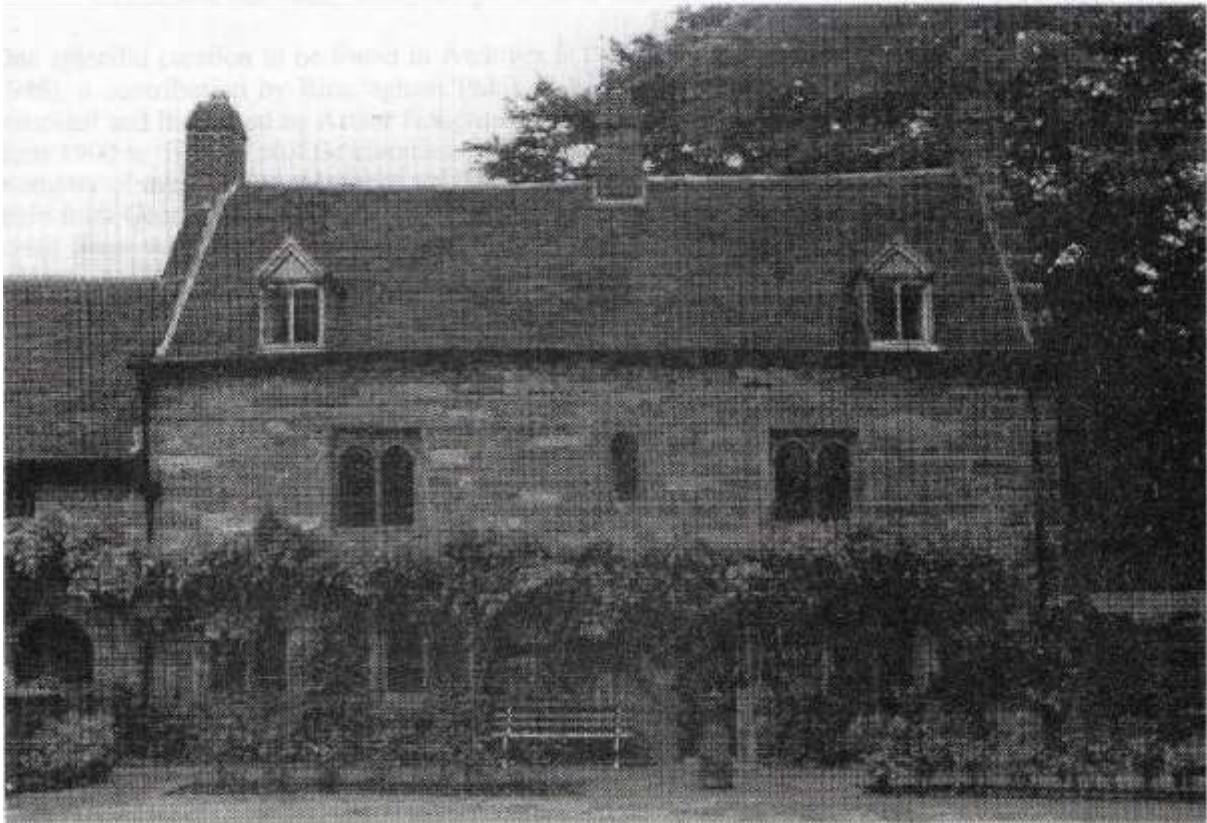


BISHOP VESEY - HENRY VIII'S MENTOR?

Roger Lea

Very little is known about Henry VIII's childhood, or who was responsible for the development of the prince who burst spectacularly onto the scene on his accession to the throne in 1509. The suggestion that the unknown guiding hand may have been that of Bishop Vesey is put forward here on the basis of a new look at his activities in the early years of the reign, and the light that is thrown on his subsequent career if such an assumption is made. Given further research, the speculative nature of much of the material could perhaps be remedied: but Henry VIII was born on 18 June 1491, and the recent 500th anniversary of this event prompted the writer to put forward this proposal now rather than later.

A brief account of Bishop Vesey's life will show the limitations of the relevant known facts. Supposedly born in 1452 at the house known as Moor Hall Farm, which still stands in Sutton Coldfield, he was christened John Harman, being the eldest son of William Harman, who had another son and two daughters. We are given this information by the inscription on his tomb at Sutton Coldfield Parish Church, but there is some question as to whether the house is quite that old, and very strong reasons for doubting the year of birth: 1465 has been suggested in the *Dictionary of National Biography* as a more probable date.



