

### **The six years 1547 – 1553 in more detail.**

Henry VIII died on 28 January 1547. He was succeeded by his only son - Edward VI - at the age of nine years. When Henry made his will just a month earlier on 26 December 1546, he left the government in the hands of a Council of Regency consisting of sixteen chosen executors. None were accorded any precedence as Lord Protector or Regent. They were to rule jointly in the young King's name, until he came of age.

Most of the sixteen had only recently been raised to high office. All but four were committed to the concept of royal supremacy over the Church in England and to the Protestant faith. One of the sixteen - Edward Seymour - was uncle to the young King. He was brother to Jane Seymour, who had become third wife of Henry VIII in 1537. Edward Seymour had been made Earl of Hertford as reward for his military victories in Scotland and was created Duke of Somerset the day after Henry VIII was laid to rest.

From the outset Edward Seymour saw no need to share government of the kingdom with his fellow executors. As the King's uncle, he felt he should enjoy no less a role than that of Lord Protector. In this he was actually supported by most of his fellow counsellors, who felt such a Council was too large to wield power effectively without one leader. However, Edward Seymour soon became insensitive to the opinions and feelings of others and high-handed in his manner of handling affairs. As a statesman and soldier he had undoubted ability. He enjoyed considerable popularity with the common people, although his record of service was indelibly marred by his greed and rapacious self-interest.

In the following six years there were successive plots and counter plots as various factions, vied for power. Thomas Seymour, younger brother of Edward Seymour, was executed for treason on 20 March 1549. His elder brother seemed powerless or unwilling to save him. By trying to follow a middle road in his religious policies, Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset, had offended both diehard Catholics and Protestants. His economic policies had alienated the lords who should have been his friends and allies. His fellow counsellors had no patience with his liberal views and blamed them for several rebellions and the perilous state of the realm. Law and order was breaking down, the Crown was almost bankrupt, the price of food had almost doubled in the six years following Henry VIII's reign, religious dissension raged throughout England and there were fears that the peasantry might rise again in revolt against the effect of these evils.

Within two years and by September 1549 most of the Council were united behind another counsellor, John Dudley, and ready to overthrow Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset. In October there was a bloodless coup in which Edward Seymour went to the Tower of London. There he remained until February 1550, largely because John Dudley was not yet ready to dispose of him. On 16 October 1551 he was re-arrested on a preposterous trumped-up charge of treason and executed at the Tower on 22 January 1552

It was hardly surprising that there remained tensions on the Council. These were tumultuous times. By 1540, the English Bible had replaced the Latin Bible in many churches, the monasteries had all been closed, their wealth confiscated and their lands distributed to those lords who had supported Henry's reformation of the Church. Nevertheless, the religion of England was still officially Catholic.

In this period, the young King Edward VI himself was beginning to mature into a determined Protestant fundamentalist, although it was never totally clear to what degree this was due to the influence of rising Protestant factions on the Council. He offered to re-write the new prayer book, to the delight of one of his Protestant tutors, and was debating religious theory and history with his bishops. He understood Latin, speaking and writing it with accuracy, propriety and ease. In Greek he learned Aristotle's Dialectic and Ethics. He could translate quite easily the Latin of Cicero's philosophy into Greek. At thirteen, he considered himself old enough and wise enough to make his own decisions.

As the young King Edward VI wished to maintain the momentum of his Protestant reforms, both he and those around him became increasingly concerned that his heir and eldest half-sister Mary Tudor remained a staunch Catholic. She was seen as a direct threat who might take the entire country back to Catholicism. Increasing pressure was placed upon her to renounce the Catholic Mass, but she refused, on the ground that Edward VI was too immature to make religious changes. She proclaimed her determination to adhere to the religious laws of their father (Henry VIII), until Edward VI became of age. Yet to deny the King's command risked interpretation as treason.

Meanwhile Edward's second half-sister Elizabeth remained a firm Protestant. Sibling relationships between the three were a minefield of tension, with their supporting factions risking treason by meddling in various intrigues. Both sisters at different times had been declared illegitimate and therefore not in the line of succession: Mary's mother (Katherine of Aragon), had been supplanted in King Henry's affections by Elizabeth's mother (Anne Boleyn), who had, in her turn, been supplanted by Edward's mother (Jane Seymour). Throughout this period, one who was always close to Edward VI was John Dudley.

