

Teacher Fellowship programme:
Henry on Tour: Teaching the royal progresses of Henry VIII

Exemplar work (Year 9)

When King Henry VIII arrived at Reading for a royal progress, the town would ring its bells, signalling that the King had arrived. He would have come with a massive entourage, hundreds of those who serve him, including a sewer, a personal attendant, and key Privy Councillors, the latter of which were his key advisors. The King and his entourage would have needed a place to stay. This could have been partially provided by the Reading Abbey, with the Hospitium available to house up to four hundred guests, but we also know that tents were provided, such as the tabernacle. On this basis, it is possible that the hospitium could not provide enough housing for the entire entourage, as supported by the evidence that the King's fletcher had to stay in a house in Market Square and the evidence of the tents. However, while we do not know whether the fletcher arrived with the King or came from Reading originally, it is certain that temporary accommodation was found for them.

So how did Reading prepare for the King's arrival? The Abbey would have prepared by cleaning their candlesticks and sweeping the Church, which seems to suggest the monks and abbot would have had great respect for the King, unlike their opinion of Queen Katherine of Aragon. Other preparations include the testing of tents for the King and his entourage, reinforcing the suggestion that the King's progress included more than four hundred members, and lodgings rented in advance for the King's fletcher.

The evidence of the fletcher provides us with knowledge of how the town may have entertained King Henry, as the fletcher's job was to provide arrows. Therefore, it is likely that the King went hunting, and this theory is supported by the nearby location of the deer park at Whitley, which was perfect for hunting. In addition, the King may also have been entertained by plays when he visited, some paid for by him, others paid by the town, and we have evidence that shows at least one play was provided at Whitsuntide. On top of this, there is evidence of a drummer (Thomas Taborer), which seems to suggest that there was music played.

As well as entertainment, Reading would have provided Henry with gifts, such as 'a great present of fish' in Henry's progress of 1520 to the town, and the King's New Year's gifts, 'From the King to the Abbot of Reading: gift cruses, cups, a goblet, and a bowl, 11 oz. to 30 oz. From the Abbot of Reading to the King: £20 in a white leather purse'. These gifts were exchanged in 1532.

While we do not know exactly what Henry ate while in Reading, we do know that, with the support of some records from the St. Laurence Churchwarden's account, malt was bought to make ale to serve the King at Whitsuntide. Despite this, one wonders whether Henry's royal progresses to Reading were not just for the entertainment and hospitality of the riverside town. We know that he conducted business while in Reading, for example overseeing a clothmaking agreement on the Inspeximus document in 1520. In addition, on the 22nd August 1540, the Privy Council met and the minutes they took show they were discussing a bill put to the King on the 21st, by the mayor and his burgesses, to do with a suit for a fulling mill that was granted (Letters and Papers of King Henry VIII).

While we have seen what was provided for the King while at Reading, we have not yet looked at the impact on the

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town that Henry's progresses inflicted. For the most part, we believe it was positive; we are certain that it provided a lot of work, such as cleaning in the Abbey, performing in the plays and playing the music put on for the King. Another benefit was the agreement on clothmaking, which at that time was a key source of income for Reading, and yet another benefit was the opportunity for the townspeople to petition the King directly and succeed, such as in the situation of the allowing of the fulling mill. Finally, the patronage of the King made the abbot very wealthy, as he received three thousand marks a year.

However, the progresses did result in some drawbacks for Reading, such as the fine for not ringing the bells when Katherine of Aragon came on progress. Furthermore, during the dissolution, Thomas Cromwell came on progress with Henry, and he was the key figure behind the idea of the dissolution of the monasteries, as well as a chief advisor to the King. The abbot of Reading at that time, Hugh Faringdon, tried to bribe Cromwell to leave the Reading Abbey as it was, sending him an annuity of twenty marks, but as we know that did not work, hence the Reading Abbey standing in ruins today. A final drawback would have been the cost, as the town would have had to pay for some of the accommodation of the King's entourage, such as the fletcher's housing, and for some of the entertainment, such as putting on the plays.

