PART I

Backgrounds and Beginnings

1

A Courtier's Daughter

ANNE Boleyn was born, so tradition goes, at the fairy-tale castle of Hever in the Weald of Kent. Reconstructed by the Astor family in the twentieth century, Hever remains a romantic shrine to Anne and her love affair with Henry VIII. Unfortunately for romance and tradition, Anne was in fact born in Norfolk, almost certainly at the Boleyn home at Blickling, fifteen miles north of Norwich. The church there still has brasses of the family. The Boleyns certainly owned Hever, although it was less a castle than a comfortable manor-house which her great-grandfather, Geoffrey, had built within an existing moat and curtain wall, and it did become the principal residence of her parents. But Matthew Parker, who became archbishop of Canterbury in 1559 and had earlier been one of Anne's private chaplains, was quite specific that she came, as he did, from Norfolk.[1]

Tradition also tells us that the Boleyns were a family of London merchants, and again tradition leads us astray. Anne Boleyn was born a great lady. Her father, Thomas, was the eldest son of Sir William Boleyn of Blickling, and her mother, Elizabeth, was the daughter of Thomas Howard, earl of Surrey, one of the premier noblemen in England. There was mercantile wealth in the family, but to get to that we have to go back to Geoffrey Boleyn, the builder of Hever. He had left Norfolk in the 1420s, made his fortune as a mercer in London, served as an alderman and become Lord Mayor in 1457–8. Fifteenth-century England, however, was a society open to wealth and talent. Had not William de la Pole, the most powerful man in England, been created duke of Suffolk in 1448, and his great-grandfather a merchant from Hull? It is no surprise, therefore, that Geoffrey Boleyn was able to secure as his second wife one of the daughters and joint heiresses of a nobleman, Thomas, Lord Hoo. William, the eldest surviving son of that marriage, made an equally good match

with Margaret Butler, daughter and co-heiress of the wealthy Anglo-Irish earl of Ormonde, so that when their eldest son, Anne's father, married a daughter of the earl of Surrey he was continuing a tradition into the third generation. As a result – and this should finally dispel all smell of the shop – Anne's great-grandparents were (apart from Geoffrey) a duke, an earl, the granddaughter of an earl, the daughter of one baron, the daughter of another, and an esquire and his wife.[2] Anne Boleyn came, in fact, from the same sort of background as the majority of the Tudor upper class. Indeed, she was better born than Henry VIII's three other English wives. Marrying Anne did not, as has been unkindly said of Jane Seymour, give the king 'one brother-in-law who bore the name of Smith, and another whose grandfather was a blacksmith at Putney'.[3]

The Boleyns, thus, were not bourgeois, but Geoffrey's wealth had enabled his son William to establish himself as a leading Norfolk gentleman. Knighted in 1483, he became a Justice of the Peace and one of that elite of country gentlemen on whom the Crown relied in time of crisis.[4] By contrast, the position of his son and heir remained decidedly equivocal so long as Sir William lived. Thomas was the prospective successor to great wealth – the Boleyn and Hoo estates, half of the Ormonde fortune and half of the lands of the wealthy Hankford family, inherited from his Butler grandmother – but in the meantime he had to exist on an annuity of fifty pounds a year, the occupancy of Hever, and whatever his own wife had brought him.[5] That was probably not much, for the earl of Surrey had only just completed the expensive task of buying back the Howard lands he had lost after his ill-judged support for Richard III at the battle of Bosworth. With the fifty pounds and his wife's portion Thomas Boleyn was not penniless, but he had nowhere near the income to sustain his pretensions, or that high profile which was necessary if he was to achieve his full promise – even, perhaps, the revival of the Ormonde earldom in his favour. The Howard marriage and the influence of his Butler grandfather did, nevertheless, offer one immediate prospect: an entry to the traditional career of the ambitious English gentleman, royal service.[6] In 1501 Boleyn graced the marriage of Katherine of Aragon to the king's eldest son, Arthur, and in 1503 helped to escort the king's eldest daughter, Margaret, to her marriage with the king of Scotland.[7] By the time Henry VII died, in the spring of 1509, Anne Boleyn's father had risen at court to the important rank of 'squire of the body', and as he walked in the king's funeral procession, clad in his newly issued black livery, he could reflect that since his father had died in 1505 and the old earl of Ormonde was about 85, his private fortune now looked good also.[8]

