

# Whipping boy claim exposed as whopper

Jack Malvern

The term “whipping boy” has been a byword for a scapegoat for more than 300 years.

The explanation for the phrase, popularised by Mark Twain in his story *The Prince and the Pauper*, is that Edward VI, below, and Charles I could not be punished by their schoolmasters because of the divine status of the monarchy. Instead, a prince would be taught alongside another boy who would be whipped for the royal pupil's mischief in the hope that he would feel discomfort at another's pain.

These royal origins are attested by such august sources as the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography and a chief curator of Historic Royal Palaces. The problem, as the BBC conceded last month when a historian complained about its education website, is that it appears to be a canard with no primary evidence.

BBC Bitesize removed the explanation from materials for children aged 11-14 after acknowledging that it was probably invented by Samuel Rowley, a 17th-century playwright. But Tracy Borman, a joint chief curator for Historic Royal Palaces, which manages the Tower of London and Hampton Court Palace, is sticking by the explanation because “there's no smoke without fire”.

She has been challenged by Tony

Adler, a freelance historian, to withdraw claims she made in *BBC History Magazine* that named Barnaby Fitzpatrick as Edward VI's whipping boy. She defended her position by claiming “that Barnaby Fitzpatrick was a whipping boy to Edward VI is well attested in the contemporary sources, notably the state papers which are now preserved in the national archives”. She added that Charles I had a whipping boy, William Murray, whose appointment “is recorded in the contemporary state papers domestic series as early as 1603”.

However, the state papers have been fully digitised and Mr Adler found that the boys were named only as grooms, not whipping boys.

Dr Borman later told *The Times* that her book *The Private Lives of the Tudors* “does not claim that the fact that

Barnaby Fitzpatrick was a whipping boy was featured in the state papers” but that she took her information from a secondary source. When asked to name that, she said “almost all of the major historians for the Tudor period cite Barnaby Fitzpatrick as Edward VI's whipping boy” and recommended Chris Skidmore's book *Edward VI: The Lost King of England*.

Mr Skidmore, a Conservative MP, said that there was no primary evidence of royal whipping boys and the role probably never existed.



## Corrections and clarifications

● Dr Tracy Borman has asked us to clarify that she recommended Chris Skidmore's biography of Edward VI because he discusses whether the post of whipping boy was real, not as a citation for proof of their existence (News, Jan 16). The absence of contemporary references does not, in her view, mean that they did not exist.