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HOUSE OF TREASON

The Rise and Fall of a Tudor Dynasty

ROBERT HUTCHINSON



PHOENIX

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I

REBUILDING THE DYNASTY

'Sir, he was my crowned king. Let the authority of Parliament set the crown on that stake and I will fight for it. As I fought then for him, I will fight for you, when you are established by the same authority'

Thomas Howard, Earl of Surrey, to King Henry VII, 1485¹

Thomas Howard, Earl of Surrey, was already middle aged when he saw his father die amid the din and slaughter of Bosworth. After recuperating from the serious wounds he suffered at the Battle of Barnet on Easter Sunday 1471, the following year, like many Howards before and after, he had married a carefully selected wealthy heiress. Elizabeth was the daughter of the minor Norfolk magnate Sir Frederick Tylney and the widow of Sir Humphrey Bourchier, a comrade-in-arms who had been slain during that same battle. She brought him twelve prosperous manors in East Anglia, as well as five surviving children,² one of whom was destined to play a momentous role in shaping the monarchy in sixteenth-century England: Thomas junior, born in 1473, was the uncle of two of Henry VIII's queens and, arguably, the principal political survivor of the bloody tumult of three Tudor reigns.

After the disaster of Bosworth and his imprisonment in the Tower, Howard was released in early 1489 by Henry VII, and the attainder for treason against him was reversed on 3 March that year by Parliament – although most of the lands he had lost were cannily withheld until he could demonstrate fully his loyalty to the crown.³ In May, however, he celebrated his restoration to the title of Earl of Surrey.

He became the archetypal Tudor nobleman who maintained full allegiance to whoever sat on the throne, whatever policies they

pursued. If God was in His heaven, and the king ruled with a firm but fair hand, the Howards were perfectly content. This deeply held fidelity to the crown – also destined to become his son's watchword – was born out of the family's intense desire to preserve social order and cohesion in the realm. The Howards were Tudor aristocratic anachronisms, with an inbred conservatism which led them to worship devoutly at the altars of hierarchy, autocracy, status and power. Over the next three generations, they kept one foot firmly grounded in the old confident and arrogant attitudes and beliefs of fifteenth-century noble England, despite the storm of change that raged all around them and which, several times, nearly brought them down.

Henry VII had no such luxury of certainty in the scheme of things. His claim to the crown was at best slender and secured only by right of conquest at Bosworth. He adroitly married Elizabeth of York, the eldest daughter of King Edward IV, on 18 January 1486 in an attempt to implant political unity into a still divided realm but was always apprehensive about the insecurity of the Tudor grip on regal power. A spate of rebellions (and a dangerous pretender to the throne) justified fully his fears. Later, these were to return again and again to haunt his descendants who wore the crown of England. A king's prime duty is to prolong his dynasty and, in this, Henry was in an almost indecent haste. Almost nine months to the day after the wedding, his lineage was safeguarded by the birth of a prince, at Winchester, christened Arthur. A second son, Henry, was born at Greenwich Palace on 28 June 1491.

Surrey began his long, careful journey back to power and status with an appointment as Chief Justice in Eyre North of the Trent in 1489. The following year, rioting and disorder broke out in Yorkshire after the king's imposition of new taxes and Surrey, at the head of a small royalist force, swiftly and efficiently quashed any opposition. As a grim public demonstration of his effectiveness in this police action, he summarily strung up the ringleaders at York. The main protagonist – the 'firebrand' John à Chambre – was executed 'in great state' as 'a traitor paramount' on specially constructed gallows high up on a stage, with fellow malcontents hung on 'the lower story round about him'.⁴ Surrey was rewarded

for his efforts on 20 May 1490 when Henry VII made him Vice-Warden of the East and Middle Marches on the borders of Scotland, as the operational deputy to the infant Prince Arthur who nominally held the top job.⁵ He was granted power to negotiate with the Scottish king James IV over any breaches of a fragile Anglo-Scottish truce and to investigate 'all persons who have *covyn* [treacherous dealings] with the enemy and [to] punish them'. Within two days, he published a proclamation warning the 'great numbers of Scots [who have been] applying themselves to idleness and begging [and have] over-run the realm' to immediately return home 'under pain of punishment'.⁶

He continued in the north as the king's lieutenant, administering law and order,⁷ collecting taxes, suppressing dissent – such as further riots in the spring of 1492 at Acworth, near Pontefract, Yorkshire, over tax⁸ – and handling the sometimes Byzantine diplomatic relations across the Scottish border. His first two sons, Thomas and Edward, the latter born in 1476, were educated as pages in Henry's household but they were, to all intents, being held hostage to guarantee his good behaviour as the king's viceroy in the north.