Bishop Vesey's birthplace at Moor Hall (still standing as a private residence)

His father died in 1470, the year when Edward IV fled to France and Henry was restored to the throne, events attributed to 'Warwick the Kingmaker's' policies. The Earl of Warwick was, among other things, Lord of the Manor of Sutton Coldfield, and therefore entitled to expect some support from the local gentry such as the Harmans, but there is no indication that William died in battle. If John Harman alias Vesey was indeed eighteen at this time, steering the family fortunes through the remaining fifteen years of the Wars of the Roses (the Earl of Warwick was executed after the Battle of Barnet in 1471) would have kept him at home. Alternatively, if he was between five and eight years old, an intriguing possibility is that he went to live in the household of his relatives, the Veseys of Chimney in Oxfordshire, which would have given him an education in a learned household and a reason for changing his name.

The main events of his subsequent career are: entered Magdalen College, Oxford, 1482; appointed to the household of the Queen in 1489 (Henry VII had married Elizabeth of York, thus securing the succession); many preferments in the Church; appointed Dean of the Chapel in 1514; read the Papal Bull when Thomas Wolsey was invested as Cardinal in 1515; appointed tutor to the infant Princess Mary in 1516; Bishop of Exeter in 1519; attended the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520; greeted the Emperor Maximilian I at Dover in 1522; created President of the Council of the Marches in Wales in 1525. Shortly afterwards he turned his attention to his native Sutton Coldfield, establishing his Moor Hall Estate in 1527, and securing the Town Charter in 1528. He died in 1555. ¹

Vesey's key influence on the history of Sutton Coldfield is the main interest for a local historian, but this article is more concerned with his possible influence on our national history, and particularly on Henry VIII. First, however, I would like to reconsider Magdalen College in the 1480s. The college was founded in 1458; the President of the College from 1480 was Thomas Mayew, who became Henry VII's Almoner. (Note that Wolsey was Almoner to Henry VIII - obviously a job with prospects!) Another person associated with the college at this period was Richard Fox, who shared the running of the country with Thomas Howard, Earl of Surrey, at the beginning of Henry VIII's reign. Wolsey himself, soon to be all-powerful, arrived in 1488 at the age of 15, and the Chancellor of the University was William Warham, Archbishop of Canterbury and Henry VII's Lord Chancellor² Vesey possibly owed his appointment at court to one of these powerful men.



lacking').⁴

Bishop Vesey: pseudo-portrait by Lewis (1936)

Vesey was ideally placed at court, and with his educational background, to play a major part in aiding Henry's intellectual development during the years when his character and mind were being moulded. Although of mature years, and possessed of softer manners than those of the austere Henry VII, it is

Oxford was a place of learning, and Renaissance learning was immensely exciting. Reader in Divinity at Magdalen College in 1482 (when Vesey arrived) was William Grocyn. Described by Hallam as 'the patriarch of English Learning', he was the first, in 1501, to teach Greek in England. The names associated with the introduction of Renaissance scholarship to England in the first decade of the 16th century are those of Grocyn, Colet, Linacre, More, and Roper.³

Friends and admirers of Erasmus of Rotterdam, they were the nucleus of the movement which released English culture from the shackles of the Middle Ages. Vesey's name is not normally included in this list, but the circumstantial evidence for his inclusion is strong. He can hardly, in any case, have been immune from the tremendous excitement and feeling of release which the new learning brought with it.

Vesey had already been in the Queen's household for two years when the future Henry VIII was born. All the attention due to a future king was received by Henry's elder brother, Arthur, but even after Arthur's death in 1502, Henry is a shadowy figure until his accession to the throne in 1509 in a blaze of glory. The history books are silent, or nearly so (Scarisbrick, for example with: 'we know very little about his early life'; 'details of his education are sparse'; 'information about Henry's childhood and adolescence is

impossible to prove whether or not Vesey was a father-figure to the young prince. Their subsequent careers, however, offer some pointers.

