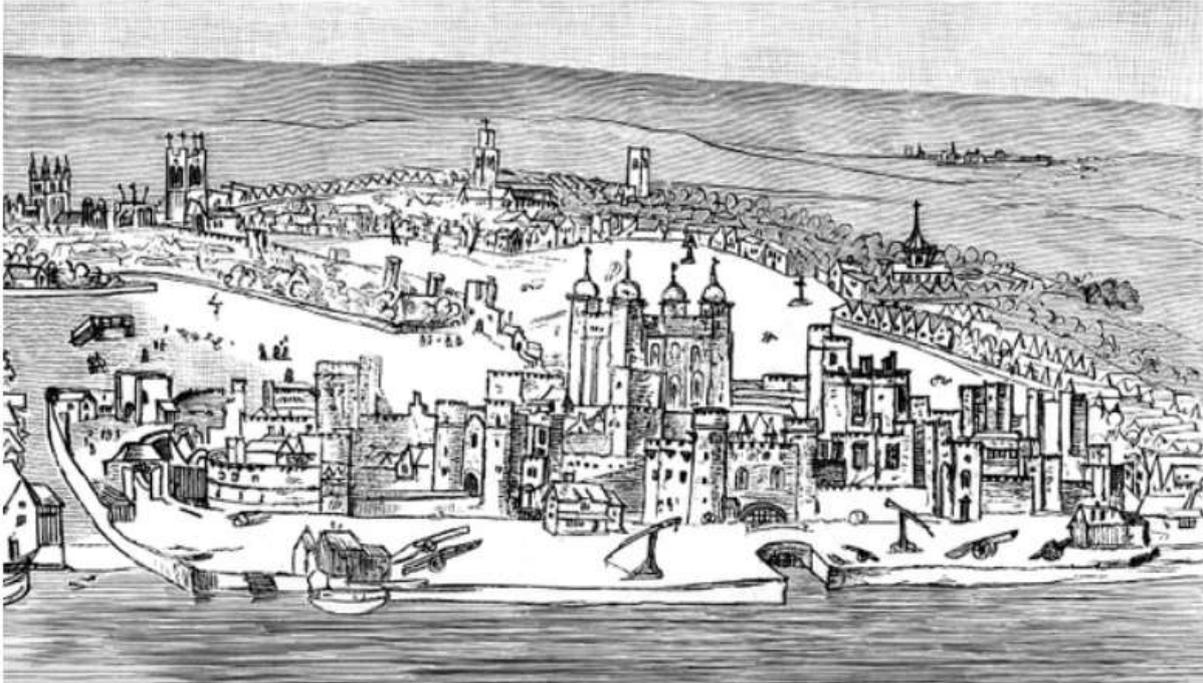


# The final days of Anne Boleyn: why did she die?

On 19 May 1536, Queen Anne Boleyn, second wife of King Henry VIII, was executed by beheading within the confines of the Tower of London. She'd been queen for just three years. Here, Claire Ridgway, creator of *The Anne Boleyn Files* website, considers Anne's final moments and reveals how the valiant queen was said to have had "much joy and pleasure in death"



An illustration of the Tower of London, c1543, taken from 'A Short History of the English People' by John Richard Green (1893). (Photo by The Print Collector/Print Collector/Getty Images)

Anne Boleyn, Henry VIII's second wife, was found guilty of high treason by a jury of her peers in the king's hall at the Tower on 15 May 1536. She was executed by decapitation on 19 May 1536 – and is thought to have been around 35 years old at the time.

Queen Anne had been charged with having relationships with five courtiers, including her brother, George Boleyn (aka Lord Rochford), and the king's good friend and groom of the stool, Sir Henry Norris. According to the indictments, not only had she slept with these men (as a result of her "frail and carnal appetites"), but she had also conspired with them to kill her husband, the king.

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- Guilty or not guilty: why did Anne Boleyn have to die?

