



Boisterous life: Henry VIII

**J**UNE 28 is to be a day of no mean importance in the English calendar this year. It will see countrywide celebrations — with vivid pageants, touring shows, music concerts and period costume competitions along with food and film extravaganzas. For, the date marks the 500th anniversary of the birth of Henry

VIII.

It was, in a sense, both the best and worst of times. A more eventful regime under such a controversial monarch is hard to come by in the colourful annals of British history. Known as he was for six tempestuous marriages and for savagely snapping ties with the Roman Church, the feisty

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**A** series of commemorative events have been planned in Britain to mark the 500th birth anniversary of Henry VIII on June 28

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Tudor (barely 18 at his accession) seemed the right kind of king his people deserved at the start of the 16th century.

Today he remains an enigma, an intriguing study in contrasts. Frighteningly powerful, he enjoyed immense popularity, despite a blatantly self-centred stance in the garb of public policy. Though arrogant and decidedly dubious morally, he was able to give England a relatively peaceful, even progressive, reign with steady advances in his own political insight. Now, 500 years after, the ruler is remembered with due fanfare in the land he took by storm. With a series of carefully planned events throughout the year recreating that compelling era.

Apart from exciting jousting tournaments, banquet feasts and a comprehensive display of

objects and artifacts exhibited until the end of September at Rockingham Castle in Leicestershire, the high point of the programme is the throwing open of some 350 historic buildings and magnificent monuments associated with the reign.

Relics of the age of the ostentatious Cardinal Wolsey, the King's numerous wives and children, they include the Hampton Court Palace, Tower of London, Stonehenge, Greenwich Borough, Osborne House, Blickling Hall, Hatfield Park, Lacock Abbey and St George's Chapel, Windsor, maintained in quiet splendour by the English Heritage trust, the sprawling acres of these premises are appropriately turned to use for the festivities.

Loveliest among any in their class in entire England, the beautiful Hampton Court gardens feature vast sweeps of restored ground, of the tennis court, the famous Maze laid out by William III and the unusual Elizabethan Knot Garden.

The tall turrets of the Tower of London stand grim testimony to a host of tragic choices. Ironic as well, in the case of Anne Boleyn. His first wife, his brother's widow the Spanish princess Catherine of Aragon, had failed to bear him a son. Fiercely opposing Pope Clement VII who refused him a second marriage to pregnant Boleyn, the eighth Henry grew increasingly anti-ecclesiastical and finally broke from the papal order. The triumphant

# A KING REMEMBERED

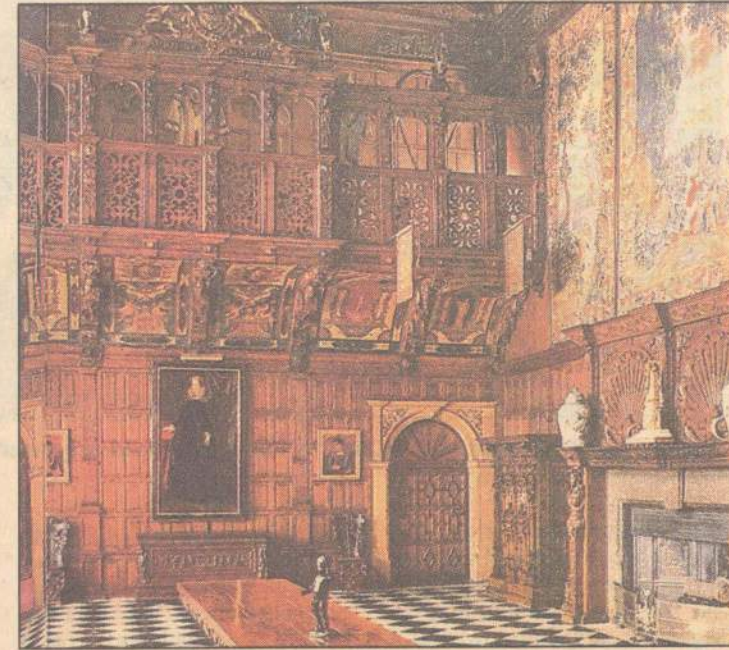
By Meher Marfatia

supreme head of the new Church of England succeeded in his alliance and kept extending his palace residences. That was in 1533. Yet, only three years later the Tower was Boleyn's cloister once again: for her execution... she was convicted of adultery.

The fifth wife, Catherine Howard, was beheaded here too, Sir Thomas More suffered a similar fate at the same place. The Tower's royal armoury contains different knights' combat gear.

Also encapsulating large slices of the turbulent times are the Old Royal Observatory and Queen's House, constituting the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich. The formidable collection housed within offers valuable links with the pivotal role the heir of Henry VII played in changing the very face of the Navy. Nautical affairs formed one of his several interests, and nowhere else is this as clearly shown.

Having built the dockyards at Deptford and Woolwich, he was equally responsible for equipping fresh fleets of ships with iron cannons, then far superior to the early 'round' medieval vessels. Presently, Greenwich Theatre and cinema are participating in themed productions.



Enduring architecture: An immense mansion, Hatfield

The 13th Earl of Oxford — godfather to Henry VIII — lived at Hedingham Castle in the village of Castle Hedingham. Home to the de Vere family, this Norman keep is reputedly one of the finest preserved in the whole of Europe. Visitors may look forward to roaming its garrison chamber, banqueting hall with its Minstrel Gallery and charming bridge surrounded by tran-

quil lakes and verdant woodwalks. A river pageant scheduled for July will use mainly the Globe Rowing Club, besides the barge from the film *A Man For All Seasons*.

The local History Fest at Avery Hill College bases engaging lectures and guided tours on the Tudor tapestry of experiences. Hatfield House hosts four entertainment nights per week. At Blackheath, a com-

munity play is enacted by wandering buskers, and Kenwood witnesses a concert with *Greensleeves* in its repertoire. Till the summer months last, Hautbois — a musical duo — are to spend their days travelling around various Heritage properties to provide a lyrical touch, with stirring strains from the reign.

A Henry VIII 'Living History' ground will tour the organised coastline of forts he had erected in the south as a defence against external aggressors. This parades Henry and Anne trailed by courtiers, soldiers and loyalists, resplendent in authentic regalia.

Ultimately, however relentless his pursuit of tyranny for which generations condemn him, Henry VIII was possessed of true brilliance. It was adequate proof of his ability — arguably, of course — that he died on his throne after almost 40 years of autocratic rule. In the course of which he ruffled enough feathers and did more to lead the realm to prosperity than any previous king.

Quite fitting, then, that his admirable statesmanship, scholarship, and life-long passion for music and the arts be so commemorated in the land of his birth and reign.