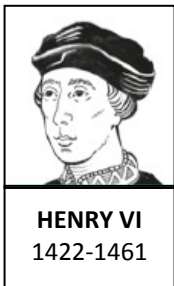


The Wars of the Roses – An Outline

Agincourt and the minority of Henry VI

English monarchy was very successful in the early 1400s. Henry V, one of the greatest English kings, won the battle of Agincourt in 1415 and conquered northern France, united his nobility and worked with them to suppress local crime and disorder. Henry showed that a good king could make the system of government work and it kept on working after his early death in 1422. From 1422 to 1437, during the long minority of his son, Henry VI, England continued to prosper. The nobility believed their duty was to serve the young king and they mostly put the good of the king and nation first before their own quarrels.



1437-1450: The problem of Henry VI

Once Henry became involved in government from 1437 problems developed until, by 1450, a major crisis had developed. By then most of the English lands in France had been lost, law and order was breaking down and courtiers were enriching themselves at royal expense and through bullying their local communities. These failures provoked a mass protest known as Cade's Rebellion in summer 1450 when London was in the hands of the protesters for several days and the king fled to the midlands for safety.

These problems were the direct result of the inadequacy of Henry VI, by then aged 29. Historians disagree on the exact nature of his problems (was he completely mentally incapable or did he make sporadic and foolish interventions?) but totally inadequate he was. He failed to meet the primary requirements of a king, to provide military leadership or enforce justice. Recent research suggests the nobles tried to make good these inadequacies but there was only so much they could do – the system needed a king with personal authority to make it work but Henry VI completely lacked that authority. In 1450 it was the people of London who cleared Cade's men out of the capital, not the King.

1450-1455: The beginnings of conflict: York v Somerset

Despite those problems it was another five years before the first battle took place and even then it wasn't a fight for the crown between Lancaster and York. The main theme of these years was the competition between two royal dukes – York and Somerset - to be Henry's chief councillor. Both men were reasonably capable with decent war records and there had been no rivalry between them before 1450 so it's intriguing why they couldn't work together. The two most likely reasons were York's wish to be seen as heir apparent to the fragile Lancastrian dynasty and anger at Somerset's surrender of Normandy in 1450. At first it was Somerset who was successful and York was a political outcast but in 1453 that situation was reversed with King Henry's complete mental collapse. York became the central figure in government during the King's illness and Somerset was imprisoned. However when Henry recovered at Christmas 1454 their roles were reversed again! Therefore in early 1455 both Dukes were deeply afraid that the other was about to attack. It was York who got his retaliation in first, marching an army to confront Somerset at St. Albans. This battle,

described as little more than ‘a skirmish in a side-street’ left Somerset dead and York kneeling at King Henry’s feet, begging forgiveness and declaring his loyalty. No-one wanted more battles.

Key Point:

The first battle was about who would be Henry VI’s chief councillor.
It was NOT a battle for the crown.

1455-1464: The core of the Wars of the Roses

It was four years before another battle – time for students to complete GCSE and A levels and have a holiday. This length of time indicates the desire of the great majority of nobles to avoid war. The few who wanted to attack their enemies did not want to push that peaceful majority into the enemy camp by breaking the peace first. It’s also important to note that there was no ‘Yorkist’ challenge for the crown until late in 1460. York was loyal to Henry until again fear played a critical part.

The queen, Margaret of Anjou, believed that York was a threat to her husband and young son (Prince Edward, born in 1453, one of the very few kingly duties Henry carried out successfully). In 1459 Margaret finally attacked York. Once fighting had begun it was then, for both sides, a matter of continuing to fight to win or lose everything, lands, family, life. This need to win drove York in 1460 to say he had a better claim to the crown than Henry, tracing this ‘right’ back to his descent from Edward III (1327-1377), but this argument only appeared when York needed a legal justification for fighting against the king.

York was killed at the battle of Wakefield in December 1460 but then his charismatic and militarily far more skilled son, Edward, led the Yorkist army to victory at Towton in March 1461. Edward became king as Edward IV

In 18 months between September 1459 and March 1461 there had been six battles. Most nobles fought for Henry despite his incompetence and mental frailty, strong evidence of their respect for their oaths of loyalty to the anointed king. This also meant that while Henry and Prince Edward were alive more battles were possible.

Key Points:

Most nobles and gentry wanted to avoid war. In 1461 most of them still wanted to keep Henry as king despite his failures.

Edward IV was king because of his success at the battle of Towton. He faced a difficult task uniting the nobles behind him and restoring order because he had only limited support amongst the nobles.



