

At the January meeting of Sandbach History Society, Tony Bostock's talk was about Sir Thomas Holcroft of Vale Royal. Thomas Holcroft is known in Cheshire as the man who was responsible for the surrender of Vale Royal Abbey during the dissolution of the monasteries under Henry VIII. But he also held important posts as an officer in the royal household, was an energetic diplomat and a courageous soldier.

Thomas was born in 1505 or 1506 at Holcroft Hall near Culcheth (then in Lancashire). He was the second son of John Holcroft and Margaret Massey. Nothing is known of him until he was in his early twenties but it is likely that he obtained a position in royal service, working for Cardinal Wolsey, Lord Chancellor. He probably started as a page boy but by 1528 he is a "sewer" – an attendant of fairly high rank, seating guests and serving meals on special occasions. In this role he is first referred to delivering correspondence between King Henry VIII and his widowed sister, Queen Margaret of Scotland. In 1532 he is a messenger acting for William Paulet, Comptroller of the Royal Household, carrying correspondence to the Chamberlain of Chester.

He continues for a few years, constantly back-and-forth between London and Scotland and next appears on the staff of Thomas Cromwell, Henry's chief minister. Through his energy and zeal he became a valued member of Cromwell's staff and was described by the king as a "trusted and well-beloved servant." When Ann Boleyn became queen in 1533, Thomas is listed as one of the important servants at the coronation.

It is in the dissolution of the monasteries, working with Thomas Cromwell, the architect of the dissolution, that he is most known. The first abbey to be dissolved was at Furness in 1537 where Thomas is described as "diligent". At Cartmel Priory, the monks were reluctant to give up their life and home without a fight. For their opposition to Holcroft, four of them were hanged for treason. Eventually, in 1540, the site of the priory together with its possessions in Lancashire and Cheshire, were granted to Thomas Holcroft, "Esquire of the Body". He is later involved with the surrender to the Crown of Lancaster, Preston, Warrington and Lytham friaries. In 1540 the Crown sold the lands to Thomas who, a few years later, sold them on – no doubt at a profit, said Mr Bostock. It is at Vale Royal that Thomas establishes a house for his family.

Thomas's sterling work for the Crown was rewarded with substantial offices such as Bailiff for the Duchy of Lancaster, Receiver for Lancashire and Cheshire and Master Forester for Quernmore and Wyresdale. There can be little doubt, said Mr Bostock, that Thomas used his position at Court for personal gain, amassing a considerable amount of land and wealth. He was also elected to Parliament - for Lancashire in 1545, for Cheshire in 1553 and Arundel in 1554.

Thomas was also a soldier and was involved in the Scottish wars which started around 1542, mustering troops and organising supplies. In 1544 he was knighted for his service in the campaign to capture Leith and Edinburgh. Following the Battle of Pinkie Cleugh in 1547 he became responsible for fortifying the towns in the Borders. He regularly sent reports back to the king and the Privy Council and very favourable comments are made about his work. It is also clear that he is responsible for a network of spies, passing vital information to London.

When Edward, aged 9, became king in 1547 his uncle, Edward Seymour, now Duke of Somerset, was made the king's chief regent. Late in 1549, Somerset's role became the subject of severe criticism by the Privy Council and he was arrested and charged with high treason. Given his closeness to Seymour, Thomas Holcroft was arrested and interrogated about his loyalty. Somerset was executed but Holcroft, after 12 months incarceration, was released after a court appearance and loss of certain offices.

When, in 1553, Edward VI died and was followed by Catholic Queen Mary, Thomas managed to remain at court and loyal to the regime. Despite his Protestant leanings, great favour was shown towards him when he was made Knight Marshal, an office he held between 1555 and 1558. This was a position within the royal household of great power and influence. He was responsible for maintaining order in the sovereign's court; his court and prison known as the Marshalsea. But it would seem that he used his position to help those falling foul of the new Catholic regime and it was claimed that Thomas Holcroft, his assistant and his secretary, were all secretly friends of Protestants and would tip them off if they were about to be arrested or show them kindness if imprisoned.

In 1558 Thomas was suddenly replaced as Knight Marshal by the Catholic Thomas Harvey. There is no record of the reasons why he was replaced but he died within four months of losing his position, so

perhaps it was due to illness and he couldn't carry out his duties. (There was an influenza epidemic which swept through London in 1558).

In his will, dated six days before his death, he names Juliana, his wife, as sole executrix. He had married late in life and Juliana was nearly thirty years younger. They had at least two offspring, Isabel and Thomas, who were both children when he died. It is not known exactly where Thomas Holcroft is buried. His will requests he be buried at the "Parish Church of Wenham". A record exists which states that Sir Thomas was under arrest and in the custody of Michael Wentworth, a royal courtier, at his house in Wenham, Suffolk when he died. However, Mr Bostock said that the will had been copied by a scribe and Wenham could possibly be an abbreviation for Weaverham.

Mr Bostock concluded by saying that Thomas Holcroft was one of few men who made it from local service to national politics but little is known of him without extensive research.

The next meeting of Sandbach History Society will be on 1st February at St Mary's Parish Church, Sandbach **starting at 2.00 pm** when Richard Vickery will give a presentation about the stained-glass windows in the church. Visitors are welcome to attend; please e-mail Richard on info@sandbachhistorysociety.org.uk or view the Society website www.sandbachhistorysociety.org.uk for further details