

# Factsheet

## Executions at The Tower Of London

Contrary to what many believe, actually surprisingly few prisoners were executed inside the walls of the Tower of London. Most prisoners sentenced to death were given public executions at various sites across London - including Tower Hill. Private executions inside the walls here were reserved for only the most sensitive, high profile cases involving prominent figures in society such as nobility and royalty. The bodies of the six beheaded at the Tower during the Tudor period are still buried in the Chapel Royal of St. Peter ad Vincula located within the Tower. In the 20th century, some of the prisoners accused of espionage during the First and Second World Wars were executed by a firing squad at the Tower of London.

### 16th Century

- The beheading of **Queen Anne Boleyn**, the second wife of Henry VIII, is perhaps the Tower's most famous execution. She was accused and convicted of infidelity and incest and beheaded by a French swordsman near Tower Green on May 19 1536. It is reported that as the swordsman held up her head to show the crowd, her eyes were still moving and her lips were framing her dying prayer. Out of respect for their mistress, it was Anne's ladies-in-waiting that carried her body and head off the scaffold. Five men, one of whom was her brother, were also executed nearby on Tower Hill two days prior for their adulterous associations with the Queen.
- 68 year-old **Margaret Plantagenet Pole**, Countess of Salisbury was imprisoned in the Tower in 1539 and was executed on the Tower Green on May 27 1541. She was tried and convicted for her implication in a protest known as 'The Pilgrimage of Grace,' for which she swore innocence. It was a gruesome death, for Margaret put up a bit of a fight. The executioner could not get a clean blow with the axe and it took several attempts. The Countess was the niece of Edward IV and her son, Cardinal Reginald Pole, led a Catholic opposition against Henry VIII's break with Rome. It is believed that she was imprisoned and executed for that reason alone.

- **Queen Catherine Howard** and her lady-in-waiting **Viscountess Jane Rochford** were both beheaded at the Tower on February 13 1542. The Queen, who had been Henry VIII's fifth wife for only eighteen months, was charged with high treason and infidelity and was beheaded on Tower Green. Apparently, several scandalous acts from her youth were brought to the attention of the King and sparked the charges against her. She was only 20 years old. She spent the last night of her life practising how to lay her head on the block. Lady Jane Rochford was charged and executed for concealing knowledge of the Queen's affairs.
- Another famous prisoner beheaded at the Tower was **Lady Jane Grey**. Upon the death of the Protestant Edward VI, Lady Jane Grey, a cousin to the Tudors, was declared Queen on July 10 1553 and was lodged in the royal apartments at the Tower. On the 19th July she was told she was no longer queen but she was to stay in the Tower as a prisoner, for the Catholic Mary I, first child of Henry VIII, was to take the throne. On February 12 1554, Lady Jane Grey was beheaded on Tower Green for her crime of usurping the throne of England.

### 17th Century

- The last prisoner to officially be beheaded at the Tower was **Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex**, in 1601 under Queen Elizabeth I. The Earl returned from his posting to Ireland without permission and became the centre of a plot against the Queen, despite being a past favourite of hers. He was deprived of his high office and was imprisoned in the Tower in early February 1601. He was beheaded at the Tower on February 25 1601.

### 18th Century

- The **Black Watch Mutineers**: On July 18 1743, three men from the Black Watch regiment were shot at the Tower on charges of mutiny. They were a Highland regiment entrusted to keep the peace in Scotland and were assured that they would only be asked to serve in their native land. They were summoned to London to be inspected by the King and rumours reached them on the way south that this was a pretext to send them to new postings in the Caribbean. About 100 of them turned round to go back, but were rounded up and marched to the Tower. All but the three were pardoned and reassigned.

## 20th Century

- World War I: Between 1914-1918, **eleven men of various nationalities** were tried in camera, found guilty of espionage, and shot as spies by firing squad at the Tower of London.
- World War II: During this war, the Tower again served as a temporary prison and in 1941, German **Josef Jakobs** was the last person to be executed at the Tower of London. After being captured parachuting into England, he was charged with espionage and tried in camera. He was shot by a firing squad while seated in a chair in the East Casemates Rifle Range on August 15 1941. This chair is still preserved in the Royal Armouries' artefacts store