John Dudley first came to prominence and was knighted during a French campaign in 1523. Over the next twenty years he enjoyed a brilliant military career. In 1546 he was appointed Lieutenant General of all the King's forces and in 1547 made Earl of Warwick and Great Chamberlain of England. By this time he was one of the most powerful men on the Council. No breath of scandal attached itself to his private life; he did not drink, gamble or womanise. His wife and seven surviving children were affectionate and loyal, united in their common interests. Their household was harmonious, its peace uninterrupted by dissension. Despite all this, he was also arguably the most evil statesman of the sixteenth century in England. He was greedy and rapacious, corrupt, cruel and unscrupulous. Some contemporaries regarded him as both cunning and clever, with a particular talent for intimidation. He had been one of the counsellors who had profited as a result of the Reformation of Henry VIII - and he was greedy for more. His dark good looks and charismatic virility were sometimes marred by a cold and arrogant manner, although he could exercise charm when he wanted to. The now adolescent King Edward VI was one of those who quickly succumbed to his blandishments. In the young King's presence he was the perfect courtier, treating the boy with deference and respect. Finally on 11 October 1551 he was created Duke of Northumberland, the first man not of royal blood to bear the ducal title in England.

On 2 April 1552, Edward VI fell sick with a bad attack of measles, but by 23 April was recovered sufficiently to take part in the St George's Day service at Westminster Abbey. Some had suspicions that his constitution had been irrevocably undermined by this illness. However, on 27 June the young King rode through London to depart on his annual progress - a tour of his kingdom, enabling him to meet his subjects and be seen by them. He left London in a cheerful mood, but some observers noticed that he was looking thin and pale.

His advisers had arranged a punishing schedule, which required him to perform all kinds of public duties, such as inspecting the naval dockyard at Portsmouth and constantly to be on show, both as King and as a guest at the great houses along the way. By August the strain was beginning to show and on all sides people observed how sickly he looked and many felt pity for him. He appeared exhausted but refused to give in. He knew that to do so might provoke a political crisis by admitting that the King was ill. Finally Edward returned to Windsor on 15 September, too ill to travel further. Throughout the rest of the autumn and into the winter of 1552 the King's health steadily declined. By Christmas it was obvious that "a consumption of the lungs" was well-established and the King's days on earth might be numbered.

Northumberland, however, chose to act as if all was normal, arranging especially elaborate entertainments for Christmas and pretending that the King would soon recover. Northumberland knew Edward's death would put an end to any schemes he may have had, for it would bring Catholic Mary to the throne, and Mary would not look kindly upon heretics who had bullied her mercilessly over religion. He may have been devising in his mind ways of preventing Mary from ever succeeding, while at the same time making friendly overtures to her as if he were deferring to his future sovereign. Mary had heard that her brother was unwell, but could have had no idea how serious his illness was, because of the conspiracy of silence that surrounded him. She was astonished when she began to receive respectful, conciliatory letters from Northumberland, informing her of affairs of state and news of the court.

Elizabeth did not receive such courteous treatment. Northumberland feared her astuteness and when she demanded to visit the King, he forbade it, refusing to heed her protests. The Duke may have feared that her influence over Edward might ruin his future plans, and began systematically to poison the young King's mind against his sister.

By the middle of March 1553, Northumberland had decided that the succession must be altered to exclude not only Mary, but also Elizabeth. Next in line was the forceful Frances Brandon, the daughter of Henry VIII's sister Mary Tudor, who would be nobody's puppet. However, her eldest daughter was Lady Jane Grey, born in October 1537 to Frances Brandon, Duchess of Suffolk and Henry Grey, Marquis of Dorset. Lady Jane Grey was thus Henry VIII's grand-niece, the grand-daughter of his sister Mary Tudor by her second husband, Charles Brandon, who later became Duke of Suffolk.

Tiny in stature with fair, freckled skin and sandy hair, Jane possessed a formidable intellect. She was a devout Protestant who would promote the reformed religion, but who was also young enough to be in awe of Northumberland and manipulated by him. She was almost the same age as Edward VI. Her mother, Frances Brandon Duchess of Suffolk, was forceful, determined to have her own way, and greedy for power and riches. She bore a marked resemblance to Henry VIII and since the infancy of her eldest daughter had nursed dreams that Jane might one day be Edward's wife, and hence queen of England.

Northumberland planned to marry Jane to his youngest son, Guildford Dudley, in order to cement a bond between the two families and thereby create a royal dynasty of Dudleys. He, Northumberland, would be the founding father.

The Duke had no doubt that he was in a position to bring such an audacious plan to fruition. He ruled as a dictator and the King was in his control. Edward would surely see the virtue in

the arrangement and would give it his blessing. In late April 1553, the betrothal was announced of Lady Jane Grey and Guildford Dudley, youngest son of the Duke of Northumberland. Their wedding took place on Whit Sunday, 25 May 1553 at Durham House in the Strand, amidst much pomp and splendour to underline the importance of the occasion.

Late that same May, John Bannister, a student doctor attached to the royal household, noted that the King was

"... steadily pining away. He does not sleep except when he is stuffed with drugs. The sputum which he brings up is livid black, foetid and full of carbon; it smells beyond measure. His feet are swollen all over. To the doctors all these things portend death."

