

## Henry VII and the Shaping of the Tudor State



## Henry VII (centre), with his advisors Sir Richard Empson and Sir Edmund Dudley Henry VII: A Traditional View

In William Shakespeare's *King Richard III* the victorious Henry Tudor, earl of Richmond, has a surprisingly undeveloped role as the saviour of England from Richard's tyranny. Looking back from 1597, Shakespeare saw the fruits of the Tudor victory, and he captured the significance of the battle of Bosworth with the lines:

*All that divided York and Lancaster  
United in their dire division.  
O now let Richmond and Elizabeth,  
The true succeeders of each House,  
By God's fair ordinance conjoin together,  
And let their heirs - God, if his will be so -  
Enrich the time to come with smooth-faced peace.*

Generations of historians agreed that Henry Tudor's marriage in January 1486 to Princess Elizabeth, heir to the Yorkist king Edward, heralded a new period of English kingship that swept clean many defects of medieval government. The overmighty nobles and private armies of the fifteenth century were put under the king's control. The monarchy broke away from a reliance on parliament for money. The crown by-passed the local influence of noble landholders and placed power in the hands of junior men, lawyers, and professional administrators to begin a revolution in the way England was ruled. Henry VII's reign was traditionally seen as the first step in a period of rapid change in the ancient ruling structures of medieval England. The ruthless grip on power he achieved was the key factor in creating conditions for later sixteenth-century developments to thrive. While not exciting enough for Shakespearean drama, Henry VII's reign nevertheless was the pivotal point between medieval and more modern forms of English government.

### Assessments of Henry VII

Shakespeare's later Tudor view of Henry VII changed very little between the first study of the reign by Francis Bacon in 1622 and Henry's last academic biography, by Stanley Chrimes, in 1973. Both emphasised his focus on security, government, and the law, but neglected the politics and personalities of this fascinating period at the end of the Wars of the Roses. This established view remained unchallenged until very recently, perhaps because medieval and Tudor historians each have their own sources, techniques and approaches that do not easily cross the boundary that 1485 has become.

Yet a revival of interest in Henry VII has occurred. This has challenged the established view of Henry as an innovator. Christine Carpenter has developed Geoffrey Elton's arguments that the early Tudor period was one of evolution not revolution in government. She suggests that because Henry's lack of royal skill forced him to continue the policies of fifteenth-century kings he was locked into an existing process of growing royal power. His isolated exile in Brittany and France between May 1471 and August 1485 gave him little understanding or experience of how English government worked. Henry Tudor could not understand the problems he faced, and was essentially a bad medieval king. He could only have changed their policies after he had learned how to be an effective king. However, this interpretation takes little account of Henry's particular circumstances in 1485. It was precisely because of his unique upbringing and disconnection from England that Henry Tudor was able to bring new ways of doing things to his kingdom. Between about 1480 and 1520 England was certainly transformed from what Nicholas Pronay described as the 'merry but unstable England ruled by Edward IV to the tame, sullen and tense land inherited by Henry VIII'.

## **Inexperience and Innovation**

When Henry VII took the crown from Richard III he inherited all of the authority and royal resources that previous kings had enjoyed. Yet his exile meant that, unlike many of his knights and lords, he did not have the practical experience of running manorial estates or of managing a complex network of servants (called an affinity or retinue). Henry lacked sufficient knowledge of how English government worked. This restricted how he could exercise his authority, especially in the reform of government departments and processes. For example, many lords, knights and gentlemen were familiar with what sheriffs did to control a county, or how taxation was collected and paid to the Exchequer, because they were part of the elite who did those tasks year-after-year. Changing the way that these and many other important jobs were done would have brought administrative chaos when the king's political control was also weakest.

What Henry VII did have great expertise in also grew from the circumstances of his exile. Henry had watched how the Breton and French courts worked. More specifically, he had learned how people could be manipulated by reward and coercion into doing what rulers wanted; how faction and political conspiracy operated; and how attention to detail was vital to a king's security. It was control of personal relationships and mental attitudes among the people who represented the king that Henry VII saw as the key to forcing change upon the medieval ruling structures he inherited.

