

The Field of Cloth of Gold - Henry VIII and Humphrey Cooke

This summer marks the 500th anniversary of the Field of the Cloth of Gold, Henry VIII's celebrated meeting with the French King Francis I. Held from 7th to 24th June 1520, the event was named for the vast swathes of cloth of gold used for both the pavilions and clothes - a luxurious cloth made from silk threads wrapped in gold. The meeting was held about 10 miles from Calais, then in English possession, carefully sited on the border between English and French territory.



The Field of Cloth of Gold c. 1545, Royal Collection. Henry VIII's arrival.

The surviving paintings and descriptions depict the event as a dazzling display of wealth and extravagance, designed to showcase the splendour of both courts. Jousting, archery and wrestling tournaments (both Henry and Francis participated in the jousting) were interspersed with lavish banquets. The kings and courtiers dazzled in clothes of silver and gold with heavy embroidery and precious stones and pearls. It was also an opportunity for Henry and Francis to meet for the first time. Both young and ambitious rulers, rivals in international diplomacy as well as personally, it was hoped that an alliance could be forged to the benefit of both countries.



A huge logistical exercise, the event was planned and organised at enormous expense by the Lord Chancellor Cardinal Wolsey. Wolsey entrusted the building works to Humphrey Cooke, appointed King's Carpenter shortly before in 1519. Cooke was the Upper Warden of the Carpenters' Company at the time and one of the most prominent carpenters in London. He was also a senior figure in the King's Office of Works and would have been well known to Wolsey, who was still building his own huge palace at Hampton Court as well as overseeing the King's buildings projects.

Cardinal Thomas Wolsey 1585-96, Trinity College.



Tent design for the Field of Cloth of Gold, c.1520 The British Library Board

Cooke was given responsibility for building the ‘magnificent tents’ and a temporary palace covering over 12,000 square yards. Nearly 3,000 tents were erected for the vast retinue that accompanied Henry. Surviving designs (as above) show the elaborate accommodation for Henry’s courtiers. A series of canvas tents provided spaces which could be divided using hangings of rich cloth to create reception rooms, private apartments and chapels. On top of tent poles the ‘King’s beasts’ held standards with royal emblems.



The Field of Cloth of Gold Detail of Timber Palace and fountains



Henry VIII after Hans Holbein, Walker Art Gallery

The temporary palace was constructed with brick foundations and timber, supporting painted canvas walls. Red roof tiles were painted on the roof coverings and extensive glass windows were built into the structure. Two fountains flowing with wine and beer were constructed on either side of the entrance. A chapel was constructed and decorated with ornate hangings and filled with statues of saints and holy relics. Cardinal Wolsey celebrated mass there with Henry and Francis in attendance.

Henry himself slept at the nearby Château de Guînes for security and comfort, using his decorated timber palace during the day. It was not the first or last constructed for him. A fir 'house of timber' is

first recorded for a military campaign in France in 1513, and was a prototype for the palace at the Field of Cloth of Gold. An inventory from the 1540s describes it was painted to resemble brick, with a roof decorated with heraldic beasts, crowns and vanes, heated by fireplaces with iron chimneys, and had two rooms of 12ft by 24ft and 16ft. It came with a luxurious bed hung with curtains of cloth of gold and carved gilt woodwork.

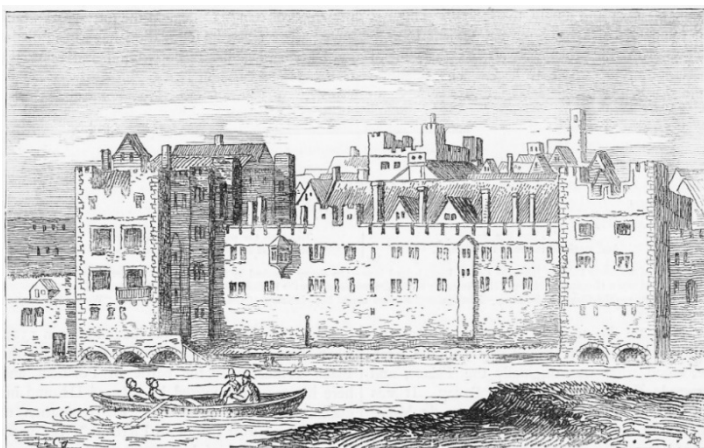
Designed to move with the army, the timber structure could be assembled and taken down rapidly and was carried in twelve carts. For speed and efficiency the craftsmen used screws, iron plates, and nuts and bolts (rather than more traditional mortice and tenon joints) to fasten the timber frame into place.

Henry continued to use temporary buildings throughout his reign when no suitable palace or manor was available, and they grew increasingly large and elaborate. In 1544 a 'timber lodging' for another French military campaign had five rooms, four corner towers with columns supporting pediments, wooden battlements and windows made of lantern horn. Thirty carts were needed to transport the whole structure as Henry moved with his army.

Humphrey Cooke – The King's Carpenter

The King's Carpenter was a senior post in the Office of the King's Works, always held by a member of the Carpenters' Company at this time. A master builder, architect and surveyor, he would have been used to building in stone as well as timber, and was responsible for the accounting as well as the building work on many of Henry VIII's projects.