The King's condition was indeed critical. Confined to his bed at Greenwich with a high temperature, he lay coughing up foul-smelling sputum and wincing at the pain caused by ulcers that had erupted all over his body. Northumberland was still issuing optimistic bulletins but nobody took them seriously. There were frequent reports that the King's death was imminent or that he was already dead. After the wedding, Northumberland hastened back to Greenwich to be with the King. Thereafter he rarely left Edward's side. As May drew to a close, the young King grew weaker and his doctors predicted he would not last two weeks. Some gave him only three days.

Northumberland realized he had very little time left in which to bring his plan to fruition. The first step he took was to persuade Frances Brandon, Duchess of Suffolk to relinquish her claim to the throne in favour of her daughter. He then ordered Jane and Guildford to consummate their marriage.

Rumours spread that the King was dead or dying, yet Northumberland was still issuing bulletins that His Majesty was recovering and out of danger: even able to walk in the galleries and gardens of Greenwich. When a prayer for the King's recovery was displayed on church doors in London, many citizens were prompted to make their way to Greenwich on Sunday 2 June, demanding to see their sovereign. Fearing their mood might turn ugly if fobbed off, Northumberland ordered the King's attendants to hold him up to a window. Seeing his condition, people were shocked and "men said he was doomed". After this, no more optimistic bulletins were issued.

Knowing the royal doctors could do no more for their patient, Northumberland sent them away. He brought in a female quack who claimed she could cure the King. With Northumberland's blessing, she began giving Edward daily doses of poison, almost certainly containing arsenic. It seems likely that Northumberland knew what the effects of this drug would be, but he was desperate for more time and consequently less concerned about the agony suffered by his young master.

Ever since he became ill, Edward had wondered how to prevent his Catholic half-sister from becoming queen. His reasoning was purely religious. He was a devout Protestant; he wanted his nation, for its own sake, to remain Protestant. Just as Mary believed Catholicism was the path to righteousness, so Edward believed in Protestantism. He was King, charged by God with responsibility for his people's religious welfare. It was a sacred duty. For the sake of his immortal soul, Mary had to be prevented from leading England on the path to damnation. This necessity overcame all else.

Northumberland faced the task of persuading Edward to change his father's will and disinherit both his half-sisters. Mary and Elizabeth had each been declared bastards by Act of Parliament and never formally legitimized. So although Elizabeth was also Protestant, she might marry a foreign (i.e. perhaps catholic) prince; her legitimacy might be disputed; she might be less submissive to Northumberland. Whilst Northumberland himself fell ill, Edward became even more determined. Believing that he would soon stand before his Maker, he commanded Northumberland to draw up a will entitled "My Devise for the Succession" which he copied out with his own trembling hand. As Northumberland lay sick, the King drafted and amended the device. This vested the succession in "the Lady Jane's heirs male." Northumberland assured Edward that, even though Jane was married to his son, "I do not consider so much mine own interest as the benefit of the whole kingdom."

On 21 June, after this document had been signed by the King, the Council were required by Northumberland, in Edward's presence, to give their consent to the new order of succession. By the end of that day, over a hundred counsellors, peers, archbishops, bishops, members of the royal household, secretaries of state, knights of the privy chamber and sheriffs had put their signatures to the document.

On 28 June, Northumberland concluded a secret treaty with France. In return for money and troops it was believed he promised to return Calais to the French, all that remained of England's lands in France. At the same time, he forced the London merchants to lend him £50,000, and sent his captains and armed forces to man major strongholds throughout the kingdom in case the populace should rise in favour of Mary, when Jane was proclaimed queen.

On 2 July the King was suffering agonies as a result of arsenic poisoning. With no further need to keep him alive, Northumberland dismissed the female quack who had been attending him, and recalled the royal doctors.

He had provided Mary with regular false bulletins as to the state of the King's health. It was part of his plan to lure both Mary and Elizabeth to London, where they could be neutralized and imprisoned, at worst executed. Only seventy years before, two young princes had gone to the Tower: Edward V and Richard, Duke of York (ages 12 and 9). Neither had ever been seen after the autumn of 1483. On 3 or 4 July, at Northumberland's bidding, the Council issued both sisters with summonses to Greenwich to attend upon the King. At the same time, Northumberland wrote to Mary at Hunsdon, telling her that her presence would be a great comfort to her brother during his illness.

From sympathetic sources at Court, Mary was aware that Edward's condition was critical. She was distrustful of the Duke's intentions, and at the same time conscious of the fact that she was a lone woman, in a precarious state of health herself, with little political influence and few powerful friends. Nevertheless, after much agonising she decided to go to Greenwich. If Edward was indeed dying, it was her duty as a sister to go. She left Hunsdon on 4 or 5 July.

Elizabeth at her county house at Hatfield, at once took to her bed and gave out that she was too sick to travel. She made her doctor issue her with a letter certifying she was ill. Much as she would have liked to bid farewell to her brother, self-preservation took priority!

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