

## London Landscape

# Henry VIII: man and monarch

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To mark the 500th anniversary of Henry VIII's accession to the throne, there is a major exhibition at the British Library in London. Important and rarely displayed items from the British Library's unrivalled Henry VIII collection are exhibited, including correspondence, key official documents, maps and books from the King's own library. The exhibition examines the extraordinary transformations – personal and political, intellectual and religious, literary, aesthetic and linguistic – that took place in the reign of Henry VIII.

We could explore the beliefs and motives behind Henry's actions, telling the story of his reign from his own perspective, but I'd like to look more at his weight and health – the fact that he started out as a healthy, young man who did a lot of exercise and ended up very overweight.

Henry's prescription book contains various receipts for treating ulcers and 'restraining humours', some of them by the royal physicians and some of them ascribed to Henry himself:

'An Oynment devised by the king's Majesty made at Westminster. And devised at Greenwich to take away inflammations and to cease payne and heale ulcers called gray plaster'

## Death of Henry VIII

Henry died on 28 January 1547 but what was the cause of his death? He was 56 years of age when he died, not a bad age to reach during the Tudor period. So did he die of old age, was there a specific illness or was the cause of death syphilis? To ascertain the cause of the death it is perhaps a good idea to look at any health issues or illnesses that he had suffered during his life.

## Life illnesses

The most famous doctors who attended Henry VIII were George Owen, Doctor Augustine and Doctor

Butts. During his lifetime Henry VIII suffered from the following health issues and illnesses:

- In 1513 at the age of 22 he suffered a bout of smallpox.
- In 1524 at the age of 33 he suffered the first of recurring attacks of malaria.
- In 1535 at the age of 44 he badly injured his leg in a jousting accident. Although the leg first appeared to have healed it reopened a few years later and became ulcerated. He was unable to take exercise and his weight increased.
- His early armour showed a waist measurement of about 34 to 36 inches indicating a weight of about 180 to 200 pounds. His last set of armour showed a waist measurement of about 58 to 60 inches indicating a weight of about 300 to 320 pounds. His increase in weight could have been due to diabetes.
- Eventually, both of his legs and feet became affected with ulcers.
- He suffered from insomnia, sore throats and migraine headaches.
- He suffered some mental decline in later life, exhibiting some paranoia, feelings of depression and loneliness and a terrible temper.
- He suffered from a series of strokes prior to his death possibly indicating circulatory problems and high blood pressure.
- His toes became gangrenous as ulcerations worsened and advanced.

## Was the cause of death syphilis?

This is the belief held by many people as such a death caused by a sexually transmitted disease seems to go with his image. This image is in fact incorrect. Henry had very few mistresses for a monarch and as we all know tended to marry the women in his life. The gradual mental decline, paranoia and leg ulceration he developed as he grew older could have been the result of a terminal syphilitic infection. However, no one has ever proved that the death of Henry VIII was due to syphilis.

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## The last days

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Henry spent his last eight days in bed and was too weak even to lift a glass to his lips. His sick room was filled with the hideous stench of his bursting leg ulcers. His doctors and physicians were afraid to tell him that he was dying because the Treason Act forbade anyone from predicting the death of the king. Archbishop Thomas Cranmer gently told Henry of his imminent death.

## The burial and the strange prophecy

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Henry's body was transported to Windsor for burial and legend has it that sometime during the night the coffin burst open and when the sentries found him, dogs were licking his remains. Someone had once prophesied that '...dogs will lick his bones as they did Ahab's' and this legend appeared to fulfil this prophecy. Henry VIII was finally buried in St George's Chapel in Windsor Castle, next to his third wife, Jane Seymour.

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## His will

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Henry had made a will confirming the order of succession upon his death: the will dictated that his son, Edward, should succeed on his death. If Edward then died without heirs, his daughter Mary should then accede, followed by Elizabeth, if Mary also died childless. Should all his children die without issue, the will stated that the throne of England was to go to the descendants of his younger sister, Mary and the Grey line and not those of his elder sister, Margaret and the Stuart line, although there is some suspicion that the Seymour faction appointed to rule during the minority of King Edward VI had these alterations to the will made to suit their own interests.

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