



From the internationally bestselling author of
Eleanor of Aquitaine

MARY BOLEYN

‘THE GREAT
AND
INFAMOUS
WHORE’

‘GRIPPING’
Independent on Sunday

Alison
Weir

VINTAGE

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About the Book

Mary Boleyn is remembered by posterity as a 'great and infamous whore'. She was the mistress of two kings, Francois I of France and Henry VIII of England, and sister to Anne Boleyn, Henry VIII's second wife. She may secretly have borne Henry a child and it was because of his adultery with Mary that his marriage to Anne was annulled. It is not hard to see how this tangled web of relationships has given rise to rumours and misconceptions that have been embroidered over the centuries.

In this, the first full-scale biography of Mary Boleyn, Alison Weir explodes much of the mythology that surrounds her subject and uncovers the facts about one of the most misunderstood figures of the Tudor age.

Her extensive, forensic research has facilitated a new and detailed portrayal, in which she recounts that, contrary to popular belief, Mary was entirely undeserving of her posthumous notoriety as a great whore or the 'hackney' whom the King of France famously boasted of riding.

Weir also presents compelling new evidence that almost conclusively determines the paternity of Mary's two oldest children.

In this astonishing and riveting book, Alison Weir shows that Mary's story had a happy ending and that she was by far the luckiest of the Boleyns.

About the Author

Alison Weir lives and works in Surrey. Her non-fiction books include *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, *Children of England*, *Eleanor of Aquitaine*, *Henry VIII: King and Court*, *Mary, Queen of Scots*, *Katherine Swynford* and *Elizabeth of York*. Her novels include *Innocent Traitor*, *The Lady Elizabeth* and *A Dangerous Inheritance*.

By the same author

Non-Fiction

BRITAIN'S ROYAL FAMILIES:
The Complete Genealogy

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RICHARD III AND THE PRINCES IN THE TOWER

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CHILDREN OF ENGLAND:
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THE LADY ELIZABETH

THE CAPTIVE QUEEN

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Table 1: The Boleyns

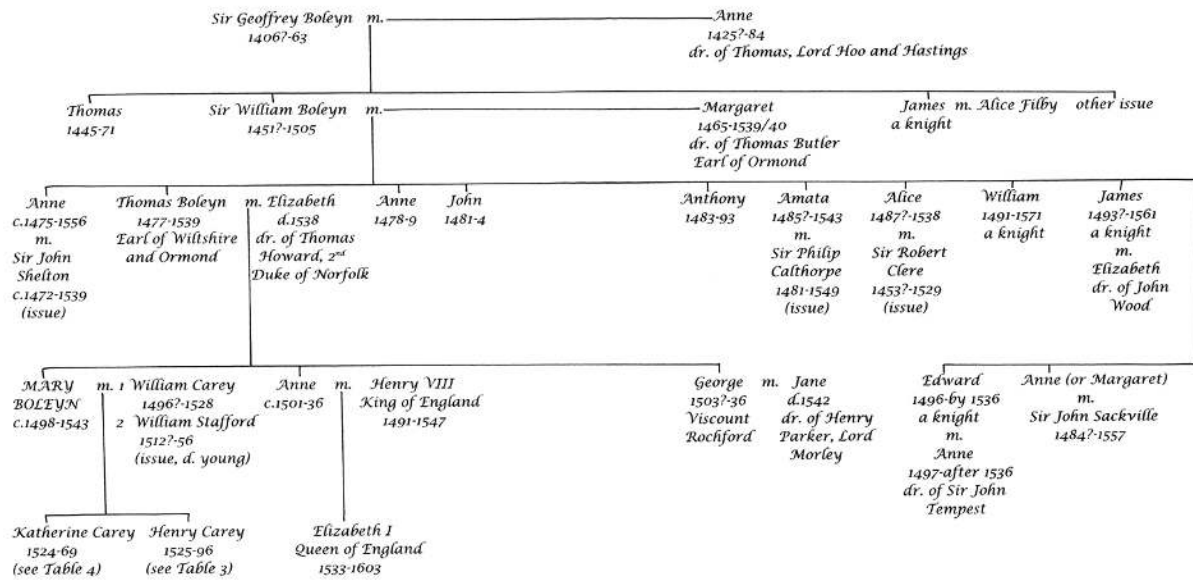


Table 2: The Carey Connections (simplified)

