



Life in Tudor Times

2. Henry the Eighth

NARRATOR: Henry VIII.

HENRY VIII: Ah ha yes! Go on, big me up.

NARRATOR: Perhaps the most famous king in English history, he ruled England for 38 years from 1509 to 1547. Time enough for six marriages and one major change of national religion. Henry never expected to become king. But his older brother Arthur died, leaving Henry in line to take over. Their father, Henry VII died when Prince Henry was just 17 years old. So the young prince became a young king. He had two sisters, but they weren't given a look in. Back then, when it came to passing on the crown, it was only sons allowed.

This rule gave the new king, a pressing problem: to make sure his family kept the throne, he had to get himself a male heir. As luck would have it, a perfect match had recently become available: Catherine of Aragon had been married to Henry's brother, Arthur, but now found herself single again. The marriage that had made sense for Arthur now made sense for the new King. Henry and Catherine were happily married for over 20 years, but still the King's problem loomed large: after all that time, their only living child was a daughter. Henry couldn't wait any longer. Perhaps a new wife might give him what he needed?

Henry didn't look far. One of Catherine's maids in waiting, Anne Boleyn, caught the king's eye. But what to do about Catherine? England was part of the Catholic Church and that meant that even kings had to listen to what the Church said. Henry tried to convince the Church's leader, the Pope, to let him end the marriage. But the Pope said that splitting from Catherine was not an option. Undeterred, Henry came up with his own solution - splitting the whole of England away from the Catholic Church. By creating his shiny, new Church of England and making himself its leader, Henry had given himself the power to do what he wanted. So he ended the marriage and Catherine was out of the picture.

After three years of marriage to Anne, he still didn't have a son. Frustrated, the king turned his attention to another lady in waiting, Jane Seymour. Now, needing Anne out of the way, Henry accused her of treason and well, punishments for that can be such a pain in the neck.

They say that in Jane Seymour Henry found the wife he'd always wanted and then, the son. Jane gave birth to Edward, the future king of England, and Henry could not have been happier.

Unfortunately, Jane's sudden death two weeks after the birth left Henry mourning for three months. Having got his male heir, Henry's next marriage was mainly political. Most of Europe was still part of the Catholic Church, so splitting from it had left England in danger and alone.



Life in Tudor Times

The King needed allies and he had his eye on the Duke of Cleves, a German duke who would allow Henry to have more power and influence in Europe. To secure their friendship, Henry agreed to marry the duke's daughter, Anne.

However, he'd never met her and had only ever seen one painting of her, and after the wedding, discovered that she didn't look exactly how the artist had painted her. It may not come as a surprise to learn that Henry saw this as a good enough reason to end their marriage. Well, that and the fact he'd already fallen for someone else.

Just a few weeks after leaving his second Anne, Henry married his second Catherine, Catherine Howard. It wasn't long, however, before rumours began to reach the King's ears. Rumours of love letters between Catherine and another man. Henry's disbelief turned to rage and soon the marriage ended at the point of an axe.

Just over a year later, Henry married his sixth and final wife, Catherine Parr. This third Catherine had already outlived her two previous husbands and she kept that run going with Henry who died four years into their marriage, but not before - perhaps at Catherine's suggestion - Henry included his two daughters Mary and Elizabeth in his line of succession. Now, a princess could become a queen. Great news for Henry's daughters. A little too late for their mothers.