Surrey was increasingly regarded as Henry VII's best soldier and he was soon to prove his military mettle. In 1497, with a force of Yorkshire levies, he relieved a five-day Scottish siege of Norham Castle⁹ which controlled a strategic ford over the River Tweed in Northumberland. Then he launched a retaliatory punitive expedition into the Scottish border country which destroyed Ayton Castle in Berwickshire before the onset of 'extraordinarily foul and stormy' weather drove him back into England.¹⁰ Thomas and Edward accompanied him on the raid, both of whom he knighted at Ayton on 30 September. Surrey later concluded a new truce and began negotiations for the marriage of Henry's daughter, Margaret, to James IV of Scotland.

His wife Elizabeth died on 4 April that year at their newly built mansion at Lambeth, across the Thames from Westminster, but he did not wait long to find a second spouse. On 8 November, Surrey swiftly married Elizabeth's cousin, Agnes Tylney, the daughter of Hugh Tylney of Skirbeck and Boston in Lincolnshire,¹¹

in the chapel of the castle of Sheriff Hutton, near York.¹² She was to become a long-lived and formidable matriarch of the Howard clan, bearing him six surviving children. Through his brood of five living sons and six daughters from two wives, Surrey was to build marital unions with most of the prominent noble families in England. For example, his daughter Muriel¹³ married John Grey, second Viscount Lisle, some time before June 1503.¹⁴ Before he died on 9 September 1504, aged twenty-four, substantial properties in Somerset, Berkshire and Gloucestershire had been settled upon her.¹⁵ Around May 1506, she took as her second husband Thomas Knyvett, one of the brash cronies who now surrounded young Prince Henry at Greenwich.

Surrey returned to court in 1499 and, two years later, became an influential member of Henry VII's Privy Council, joining a group of courtiers 'of singular shrewdness'. On 16 June 1501, he was appointed Lord Treasurer of England, a post the Howards were to make their own suzerain for the next four decades.¹⁶ He thus became the third in importance of the king's ministers. Richard Fox, Bishop of Winchester, had been Lord Privy Seal since Henry's accession – so loyal, it was said, that he was willing to sacrifice his own father's life to save that of his sovereign. And William Warham, Bishop of London, was appointed Lord Chancellor and Archbishop of Canterbury in 1504. Under Surrey's careful management, royal revenues grew from £52,000 a year to £142,000 by the end of the reign in 1509.¹⁷

The earl benefited by the slow but sure recovery of some of his lost lands and property in East Anglia, his wealth augmented by gifts from a now grateful but ailing monarch.¹⁸ Among a considerable parcel of manors acquired in 1507 was that of the former Mowbray possession of Kenninghall, a small village midway between Thetford and Norwich, where his son Thomas constructed a substantial palace of seventy rooms.¹⁹ By 1506, Surrey had built up property holdings with an annual net income of £1,200, or well over £500,000 at 2009 cash equivalents.²⁰

He was involved in negotiations concerning the marriage of the Spanish princess Catherine of Aragon to Prince Arthur on 14 November 1501 and was in charge of arrangements for Arthur's

funeral after his premature death on 2 April 1502. The following year, he escorted Henry VII's fourteen-year-old daughter Margaret to Scotland for her marriage to James IV, and had the honour of giving away the bride, dressed in a gown of cloth of gold, in the chapel of Holyrood House, Edinburgh, on 8 August.²¹

Surrey was appointed one of the executors of the king's will, and, a few days before his death from chronic pulmonary tuberculosis²² on 21 April 1509 at Richmond Palace, Henry VII suffered a rare attack of conscience. He restored all Surrey's lands, lost him by attainder twenty-four years before, as a mark of appreciation for his loyal service.²³ It was a crowning moment for the royal servant: after the defeat at Bosworth and the black despair of his incarceration in the Tower, all his hopes and dreams of the intervening years had at last been fulfilled.