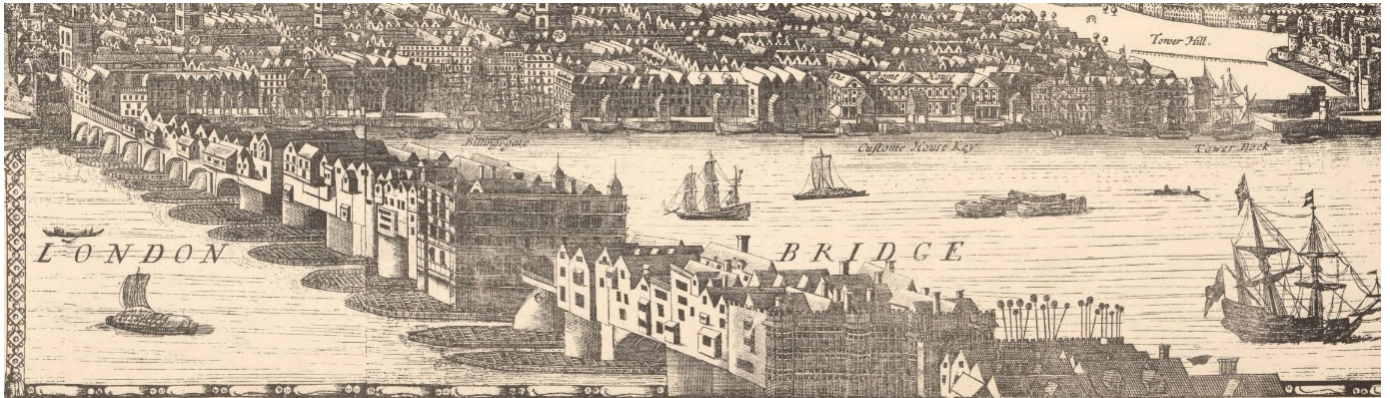
The reign of Henry VIII saw an invigorated programme of building largely overseen by Cardinal Wolsey and Thomas Cromwell. Carried out by the King's Office of Works, large numbers of skilled carpenters, masons and labourers worked at the sites, managed by senior craftsmen such as the King's Carpenter and Mason. This extensive (and expensive) building campaign meant that by the end of his reign Henry owned 55 royal properties, more than any other monarch before or since.



The Savoy Palace 1650 by Wenceslaus Hollar

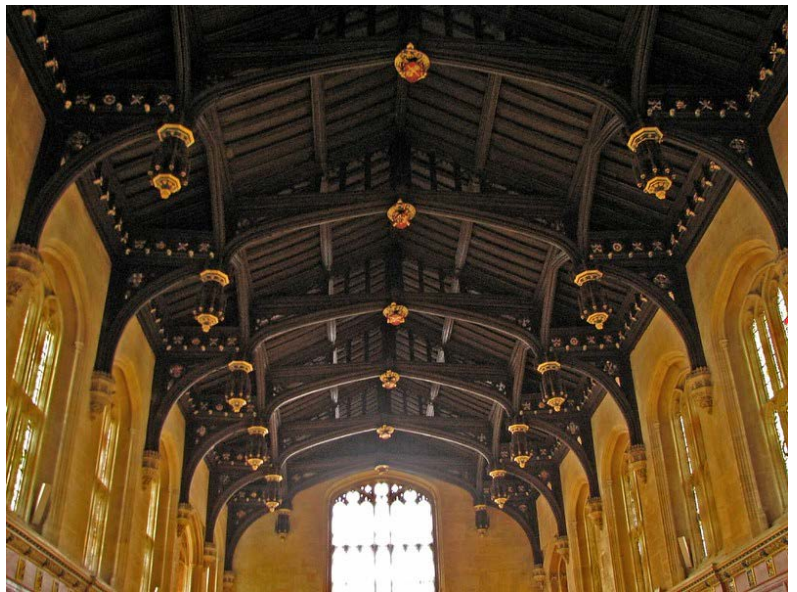
Cooke quickly rose to prominence within the Carpenters' Company, becoming Warden in 1507, 1508, 1511 and 1519. He was appointed Master Carpenter for building the Savoy Hospital in 1509, a prestigious project founded by Henry VII and a post which indicated his rising status within the King's Office of Works.

Cooke was appointed Master of the Bridge House in the same year, a lucrative and influential position within the City. He would have been responsible for the day-to-day running of London Bridge, the only bridge across the Thames at the time. The collection of tolls from carts crossing the bridge, from ships passing under it, rents from properties, fines for offences including unlawful fishing and the maintenance of the bridge fabric all fell under his remit as Bridgemaster.



London Bridge from a 1682 Map London Topographical Society, 1904.

Cooke was a skilled carpenter, and his surviving work bears testimony to his talent and contemporary reputation as 'cunning (clever) and diligent'. A notable appointment was Master of Carpentry at Corpus Christi College Oxford in 1514, where he designed and managed the construction of the Hall's hammer-beam roof. The roof survives today, the intricately carved pendants with floral motifs decorating a superb example of English medieval carpentry.



Corpus Christi Hall, Oxford

On his death in 1531 Cooke was succeeded as King's Carpenter by senior members of the Carpenters' Company long associated with him. James Nedeham, who he would have known well as a fellow contractor for both Wolsey and Thomas Cromwell was his immediate successor. Nedeham was rapidly promoted to King's Surveyor in 1532, and Cooke's protégé and son-in-law, John Russell, who himself became Master of the Carpenters' Company four times, was appointed King's Carpenter.