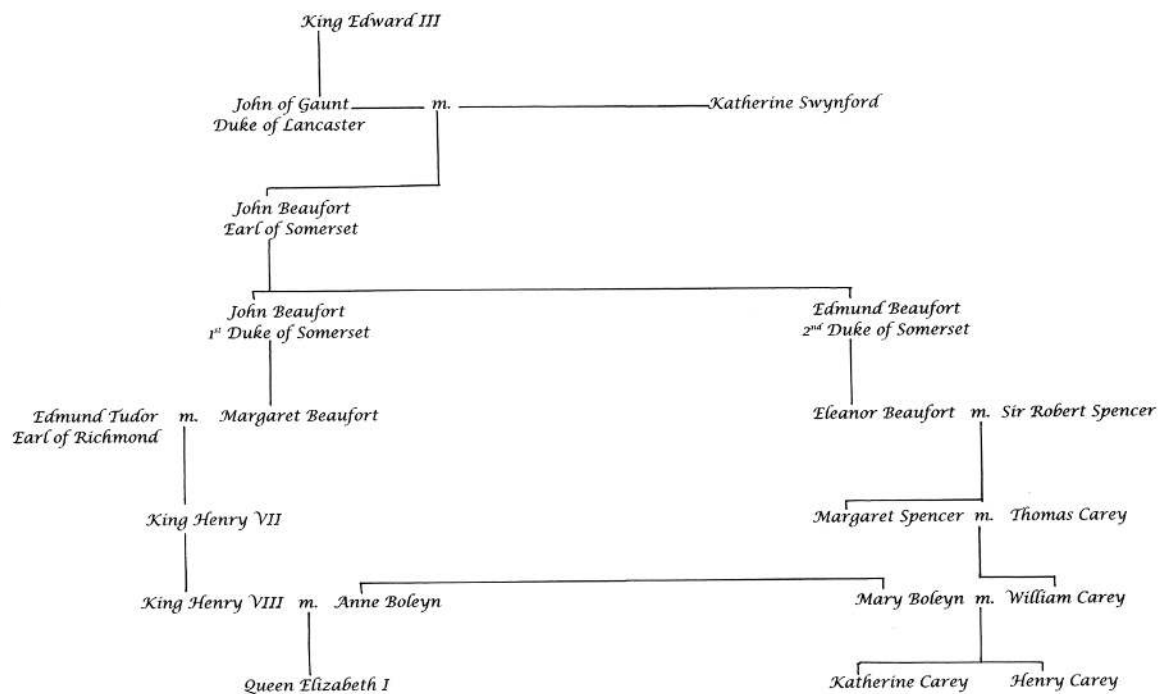


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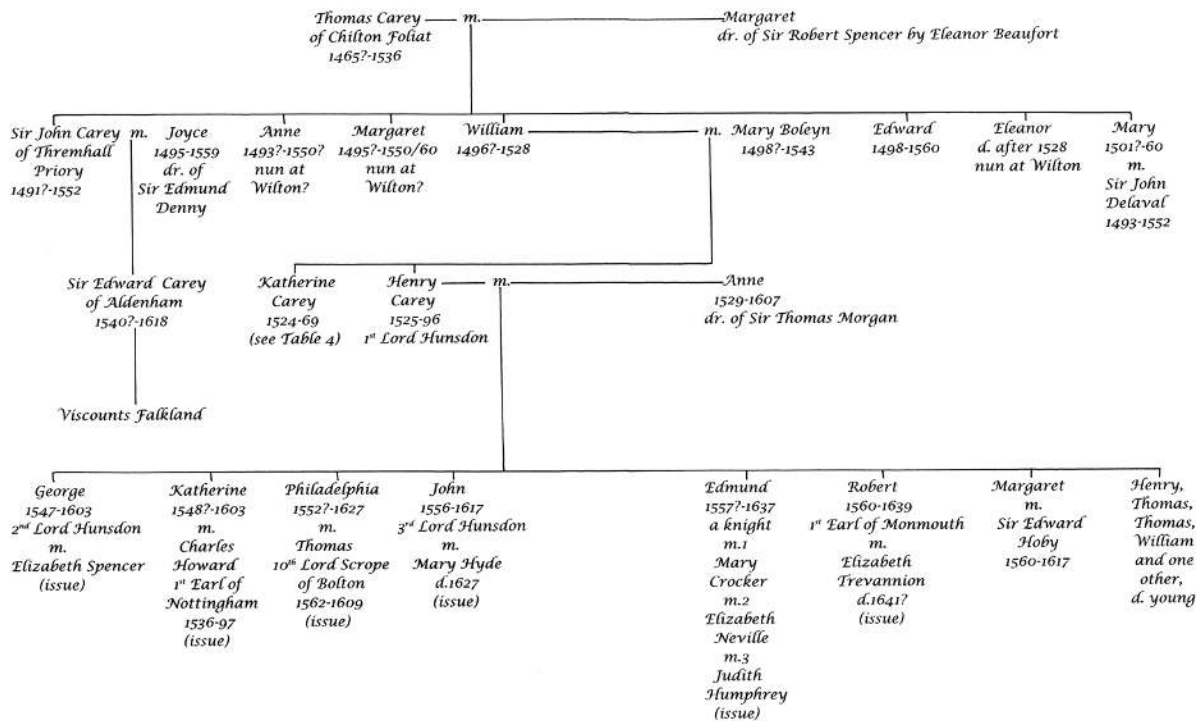