Many of the specific policies, such as a reliance on bonds, recognisances and obligations as tools to control behaviour, did not survive beyond 1509. But their effect on how England was ruled did. In fact the novelty of Henry VII's rule created a backlash that in August 1510 condemned to the block its two leading officers, Edmund Dudley and Richard Empson. The success of Henry's shake-up of the relationship of the crown with its leading subjects may have set back the acceptance of change for many years. Henry VIII's early years, with a vibrant youthful court and military glory in France and Scotland, were certainly more like those of Edward IV's second reign (1471-83) than the more sombre final years of Henry VII's. It was only in the 1530s that a new generation of officials was prepared to implement revolutionary policies on a grand scale.

Clearly Henry VIII did not share his father's interest in fine-tuning the minute details of policy. He was able to neglect the mundane aspects of his royal duties because Henry VII had done the hard work in developing the administrative structure that allowed the departments of state - the royal council, chancery, Exchequer and the state paper office - to be run without the king's constant intervention. That Henry VIII became such a gross figure of monarchy must be due partly to the freedom given to ministers like Cardinal Wolsey and Thomas Cromwell to direct royal policy. While Henry hunted, jostled and worried about the royal succession, his top bureaucrats ruled semi-autonomously. But this was done strictly for the benefit of the state and the crown's control over it. This was an extension of exactly the type of role that Empson and Dudley had enjoyed in the previous reign.

## **Ideology and Allegiance**

What seems to be different about Henry VII was his attempt to create and enforce a new ideology of service and loyalty to the crown that enhanced the medieval concept of allegiance to an immediate lord, the king and the nation. This stood alongside Tudor restructuring of existing institutions, to transform the mentality of the ruling elites. It is also a practical example of what Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer have called the 'moral regulation of the state'. In the conditions attached to the thousands of bonds issued during the reign, Henry demonstrated his authority (through the demand for payments), defined acceptable behaviour, and enforced an obligation of loyalty upon the powerful figures of the nation. This attitude was universal: it was applied against pardoned political suspects as well as allies commanding important castles or occupying official posts. By emphasising his royal supremacy, Henry VII also began to free the crown from the direct influence of the aristocracy.

Fifteenth-century kings, dukes and earls were royal cousins with a common descent from Edward III (1327-77). They held a shared elite outlook. Henry VII arrived from relative obscurity in 1485 and began to rule more like a landlord than the first among aristocratic equals. His management of the crown lands, royal patronage, the creation of peers, and the punishment of offenders, began to elevate the position of the king above the ruling elite from which previous English rulers had emerged. This change allowed the king to dominate the structures of the state rather than to share in their development as part of the ruling class. But it did not force the king to rule personally. Rather, it allowed him to function like the chairman of a massive modern corporate business. Henry managed strategically, while well-trained and closely allied bureaucrats projected royal power under his watchful eye.

Henry VII stayed closely involved in the daily tasks of ruling because he had a suspicious personality and was obsessed with the security of his Tudor dynasty. He chose to do this despite developing a framework that allowed him to withdraw physically and administratively from the process of ruling. In 1493-95 the treason of the leading officers in his household, the chamberlain Sir William Stanley and the steward John, Lord FitzWater, prompted Henry to create the privy chamber. This office was staffed by very junior grooms who served the king in his private time. It removed the politically active gentry from the king's personal chambers, although over time figures such as the groom of the stool, Hugh Denys, became important because they had the ear of the king. The great figures of the kingdom had previously surrounded the monarch and projected his power into the counties where they held their land and dominated local society. After 1495, the day-to-day isolation of the lords and leading knights from the king meant that their main role became part of the pageantry and magnificence of court life. They remained close to the crown as an institution when they sat in the royal council or on local commissions, but Henry began to select his servants for their ability, flexibility, and loyalty. Rank and prestige no longer ensured a natural right to be close to the king.