So why Reading? What made it such an attractive place to visit for a royal progress? There are several factors that we can posit to make this town attractive for King Henry VIII. For example, until the dissolution of the monasteries and Hugh Faringdon was executed, Henry and Hugh were good friends, which we are certain of not only because of the large sum of gifts they exchanged, but also because when Hugh was first appointed as abbot of Reading in 1520, Henry praised him for his 'kind and loving cheer' (Letters and Papers of King Henry VIII), marking the start of their good relationship, which was enforced with the shooting in the deer park at Whitley and the exchanging of gifts. Furthermore, it seems the town had lots of trade, such as clothmaking (the Insepimus document), tanning (part of a shoe found in Reading) and possibly even fishing (at one point, the town gave Henry a large gift of fish). This could have attracted Henry as a trade opportunity, especially as the River Kennet runs right next to the Abbey, meaning products from Reading could easily be transported out. In addition, the 'hand of St. James' was held in the Reading Abbey walls, and many people would have come to the Abbey on pilgrimage to the hand of St. James, and it was supposed to have healing properties, curing a woman from dropsy. Perhaps Henry came on pilgrimage a few times to this hand, which has now been found to be a woman's hand, not the hand of St. James. Finally, Reading is not very far from London, meaning he would have had easy access to it and would not have had to travel a long way to get there, which would probably have discouraged him. This, combined with the profit available and his friendship with Hugh Faringdon, would have increased the attractiveness of spending time in Reading.

However, when Katherine of Aragon arrived at Reading on a royal progress in 1529, the bells were not rung, resulting in the town having to pay a fine, as shown by St. Laurence Churchwarden's account. This, coupled with the evidence that Abbot of Reading Hugh Faringdon petitioned to the Pope on the King's behalf in support of his divorce, means we can posit that those in charge of ringing the bells did not like or support Katherine of Aragon, possibly believing she was not worthy to be the Queen, and also that maybe those ringing the bells were very much under the influence of the Abbey.

Interestingly, 1529 was the year that Henry VIII was trying to divorce Katherine of Aragon, so, in view of the wider context, the lack of ringing the bells could have been in support of the King's divorce as, if Hugh Faringdon petitioned the Pope for the divorce, it may have been that Reading as a whole supported the divorce and were not in favour of Katherine of Aragon. So, all in all, Reading supported King Henry.

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Nonetheless, despite the support and friendship between the Abbey and King Henry, it did not stop Thomas Cromwell from forcing it to be dissolved. In 1535, Cromwell was made Vicar-General of England. He sets up a team to survey the wealth and income of all religious houses and monastic lands in the country. The findings were compiled in a book known as the 'Valor Ecclesiasticus', and Cromwell came on progress with the King in 1535 to Reading to evaluate the Abbey. The next year, Hugh Faringdon was attempting to bribe Cromwell with an annuity of twenty marks, but this, even combined with the 1537 report of the culprit who started the rumour that the King was dead, was not enough to leave the Reading Abbey standing. This shows how determined Cromwell was in the task he had been given, and even if there had been a good relationship between Hugh and Thomas previously, it had been ruined by 1540.

So what effect on Reading did the dissolution have? To start off with, we could see a loss of income. Merchants would have made money from those coming on pilgrimages to see the hand of St. James, as the Abbey may have made money from visitors staying in the hospitium, and bought supplies from the merchants to help support their visitors and themselves generally. Furthermore, 1540 was Henry's last visit to Reading, perhaps because Hugh Faringdon was no longer there and the Abbey was no longer there, and so there is less attraction to Reading than there was before the dissolution, but we do not know for certain whether that was the case. I would like to find out why Henry did not spare Hugh Faringdon, if he was such good friends with him. What ruined their relationship? The treason of refusing to give up the Abbey? Hugh Faringdon did support Henry throughout his entire abbotship.

However, what happened in Reading with Hugh Faringdon and the Abbey shows us just how ruthless Henry could be. He was good friends with Hugh and let him die when he refused to give up his career and religion and this, coupled with our prior knowledge of Henry's treatment of his wives, means that we can posit how Henry's allegiances can switch easily depending on his situation and what he wants to do, and that even if one was favoured by him they were not safe with Henry. This leads one to wonder whether all around the country Henry had favourites among his associates, and if he treated them in the same way as he did Hugh Faringdon and his wives.

To summarise, we know that Henry came to Reading a lot due to several factors that could be to do with his friendship with Hugh Faringdon, the prosperous businesses and the entertainment provided for him. We know that he was entertained with plays and shooting in the deer park at Whitley, completed business with his Privy Council including a clothmaking agreement and the acceptance of the fulling mill, and spent time with Hugh Faringdon as he was entertained. We can posit that he stayed in the hospitium, but that his entourage and servants summed to more than four hundred as tents were provided and lodging was found for the king's fletcher in Market Square. And finally, we know that Henry's friendship with Hugh Faringdon did not stop Henry from executing him. Thank you for reading, and I hoped this helped with your understanding of King Henry VIII's visits in Reading.

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