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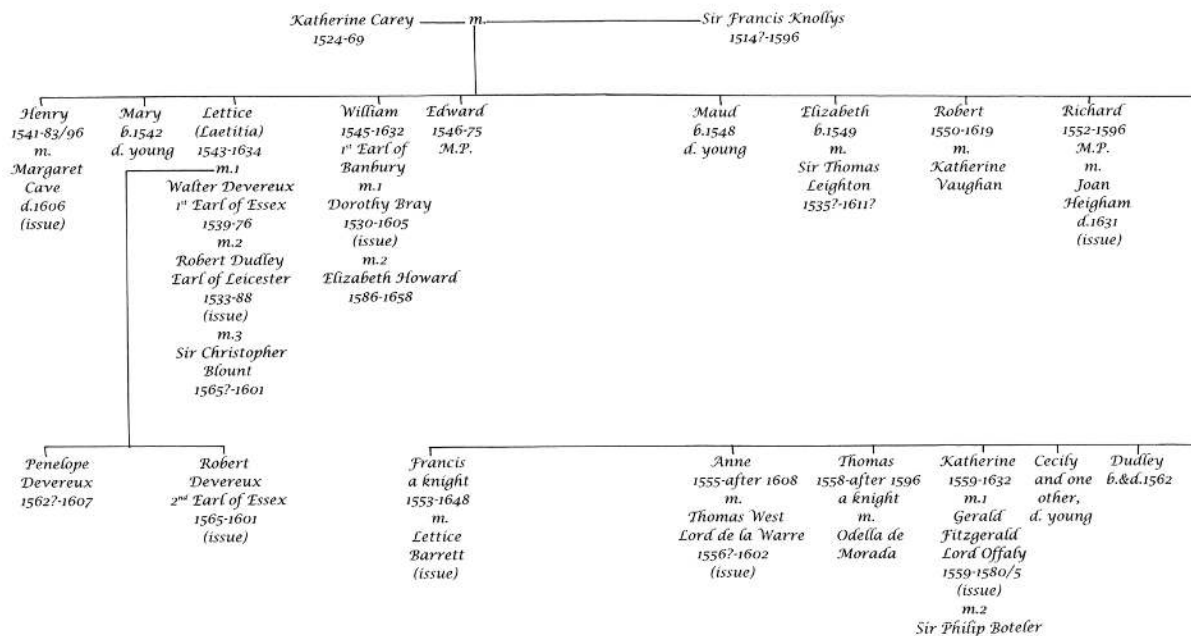
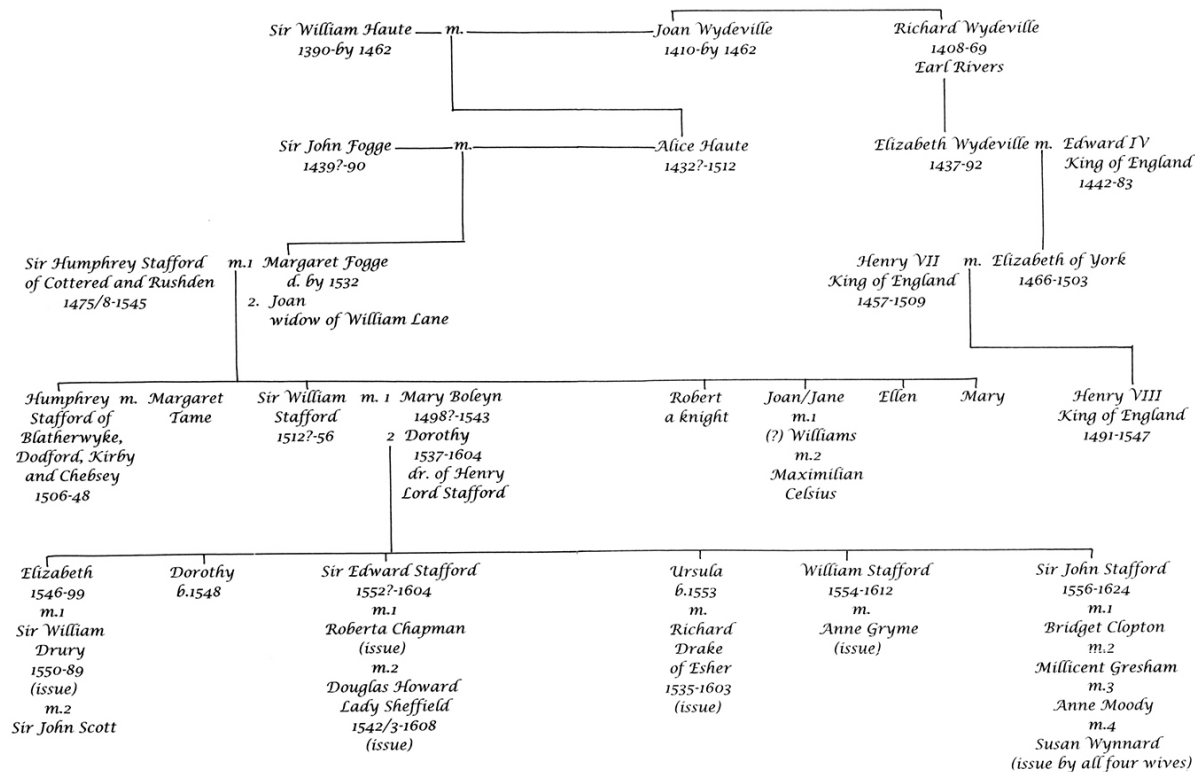


Table 5: The Stafford Family



This book is gratefully dedicated to my editor, Anthony
Whittome, to mark his retirement

Mary Boleyn

'The Great and Infamous Whore'