In this respect Vesey's appointment as Dean of the Chapel in 1514 is very significant. J A Guy in *The Public Career of Sir Thomas More*⁵ highlights the importance of this office in his description of More's early work in 1517 as a Councillor being accomplished alongside the Dean of the Chapel. A further indication is revealed when the importance of Wolsey's position as Almoner is considered. In the early years of Henry's reign the court was constantly on the move; it was the councillors, travelling with the court, who traditionally dealt with any suitors who exercised their right of direct appeal to the king when he was away from Westminster; these councillors were, notably, the Dean of the Chapel Royal and the King's Almoner. These incidental mentions of Vesey show that he was a member of the King's Council and Star Chamber (roughly equivalent to the modern Cabinet), and Guy further states that Wolsey's management of the Council and the Star Chamber required the appointment of able judges and committees, and that More's appointment in 1517 was part of this policy. This shows Vesey as a trusted friend of Wolsey, almost a mentor to More, and a member of the most powerful body in the land. Much more could be inferred if it were possible to show that Henry was not a pawn in Wolsey's game, but the source of Wolsey's power. Peter Gwyn's book, *The King's Cardinal*⁶ claims this to be the case at least until the 1520s, with Wolsey always acting in close consultation with Henry, and sometimes deferring to him, even against his better judgement. If Vesey was a respected father-figure in the young king's court, and also, as seems certain, in Wolsey's confidence, then some of the rapport between Henry and Wolsey, which has puzzled historians, could be attributed to the gentle influence on them of Vesey. The king's trust in Vesey is sufficiently attested by his appointment in 1516 as Tutor to the infant Princess Mary, on whom Henry doted for many years. Might the king's remembrance of Vesey's guardianship in his own childhood have been the reason for this choice? There is no hard evidence of this, but let it be noted how elusive Guy found archival material on More to be, much of it being in the Ellesmere Papers at the Henry E Huntington Library in San Marino, California. A few more years of research may be necessary to convert my supposition to fact.

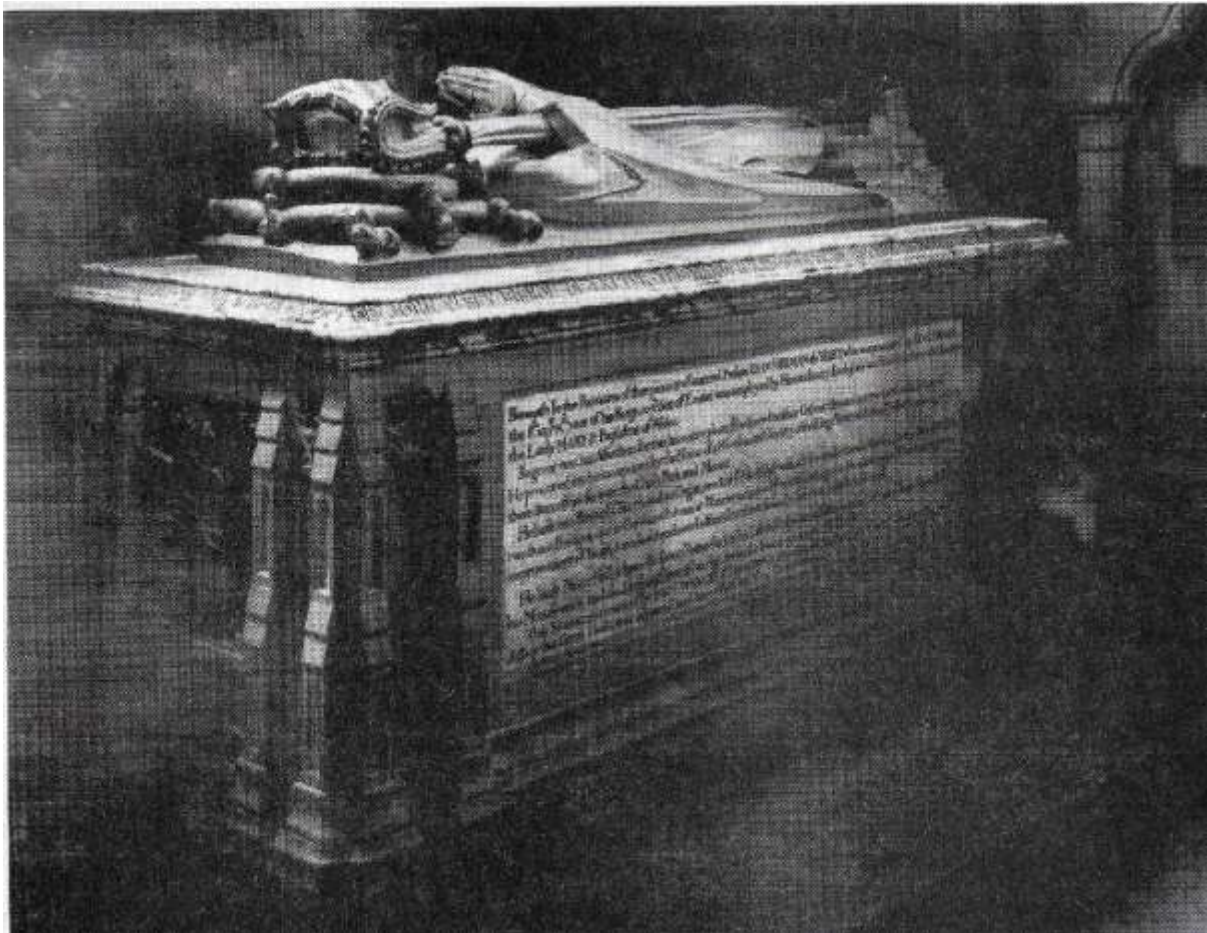
Vesey's services to Henry and Wolsey were recognised in 1519 by his appointment as Bishop of Exeter, but this may also have taken him away from the levers of power. He was, depending on his actual birth year, in either his late fifties or else his sixties, and he is heard of subsequently in more ceremonial capacities, with the exception of his appointment as President of Wales. The latter is supposedly the hand of Wolsey, but it coincided with the establishment of a court for Princess Mary at Ludlow in 1525, and may have reflected Henry's continuing regard for him. He is said to have been a weak president, apparently on the basis that he failed to execute as many Welshmen as his 'strong' successor, Bishop Lee. However, another common criticism of Vesey is that, as Bishop of Exeter, he had a heretic in Devon burned at the stake. Incidentally, few heretics were burned under Wolsey's Chancellorship: it was More, in 1529, who called for the rigorous enforcement of the law, and Vesey obeyed.