Our appreciation of what it meant for Thomas Boleyn, and his daughter after him, to make a career at court is grievously impaired by our knowledge of later times, of Fanny Burney's boredom and the insipid routine of the Victorian palace. Until late in the last century, historians left court life to the writers of fiction and the imagination of Hollywood. Yet there was one great difference between later courts and those of Tudor times. The earlier court was concerned with real power, real decisions and real wealth. Though display was highly important, to be a courtier was to be at the sharp end of politics, power and profit. And since Anne Boleyn, no less than her father, was first and last a phenomenon of the court, we need to explore the milieu to which she belonged.

The starting-point is a commonplace. In the sixteenth century, power was exercised by the ruler in person, or by direct delegation. This was the reality in England and in the rest of Europe alike. Policy was what the prince laid down; advancement and honour were in his gift; his person personified the community. This is not to deny that all government was necessarily politically constrained – and in England also limited by formal structures such as parliament and the due process of law – but in practical day-to-day terms, government was a response to the will of one man. The ultimate demand on any subject was to be called to obey 'on your allegiance'.

The consequences that flowed from this 'personal monarchy' determined the shape of Anne Boleyn's life. In the first place, it meant that royal authority operated in terms of royal favour. There was no way in which men could challenge a policy when that policy was the king's will, other than themselves trying to gain the ear of the king so as to persuade him to will something different. This was precisely what Thomas More was unable to do when Henry VIII put pressure on the pope and the English Church in his effort to end his marriage to Katherine of Aragon. Open opposition would be treachery, but access to the king's mind and emotion was blocked by Anne Boleyn. Royal favour was just as vital in the exercise of power. The king gave executive authority to the men he trusted, and they acted so as to retain his trust. Thus Henry's interest in Anne had enormous implications for the government of the country at large. Favour was equally crucial in the matter of rewards. These were expressions of standing with the monarch, and it was thus of great significance when someone like Anne gained the influence which could ease her supporters into grants, offices and honours. A further consequence of personal monarchy was competition. The struggle for power was a struggle around the king's person, a battle for his favour; politics were thus court politics.

Decisions, likewise, were court decisions, and promotion and advancement were things achieved at court. The court made Anne Boleyn, and it would be the court which destroyed her.

To say that Thomas Boleyn and his children after him set out to be courtiers is, therefore, to say a great deal; they were taking the road to power, prestige and profit. Whether it was the road to honour is a different question, and most historians have felt that Anne's father personified all that was bad about the court. P. W. Sergeant's verdict that 'it is clearly hopeless to attempt a defence of Sir Thomas' may seem totally justified in the case of a man who, on his way to an earldom, slipped, or appears to have slipped, two daughters in succession into the king's bed.[9] Friedmann's judgement, 'mean and grasping', is certainly correct.[10] In the autumn of 1536, when the Crown was desperately scraping up money to combat the northern rebels, Henry was delighted to be told that Cromwell had approached Boleyn for an excessive sum:

> his Grace, being very merry said there was a servant of King Edward's, his grandfather, which once made a suit unto him for 1000 oaks [so] that he might only obtain 20, and so he trusted your request to my lord of Wiltshire should purchase [bring in] £500 or such a matter by the reason it was so great, which being less would else percase [perchance] have wrought nothing with him.[11]

Equally warranted was the contemporary opinion that Thomas 'would sooner act from interest than from any other motive'.[12] When returning from an embassy in Spain in 1523 he brought with him an important messenger from Charles V, only to dump him when they reached London and leave the total stranger to find his own accommodation![13]