Alison Weir



JONATHAN CAPE
LONDON

Preface

I OWE A debt of gratitude to several kind people for their assistance with this book. To Nicola Tallis, who is surely destined to be one of our great popular historians of the future, for so generously sending me her research paper and numerous related documents on Mary Boleyn, and for encouraging me to write this book and listening so enthusiastically to my arguments. To Douglas Richardson, for emailing me so much helpful information and for his very judicious observations on the paternity of Mary's Carey children. To Anthony Hoskins, for so kindly sending me copies of his article 'Mary Boleyn's Carey Children' and his unpublished responses to Lady Antonia Fraser's views on that article, with other related essays, letters and press cuttings. Anthony, we may not agree on all points, but it was so generous of you personally to share all this, and your conclusions, with me. To Carole Richmond, who - just as I was finishing revising the text - very kindly drew my attention to, and sent me, Elizabeth Griffiths' groundbreaking article on the Boleyns at Blickling, which has proved invaluable. To Josephine Wilkinson, author of *Mary Boleyn*, for assistance with sources and permission to publish her theory on the 'sister' who was present when Anne Boleyn miscarried in 1536.

I should like to thank my historian friends, Tracy Borman, Sarah Gristwood, Siobhan Clarke and Susan Ronald, for all the lively discussions about this book, and their professional support while I was writing it.

My agent, Julian Alexander - is it really twenty-three years we've been working together? - has been, as ever,

enthusiastic and dynamic in his advocacy of my work, and always a friendly and encouraging voice at the other end of a phone. In a year in which we have set up my own historical tours company, at Julian's suggestion, he has worked indefatigably to get us off the ground whilst supporting me in my writing career. That's some feat!

I wish also to thank my professional colleagues, Siobhan Clarke and John Marston, for shouldering many of the administrative burdens of Alison Weir Tours Ltd, so that I could get on with finishing this book. And to my lovely husband, Rankin, the mainstay of my life, thank you for shouldering nearly everything else, and for the occasional glass of wine placed on my desk when the stress gets too much!

I wish to express my deepest gratitude to my dear mother, Doreen Cullen, for all her selfless support of my work over the years, and for her unending enthusiasm, praise and encouragement.

I am singularly blessed in having three outstanding editors. A huge thank-you goes to my commissioning editor, Will Sulkin, and to my editorial director, Anthony Whittome, without whose brilliant creative support and boundless interest and enthusiasm this work would not be in print. I want to thank you also, Tony, for all the excellent work you have done on my books over the past twelve years, and for being such a wonderful friend. I feel very privileged to be one of the authors you have chosen to work with following your much-lamented retirement. I have learned so much from you, and it is thanks to you that I am much more knowledgeable about writing and publishing books than I was twelve years ago.

I wish also to acknowledge all the support and advice given to me by my American editor, Susanna Porter, and her lovely team, who welcomed me so warmly to New York last summer. I'd like to make special mention of my publicists too: Lisa Barnes at Ballantine, Clara Womersley

at Jonathan Cape and Ruta Liormonas at Doubleday, and to thank them for all their hard and highly professional work on my behalf, and for making publicity such fun.

Finally, I should like to acknowledge all the efforts put in on my behalf by the unsung heroes of the publishing team at Jonathan Cape and Random House, notably Neil Bradford, Sophie Hartley and Kay Peddle.

I thank you all, from the bottom of my heart.

Alison Weir
Carshalton, Surrey
January 2011

Introduction

[MARY BOLEYN](#) HAS gone down in history as a 'great and infamous whore'. She was the mistress of two kings, [François I](#) of France and [Henry VIII](#) of England, and sister to Anne Boleyn, [Henry VIII](#)'s second wife. She may secretly have borne Henry a child. It was because of his adultery with Mary that his marriage to Anne was declared invalid. It is not hard to see how this tangled web of covert relationships has given rise to rumours and myths that have been embroidered over the centuries, and particularly in recent years, so that the truth about Mary has become obscured. In all my years of writing women's histories, I have never tackled a subject who has been so romanticised, mythologised and misrepresented.

