

return to the 'good old (Catholic) days'. There were also social reformers who opposed many of the new landlords who had acquired land during Henry's dissolution of the monasteries and were, it was claimed, riding roughshod over the rights of the common people.

At his death in 1547, Henry had left power in the hands of a moderately reformist body that was to act as Edward VI's council until he reached 18. However, in the back rooms of Whitehall where secret deals were done, it was agreed that much of that power should be concentrated in one man's hands: Seymour.

Over the centuries historians have offered many explanations as to why the councillors agreed to Seymour's power-grab – including the need for a strong government to fend off any conservative reaction, the fact that Seymour was Edward VI's uncle, and the dishing out of sweeteners to pliable supporters. Whatever the reason, Seymour was now Protector of the Realm. Soon, he was consulting the council less and less and ruling by decree in his nephew's name.

Hero of the have-nots

The historian Diarmaid MacCulloch has written of Edward Seymour that he "combined the reforming zeal of Thomas Cromwell, the chutzpah of Cardinal Wolsey and the flashy populism of Queen Elizabeth's doomed Earl of Essex". At first, that "flashy populism" appears to have borne fruit. Declaring that he was committed to creating a fair society, Seymour appointed royal commissions to enquire into such agrarian grievances as the enclosure of the common land. In doing so, he made himself something of a hero among the disenfranchised: England's 'have-nots' genuinely believed that the 'Good Duke', as they called Seymour, was on their side.

Unfortunately for Seymour, a growing number of these 'have-nots' began interpreting his policies as a cue to take the law into their own hands. Following his lead – or so they thought – bands of iconoclasts started smashing up church windows and tearing down rood screens. Other malcontents uprooted the hedges and fences built by 'grasping' landowners – reclaiming land they thought was rightfully theirs.

It was now that Seymour betrayed a weakness that would continually undermine his attempts to dominate England's political landscape: an unwillingness to meet force with force. He issued pardons to offenders, promised new legislation and, as Paget later pointed out, only encouraged further lawlessness. So it proved when a rebellion broke out in the South West, where militant conservatives began protesting at the government's religious policy and the



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ABOVE: A portrait of Edward VI's mother, Jane Seymour. Her marriage to Henry VIII made her elder brother, Edward, a powerful man

attempt to force an English Prayer Book on Devon and Cornwall. On 2 July 1549, 2,000 rebels laid siege to Exeter.

It was not only in the shires that Seymour faced problems. His autocratic style had alienated several members of the council in London, whose support he now needed. He did not dare leave the capital himself but he did not know which of his conciliar colleagues he could trust with an army. On 9 July, Lord Russell, sent to quell the western rebellion, halted at Honiton, refusing to advance on Exeter until Seymour sent reinforcements.

At the same time a commotion at Wymondham, Norfolk, involving the breaking of hedges, turned into a mass movement when Robert Kett, a landowner of moderate means, accepted the leadership of the rebels and set off to attack Norwich, then the second largest city in England. By 11 July he had amassed a force of 16,000 followers and set up camp on Mousehold Heath, close by the city. When news of this and other disturbances reached London the following day, the city was placed under martial law. The capital was wracked by mounting fear of demonstrations of sympathy for the rebels.

Seymour, meanwhile, was with King Edward at Hampton Court and under virtual siege. Landowners demanded that he take

action against unruly tenants, and his councillors urged him to send troops to the trouble spots to make examples of rebel ringleaders. Instead, he hesitated.

On the night of 21–22 July, Kett's 'army' attacked Norwich, bombarding the city with confiscated cannon. His men stormed through breaches in the wall and, fighting their way hand-to-hand through the narrow streets, reached the market place. Kett set up his own court, passing judgment on prisoners dragged before him and authorising foraging parties to commandeering provisions from houses and surrounding farms. He sent the government an ultimatum of 29 demands, insisting that they were in line with Seymour's policy, and directed only against landowners who were "enemies of king and commonwealth".

Once again, Seymour dithered. It was the 28th before he sent a mere 1,300 mercenary and local levies, under the command of William Parr, Marquess of Northampton, to face Kett's vastly superior force. Parr had little military experience, and it showed. Soon after Parr's arrival, Kett's army attacked, inflicting on Parr a humiliating defeat. An eyewitness described the scene: "Lamentable and miserable was the state of the city at this time when nothing was seen or heard but lamentation and weeping... the clashing of weapons, the flames of the burning, the ruin and fall of houses, and many other fearful things which... struck with incredible sorrow the hearts and ears of all that heard it."

Too little, too late

Now, at last, Seymour seems to have stirred from his stupor. Fearing that Kett's army would march on London, he doubled the guard on the city gates, set up gibbets as a warning to disaffected citizens and instructed the bishop of London to preach at St Paul's that "those who resist temporal authority resist God's ordinance, and are utterly damned. The rebels deserve death as traitors and receive eternal damnation with Lucifer."

But for most members of the political class, Seymour's intervention was too little, too late. With the capital in a state of panic, several councillors now abandoned him, quitting Hampton Court and meeting in Westminster – to all intents and purposes a rival government.

However, better news for Seymour came from the West Country. Russell, having been granted reinforcements, defeated the rebels Fenny Bridges, Clyst Heath and Clyst St Mary and raised the siege of Exeter. He arrived not too soon. A contemporary chronicle related the suffering of Exeter's besieged citizens: "Many assaults and sundry skirmishes were made, the gates set afire, the walls under-