still imprisoned, Earl of Warwick then was found guilty on a trumped-up charge of conspiracy and was put to death. Thus, the first judicial murder of the Tudor dynasty extinguished the last remaining Plantagenet. Henceforth, Henry VII who would be secure on the throne of England, shrewdly feared much more than he was loved.

King Henry VII quickly recognized the true nature of the threat to his leadership, namely the financial poverty of the Crown. His first parliament, in November 1485, passed a sweeping Act of Resumption that restored to the crown all lands alienated since 1455 by confiscation and attainder and many other great estates in addition:

He already possessed a valuable nucleus in the inheritance of the Lancastrian kings, whose heir he was. The North Country estates of Richard, Duke of Gloucester, were his by right of conquest, and later the treason and execution Of Sir William Stanley, who had been discontented with his rewards after Bosworth, brought spacious properties in the Midlands into the royal hands. Henry was thus assured of a settled income. (Churchill 1956, p. 14)

Ruthlessly, Henry brought the nobles to heel, systematically stripping away their autonomy (Meyer 2010, p. 21). First, he marginalized them, making room on his council for those he did not actively distrust, while excluding them from offices of the highest importance. Second, he decimated them. Any member of the nobility, who opposed him, especially, but not only if he had royal blood, was executed. Third, he impoverished them. Relatives of such rebels were required to pay heavy bonds as a guarantee of good behavior. Henry eventually would levy such bonds against more than half of England's nobility.

Henry was so unwilling to create new peers that their numbers shrank from 55 at the beginning of his rule to 42 at the end. A substantial proportion of the 138 individuals that he attainted were nobles, and the resulting confiscation of their lands made Henry richer than any previous English king.

Not content with these accumulations, Henry also milked the church for money. Bishopricks became a reward for service to the crown. The ecclesiastical hierarchy became dominated by administrators and politicians who owed their positions to the king and who served his interests. Every new appointment required the payment of substantial fees to the Crown. Even the revenues of vacant bishopricks went to the king (Meyer 2010, p. 22).

To consolidate his growing wealth, Henry put in place a new private office, the *Treasureship of the Chamber* that would become the receiving department for the king's revenues. As early as 1490, King Henry VII had become a lender rather than a borrower. After 1496, he had freed himself from any dependence on parliamentary and clerical taxes. Henceforth, he could live well within his own means, free from any dependence on parliament. When he died, the crown was no longer poor.

Henry wisely avoided continental wars. He recognized that the kings of France were no longer as weak as they had been during the medieval period. He took an army across the Channel only once, in the early 1490s, and then merely to signal his objection to France's absorption of Brittany. Once Charles VIII agreed to pay handsomely and to refrain from supporting Perkin Warbeck, Henry returned to England loaded with French gold.

Henry strove to establish a strong monarchy in England. The King's Council was strengthened. It was given parliamentary authority to examine individuals with or without oath, and to condemn them on the basis of written evidence alone, in a manner that ran counter to the common law. The Court of the Star Chamber met regularly at Westminster with two Chief Justices in attendance.

It was originally a judicial committee of the King's Council, trying cases that required special treatment because of the excessive power of one of the parties or because of the enormity of the offence. This court enabled the government to act without the formalities of indictment and trial by jury that provided for individual liberty (Britannica 1961, Vol. 8, p. 506).

In 1495, under the threat of Perkin Warbeck's insurrection, the Perjury Act laid down procedures for bringing corrupt juries before the council for punishment. Two other acts allowed the local courts to bring individuals for trial without indictment by a grand jury. In these ways, the common law was brought more under the control of the King's Council, inevitably with some loss of the protection of due process. Surely, this increasing use of conciliar justice encroached upon the liberties of Englishmen. Yet, its drastic procedures still depended for their effect on the tacit consent of the king's subjects, the king had little armed force to coerce them.

In the field of economic policy, King Henry VII was no innovator. He relied for the most part, on medieval precedent, albeit reaching out more extensively than his predecessors into mercantile policies. Acts forbidding the export of bullion, reasserted royal control over the currency. An Act of 1504 asserted the supremacy of the common law and central government over guilds and corporations by subjecting their ordinances to review by the chancellor, treasurer, and chief justices. The merchant adventurers were prevented from squeezing out smaller traders by extracting entrance fees to their fellowship. In 1489, an Act was passed to check enclosures of arable land for sheep pastures. An Act of 1504, imposed on justices of the peace the responsibility for dealing with vagrants, driven from the land by the enclosure system.

Henry VII died at the age of 52, respected by but not beloved of his subjects. His reputation for personal greed, for being willing to bend the law in every feasible manner to relieve his wealthiest subjects of as much of their property as possible, still stands today as the most vividly remembered part of Henry VII's legacy (Meyer 2010, p. 23). Yet, Henry's unpopularity during the last years of his reign itself bequeathed an invaluable inheritance to his son and heir, Henry VIII, who ascended the throne like the dawn of a new beginning.