The dates of her alleged crimes ran from October 1533 to January 1536, but, as the late historian Eric Ives has pointed out, three-quarters of the dates mentioned in the indictments do not make sense for either Anne or the accused man; Anne was not present at the places at the times stated. For example, in October 1533, when Anne was accused of “procuring” Sir Henry Norris to “violate” her at Westminster, Anne was still confined to her chambers at Greenwich after the birth of her daughter, Elizabeth. In 1535, when she was supposed to have been seducing Mark Smeaton at Greenwich, the queen was actually at Richmond. The charges were nonsensical, but if any doubt had been cast on these dates, then this was covered by the addition of “divers [diverse] days before and since” and “several times before and after” in the indictments.



*A painting by Édouard Cibot of Anne Boleyn in the Tower of London (1835)*

## *Why was Anne Boleyn executed?*

*The majority of modern historians believe that Anne Boleyn was an innocent woman framed: either by her husband, Henry VIII, who was intent on moving onto a new wife with whom he hoped to have a surviving male heir; or by his loyal servant, Thomas Cromwell, who devised the case against Anne to remove a threat and an obstacle to his plans. Anne disagreed with Cromwell's plans for the monasteries and her pro-French stance on diplomacy was a problem when Cromwell wanted an alliance with the Holy Roman Empire. Anne's almoner had attacked Cromwell and the advice he was giving the king in a sermon preached in the presence of the king.*

## *When did Anne Boleyn die?*

- 19 May 1536

*In Tudor law, defendants were presumed guilty until proven innocent (the burden of proof was on the accused to prove their innocence) and defendants were often unaware of the exact charges and the evidence being used against them before the trial, so it was incredibly difficult for them to defend themselves properly.*

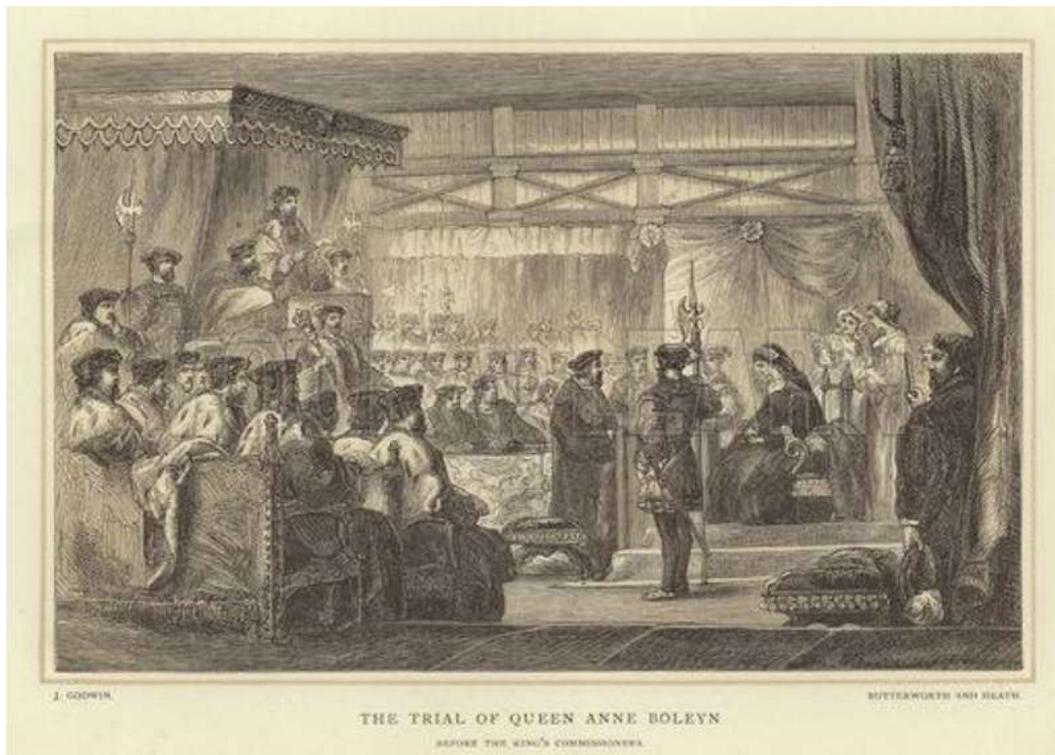
*The jury also knew what was expected of them in a case of high treason, a case of six people conspiring to kill God's anointed sovereign. Anne; her brother George Boleyn, Lord Rochford; Sir Henry Norris, groom of the stool; courtiers Sir Francis Weston and William Brereton; and musician Mark Smeaton had little hope of justice. Imperial ambassador Eustace Chapuys, in his dispatch regarding the trial of four of the men, wrote that they "were condemned upon presumption and certain indications, without valid proof or confession". No witnesses were produced against Anne and her brother either, and they defended themselves admirably, with George being described as replying "so well" to the charges "that several of those present wagered 10 to 1 that he would be acquitted". It was no good, though. All were found guilty and condemned to death.*

