

Private Lives of the Tudors

Tracy Borman explores the distinction between the public and private lives of the Tudor monarchs.

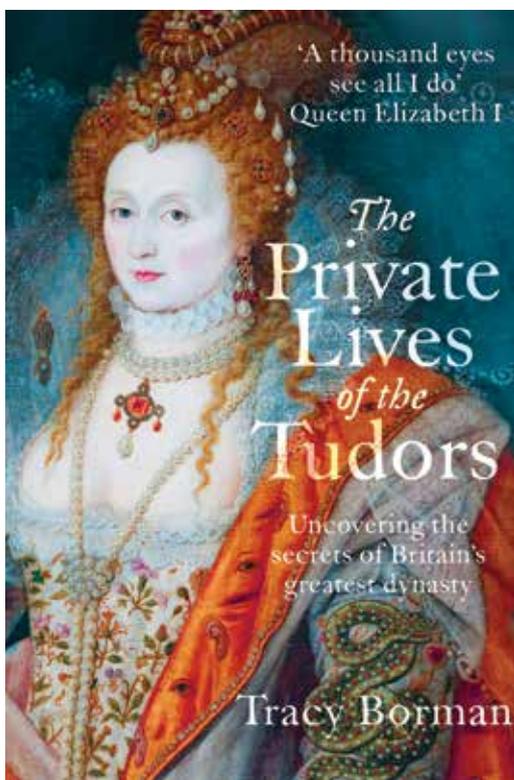
The Tudors were renowned for their public magnificence. Perhaps more than any royal dynasty in British history, they appreciated the importance of impressing their subjects with the splendour of their dress, courts and pageantry in order to reinforce their authority. Wherever they went, the monarchs were constantly surrounded by an army of attendants, courtiers, ministers and place-seekers. Even in their most private moments, they were accompanied by a servant specifically appointed for the task. A groom of the stool would stand patiently by as Henry VIII performed his daily purges, and when Elizabeth I retired for the evening, one of her female servants would sleep at the end of her bed.

But if the Tudors were rarely alone, they did lead a very different life behind closed doors to the one that most of their subjects witnessed. Here, they were dressed and undressed, washed and groomed, took most of their meals, and found refuge in music, cards and other entertainments. As the sixteenth century progressed, so these 'private' hours, and the court department that supported them, evolved into a distinct and tightly run institution that reflected the needs and personality of the reigning monarch.

By the dawn of the Tudor period, the private life of the monarchy had long been subject to a strict order of routine, tradition and ceremony. This was reflected by the structure of the court and the architecture of the royal palaces. The creation of a private suite of chambers for the king or queen can be traced to as early as the twelfth century. But it was only 300 years later, during the reign of Edward IV, that this development was accelerated when the king transformed all of the royal residences in order to provide himself and his family with separate, private lodgings known as the chamber. This was a deliberate strategy by Edward to control access to the royal person, and in so doing to centralise power in the hands of the king. Separating the king from his subjects in this way enhanced the mystique of monarchy, and elevated those who were allowed to penetrate the architectural divide and gain access to the royal presence.

Keen to emphasise the continuity of the royal succession, and thus his own place within it, the first Tudor monarch, Henry VII, was content to retain the structure, and some of the personnel, that he had inherited from his Yorkist forbears. As Henry's reign progressed and he became ever more preoccupied by threats from rival claimants, he increasingly retreated into the privacy of his apartments at court. The threat from the second 'pretender', Perkin Warbeck, inspired the king to make a significant change to the workings of his privy chamber, as it was known. Having discovered that there were conspirators within the household itself, Henry was no longer prepared to adhere to the detailed protocols that governed it. From 1494, the privy chamber was established as an entirely separate, private and closely guarded entity, not subject to the normal rules of the court.

Now that it was separate from the rest of the court, the privy or 'secret' chamber expanded into a more luxurious suite of rooms, where the king's every private whim was catered for. First among these rooms was the privy chamber itself – usually a medium-sized apartment richly decorated with tapestries, carpets and a chair of estate. Beyond it lay a small complex of inner chambers or privy lodgings that varied in size and number in each palace. They included at least one bedchamber with a garderobe



'Queen Elizabeth I' by Unknown artist,
c. 1585-1590

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leading off it, a bathroom, a withdrawing room, a robing chamber, a closet or oratory for the king's private devotions, and a study or library filled with his most precious and well-thumbed books. The rooms were often lined with wooden linenfold panelling, which made them rather gloomy and heightened the feeling of privacy. They were usually linked to the public rooms of court by a short corridor or gallery, and to the queen's apartments by another gallery or privy stair. Here, the king and his intimates could walk and talk in confidence and comfort, shielded from both the elements and the public world of the court.