Courts and courtiers had, of course, existed since time immemorial, and in Western Europe a vigorous tradition of comment had long condemned the courtier as a self-seeking sycophant and the court as a living hell.[14] Not only did the deadly sins of sloth, gluttony and lust flourish there, but to succeed a courtier had to embrace the other four as well – pride, avarice, envy, anger – along with falsehood, flattery and servility. The wealth, power and prestige which success at court could bring attracted countless young men and women to attempt their fortunes there. But the price was their integrity, their morality, their health, their spiritual safety and their self-respect. A telling instance is provided by the love notes which passed between Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn during morning mass in the royal chapel. They wrote them in an illuminated Book of Hours, and there is

something gross in the king's scrawl below the miniature of the blood-stained Man of Sorrows:

> If you remember my love in your prayers as strongly as I adore you, I shall hardly be forgotten, for I am yours.
>
> Henry R. forever.

Anne replied:

> By daily proof you shall me find
> To be to you both loving and kind.

And, with deliberate enticement, she chose to write this below a miniature of the Annunciation, the angel telling the Virgin Mary that she would have a son.[15]

On this view, then, the court was a Moloch that sucked in good people, body and soul, and spewed out a noisome plague of parasites – Anne among them – corrupting the community in the process. On the other hand, to the landed elite from which courtiers came, even menial duties could be intrinsically honourable. According to traditional chivalric values, still very much alive, what made service honourable was the rank of the person served. To take an extreme example, the most influential of Henry's courtiers was the man who occupied the post of 'groom of the stool' – by the time of the king's death he would be a knight and a member of the privy council – and his duty was to make provision for the king's natural functions and to attend the monarch when he relieved himself on the close stool, the royal commode.

Apologists could also stress that the courtier bore a great moral responsibility. Precisely because of the potential for corruption, it was imperative to surround a prince with good advice and men of honour. In 1536, in the northern uprising which followed the political upheavals which took Anne's life, one of her enemies, Sir Thomas Tempest, reminded the rebels of the lessons of history:

> It is necessary that virtuous men that loveth the commonwealth should be of his council . . . such virtuous men as would regard the commonwealth above their prince's favour . . . In this noble realm, who[ever] reads the chronicles of Edward II [will see] what jeopardy he was in for Piers de Gaveston, [the] Spensers and such like counsellors and . . . Richard II was deposed for following the counsel of such like.[16]

Only the virtuous adviser could resist the potential of the court for corruption, and thereby help to make princely rule virtuous.

This line of thought appealed very much to the new, lay, intellectual fashion which we call Renaissance humanism. Since the ruler was the embodiment of the community, serving him presented the supreme opportunity to apply the moral philosophy which the humanist study of classical literature taught. As Thomas More wrote in *Utopia*, 'You, if you be disposed and can find in your heart to follow some prince's court, shall with your good counsels greatly help and further the commonwealth. Wherefore there is nothing more appertaining to your duty, that is to say to the duty of a good man.'[17] The personal qualities that humanist education inculcated were important too: effective speech, impressive appearance and manner, personal achievement and *sprezzatura*, that unique something which combined nonchalant ease with *savoir faire*; these were exactly what was needed to command attention and allow the courtier to achieve his aim 'to become the prince's instructor'. More's own entry into public service was not, as is sometimes suggested, a turning away from the ideals of humanism; it was their fulfilment.

Attitudes to the court and to courtiers were thus ambivalent. More himself was well aware that in the real world of the Renaissance court, compromise was the most that morality and honesty could hope to achieve.[18] His own career would show how difficult that was, but the dilemma was also explored at first hand in the poems of a courtier whose life was to be closely linked with that of Anne Boleyn, Sir Thomas Wyatt. Born about 1503, the son of a lifelong courtier, Thomas was at court in his early teens and, according to some stories, became Anne's lover in the 1520s. Thereafter, apart from several embassies abroad and a number of periods in the Tower or under house arrest, he spent the rest of his life in the royal household.[19] His satires are particularly revealing. Two are addressed to 'mine own John Poyntz', a minor courtier at one time in Anne's own service, and a third to Anne's cousin Francis Bryan, one of the most prominent men at court. In the first, possibly written in 1536 soon after his release from the Tower after being arrested as one of Anne's supporters, Wyatt bitterly attacks the dishonesty, the prostitution and the denial of integrity necessary for success at court and, in particular, the moral hypocrisy demanded of him:

> None of these points would ever frame in me –
> My wit is nought, I cannot learn the way.
> And much the less of things that greater be,

> That asken help of colours of device
> To join the mean with each extremity:
> With the nearest virtue to cloak alway the vice,
> And as to purpose likewise it shall fall
> To press the virtue that it may not rise,
> As drunkenness, good fellowship to call.[20]

However, Wyatt was also well aware of the attraction of the royal court:

> I grant sometime that of glory the fire
> Doth touch my heart; me list not to report
> Blame by honour, and honour to desire.[21]

His third satire is warm in its approval of Bryan's rejection of the lure of private self-indulgence:

> Likest thou not this? 'No.' 'Why?' 'For swine so groins.
> In sty and chaw the turds moulded on the ground,
> And drivel on pearls, the head still in the manger,
> [As] of the harp the ass to hear the sound.
> So sacks of dirt be filled up in the cloister
> That serves for less than do these fatted swine.
> Though I seem lean and dry, without moisture,
> Yet will I serve my prince, my lord and thine,
> And let them live to feed the paunch that list,
> So I may feed to live both me and mine.'
> By God, well said![22]

Wyatt, however, sees no escape from the courtier's dilemma, in this case, how to afford to give this devoted service. Buy friends, maintain virtue only as a front, batten on the rich and elderly, marry for money and take your pleasure on the side; if a female relative is attractive, then sell her for a good price to 'thy better', and never let friendship get in the way of advantage – this is the only recipe.[23] It was one that Wyatt, Thomas Boleyn, his daughters, indeed every courtier at some time had to follow. Yet despite his disgust, back to court Wyatt came, again and again, and it was on the way to meet the imperial ambassador and escort him to the king that he caught pneumonia and died at Sherborne in Dorset. We would describe Wyatt as a poet, but the Sherborne parish register calls him *regis consiliarius*, 'counsellor to the king'.[24]

There is no evidence that Anne's father shared Wyatt's qualms of conscience or that Anne, who did, acquired them in the Boleyn household.

Yet even if Thomas Boleyn typifies the self-seeking courtier, he did have many of the qualities a ruler looked for. He was a man of some education, far and away the best speaker of French in the Tudor court, with Latin as well, and cultured enough to commission several items from Erasmus.[25] He was, as we shall see, careful to ensure that Anne had the best available education, and he was obviously also responsible for the education of her brother, George – possibly a product of Oxford and later a recognized court poet.[26] Thomas Boleyn was also adept at courtly entertainments, notably the tournament. He fought with the king himself at Greenwich in May 1510, and nine months later he was one of the 'answerers' at the great Westminster challenge of February 1511.[27] A tournament was very much more than an occasion for martial combat. By combining display, drama and symbolism, it could approach a major art form.[28] Thus on the second day of the 1511 tilt the leading answerer, Charles Brandon, entered the lists in dead silence, concealed beneath a moving tower; when the door was unlocked, he rode out in the costume of an old, bearded pilgrim, only to cast off this disguise and appear in polished armour once the queen, in whose honour the festivity was being held, had consented to his taking part.[29] Anne's father was third into the tiltyard, alongside the marquess of Dorset, and together they continued the theme:

> like two pilgrims from St. James [of Compostella], in tabards of black velvet, with palmers' hats on their helmets, with long Jacob's staves [pilgrim staffs] in their hands, their horse trappers of black velvet, their tabards, hats and trappers set with scallop shells [pilgrims' badges] of fine gold . . . their servants all in black satin, with scallop shells of gold in their breasts.[30]

There were also indoor festivities, and at Christmas 1514 Boleyn was joined by his son in a season which included a fancy-dress dance and an indoor mêlée.[31]

This experience and skill, and his knowledge of other things courtly – horses, hawks, bowls, shovelboard – allowed Boleyn to pass anywhere and gave him the final accolade of the humanist courtier, usefulness to his prince. A man of intelligence, gifts and capacity, with a loyalty only to himself (and so to the king) and a willingness to take on a heavy workload, was a courtier worth having. For example, in the period 1519–23 Thomas Boleyn was successively Henry VIII's ambassador to the court of France, in attendance at both the Field of Cloth of Gold and the subsequent meeting with the emperor Charles V at Gravelines, a participant in the

