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Thomas Wolsey, 1514.

Ordinary people, extraordinary lives

Sarah E Doig celebrates the life of Ipswich's famous son, Thomas Wolsey



Above:
Wolsey's Gate in Ipswich

Below and top right:
A grand procession paraded through the streets of Ipswich to unveil the new statue of Cardinal Thomas Wolsey created by David Annand in St Peters Street. The late Dr John Blatchly was the force behind the idea.

IN June 1930, a rather extraordinary event took place on the lawn in front of Christchurch Mansion in Ipswich. Local government, businesses and townspeople came together to stage a series of nine performances of a pageant, the like of which had not been seen in the county town of Suffolk in modern times.

This historical play involved a cast of around 1,000 local men, women and children. It drew an audience of 25,000 who had paid ticket prices ranging from 1 shilling and 6 pence to 21 shillings for the best seats. In exchange, the spectators were treated to a lavish feast of theatre, dancing and music. No expense was spared in producing stunning costumes, scenery and props to accompany this extravaganza. It was staged to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the death of one of Ipswich's most famous residents who, despite his relatively humble origins rose to become King Henry VIII's chief adviser.

HUMBLE ORIGINS

Thomas Wolsey was born in the early 1470s in the heart of prosperous medieval Ipswich. The town had been founded in Anglo-Saxon times when it was an important centre for the manufacture of pottery, the kilns producing the distinctive Ipswich Ware. Ipswich's position on the north bank of the River Orwell meant its prominence as an international trading port grew rapidly. By the Middle Ages, Ipswich was a bustling, thriving community with numerous churches, five monastic orders and four hospitals. The town centre was packed with markets and shops offering all manner of goods. Wolsey was, during his lifetime, described as a butcher's boy by his enemies who sought to belittle the great man. However, it is probable that his father, Robert, was a modest landowner who sold the livestock he reared on his land. Robert was also churchwarden at nearby St Nicholas' church where Thomas must have gone on Sundays too.

Little is known about Thomas Wolsey's early life other than he was fortunate enough to receive an education at Ipswich Grammar School, later the Ipswich School. Like other such grammar schools, the establishment in Ipswich benefitted from an endowment, in this case from a rich merchant and politician. This meant that some free places at the school could be offered to children from families who could not afford school fees. From this point onwards, Wolsey did not look back. He moved to Oxford and received further education at Magdalen College, moving on to study theology and to be ordained as a priest. The student then turned into an educator becoming Master of Magdalen College School.

ABLE AND AMBITIOUS

Thomas Wolsey's rise to power began at the court of Henry VII when he was appointed royal chaplain. Clearly a very able and ambitious man, Wolsey benefitted from the king's introduction of measures to curb the power of the nobility, favouring instead men



THE WOLSEY FACTOR

Today, it is hard to find a corner of Ipswich that does not in some way celebrate Cardinal Wolsey. Aside from the Wolsey Art Gallery, Wolsey Garden – both at Christchurch Mansion – and Wolsey Theatre, we have Wolsey Street, Cardinal Street, New Cardinal Street, Wolsey Court, Wolsey Gardens and Cardinal's Court. There are several busts and cameos of the great man in various locations, including at the Town Hall. A pub in St Peter's Street, close to where Wolsey is said to have been born, was renamed The Thomas Wolsey in 2011. And even the Ipswich Town Football Club badge incorporates turrets – from the 1995-96 season onwards on the top of the emblem – which if they don't represent Wolsey's Gate itself, certainly hark back to the town's noble past.

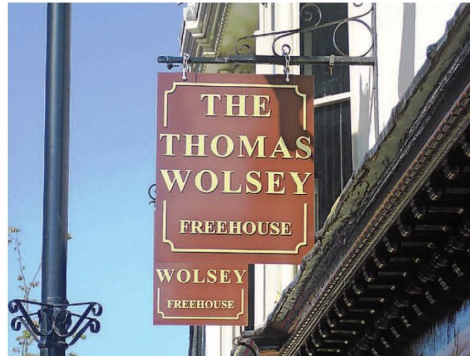
Given Ipswich residents' high regard for one of their most famous sons, it is rather surprising that it should have taken until 2011 for a permanent statue of Thomas Wolsey to be unveiled in the town. The bronze sculpture sits at the junction of Silent Street and St Peter's Street, close to the spot where the cardinal is said to have lived. This lasting memorial to him celebrates his desire to leave a lasting legacy in his home town in the form of an educational establishment. Part of the inscription on the statue's plinth reads: "Cardinal, Archbishop, Chancellor and Teacher who believed that pleasure should mingle with study so that the child may think learning an amusement rather than a toil".



from more humble backgrounds. And by the time of the monarch's death in 1509 and the accession of his son, Henry VIII, Thomas Wolsey was proving his skill at diplomacy and political affairs. Several appointments to high offices in the church quickly followed, culminating in September 1514 with Wolsey's appointment as Archbishop of York and a year later by the pope creating him a cardinal. Just one month later, Henry VIII appointed Cardinal Wolsey as Lord Chancellor of England. So, at the age of just 40, the 'butcher's boy' from Ipswich had attained one of the highest ranks in both church and state.

As one of Henry VIII's closest counsellors, Thomas Wolsey became a rich man. In 1514, Wolsey acquired a site on the Thames near London and over the next seven years, he spent a small fortune on the construction of a palace at Hampton Court; a home fit for a cardinal. But he did not use his money purely for his own enjoyment. Wolsey founded his own Oxford college, Cardinal College (now known as Christ Church) and then set about constructing a school in Ipswich. The College of St Mary, as it was called, was founded on the site of the dissolved priory of St Peter and St Paul, one of the many monasteries across the country which Wolsey had had closed due to alleged corruption. In 1528, Cardinal Wolsey appointed a dean and staff for his Ipswich college who were to teach 50 children. The former priory church of St Peter's in one corner of the college site became Wolsey's school chapel.

He had great plans to transform the church into something resembling Eton College chapel and the magnificent King's College chapel in Cambridge. Just one year after opening, the school was such a success that discussions took place for it to be enlarged.



The Thomas Wolsey Free House is close to where the man was born

However, Wolsey was destined not to implement these more ambitious plans.

Being Henry VIII's right-hand man came with its perils and Cardinal Wolsey fell victim to the king's own ruthless ambitions. Henry was determined to get an annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon so he was free to marry Anne Boleyn. But despite strenuous efforts, Wolsey was not able to secure this annulment as fast as Henry and Anne wanted. And so, in December 1529 he was stripped of his role of Lord Chancellor and his property, including Hampton Court, was seized. Cardinal Thomas Wolsey died a year later in Leicester where he is buried.

Wolsey's Ipswich college was closed in October 1530 and the king ordered the demolition of the buildings. Ironically, the bricks and other materials from the dismantled school were shipped to London to enlarge York Place, another of Wolsey's former properties, which was to become Henry's royal palace of Whitehall. Only the former waterside gate, the southernmost entrance to Thomas Wolsey's college, remains today, standing alongside St Peter's Church. ♦