It may seem strange, in the pages that follow, to see popular history books, some of them decades out of date, compared with serious academic studies, and yet the former are important because it is through them that the mythology of Mary Boleyn has been largely created, nurtured and reaffirmed; and it is helpful to see where and how misconceptions originated.

Everyone knows Henry VIII as the king who married six times. His matrimonial adventures have been a source of enduring fascination for centuries, and the interest shows no sign of abating. On the contrary, in the wake of Philippa Gregory's *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2001), the two film versions of it, and the successful (but alarmingly inaccurate) TV drama series *The Tudors*, it has become elevated to a virtual obsession, as one can see reflected only too clearly in numerous websites and blogs on the

internet, where historical personages like Anne Boleyn now have what are virtually fan clubs. We have also witnessed in the public's eye a disconcerting blurring of the demarcation line between fact and historical fiction.

Comparatively little is known or understood about Henry VIII's extramarital adventures. Most recent popular history books have thrown little new light on that subject, or have merely confused it further, and thanks to them, and to the widespread appeal of *The Other Boleyn Girl*, many people have the wrong idea about the woman whom that novel has made the most famous of Henry's mistresses, Mary Boleyn. Was she really such a 'great and infamous whore' with a notorious reputation? Is it true that the King was the father of her children? I am often asked these and numerous questions about Mary, and am constantly being made aware, not only of various misconceptions that are accepted as facts by a majority, but also of the views of many others who *are* well informed on the subject and are wondering why Mary Boleyn is so misrepresented. It is for these reasons – and because I have done a lot of unpublished research on her over four decades – that I have written a biography of Mary.

Mary Boleyn represents only one short episode in Henry VIII's chequered love life; all we can say with certainty is that she was his mistress for a short period while he was married to his first wife, [Katherine of Aragon](#). Mary's true historical significance – and importance – lies in the implications of her royal affair for her more celebrated sister, Anne Boleyn.

My interest in Mary, and my research, goes back to the 1960s, when she was regarded as little more than a footnote to history – in which obscurity she remained until the publication of Philippa Gregory's novel. Since then, I have written about Mary briefly in three books: *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, *Henry VIII: King and Court* and *The Lady in the Tower: The Fall of Anne Boleyn*, while my

unpublished research comes from my extensive original version of *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, written in 1974. A serious historical treatment of Mary Boleyn is long overdue. There has been just one admirable, but sadly brief, study by Josephine Wilkinson; I understand that Dr Wilkinson was constrained by a disadvantageous word limit when she had so much more to say, and she has most generously agreed that I can claim that this is the first full biography of Mary.

Recently, in *The Tudors*, Henry VIII has been portrayed as a great lover and sensualist. Many people are asking if this is true! Although the evidence is fragmentary, there are many tantalising references in contemporary sources that can help to provide an answer to the paramount question: what was Henry VIII like as a lover? Was he the virile Adonis portrayed in *The Tudors*? Was he, in fact, a bit of a prude in bed? The answers to these questions necessarily have a bearing on Henry's relations with Mary Boleyn, and they form a part of this book.

Having had some experience in constructing women's histories from fragmentary source material – in, for example, *Eleanor of Aquitaine; Isabella, Queen of England, She-Wolf of France*; and *Katherine Swynford* – and having collated information on Mary Boleyn and Henry VIII's extramarital career for earlier books and projects, I had a good basis for crafting what has turned out to be an unexpectedly fascinating – and astonishing – story from the surviving evidence relating to Mary Boleyn's life. In her case, the sources are richer than for those medieval ladies, for she lived in an age of flowering literacy and diplomacy, and we have far more insights into her existence through letters, diplomatic dispatches and archival records than is the case with any medieval woman.