Competition was fierce for the few places that were on offer in the new inner sanctum. In choosing those who

would serve him in private, Henry was guided not by rank or status, but by who he thought would 'best content the king'. Chief among them was the groom of the stool. As the name suggests, this official was required to attend the king on his close stool or toilet. It may seem perplexing to modern observers that such a role should be so highly sought after. But the less savoury aspects of the role were more than offset by the rewards. The groom of the stool spent more hours alone with the king than anyone else. If he proved his worth and discretion, he could become the most trusted confidante in the kingdom; the man with whom the king shared his innermost thoughts. As such, he had the potential to exert more influence than

even the highest-ranking member of the council.

The official duties of the other privy chamber staff focused upon the body of the King. They dressed and undressed him, bathed him, tested his food for poison, served him at table, arranged his bedtime drink, and took turns to guard over their master during the night by sleeping on a pallet mattress at the foot of his bed. The grooms also carried out the more menial duties of cleaning, making up fires, strewing fresh rushes on the floor of his bedchamber and laying out sleeping pallets. Yet they were also expected to turn their hands to playing cards, singing, playing music, engaging in lively conversation and other pastimes for the king's amusement.



Henry VII's desire for privacy would have a lasting impact upon the layout, functions and personnel of the privy chamber. But it was during the reign of his far more extrovert son that the prestige of this court department was significantly enhanced. During the early part of Henry VIII's reign, the number of privy chamber staff rose dramatically: from the handful of intimates that his father had retained to as many as 50 attendants. Whereas Henry VII's privy chamber had been the centre of his business and private life, his son filled it with his friends and confidantes, so that it became a forum for his social life.

The groom of the stool remained the principal member of the privy chamber staff, and the holder of this post was accorded even greater prominence and honour than during Henry VII's reign. The first to be appointed was Sir William Compton, whom Henry had known since infancy. Although his primary duty was still to attend the king on his close stool, Compton had a growing portfolio of other duties. They included acting as Henry's most confidential

messenger. As such, he was responsible for the highly sensitive and confidential task of conveying messages to the king's wife, Catherine of Aragon, as well as his mistresses.

As Henry VIII's reign progressed, his privy chamber grew ever more unwieldy with boisterous young favourites, hungry for preferment. The king's chief minister, Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, decided to take action. In 1526, the year that Anne Boleyn became the Henry's inamorata, Wolsey drew up a set of detailed instructions for the reform of the privy chamber, which had become increasingly crowded with men hostile to the Cardinal's influence. The number of privy chamber staff was reduced from around 50 to just 15 officers. Wolsey claimed that this was to safeguard the privacy of the king and prevent his being constantly besieged by ambitious place-seekers, but it was clear to everyone that it was as much an attempt to tighten his own control over Henry.

Although Henry missed his old companions, and gradually restored some of them to office, during the later

years of his reign, he sought greater privacy. His failing health, together with the humiliating betrayal by his fifth wife, Katherine Howard, made him keep to his privy chamber for much of the time. At Hampton Court, a luxurious new suite of secret lodgings known as the 'Bayne Tower' was built, away from the main privy chamber. This included not just a bedroom, but a jewel house, wardrobe, library and bathroom.

Henry created similar 'secret lodgings' at his other palaces, including Whitehall. They were all so secret that the king could remain there for days on end, hiding sickness or melancholy, conducting secret business, or simply enjoying some repose away from the glare of the court. The ambitious place-seekers who crowded the public rooms beyond were quick to notice that their royal master now appeared so seldom that they could 'no longer molest his person with any suit.' Henry lived like this until the end of his days. His final hours were shrouded in such secrecy that only a handful of trusted privy chamber servants were in attendance, and even his sixth wife, Katherine Parr, was denied access.

The accession of Henry's son Edward prompted little change in the structure or personnel of the privy chamber – initially at least. Sir Anthony Denny retained his post as groom of the stool to the new king and forged a powerful alliance with Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset, whom Henry had appointed Lord Protector to his nine year-old son and heir. Seymour was keen to control every aspect of his nephew's existence, and therefore superintended the appointment of any new officers to the privy chamber.