2.3 King Henry VIII (1509–1547): From *Fidei Defensor* to the Break with Rome

The young king, Henry VIII accessed the throne of England at a time when continental Europe was creating a modern state system. The new French monarchy was much stronger than before the Hundred Years War. Louis XI and his son, Charles VIII, now ruled a united France, a country from which England had been expelled from everywhere except Calais. The House of Burgundy had expired with the death of Charles the Bold in 1477. Burgundy was now ruled by the Holy Roman Emperor, Maximilian. The Hapsburgs now controlled the Netherlands and Belgium.

Although Henry VII had bequeathed a reformed exchequer, King Henry VIII ruled a country of only 3 million subjects, no standing army and no state apparatus, answerable only to the royal will (Churchill 1956, p. 25). England, essentially, was at the mercy of any shift in continental politics that might involve a hostile alliance between France and Spain. Perhaps to counter such an outcome, within 6 weeks of inheriting the throne, the 18-year-old king married the 24-year-old Catharine of Aragon, the widow of his deceased brother, Arthur, and the daughter of King Ferdinand of Spain and the late Queen Isabella.

The English people were delighted with their young, handsome king, following the drabness of King Henry VII's court. Henry VIII had little interest in administration, and delegated decision making to his council and to the parliament. He relied heavily on his father's senior ministers, most notably William Warham in his dual capacities of Archbishop of Canterbury and Lord Chancellor of England. The young Henry for the most part engaged in wenching, hunting, music, dance, jousting, tennis, and gambling, while spending recklessly on collecting and improving his royal palaces (eventually he would possess 50 such, an all-time record for any monarch of Britannia).

Even at the beginning of his reign, however, the shadow of tyranny appeared. Henry VII had established the Council Learned in the Law as a mechanism for compelling the wealthy to disgorge land and the gold for the benefit of the Crown. Two of the king's most trusted lawyers, Edmund Dudley and Richard Empson, ran this agency and had become wealthy in doing so. They were detested by the wealthy for their services to the king.

Before Henry VII was in his grave, the new king arrested those two men, attainted them for treason—thus ensuring that they were stripped of everything that they owned—and within 16 months, had them put to death. By this act, Henry VIII demonstrated cunningness that would serve him well in later years: How easily he could deflect blame for unpopular policies onto servants of the Crown, and how the anger of his subjects could be dissipated through the extermination of those same servants (Meyer 2010, p. 27). The new king was no liberal, however jovial his palaces. He was an autocrat with tyrannical predilections.

Eager to waste his inherited fortune and to reverse the policy of continental isolation pursued by Henry VII and his advisers, Henry VIII relied increasingly on his almoner, Thomas Wolsey who supported war against France as a means of ingratiating himself with the pope. Henry VIII eventually joined the Holy League against

France and, in 1512, for the first time since the end of the Hundred Years War, dispatched English troops to the continent. The expedition led by the Marquis of Dorset and egged on by Thomas Wolsey was a complete disaster. Dorset's poorly trained army disintegrated and fled despite offers of support from Ferdinand.

Undeterred, Henry hired Austrian mercenaries under the Emperor Maximilian and routed the French at the battle of the Spurs in August 1513. In his absence, Queen Catharine, as Regent of England, arranged for the defeat of Scottish invaders at Flodden Field in September 1513, killing their king and the flower of the Scottish nobility. In 1514, peace with France and Scotland, together with the marriage of Henry's sister Mary to Louis XII and the regency of his other sister Margaret in Scotland restored England to a position of political security, albeit at some cost in terms of national treasure.

In December 1515, Wolsey became chancellor and unrivalled counselor to Henry VIII. He controlled the great seal, the privy seal, and the signet, all the instruments through which king or council could issue formal orders. Other counselors in Westminster became Wolsey's agents rather than his peers, cut off, as best Wolsey could manage, from direct access to the king. As we shall discuss later in this chapter, Wolsey's extensive powers forced him to delegate detailed decision-making to a range of separate courts and departments operating alongside the common law system of governance.

Between Wolsey's appointment as chancellor in 1515 and his fall in 1529, parliament, only once, ceased to be an effective check on the will of the king and his chancellor. Meanwhile, Wolsey advanced within the Catholic Church to become supreme, under the pope, as he was under the king in secular affairs. Successive commissions as legate *a latere* gave Wolsey precedence over Warham, the archbishop of Canterbury, and delegated to him the greater part of the papal power in England. Ultimately, Wolsey would be elevated by the pope to the position of Cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church. The absolutist ambitions of king and chancellor appeared to be attainable without any rift with Rome.