As is my usual practice, I consulted all the primary sources first when preparing this book, researching into the expanding and ever-changing narrative, which is, I

have found (thanks to Sarah Gristwood), the most effective way to write historical biography. Only then did I look at the secondary and present-day sources, leaving Josephine Wilkinson's biography of Mary Boleyn until last, as I wanted to research my subject thoroughly beforehand and did not wish to be seen to be drawing upon her work. In this process, I found that some modern historians had reached the same conclusions as I had already, and in such cases that is signified by 'cf.' (compare) in the references section. I have also made it clear where I have benefited from their insights and research.

There is no escaping the fact that an air of mystery pervades every aspect of Mary Boleyn's life.¹ There is so much we don't know about her, and only so much we can infer from the scant sources that have survived. She is in the shadow of her famous sister in more than one way. Furthermore, much that is inaccurate has been written about her. Many of the misconceptions come from novels like *The Other Boleyn Girl* and others of its kind, namely *The Last Boleyn* by Karen Harper (2006) and *Court Cadenza* by Aileen Quigley (1974) (republished as *The Tudor Sisters* by Aileen Armitage) – because people often make the mistake of thinking that what an author of fiction writes must be history – and accurate history.

Yet even historians have often been guilty of making sweeping, unsupported assumptions about Mary Boleyn. This became staggeringly clear when, having researched the original sources, I turned to the secondary ones, which are – with only a few honourable exceptions – littered with inaccuracies. For example, many modern works state categorically that one or both of Mary's children was or were the King's, even though this has never been proven. Time and again, mere assumptions are presented as hard facts – I have lost count of the number of times I have noted a source not being cited – and dubious evidence is accepted indiscriminately, as will repeatedly be highlighted in the

pages that follow. Some writers merely recirculate and perpetuate old myths, and even sound and respected, reliable and conscientious historians can be guilty of repeating the same misinformation about Mary Boleyn. I have to confess that I too, in earlier books, have sometimes accepted without question what others have written about her.

It is thanks to such accounts that misconceptions about Henry VIII's private life remain widespread. In fact, it is the persistence of the mythology surrounding Mary Boleyn that has been the most disconcerting aspect of my research. For much of what we might read about Mary, even in history books, should be treated with caution, based as it is on false assumptions. And yet, as will appear in the pages that follow, it is sometimes the case that even the most fanciful and unreliable historians can provide us with compellingly credible – and useful – insights into Mary's character and conduct.

One could go on; the fact is that – as we will see – much of what has been written about Mary Boleyn in history books belongs more properly to historical novels. For this reason, this book is not only a biography but also a historiography of Mary Boleyn.

What follows is a tale that has never fully been told, a rigorous assessment of what we know – and don't know – about Mary Boleyn, which hopefully will enrich our understanding of this much-misrepresented lady and her relations with Henry VIII.

A NOTE ON MONETARY VALUES

All monetary sums quoted in the text are in sixteenth-century values. The approximate modern equivalent (at the time of writing) is given in brackets. For converting old money to new, I have used the National Archives' Currency Converter (www.nationalarchives.gov.uk).

1

'The Eldest Daughter'

[BLICKLING HALL](#), ONE of England's greatest Jacobean showpiece mansions, lies not two miles north-west of Aylsham in Norfolk. It is a beautiful place, surrounded by woods, farms, sweeping parkland and gardens - gardens that were old in the fifteenth century, and which once surrounded the fifteenth-century moated manor house of the Boleyn family, the predecessor of the present building. That house is long gone, but it was in its day the cradle of a remarkable dynasty; and here, in those ancient gardens, and within the mellow, red-brick gabled house, in the dawning years of the sixteenth century, the three children who were its brightest scions once played in the spacious and halcyon summers of their early childhood, long before they made their dramatic début on the stage of history: [Anne Boleyn](#), who would one day become Queen of England; her brother George Boleyn, who would also court fame and glory, but who would ultimately share his sister's tragic and brutal fate; and their sister Mary Boleyn, who would become the mistress of kings, and gain a notoriety that is almost certainly undeserved.