Calais conference of 1521 (which also involved a short mission to the emperor) and finally ambassador to Spain. He clearly had the flair for diplomacy as well as the languages; Henry was to say in 1530 that there was no skilled negotiator to equal him.[32] There is a revealing scene of Boleyn at Brussels on his first embassy in 1512, shaking hands with Margaret of Austria, regent of the Netherlands, on a bet that progress in their negotiations would be achieved in ten days – her Spanish courser against his hobby.[33] One admires, too, his ability to handle Henry, the ease with which he slipped into one diplomatic report in October 1513 the remark that negotiating with Maximilian I was like tilting with a man whose horse was out of control: 'it will be long or they join well together' – just the pleasing, intimate metaphor to attract a king never fond of long epistles.[34]

Back in England, Boleyn was active on the king's council, that group of up to perhaps seventy individuals of varying importance and often fluctuating roles, which was the nearest England then had to what might later be called 'the government'. He was, indeed, one of its most active members, whether policy and administration or judicial (star chamber) business were on the agenda.[35] And there were courtly chores too, such as a six-week assignment in 1517 looking after the king's sister, Margaret, during her visit from Scotland.[36] All this brought rewards – rank (knighthood in 1509), office, wardships, some grants of land – but rewards earned the hard way. Royal favour for the really ambitious did not come cheap.

Thomas Boleyn was not the only courtier on whom the young sun of Henry VIII's bounty shone, although all were eclipsed by Charles Brandon, who succeeded in marrying the king's younger sister Mary and founding the dukedom of Suffolk. Opportunities at court were indeed particularly good at this time. In the troubles of the mid-fifteenth century, royal service in England had lost some of its kudos, but the establishment of Edward IV in 1471 as the unchallenged king ushered in a period when first the Yorkists and then the Tudors used the royal court to draw together the upper classes in support of the throne.

Political exploitation of the court was, of course, hardly revolutionary, and the model for all this was the court of the duke of Burgundy, the ruler of what is today the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxemburg, plus sizeable parts of northern France. There, in a deliberate attempt to unite these anything but coherent territories, the duke's household consciously cultivated magnificence in order to command prestige internationally as well as locally, and enrolled the arts in the service of the state. Edward IV (whose sister married the duke of Burgundy) set out to rival his brother-in-law,

with results which can be seen today in the architecture of St George's Chapel, Windsor, in the pages of the earliest books in the English royal library and in the reinvigoration of the Order of the Garter. Edward's son-in-law, Henry VII, deliberately modelled his court on that of Burgundy, and his grandson did likewise.[37]

All this meant an increasing demand for able courtiers and a special premium on those with European sophistication, something which, as we shall see, lies at the heart of Anne Boleyn's success. The need for a new breed of courtier was also increased by more sober organizational changes in the English court, which created a distinctive pattern of court life for Henry VIII and his wives. For many generations kings (and great lords) had occupied that part of the 'household above stairs' known as the chamber, far away from the hustle of the kitchens and the rest of domestic life 'below stairs'. However, in the fifteenth century, the king began to desire greater privacy and to realize that the more private a monarch, the more impressive are his appearances. The result was that the chamber became divided into three parts: the privy chamber, which was a suite strictly private to the king; the presence chamber, which was open to courtiers except when the king was holding audience there; and the great or watching chamber, which was regularly accessible to all entitled to attend the household above stairs.[38]

