

## THE WIVES OF HENRY VIII

**H**ENRY VIII's matrimonial adventures owed as much to politics as to passion. He was betrothed to Catherine of Aragon, his brother's widow, when he was eleven years of age, and married her as soon as he succeeded to the throne at seventeen. The motive seems to have been a mixture of chivalry and inability to repay the dowry which had been received. Their first son lived only a few days in 1511, and a series of miscarriages and still births followed. The only surviving child was the Princess Mary, born in 1516. By the 1520s, Henry's mind was turning towards divorce. In 1527 formal proceedings for an annulment of the marriage were instituted, by which time Henry's attentions had moved on to Anne Boleyn, younger sister of a former mistress. Catherine resisted great pressure to retire to a nunnery and negotiations continued until 1533, when Cranmer's appointment as archbishop coincided with Anne's pregnancy. At the coronation in June 1533, Anne was six months with child, and the Princess Elizabeth was born in September. By January 1536, when Catherine died at Kimbolton, Henry's passion for Anne was spent, and his eye had been taken by Jane Seymour, a lady-in-waiting and sister of the future Lord Protector. Anne's miscarriage later that month sealed her fate, and in the summer she was accused of incest and adultery and beheaded. The betrothal to Jane followed a day later. Henry's third marriage lasted sixteen months, and in October 1537 Jane died giving birth to Prince Edward. The fourth marriage, to Anne of Cleves, was purely

diplomatic, and was intended to rally Protestant Germany against the emperor. Henry hastened to Rochester to greet his bride, whom he had never seen, but recoiled in dismay, complaining that he had been deceived by her portrait. To Cromwell, he confided: 'if it were not that she is come so far into England, and for fear of making a ruffle in the world, and driving her brother into the Emperor and the French king's hands, I would never have her: but now it is too far gone, wherefore I am sorry.' Closer inspection merely confirmed the king's anxieties and a few months later, the marriage was annulled on grounds of non-consummation. Anne was assured that she would be treated as a sister, was given a generous settlement, and remained in England until her death in 1557. A month later, Henry married Catherine Howard, an attractive and vivacious seventeen-year-old, but who had formed previous attachments. After little more than a year, she was accused of adultery and beheaded, dying in the Tower with composure and dignity. Henry's sixth wife was Catherine Parr, twice-widowed and aged thirty-two. Older and more mature than her predecessors, Catherine got on well with Henry's mixed brood of children, created something of a home, survived him, and married a fourth time a few months after his death. She died in childbirth at Sudeley Castle in September 1548. Henry's lifelong desire for a secure succession produced three legitimate adult children, none of whom had offspring.



THE WIVES OF HENRY VIII. Catherine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn, Jane Seymour, Anne of Cleves, and Catherine Parr; there is no authentic portrait of Catherine Howard.