

Cardinal Wolsey
By Mrs R Coope 14th November 1992

Two famous historical people have visited Southwell: Charles I's stay of some hours is well-known; but few are aware that Cardinal Wolsey lived here from April-September, 1530.

Because he had failed to obtain for Henry VIII from the Pope a divorce against Queen Catherine, Wolsey had fallen from favour, been compelled to hand over the Great Seal, and been advised to retire to York, the seat of his archbishopric he had never visited. He travelled by easy stages to Newark Castle and thence to Southwell.

Like the great cardinal princes of the Church on the mainland of Europe, Wolsey was a courtier, a diplomat, a patron of the arts and learning. Unlike them, he was of humble birth, the son of an Ipswich grazier and butcher. He entered the Church because it offered to the able but humble the best opportunity to rise in the world. He wanted to be remembered for his visible works, e.g. the foundation of Ipswich Grammar School and Cardinal College (Now Christchurch), Oxford: his patronage of musicians, and his buildings: the Long Galleries which he constructed in every residence he owned, and of course Hampton Court

Before leaving London, Wolsey had been informed by Brown, his agent in Southwell, that the Palace was badly in need of repair. Wolsey had ordered work to be carried out to stop rain damage, and to construct a Long Gallery. We do not know where this was built. There was no site available overlooking gardens or a river, which was usually required. It may have been on the courtyard side of the northern wing, to provide a warm, dry route from the private apartments to the north door opposite the south transept of the Minster. We know that workmen were sent from London to do the plaster decorations and that the windows were the work of some of the King's glaziers.

While the work was completed, Wolsey stayed in the prebendary house of Dr Thos. Magnus (founder of Magnus Grammar School) from April-Whitsuntide 1530. He made himself well-liked by people of all stations in the locality.

George Cavendish, messenger and usher to Wolsey, has left an account of Wolsey's life. He tells how, one night in Southwell, the porter roused him because Messrs. Brereton and Wriothesely had come from the King and demanded audience of the Cardinal. Cavendish wakened Wolsey and was present throughout the interview, though out of earshot. The men produced a green velvet coffer bound with gold and silver from which they took more than one sheet of parchment "having many great seals hanging at it." This Wolsey signed and appended his own seal. The men departed. This was the petition from the clergy and nobility to Pope Clement VII to ask for the Royal Divorce. His signature was probably Wolsey's last attempt to regain the King's confidence.

Wolsey left Southwell in September for Welbeck Abbey, Rufford Abbey, Blyth Abbey, Scrooby and Cawood Castle. There, a few days before he was to remove to York, he was arrested for treason. He died at Leicester Abbey on his way to London to stand trial.