These changes would be of only technical interest were it not for the personnel changes which followed in their wake. First, a new and exclusive group of servants was established to serve in the new privy chamber; second, because Henry VIII wanted 'pastime with good company' as well as service, such posts began to be filled by men who were first and foremost his cronies. Some years were to pass before arrangements reached their final form, but by 1518 or 1519 we can see a small establishment of such men occupying posts as either 'gentlemen' or 'grooms of the privy chamber'. In addition the king would, from time to time, invite into the privy chamber anyone who took his fancy and with whom he wished to pass the time. Such men might not have the pay of the official staff or their automatic right of access, but they were part of the privy chamber circle, and everything depended, for them as for the salaried staff, on the impression that they could make on the king. Never had a group of young men been in such a position of potential advantage since the late fourteenth century and the hated minions of Richard II. And never since that day had there been men in such a position of potential power, especially given the highly persuadable man that Henry VIII was. They gave Cardinal Wolsey nightmares – his famous Eltham Ordinance which tried (in vain) to set

privy chamber numbers at fifteen was only one of a series of attempts to keep the privy chamber circle at bay – and we shall see how strife within the privy chamber circle helped to destroy Anne Boleyn in May 1536.[39]

Thomas Boleyn was deeply involved in all this. He was close to the king in the early years of the reign as one of the aristocratic group which sympathized with the ambitions of the young, warlike Henry VIII against the more sober counsels of his father's churchmen and bureaucrats. All the while, however, the brilliant new administrator, Thomas Wolsey, was advancing in royal favour, and in 1515 and 1516 he came to grips with the courtiers. One of his targets was Thomas Boleyn, whom he was certainly trying to taint with disloyalty early in 1515, although nothing came of the insinuation.[40] Indeed, for much of that year Wolsey (now a cardinal) was very much on the defensive as the champion of the clergy, who were being heavily attacked following the notorious death in church custody of a London merchant, Richard Hunne. One indication of the minister's preoccupation was that about this time Thomas Boleyn secured from the king a promise of the succession to the highly prized post of controller of the royal household whenever the existing occupant, Sir Edward Ponynges, was promoted to the senior post of treasurer.[41] Not until the autumn of 1516 did the cardinal finally triumph, or seem to triumph, though at the cost of the support of 'well nigh all' the magnates; 'the cardinal of York' was, so Sebastian Giustinian said, 'the beginning, middle and end'.[42]

'Seemed to triumph' is an important qualification, for the courtiers, defeated this time in the struggle to monopolize the king, still occupied the citadel of royal favour, the privy chamber, and continued to secure favours from the king under Wolsey's disapproving nose. When the privy chamber staff was finally organized, Boleyn had become neither a gentleman nor a groom (these posts went to somewhat younger men), but he remained in the privy chamber circle and his son George became the king's page.[43] It was probably Wolsey's suspicion of this closeness to the king, as much as Boleyn's experience in diplomacy, which brought Sir Thomas the posting to Paris in January 1519, and within weeks he was showing anxiety about the promised controllership.[44] His fears were well grounded, for in the second week in May, Wolsey wrote to say that although Ponynges would move up to the post of treasurer of the household after the 29th, Boleyn would not get the succession this time; instead, he would succeed Ponynges in due course. Boleyn's reply was an abject plea for Wolsey's support; if the minister would favour him, neither he nor the king would regret it.[45] A week later, the French king, Francis I, broke even more

alarming news to him – Henry had expelled eight or nine of the privy chamber circle.[46] Pastime in the privy chamber between the king and his younger minions had been pretty free, and Wolsey had seen his chance. Henry was told that his 'minions were so familiar and homely with him, and played such light touches with him that they forgot themselves'. He reacted on cue to this slur on his dignity, and dispersed the young men to posts remote from court.[47]

Wolsey left Boleyn to sweat for four months before sending a message by word of mouth setting out his intentions about the controllership, confirming that Sir Thomas would not get it, but would become treasurer in due course. Boleyn took the hint and wrote to say that he accepted the cardinal's decision and wholly resigned his claim to the controllership to the discretion of the king and Wolsey.[48] With his abject submission thus on file and a clear recognition that while the king might promise it was Wolsey who performed – and could refuse to perform – Boleyn got the controllership after all.[49] He held it for only a short time, for Ponynges died in the autumn of 1521, whereupon he succeeded as treasurer.[50] The lesson in the political facts of life remained with Thomas Boleyn for the rest of the decade; only when his daughter was there to shield him would he be prepared to challenge Wolsey again.