By 1529 Wolsey had died in disgrace, and More was struggling with the king's demands for a break with the Pope. Bishop Vesey was foremost among those who combined to offer Thomas More substantial aid at the time of his trial, which he so splendidly declined. (A letter from More to his daughter in 1521 shows in what regard Vesey was held: 'Write to thank him with the greatest care and delicacy. You will one day be glad to have given pleasure to such a man'.⁷ This letter also indicates that Vesey had gold to spare!). These must have been trying times for Vesey. His powerful friends were gone, whilst he was closely associated with a princess whom the king had determined was illegitimate. Keeping a low profile at Sutton must have seemed quite attractive at this time. He remained Bishop of Exeter, however, and so, presumably, managed to retain the royal favour: a feeling that perhaps dated from the king's childhood.

Vesey's subsequent episcopate has been much criticised on the grounds that he impoverished the once-rich See of Exeter. A different view of this can be found in *Of Prelates and Princes* by Felicity Heal.⁸ At the time of the dissolution of the monasteries, from 1535, the disposal of their immense riches formed the foundation of many private fortunes. But by 1540 this plunder was running out and the Church reformers were exclaiming against the idea of the Church owning wealth. The wealth of bishops consequently began to be tapped, and Vesey was in no position to resist Henry's importunate demands that he surrender this or that manor to the ailing king's latest favourite.

Recent scholarship applied to the early years of Henry VIII's reign appears to have been remarkably fruitful in throwing new light on the received view of the period, and Heal's work on the bishops has also overturned some previously unquestioned assumptions. The reader may think I have whitewashed Bishop Vesey, and set him up as a figure of key importance, on no evidence at all. I am hoping that further research into the elusive source material will confirm my proposition.

In spite of the new learning and the shaking off of medieval modes of thought, the England of the 1520s was still a world away from our own time, as demonstrated by a deed of 1525. This is the marriage settlement between Vesey's niece, Jane Harman, and George Middlemore, heir of the Manor of Hazelwell in Sturchley⁹ (see Appendix). Vesey, rather than his brother Hugh (the bride's father) acts for Jane, and the deed describes one of Vesey's nephews, John Gibbons, as Chancellor of Exeter Cathedral; it is clear that Vesey looked after his kin. On 14 December 1525 it was agreed that the wedding should take place before the following 24 June; if Jane died, however, then one of her sisters could be a substitute bride for George. Vesey was obviously keen on this alliance! Annual prayers were to be said for John Middlemore (father of George) after his death, at Kings Norton Church and Moseley Chapel; which reminds us of the unreformed state of religion at that time. The deeds were to be kept at Moor Hall, under two locks, with Vesey and Middlemore each holding a key to one of them. Vesey was to hold the Manor in trust with six of his nominees, all of them prominent gentry in the Sutton area, which indicates the local following which he already enjoyed. This marriage settlement is full of interest from the aspect of local history, but it also illustrates clearly that Vesey acted as would any head of a contemporary family with pretensions to grandeur, notwithstanding the impact of Renaissance learning, the heady days at court or the high Church office that had been his lot.