## *How did Anne Boleyn die?*

*The men were sentenced to being hanged, drawn and quartered, but the king in his 'mercy' commuted their sentences to beheading. Anne was sentenced to burning or beheading "as the King's pleasure shall be further known of the same". Nevertheless, the Hangman of Calais, who was renowned for his skill at beheading by sword, was sent for, possibly before Anne had even been found guilty.*

George Boleyn, Sir Henry Norris, Sir Francis Weston, William Brereton and Mark Smeaton were all executed on Tower Hill on 17 May 1536. Poet Sir Thomas Wyatt, who was imprisoned in the Tower at the time, wrote of witnessing their executions from the Bell Tower, a sight “That in my head sticks day and night”. In his poem, he wrote of how those “bloody days” had broken his heart and also of his recognition of how Tudor justice worked: “By proof, I say, there did I learn: Wit helpeth not defence too yern, Of innocency to plead or prate.”

On the very same day, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer declared the annulment of the marriage of Anne and Henry VIII.



Anne's execution was scheduled for 18 May, and work began on a new scaffold to be built “before the House of Ordnance” at the Tower of London, between the White Tower and what is now the Waterloo Block (home to the Crown Jewels) – not where the present glass memorial can be found on Tower Green, which commemorates all those executed within the tower walls. Anne prepared herself to die that day, making her last confession and celebrating the Mass in front of Sir William Kingston, constable of the Tower of London. Chapuys reported to Holy Roman Emperor Charles V “that before and after her receiving the Holy Sacrament, she affirmed, on peril of her soul's damnation, that she had not misconducted herself so far as her husband the King was concerned”.

But Anne's execution was postponed when Sir William Kingston received orders from Thomas Cromwell to clear the Tower of "strangers", i.e. foreign diplomats who would include their accounts of the execution of a queen of England in dispatches to their masters and mistresses. Cromwell and the king would not want sympathy stirred for Anne or for Henry VIII to appear the villain.

The way Anne handled herself in her final hours, and the way she comforted her ladies and joked about her "little neck", led Kingston to report that the queen had "much joy and pleasure in death".

### **Dressed for death**

On the morning of 19 May 1536, Sir William Kingston escorted Queen Anne Boleyn from her apartments in the Tower's royal palace – the same apartments where she had stayed before her coronation in 1533 – to the scaffold. Anne had taken care with her appearance: the ermine trim on her outfit confirmed her status; her kirtle was crimson, the colour of martyrdom; and her hood was the traditional English gable hood, that cumbersome head-dress that resembled the gable of a house and which covered the wearer's hair (rather than the more fashionable French hood, which showed some hair).



*On the scaffold, Anne made a simple speech, sticking to execution protocol:*

*“Good Christian people, I have not come here to preach a sermon; I have come here to die. For according to the law and by the law I am judged to die, and therefore I will speak nothing against it. I am come hither to accuse no man, nor to speak of that whereof I am accused and condemned to die, but I pray God save the King and send him long to reign over you, for a gentler nor a more merciful prince was there never, and to me he was ever a good, a gentle, and sovereign lord. And if any person will meddle of my cause, I require them to judge the best. And thus I take my leave of the world and of you all, and I heartily desire you all to pray for me.”*

*The executioner beheaded the queen with one stroke of his sword and then her distressed ladies wrapped Anne's remains in white cloth and carried them to the nearby Chapel of St Peter ad Vincula. Nobody had thought to provide a coffin for her burial, so a yeoman warder had to fetch an old elm chest, which had once contained bow staves, from the Tower armoury. Anne's head and body were placed in the chest and buried in the chancel near to the remains of her brother, Lord Rochford.*