However, Queen Catharine failed to produce a male heir to the throne. Her only surviving contribution was a daughter, Mary. Henry VIII was mindful of the precarious rule of Matilda, and of the tenuous claim of the Tudors to the English throne. Therefore, he was unwilling to commit his dynasty to the fortunes of a female successor. Simultaneously, he was tired of his older spouse and enthralled with a youthful courtier, Anne Boleyn.

His mind turned fortuitously to the Holy Bible, specifically to Leviticus chapter 18, verse 16 and chapter 20, verse 21. In God's own book, it was stated that if a man uncovered his brother's wife's nakedness, it was an unclean act, and the sinful couple would be childless. Conveniently forgetting about the birth of Mary, Henry determined that he had sinned against God and that the failure to bear a son was God's punishment.

Initially, Henry had good reason to suppose that the annulment of his marriage to Catharine would be a simple task. What Pope Julius II had done in blessing the marriage would now be undone by Pope Clement VII. And Henry was in excellent standing with Pope Clement VII.

When Martin Luther had launched his thunderbolts against the Catholic Church, Henry responded in 1521 with a popular tract entitled *Defence of the Seven Sacraments*, for which he was rewarded in 1524 by the papal title *FideiDefensor* (Defender of the Faith). Surely the pope would not refuse a king who had championed the papal cause both in arms and in scholarship.

In this expectation, Henry would be frustrated. The pope proved to be timid in nature and after Pavia and the imperial army's sack of Rome, in 1527, he was in the power of Catharine's nephew, Charles, the Emperor, whose support he needed against the Lutherans in Germany. Catharine's emissaries alerted Charles to her desperate situation and his vise tightened around the neck of the hapless pope.

A desperate effort by Henry VIII and Wolsey to enter into an offensive alliance with France, designed to release the pope from the Emperor's grip, failed with the destruction of Marshall Odet Lautrec's army in the autumn of 1528. In July 1529, Clement made the Treaty of Barcelona with Charles, recalled his legate, Lorenzo Campeggio from England, and evoked the marriage annulment case from England to Rome.

In August 1529, France made its peace with the Emperor at Cambrai. Wolsey's diplomacy clearly had failed. On October 17, 1529, Wolsey was dismissed from all his positions by Henry VIII. On November 7, 1529, Wolsey was charged with high treason, but before he could be tried, he starved himself to death at 60 years of age. At 38 years of age, Henry VIII's reign of tyranny and his reputation for disloyalty to his closest servants was now about to unfold in earnest.

Wolsey's high offices were quickly conferred on a new administration based on a small winning coalition. Gardiner secured the Bishopric of Winchester, the richest in England. Norfolk became President of the Council and Suffolk the Vice President. Sir Thomas More became the Lord Chancellor. The king now moved into a direct challenge to the primacy of the pope on matters of religion, recognizing that the Roman Catholic Church represented a continuing threat to the secular dominance of the throne across England.

The king's first measure was to pressure Pope Clement by threatening papal jurisdiction over and revenues from the church in England. Parliament was called in November 1529 to offer its sanction to these royal threats. Parliament proved to be more than ready for such a responsibility.

The bishops and abbots, who constituted a majority in the House of Lords, owed their fees, not to the pope, but to long service in the Royal Courts. The House of Commons, composed largely of substantial landowners and wealthy townsmen, although professing to be good Catholics, coveted the church's lands and other riches. Parliament eagerly passed legislation limiting mortuary dues and probate fees, while restricting nonresidence among the clergy. Responding to such pressures, the clergy in convocation albeit reluctantly acknowledged the king as their "only and supreme lord and, as far as the law of Christ allows, even supreme head" (February 1531).

In the meantime, Thomas Cranmer polled the great universities of Europe for opinions favorable to Henry's divorce. His success failed to move the pope, so parliament intervened again, attacking not only the church's courts but also the right of the church to legislate without the king's support. In May 1532, the Submission of the Clergy destroyed the legislative independence of the church. Early in 1533,

another act forbade all appeals to Rome and determined that all spiritual causes should be adjudged within the authority and jurisdiction of the king.

In March 1533, the pope acquiesced to Cranmer’s consecration as the Archbishop of Canterbury, even though he still refused to grant Henry the annulment of his marriage. In May 1533, Cranmer pronounced Henry’s marriage null and void. Thereupon, Anne Boleyn, whom Henry had already married in secrecy, was crowned queen and, on September 7, 1533, gave birth to a daughter, the future Queen Elizabeth I.

Over the period 1534–1540, Henry VIII, with the assistance of Thomas Cranmer and Thomas Cromwell, then imposed his own version of the Reformation on the English people. The Act of Supremacy confirmed the king’s headship of the church, another act made it treason to attack his new title even in speech (November 1534). Under this latter act, Sir Thomas More was executed in July 1535, as were Bishop Fisher and a number of Carthusians who also refused the new oath. Thomas Cromwell pursued police–state strategies based on a mixture of terror, propaganda, and political bribery to enforce the new order on the English people.