In October 1549, Seymour was ousted from power following a coup by his rival, John Dudley, Duke of Northumberland. This sparked a dramatic change in the personnel of the privy chamber. No longer content to be dominated by ambitious courtiers, Edward put his own stamp on this most intimate of court departments. The men whom he chose as his closest body servants shared two characteristics: the king's religion and his personal favour. They included Barnaby Fitzpatrick and another childhood companion, Sir Robert Dudley, the future favourite of Edward's half-sister Elizabeth.

Northumberland excluded most of his rivals from the young king's inner sanctum, but he himself paid regular secret visits to him at night, 'unseen by anyone, after all were asleep.' As a result, Edward would come into the council chamber the following day and voice opinions 'as if they were his own;

consequently, everyone was amazed, thinking that they proceeded from his mind and by his invention.'

Most of the developments in the privy chamber during Edward VI's six-year reign reflected the practical needs of his minority, as well as the controlling influence of his protectors. The accession of his half-sister Mary, the first queen regnant for more than 400 years (with the exception of her immediate predecessor, Lady Jane Grey, the 'nine days queen'), presented a suite of entirely different practical issues. Traditionally, officials in both the king's privy chamber and his council had been of equal importance, and in some cases interchangeable. But a queen must be attended by female servants. At a stroke, this effectively deprived the privy chamber of its political influence because all of the key posts were now filled by women. Even though some of Mary's ladies exploited their position to gain influence, they did not have the same overt power that their male predecessors had enjoyed.

Moreover, Mary set the tone of court life by appointing ladies of irreproachable character, who dedicated their lives to her service and had no ambition to interfere in matters of government. All of the queen's ladies were staunch Catholics which, coupled with their high morals, established her privy chamber as a sober and devout retreat.

Although she reigned for just five years and cannot be credited with many significant household reforms, Mary had set a precedent for an all-female privy chamber, which was of benefit to her successor and half-sister, Elizabeth, who inherited the throne upon Mary's death in November 1558. But the new queen was quick to make her own mark on the privy chamber – notably by reducing its size to just eleven servants. This was the lowest number of female attendants that any queen (consort or regnant) had had for almost 40 years. Competition for places was more intense than ever before because it was practically the only way that women could guarantee a presence at court: Elizabeth did not welcome the wives and female relations of her male courtiers for fear that they should distract attention from herself.

Among the female members of Elizabeth's privy chamber staff, there were three tiers of posts: ladies, gentlewomen and chamberers. This structure appears to have been modelled upon the household of her favourite stepmother, Katherine Parr, who influenced so much of Elizabeth's outlook. These ladies received salaries, lodgings, horses and clothing as part of



King Henry VIII by an unknown artist c.1542
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their remuneration, as well gifts from their royal mistress

There was a remarkably low turnover of staff in Elizabeth's privy chamber. Most of the women held office for decades and died in post, rather than resigning or being dismissed. Indeed, during the whole of what would be the longest reign of any of the Tudor monarchs, only 28 women occupied paid posts in the privy chamber. Recruitment was also largely limited to the families of the incumbents – most notably the Careys, Howards, Knollyses and Radcliffes – with daughters inheriting posts from their mothers.

Much as she loved the public feasts and entertainments regularly on offer, Elizabeth preferred to take her meals in

her private apartments, where she would be served by a select group of her ladies 'with particular solemnity...and it is very seldom that any body, foreign or native, is admitted at that time and then only at the intercession of somebody in power.'¹ Increasingly, there was a gulf between the public world of the court and the private world of the queen.

The ladies who served the queen in her inner sanctum would see the private face that she kept hidden in the public rooms beyond. They would wash her, attend to her make-up and coiffure, dress her, serve her food and drink, and carry out any other task that she saw fit to demand. The most menial servants were the chamberers, who cleaned the queen's apartments, emptied

her washbowls and made up her bed. Although Elizabeth chose not to appoint a groom of the stool, Kat Astley, as chief gentlewoman, was keeper of the queen's close-stools and would also attend her royal mistress when she used the new flushing lavatories.

At least one of Elizabeth's ladies would sleep in the same room as her, usually upon a truckle bed at the end of the queen's own bed. This meant that as well as being able to run errands at a moment's notice, these ladies also helped to safeguard the royal person. Elizabeth was under constant threat of assassination, particularly after 1570, when Pope Pius V issued a bull of excommunication and encouraged her Catholic subjects to rise against her. Her women fulfilled an invaluable role with their constant presence and vigilance. As well as carrying out nightly searches of her private apartments, they would taste each dish before it was served to the queen to ensure that it was not poisoned, and would test any perfume that was sent to her as a gift.