Such was the heated, some might say foetid atmosphere of the court world into which Anne Boleyn was born, and such was her father. Her mother also was at court, in Katherine of Aragon's entourage, though we know less of her activities.[51] Also at court before 1520 was Anne's sister Mary, who in February of that year married William Carey of the privy chamber, with the king himself as the principal guest.[52] Her brother George had, as we have seen, played in a mummery at Christmas 1514–15 and gone on to become the royal page, but there were still some years to go before he would matter much at court.

Anne, Mary and George were the only children of Thomas Boleyn to survive to maturity, and there has been a long-running historical dispute about the date of Anne's birth and the relative ages of her brother and sister. Evidence from the later sixteenth century and the earlier seventeenth gave modern scholars the choice of a birth date for Anne of either *circa* 1501 or *circa* 1507.[53] An early letter which Anne wrote to her father would have settled the matter, but it could not be dated.[54] In 1981, however, the art historian Hugh Paget successfully demonstrated that the letter was written in 1513 when Anne Boleyn left England to become a maid of honour in the court at Brussels, a position which was open to a

12- or 13-year-old.[55] His conclusion has been challenged but is established beyond question because Anne's letter is self-evidently in the formed hand of at least a teenager (plate 14).[56] The correct date for Anne's birth is therefore *circa* 1501. This means that she was significantly older than is usually imagined. The domestic triangle which developed in 1527 was between a 36-year-old king, a wife over 40 and a mature woman of 26, not a girl of 19 or 20. Similarly, in the spring of 1536 Anne was not rejected by Henry when she was, as Catholic tradition has it, less than 29, but as a possibly ageing 35, while her supplanter, Jane Seymour, was, at 27, marginally older than Anne had been when challenging Katherine for the first time.[57] The gossip that credited Henry with a taste for younger women was evidently ill informed.[58]

Dating the birth of Anne Boleyn to 1500–1 resolved one long-running dispute, but it did not tell us about her relationship with her siblings. Here the evidence is slight, and as far as George is concerned, contradictory. His appearance in court as a juvenile and the fact that he secured his first royal grant only in 1524 would suggest that he was the youngest of the three.[59] However, a poem by Cavendish (who had certainly known him) has George saying that he had obtained a place in the privy chamber 'or years thrice nine my life had past away', and Boleyn was retired from his place there by the Eltham Ordinance of January 1526.[60] Indeed, that is only an end date, and if Cavendish is referring to George's arrival as the king's page, it could have been several years earlier. Yet even for George Boleyn to have been in his twenty-seventh year by 1526, he would have to have been born by 1499 and thus would be older than Anne.

How reliable Cavendish is on this is, however, another question. He was writing thirty years after the event, and since the dictates of the verse made the next lowest number 'years thrice eight', he may have been trying to say no more than 'about twenty-five', thus indicating a birth-date of about 1500.[61] On the other hand, after losing his post in 1525, George was restored to a full adult place in the privy chamber by the end of 1529, and it could be this that Cavendish had in mind.[62] In that case, 'or thrice nine' would, taken strictly, indicate a date of 1503–4, while 'about twenty-five' would give 1504–5. What perhaps should clinch the acceptance of this last is a remark by Jean du Bellay in 1529, suggesting that he thought George too young to be sent as ambassador to France.[63]

Mary Boleyn played much less of a part in Anne's life than did their brother. Her one claim to fame is that, for a time in the 1510s or early 1520s, she was Henry VIII's mistress. Of this there can be no doubt, despite efforts to prove the contrary. It was most tellingly demonstrated

when the king himself was taxed with having slept with both Anne's sister and her mother and made the naïvely revealing reply: 'Never with the mother.'[64] The rumour of a relationship between Henry and Thomas Boleyn's wife did circulate widely, but nothing can be discovered to upset the king's denial; most probably there was some confusion of Elizabeth Boleyn with Elizabeth Blount, Henry's known mistress.[65] Later Catholic controversialists transmuted the mistake into the claim that Anne Boleyn was Henry VIII's daughter! To achieve such a feat Henry would have had to have been astute enough to escape his father's well-attested protectiveness, as well as somewhat precocious – in 1501 he was 10 years old.[66]