In July 1536, Henry issued the Ten Articles defining the faith in a generally Catholic sense albeit with some omissions favorable to Lutheran doctrine, notably the four Catholic Sacraments. The break with Rome in 1533 eliminated the pope as a significant independent force in England, and allowed Henry to replenish his depleted financial coffers by raiding Church lands and properties. Despite this spoliation of the Church, the Crown failed to regain its financial independence. The defense preparations and wars over the period 1538–1547 burned up not only the spoils of the monasteries, but also the profits from Henry’s debasement of the currency, 1544–1547.

So Henry VIII forfeited the financial independence that his father had achieved for the Crown and, in consequence, placed his office under the scrutiny of parliament, giving rise to a new concept of governance, namely that of the king in parliament. Legislation would henceforth be viewed not just as the Roman law’s *quod principi placuit* (what pleased the king), but statutes enacted by lords and commons and assented to by the king.

As a consequence, the grip of the nobility slackened somewhat and the influence of the gentry—through the House of Commons—allowed a growing middle class a role in policy formation. This shift constituted what would prove to be an irreversible widening both of the king’s winning coalition and of the size and composition of the real selectorate. However, the growing belief in the Divine Right of Kings, undoubtedly enhanced by Henry VIII’s sharp breach with Rome, tightened the security of the Tudor throne.

2.4 King Edward VI (1547–1553): England’s Second Reformation

With the death of Henry VIII in 1547, the supreme headship of the church in England passed to a 9-year-old child. This was a recipe for trouble (Meyer 2010, p. 313). The church inherited by the boy-king was surely not Roman Catholic, but just as

surely it was not Lutheran. Henry VIII had made it a capital crime to follow Luther in denying free will or in believing in justification by faith alone.

The central conflict was between the traditionalists and the evangelicals. Henry had held the balance between the two. The traditionalists—led by Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk and Stephen Gardiner, bishop of Winchester—represented by a wide margin the greatest part of England's population. Remarkably, however, from the start of Edward's reign, the evangelicals dominated the religious debate and strongly influenced the thinking of the boy-king.

King Henry was largely responsible for this shift of emphasis. On his death bed, he appointed a Regency Council to govern, while his son was still a child. He ruled out Gardiner and Norfolk and all those associated with them. When the list was complete, the Regency Council was dominated by evangelicals such as Thomas Cranmer and bishops associated with him, and by Edward Seymour and his evangelical cohorts. Under the terms of Henry's will, all 16 members of the Council were to be equal. There would be no chief executive.

Seymour moved swiftly to close this vacuum, persuading his friends on the Council to appoint him Lord Protector of the Realm and Governor of the king's person. It is arguable that this move represented a usurpation of authority. In any event, Edward Seymour was elevated from Earl of Hertford to Duke of Somerset, William Parr from Earl of Essex to Marquess of Northampton, John Dudley to the Earldom of Warwick, Chancellor Wriothesley to the Earldom of Southampton, while six knights were elevated to baronetcies. The Regency Council members evidently helped themselves to be rich and powerful as soon as the old king gasped his final breath.

Somerset's brother, Thomas Seymour, was Lord High Admiral, and a man with his own ambitions for power. Edward VI was clearly consumptive and might well not live long. The next Protestant heir was Princess Elizabeth who was living with Henry VIII's sixth wife, Catharine Parr. Catharine Parr married Thomas Seymour, who made sexual advances to the young princess even before the death of his wife. Thomas Seymour plotted against his brother and the Protector disposed of him in January 1549 by the Act of Attainder and the block on Tower Hill. Thus was ended the first crisis of the new reign (Churchill 1956, p. 76).

Somerset, for the most part, attempted to liberate England from the despotism imposed by Henry VIII. All heresy laws and most treason laws, other than those imposed by Edward III, were repealed. Free publication and discussion of the Scriptures was encouraged. Communion of both kinds was allowed, with the Catholic interpretation of the Mass made optional. English was introduced into much of the church services. Foreign reformers flocked to England, so much so that in 1549, Somerset passed through parliament an Act of Uniformity, imposing on the church its first Book of Common Prayer written in English.

Predictably, such liberation gave rise to rebellion, among conservative Englishmen. In June 1549, uprisings occurred in Devon and Cornwall. Following an attempt by Somerset to get Edward VI to marry the Queen of Scotland, the Scots sent Mary to France to marry the Dauphin, whereupon the French sent troops to Scotland and declared war on England (August 1549). Somerset also attempted to repress the enclosure process by taxing wool and cloth, stirring the hopes of the peasants and the fears of the gentry.

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