Bishop Vesey's tomb, Sutton Coldfield parish church

No attempt has been made here to summarise the biography of Henry VIII, but certain assumptions have been made: that he ascended the throne well-educated and fully aware of the politics of his time; that he was a prodigy in his own right in physical and artistic skills; that he consulted and accepted guidance from his Chancellors and his Council, but, in the end, made up his own mind; that from the mid-1520s his policy became less consistent, particularly with regard to those in positions of power. I

can picture Vesey observing the dazzling young Henry VIII and saying to himself 'That's my boy'. This is the Vesey who was an intimate friend of Thomas More when More had just written *Utopia* in 1516: a time when everything must have seemed possible in that brave new world, before the theses nailed to the door of the University Church of Wittenberg plunged Europe back into turmoil. From the subsequent fall from grace of Wolsey, More and Princess Mary it could have been expected that Vesey would fall as well, but he did not: the special relationship with Henry VIII, which I have proposed above, could have been the factor which prevented his being yet another victim of the tragic events that overwhelmed his friends and associates.

APPENDIX

BRL 206601: A summary of the 1525 deed (literal transcription in inverted commas, names literally transcribed)

Marriage Settlement 14 December 15 Henry VIII (1525)

- (i) The Reverent Father in God John Bishop of Exeter Hugh Harman gentylman and Jane one of the daughters of the said Hugh
- (ii) John Myddylmore of Haselwell within the County of Worcester Esquire and George his son and heir apparent
 - George to marry Jane 'onthissyde the Feiste' of the Nativity of St John the Baptist 1526 (24 June 1526) 'iff the lawe off hooly church wyll soo suffer it and the seide Jane wyll thereto assent and agree'
 - If Jane dies before 'matrimony hadd solempnyzed or consumate', George to have 'a nother Syster off the seide Jane'
 - John Middlemore to convey to Vesey and:
 - Maister John Gybbons, Chancellor of the Cathedral Church of Exeter, Thomas Ardern, Henry Morgan, Esquires; John Wistow, Nicholas Ruggele, and Raffe Warley gents, (in trust):
 - his Manor of Haselwele in the Parish and Lordshippe of Kinges Norton, they to be cofeoffees to pay Jane £10 a year for life, John Middlemore to have the manor for life, then to George and his heirs, remainder to one of the other children of Hugh and Joyce Harman to be nominated by Vesey
 - proviso that John Middlemore may bequeath:
 - an annuity of £4 out of the Farm called Fordhouse lying in 'Le Yelde'
 - 16d for an annual 'obbett' (memorial service) at Kings Norton Church out of the rent lately purchased from John Sloright from a messuage called Barons Thing in 'Lee Yelde'
 - 16d for an annual 'obbett' in 'the chapel off oure lady off Moseley' out of a croft in Moseley called Echell's Croft being part of Smothe's tenement lately purchased from Thomas Barnbroke of Selley.
 - Vesey to give John Middlemore £400
 - Deeds to be kept at Moor Hall (Vesey's seat in Sutton Coldfield), 'in some chest or closet under two locks', Vesey or Harman to have one key, John Middlemore the other.

REFERENCES

1. William Dugdale, *The Antiquities of Warwickshire*, (1730) p 913
2. A B Emden, *A Biographical Register of the University of Oxford to AD 1500*, (1957)
3. C R N Routh, *Who's Who in History vol 11: England 1485-1603*, (1964)
4. J J Scarisbrick, *Henry VIII*, (1968)
5. J A Guy, *The Public Career of Sir Thomas More*, (1980); *The Cardinal's Court*, (1977)
6. Peter Gwyn, *The King's Cardinal*, (1990)
7. E E Reynolds, *The Field is Won*, (1968)
8. Felicity Heal, *Of Prelates and Princes*, (1980)
9. Birmingham Reference Library 206601

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The photographs accompanying this article are reproduced by kind permission of Sutton Coldfield Library.