For Mary Boleyn there is, again, no known date of birth, but in 1597 her grandson, Lord Hunsdon, petitioned for the Boleyn earldom of Ormonde on the ground that she had been the elder sister.[67] Some historians have argued that he was mistaken, but this is totally implausible.[68] Although daughters did not normally inherit peerages, the eldest could hope that, where a title became extinct in the male line, it would be revived for her husband and their children. Thus, if Anne really was senior to Mary, any claim to the earldom belonged to her daughter, Queen Elizabeth, not her sister's son. On such a delicate matter Hunsdon must have been doubly sure of his ground.[69] Of course, if Mary Boleyn's liaison with the king could be firmly dated, this might put the issue of her priority beyond challenge. Unfortunately the first contemporary indication that Henry had slept with one of Anne's close relatives (unnamed) comes in a missive to the pope in 1527.[70] For the liaison to have begun before her marriage to William Carey in February 1520, Mary must certainly have been the elder sister, since by 1518 and possibly earlier, Henry's mistress was Elizabeth Blount. In 1519 she bore him a son, Henry Fitzroy, later duke of Richmond.[71] Moreover, for what it is worth, Mary is said to have had the reputation of 'a great wanton and notoriously infamous' when she was in France in 1514.[72] The alternative possibility – but one that says nothing about Mary's place in the Boleyn offspring – is that her affair with Henry postdated the marriage to William Carey and that she succeeded Elizabeth Blount after the latter's marriage to Gilbert, later Lord Tailbois.[73] This is the more likely. Mary used her influence to get Thomas Gardiner appointed to Tynmouth Priory not earlier than 1520 and her husband was the beneficiary of a spate of royal grants in 1522, 1523, 1524 and 1525.[74] It may also be relevant to note the long delay before she became pregnant, something which might be expected of a period when she was taken up with a man of such known low fertility as Henry VIII.

Perhaps the king had realized that it was safer to risk begetting children whose paternity could be denied than bastards who only emphasized his lack of legitimate heirs. Once Mary had begun to cohabit with William Carey, her two children came in quick succession.[75]

Whatever the date of Mary's liaison with Henry VIII, other indications confirm that Hunsdon was right in claiming that she was older than Anne. After the daughters had gone to France in 1514–15, it was Anne who remained for further training and Mary who was brought back and launched at the English court, a most curious choice if Anne were not the junior. Then there was the decision to leave Anne to make her career in France; clearly there was no place for her in Boleyn family plans. Furthermore, Anne's failure to marry while in France suggests that she was not much of a prize. Nor was a marriage for Anne discussed in England until nearly two years after Mary was Mistress Carey.[76] Here, perhaps, we can call in Sir Thomas Boleyn's own reflections in a letter to Thomas Cromwell in the summer of 1536, when his world had crashed around him, with George and Anne both dead, and most of the gains he had striven for threatened by the loss of royal favour. His early years, he recalled, had been financially straitened, not only because of the fifty pounds a year, but because his wife brought him 'every year a child'.[77] The date of his marriage is unknown, but Elizabeth Howard's jointure was settled on her in the summer of 1501, which suggests that it was relatively recent – say not before 1498.[78] If, then, we take Boleyn's memory literally, we may suppose a child in 1499, another in 1500, a third in 1501 and so on, although two children at least died before reaching adulthood.[79] Were Mary to be the eldest and born about 1499, this would make her 15-plus when going to France in 1514 and 20-plus at marriage, with an affair with the king in her late teens or, more probably, early twenties. Anne would fit in at 1500–1, firmly dated by her journey abroad in 1513; then George at about 1504, so entering the privy chamber as an adult in 1529 at about the age of 25. There are more assumptions in this than is good for any hypothesis, but it does satisfy the evidence.

Thus Anne Boleyn followed her sister into her teens and into the second decade of the sixteenth century, and in 1513 she went abroad. It was a journey that would shape her life. Ever afterwards she would stand out from the women of the English court whom she was leaving, and always would leave, far behind.