EDWARD IV
1461-1470

1464-1471: Edward versus Warwick

Harmless, saintly, inane Henry was replaced by tall, handsome and dynamic Edward, as fine a looking king as England ever had and, aged only 18, with a brilliant future ahead of him. However continuing loyalty to Henry VI meant that it took three years before Edward finally defeated Lancastrian resistance at the battle of Hexham in 1464. Henry VI was later captured but not executed – it was not yet politically or morally acceptable to murder the man who had been king.

Edward's closest ally was Richard Neville, earl of Warwick, his wealthy older cousin. For several years the two men worked together but gradually their alliance unravelled. Was Warwick too ambitious or was he angered by Edward's marriage to Elizabeth Woodville or by his choice of foreign policy or by his refusal to let Warwick's daughters marry into the royal family? Whatever the explanation, by 1469 Warwick feared Edward was in danger of being deposed by the Lancastrian remnant in alliance with France. That was why Warwick took the huge gamble of rebelling and, having failed, allied with his old enemy Queen Margaret, one of the most bizarre alliances in English history. Briefly it worked. Edward was forced to flee abroad and Henry, hapless Henry, was king again. Then Edward returned with Burgundian support and in a clever, devious, ruthless military campaign fought and killed Warwick at the battle of Barnet in April 1471 and next month beat the Lancastrians at Tewkesbury where Henry's heir, 17 year-old Prince Edward, was killed. Henry VI was then murdered in the Tower of London. The Lancastrian cause was dead.



HENRY VI
1470-1471

Key Points

Edward IV faced a very difficult task establishing himself as king and struggled to build up widespread support.

Without Warwick's rebellion, Henry VI could never have become king again.

France and Burgundy played critical roles in these events. They were acting in their own interests, hoping to win English support, not acting out of loyalty to Henry or Edward.



EDWARD IV
1471-1483

1471-1485: The Yorkists divided

Edward IV's second reign was successful, the country peaceful, there were no foreign threats and there was a royal nursery full of daughters plus, more importantly, an heir and a spare. No-one expected what happened in 1483. When King Edward died young and suddenly in April everyone assumed his 12 year-old son, also called Edward, would be crowned. Instead, in three dramatic and puzzling months, the young king's uncle, Richard, Duke of Gloucester executed friends and then deposed his nephew on the grounds that the boy and his siblings were illegitimate. This story was either truthful or very convenient but probably not both! Edward V and his brother disappeared and Richard III's reign never recovered from the belief that they'd been murdered. Why Richard took the crown is just as puzzling as the fate of the Princes.



EDWARD V
1483

By late summer 1483 a rebellion was underway, motivated by outrage at Richard's actions. Its leaders, former supporters of Edward IV, wanted at first to put Edward V back on the throne. Then, as rumours spread that young Edward was dead, they chose as their leader the unknown, inexperienced and exiled Henry of Richmond, usually known as Henry Tudor, who had a remote Lancastrian claim to the crown. This desperate choice indicates the depth of their hostility to Richard. The 1483 rebellion failed but many rebels fled to Brittany. The threat of invasion hung over the next two years until, with French help, Henry Tudor and his allies landed in Wales in August 1485 and killed Richard at the battle of Bosworth. The intense, devout Richard had many of the qualities of a successful king but never recovered from the violence he used in deposing his nephew, actions which split the nobles and gentry so that there were at least as many Yorkists fighting against him as for him at Bosworth.



RICHARD III
1483-1485



HENRY VII
1485-1509

Key Points

The return to fighting was completely unexpected, triggered by opposition to Richard taking the crown.

Henry Tudor had a distant Lancastrian claim to be king but the core of his supporters were Yorkists who refused to accept Richard as king. The battle of Bosworth was not York v Lancaster but Richard's supporters versus the rest including both Yorkists and Lancastrians.

Why are the Wars of the Roses so interesting?

The Wars of the Roses were not one long war fought by two implacably opposed families. It's far more interesting than that, a series of partially-linked but quite distinct phases of warfare that broke out despite efforts at almost every stage to avoid fighting. Nobles did not dash thoughtlessly into war. Their actions were as much or more dictated by loyalty and concern for the nation's good as by ambition for power and land, though that ambition certainly did exist. As the historian John Watts has written:

“the wars were fought by serious people for serious reasons; we should come to them with the same spirit of understanding that we bring to any of the civil conflicts of the past, or indeed the present.”

And despite the wars, life for most people went on largely untroubled by these political upheavals. This was a period of a significant rise in living standards, increased literacy and the development of printing and the most glorious church building – as good a time to live as any before the great improvements in medicine and life expectancy in the 20th century.