Henry VIII was proclaimed king three days later. Surrey served as Earl Marshal at the coronation of the eighteen-year-old and, on 10 July the following year, was appointed to the position for life at a fee of £20 a year, triumphantly reclaiming the position once held by his father.²⁴ A month after the coronation, his second son Edward was appointed Royal Standard Bearer with an annual pension of £40. Surrey had high hopes of becoming the new king's chief minister, but was thwarted by an ambitious young cleric introduced to court by Bishop Fox, who was now climbing high in Henry VIII's estimation. Thomas Wolsey, the son of a prosperous Ipswich butcher, had been appointed royal almoner when Henry ascended to the throne and by 1511 his position at court was becoming unassailable.

Wolsey quickly flexed his political muscles. Surrey and Fox had signed an Anglo-French treaty in 1510, but the new minister was marching very much in time with the king's ambition for military adventures, and was intent on war with France. Surrey opposed this on diplomatic and fiscal grounds, but to his chagrin discovered that his second son Edward had 'marvellously' angered and incited the king over the Scots, France's traditional ally, 'by whose wanton means, his grace spends much money and is more disposed to war than peace'.²⁵

During June 1511, Henry received complaints about the Scottish

privateer Andrew Barton who was preying on English merchant vessels at the eastern end of the English Channel. Although there is little surviving evidence of the incident, the king apparently ordered the two Howard sons, Edward and his elder brother Thomas, 'in all haste' to capture Barton and his two ships, the *Lyon* and the *Jenett of Purwyn*. Richard Grafton, the chronicler, recorded that the Howards' ships were stationed in the Downs, off the east coast of Kent, on 2 August, when they

perceived Andrew was making towards Scotland and so fast the lord [Thomas] Howard chased him that he overtook him and there was a sore battle. The Englishmen were fierce and the Scots defended themselves manfully ... Howard and his men, by clean strength, entered the main deck and the Scots fought on the hatches ... Andrew was taken and [was] so sore wounded that he died there and the remnant of the Scots were taken, with their ship called the *Lyon*.²⁶

Edward Howard, meanwhile, intercepted the Scottish barque²⁷ *Jenett* and boarded her, 'slew many' and captured the surviving crew. Both vessels were brought as prizes to Blackwall on the River Thames and the Scottish prisoners transferred to the Archbishop of York's palace in London, before being repatriated.²⁸

James IV, the Scottish king, was furious. He protested volubly about the Howards' 'outrage', fruitlessly demanded the return of the ships and sought the arrest and prosecution of the Howards for Barton's murder and for breaching the peace. Henry condescendingly pointed out that justice had merely been done to a 'crafty pirate' and thief.²⁹

Surrey, meanwhile, was growing ever more anxious about the prospect of hostilities on two fronts with France and Scotland. He sought an interview with the king to dissuade him from embarking on war, but was received by Henry with 'such manner and countenance ... upon him that on the morrow, he departed home again'.³⁰ He obtained the king's leave of absence from court in September 1511 and retired in a huff to his estates in Suffolk and Norfolk to nurse his anger at being outmanoeuvred by Wolsey.

Sir Edward was appointed a vice-admiral on 7 April 1512, charged

with maintaining control of the English Channel between the French port of Brest and the Thames Estuary. Over the next few months, his warships seized more than sixty vessels and imposed naval domination over the entire Channel. In response, the French began mobilising their own fleet and Howard, driven by his sovereign's lust for martial glory, set out to destroy it.

In the first week of August, Howard sailed from Portsmouth in his flagship, the newly built *Mary Rose*, leading a twenty-five-strong fleet, which included the mighty *Regent*, commanded by his brother-in-law, Sir Thomas Knyvett. Their objective was Brest, which was sheltering the thirty-nine ships of the French fleet. These enemy vessels left port on 10 August and had just cleared its approaches when the English vanguard attacked. In brutal fighting, *Regent* was shackled with chains to the French carrack³¹ *Marie la Cordelière* and Knyvett boarded the larger enemy ship, ignoring the storm of arrows from her decks. As the French fought frantically to repel boarders, their vessel caught fire and the blaze spread rapidly across to the sails and rigging of the *Regent*. Very soon, it, too, was engulfed by flames. One desperate French gunner, deep in the bowels of the carrack, set fire to its powder magazine, choosing death rather than suffering the dishonour of his ship being captured.