Many of Elizabeth's private attendants were quick to exploit their positions for personal gain. Sir Walter Raleigh, who had fallen foul of their intrigues, compared the queen's ladies to 'witches' because they were 'capable of doing great harm, but no good.' Even though Elizabeth had made it clear from the beginning of her reign that her ladies must not meddle in political affairs, she was quick to appreciate the advantages of controlling her court through their networks. Before long, her privy chamber attendants were perceived to have so much influence that even the most powerful men at court sought their intervention. As one courtier wryly observed: 'We worshipped no saints, but we prayed to ladies in the Queen's time.'

The fact that they were in constant attendance upon Elizabeth gave the ladies of her household the opportunity to assess her mood and judge the best time to present petitions. The queen's godson, Sir John Harington, recalled an occasion when one of her ladies had 'come out of her presence with an ill countenance, and pulled me aside by the girdle, and said in a secret way, "If you have any suit today, I pray you put it aside; the sun doth not shine!"'

By far the most influential of Elizabeth's private attendants was Lady Anne Dudley, Countess of Warwick,

sister-in-law of the queen's closest favourite Robert Dudley. Anne proved extraordinarily diligent in her duties. Her husband once complained that she had 'spent the chief part of her years both painfully, faithfully, and serviceably', attending the queen in her privy chamber, adding with some resentment that she had not received 'any kind of wage'. But Elizabeth rewarded Lady Anne in other ways, entrusting her with increasingly important matters as the years wore on, which gave her an enormous amount of influence at court. The countess's niece would later claim that her aunt was 'more beloved and in greater favour with the queen than any other woman in the kingdom.'

As she approached old age, Elizabeth increasingly withdrew from the glare of court life to the comforting presence of her small coterie of faithful women. By the time that she turned sixty, a gulf had opened up between her private, trusted attendants and the new generation of maids of honour at court, whose youthful exuberance was a source of irritation to the queen. Elizabeth often 'swore out [against] such ungracious, flouting wenches', making them 'cry and bewail in piteous sort'. Her anger was sharpened by the knowledge that she was steadily losing her grip on her privy chamber attendants, as well as by the painful realisation that she was no longer the most desirable woman at court.

Elizabeth's death in March 1603 represented more than just the end of the Tudor era. It was the demise of a court life to which England had become accustomed for centuries, with its clear – if interlinked – distinction between the public and private life of the monarch. The new Stuart king, James I, had little patience for the elaborate ceremony and pageantry that he had inherited. Neither did he appreciate the need to keep his private life hidden. His character and habits, with all their flaws, were as visible to courtiers and ambassadors as they were to his most intimate servants. Respect for the monarchy declined rapidly as a result.

It soon became obvious that the private lives of the Tudors, created and supported by the carefully controlled staff and procedures of their privy chamber, had been the key to their success. It was a lesson that their Stuart successors would have done well to heed.

REFERENCES

- ¹ William Rye (ed), *England as seen by Foreigners in the days of Elizabeth and James the First* (London, 1865), Vol.III, p.107.

Tracy Borman is a best-selling author and historian, specialising in the Tudor period. Her books include *Elizabeth's Women*, which was Book of the Week on Radio 4, *Thomas Cromwell: the untold story of Henry VIII's most faithful servant*, which was a Sunday Times bestseller, and most recently *The Private Lives of the Tudors*. Tracy studied and taught history at the University of Hull and was awarded a PhD in 1997. She went on to a successful career in heritage and has worked for a range of historic properties and national heritage organisations, including the Heritage Lottery Fund, The National Archives and English Heritage. She is now Chief Executive of the Heritage Education Trust, a charity that encourages children to visit and learn from historic properties through the Sandford Award scheme. She is also joint Chief Curator of Historic Royal Palaces, the charity that manages Hampton Court Palace, the Tower of London, Kensington Palace, Kew Palace, the Banqueting House, Whitehall and Hillsborough Castle. Tracy is a regular broadcaster and recently presented a series based upon *The Private Lives of the Tudors*. She is also a regular contributor to *BBC History Magazine* and gives talks on her books across the country and abroad.



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