Blickling was where the Boleyn siblings' lives probably began, the protective setting for their infant years, nestling in the broad, rolling landscape of Norfolk, circled by a wilderness of woodland sprinkled with myriad flowers such as bluebells, meadowsweet, loosestrife and marsh orchids, and swept by the eastern winds. Norfolk was the land that

shaped them, that remote corner of England that had grown prosperous through the wool-cloth trade, its chief city, Norwich – which lay just a few miles to the south – being second in size only to London in the Boleyns' time. Norfolk also boasted more churches than any other English shire, miles of beautiful coastline and a countryside and waterways teeming with a wealth of wildlife. Here, at Blickling, nine miles from the sea, the Boleyn children took their first steps, learned early on that they had been born into an important and rising family, and began their first lessons.

Anne and George Boleyn were to take centre-stage roles in the play of England's history. By comparison, Mary was left in the wings, with fame and fortune always eluding her. Instead, she is remembered as an infamous whore. And yet, of those three Boleyn siblings, she was ultimately the luckiest, and, unlike her sister, the most happy.

This is Mary's story.

Mary Boleyn has aptly been described as 'a young lady of both breeding and lineage'.¹ She was born of a prosperous landed Norfolk family of the knightly class. The Boleyns, whom Anne Boleyn claimed were originally of French extraction, were settled at Salle, near Aylsham, before 1283, when the register of Walsingham Abbey records a John Boleyne living there,² but the family can be traced in Norfolk back to the reign of Henry II (1154–89).³ The earliest Boleyn inscription in Salle church is to John's great-great-grandson, Thomas Boleyn, who died in 1411; he was the son of another John Boleyn and related to Ralph Boleyn, who was living in 1402. Several other early members of the family, including Mary's great-great-grandparents, Geoffrey and Alice Boleyn, were buried in Salle church, which is like a small cathedral, rising tall and stately in its perpendicular splendour in the flat Norfolk landscape. The prosperous village it once served, which

thrived upon the profitable wool trade with the Low Countries, has mostly disappeared.

The surname Boleyn was spelt in several ways, there being no uniformity in spelling in former times, when it was given as Boleyn, Boleyne, Bolleyne, Bollegne, Boleigne, Bolen, Bullen, Boulén, Boullant or Boullan, the French form. The bulls' heads on the family coat of arms are a pun on the name. In adult life, Anne Boleyn used the modern form adopted in this text. Unfortunately, we don't know how Mary Boleyn spelt her surname, as only two letters of hers survive, both signed with her married name.

The Boleyn family had once been tenant farmers, but the source of their wealth and standing was trade. Thomas's grandson, Sir Geoffrey Boleyn, made his fortune in the City of London as a member and then Master of the Worshipful Company of Mercers (1454); he was Sheriff of London from 1446-7; M.P. for London in 1449; and an alderman of the City of London from 1452 (an office he held for eleven years). In 1457, he was elected Lord Mayor.⁴ By then, he had made his fortune; his wealth had enabled him to marry into the nobility, his wife being Anne, daughter and co-heiress of Thomas, Lord Hoo and Hastings, and she brought him great estates. Stow records that Sir Geoffrey 'gave liberally to the prisons, hospitals and lazar houses, besides a thousand pounds to poor householders in London, and two hundred pounds to [those] in Norfolk'. He was knighted by Henry VI before 1461.

In 1452 (or 1450), Geoffrey had purchased the manor of Blickling in Norfolk from his friend and patron, Sir John Fastolf.⁵ The manor had once been the property of the eleventh-century Saxon king, Harold Godwineson,⁶ and the original manor house on the site had been built in the 1390s by Sir Nicholas Dagworth, but it was evidently outdated or in poor repair, because – as has recently been discovered – it was rebuilt as Blickling Hall, 'a fair house' of red brick, by Geoffrey Boleyn.⁷ Geoffrey also built the