Howard, coming up with the main body of his fleet, arrived to see both ships disappear in a series of catastrophic explosions, which hurled burning debris high into the air before falling back into the sea like a terrible deluge of fire. Inevitably, there were no survivors from either crew. Knyvett was dead, and so were all 700 of his men from the *Regent*,³² together with 1,200 enemy sailors.

Bad news in war is never welcome. Henry had lost one of his closest confidants, but he managed to control his grief publicly. In London, Wolsey informed Fox of the loss of the *Regent*:

At the reverence of God, keep these tidings secret to yourself for there is no living man knows the same here but only the king and I.

Your lordship knows right well that it is expedient for a while to keep the same secret. To see how the king takes the matter

and behaves himself, you would marvel ... [at] his wise and constant manner. I have not, on my faith, seen the like.

Howard had also lost a close friend and brother-in-law. He swore to make the French pay dearly, in blood and fire, for Knyvett's death. Wolsey added:

Sir Edward has made his vow to God that he would never look the king in the face until he had revenged the death of [this] noble and valiant knight.³³

Knyvett's widow, Muriel, swore another kind of oath which, in its way, was as awesome as her brother's. When news of her husband's death reached her at their home at Buckenham, south-east of Norwich, on 12 August, she at once declared that she had made 'tryst with him in Heaven that day five months'. Her will was written on 13 October and she died, just as she had prophesied, on 12 January 1513. Muriel had pined to death, aged twenty-six, leaving two daughters and four sons by Knyvett.

Sir Edward was one of the many members of the house of Howard who attended her funeral, his craving for vengeance still burning as fiercely as ever. On 19 March, he was appointed Lord High Admiral of England, Ireland and Aquitaine, in succession to John de Vere, thirteenth Earl of Oxford, who had died nine days earlier. On Easter Sunday, 27 March 1513, he again departed Portsmouth with his fleet and headed back to Brest. So hellbent was he on revenge that he sailed without any supply ships.

The enemy fleet remained in the port's roadstead, blockaded by the English waiting impatiently for battle offshore. French reinforcements, in the shape of six shallow-draught, oar-propelled galleys, arrived in mid-April under the command of the Chevalier Gaston Prigent de Bidoux, immediately nicknamed 'Prior John' by the English. He put into Conquet, fifteen miles (25 km.) west of Brest, his vessels protected by powerful shore artillery batteries. Howard could not deploy his warships in the shallows, so he decided to pick off the French vessels by using fifteen rowing barges, or crayers.³⁴ The admiral quit his ship for one such boat, commanded by a Spaniard called Carroz, or Charran,³⁵ and crewed

by sixteen English sailors. His plan was that the others would follow, but as the boat was lustily rowed through a hail of arrows and gunfire towards 'Prior John's' galley, Howard found that he was alone. Undaunted, he clambered aboard and tried to capture the enemy ship.

Edward Etchingham, captain of *Germyn*, graphically described his commander's death to Wolsey on 5 May: 'The news ... be so dolorous that [hardly] can I write them for sorrow':

On St Mark's day [25 April], the Admiral appointed four captains and himself ... to win the French galleys with the help of boats, the water being too shallow for ships.

The galleys were protected on both sides by bulwarks planted so thick with guns and crossbows that the quarrels³⁶ and the gunstones came together as thick as hailstones.

For all this, my lord would needs board the galley himself for there [was] no man [to] counsel him the contrary.

When my Lord Admiral leapt into the French galley, and all for fear of the ordnance that was shot from the galleys and from the land ... they left their admiral in the hands of his enemies.

Howard scrambled up over the bows into the forecastle of the French admiral's galley, together with the Spaniard and his small party of English sailors. They hitched their boat's cable to the capstan of the French ship, but it was either cut by the enemy or somehow let slip, and the boat was swept away on the tide, leaving them marooned on the enemy deck.

There was a mariner wounded in eighteen places, who by adventure, [was] recovered [by the French] galley's boat. ... He saw my lord admiral thrust against the rails of the galley with morris pikes.³⁷ Charran's boy tells a like tale, for when his master and the admiral had entered, Charran sent him for his hand gun ... and he saw my lord admiral waving his hands and crying ... 'Come aboard again! Come aboard again!'

When my lord saw they could not, he took his whistle from about his neck, wrapped it together, and threw it in the sea.

Later, under a flag of truce, 'Prior John' acknowledged that 'there