## **Tudor Support**

Henry's permanent adult exile separated him entirely from England's ruling elite, both literally and in terms of his outlook and experiences. On the one hand, this gave Henry an opportunity to unlock the closed network of personal service that had surrounded medieval royal heirs as Princes of Wales or royal nobles. On the other, it created a great dependence upon the advice and skills of others. Some, like Sir Giles Daubeney and Sir Edward Poynings, had joined Henry after 1483 in opposition to Richard III. Others, like John de Vere, earl of Oxford, followed Henry because he was the only chance they had of recovering their lands and influence. Henry could not fully trust them to remain loyal if political circumstances changed again.

Henry's power base of support did cut across existing and inherited allegiances. This was an advantage if it could be transformed into Tudor loyalty. As a result it was fundamentally important to Henry's success in establishing a stable regime. Henry used his skills to overcome previous vested interests as the Tudor regime stabilised and then flourished. There were some uncomfortable periods when the nature of his support actually allowed conspiracy to reach the heart of the regime. This was most obvious with the pretender Perkin Warbeck's call upon the loyalty of former servants of Edward V for most of the 1490s. Henry did try to heal the factionalism that had prevented a harmonious resolution of the civil wars in earlier reigns, and he did this by reshaping the political loyalties of the ruling classes.

## **The Law**

The way English government worked had always been defined by the king's power in relation to the law. Although Henry was keenly aware of the weakness of his claim to the throne through descent - which explains the often-gaudy display of Tudor imagery and heraldry - he certainly did not underestimate the hereditary rights of the

monarch. Henry pressed these prerogative rights to the very edge of the law, and many subjects complained of injustice. But the ability of the crown to intervene in their life became much more apparent. Pressure on local networks was increased by greater challenges to the manipulation of justice. Offences like embracery (corruption of juries) and maintenance (interference in legal cases by those otherwise uninvolved) were confronted. Members of regional political communities managed the interaction of the law and society at this local level. By regulating their roles as JPs, sheriffs, escheators and jury members, the Tudor crown further encroached upon the political and social freedoms of the ruling elite. Under weak leadership in Henry VI's reign (1422-61), they had been partly responsible for the descent into lawlessness and civil war. The Tudor king sought to remedy both deficiencies.

## **Lordship**

Henry created few new nobles and was reluctant to promote or reward his servants excessively. There were some restorations on the king's terms, such as Thomas Howard, earl of Surrey, and Henry Percy, earl of Northumberland, but rebellion and attainder after 1485 further reduced the pool of leading peers. Henry also kept the personal estates of the crown (the demesne lands) in his own hands. With little royal family to endow, it was easier for him to make the royal lands work harder for the crown rather than to give them away. Where land was granted, it was primarily as stewardships or leases. Henry deliberately split up forfeited estates, such as those of the rebel Sir Humphrey Stafford after 1486. This prevented the build up of blocks of concentrated power even among his own followers. It also disrupted the traditional means of lordship, and is seen by Christine Carpenter as Henry's failure to understand the system of medieval lordship and the king's place within it.

Yet this policy sharply defined the network of king's supporters in the regions and created a clear role for royal stewards and officers. In many cases it conflicted with traditional arrangements for effecting local rule through gentry retinues. Conflicts between the Lancashire Stanley family and Sir Thomas Butler, or the earl of Northumberland and Sir John Hotham in East Yorkshire, emerged for this reason as the king's servants were promoted against noble power. The king's men soon learned that they could still wield great power: Sir Thomas Lovell's retinue, based on a number of scattered crown stewardships, was as large as any noble connection during this period. But Henry's knights were closely monitored. In another case, the king was willing to sacrifice Sir Richard Guildford's influence in Kent, when it became clear after 1504 that he could no longer represent the crown's interests effectively.

Towards the end of Henry VII's reign, members of the elite were competing for office and influence within a clearly defined structure of crown service. They were not challenging independently for resources of land and men that could threaten Tudor stability. Nobles could still be great landowners, courtiers or commissioners, like the restored earl of Surrey in the north before 1500. They were, however, obliged to be the king's loyal men. They were important because Henry allowed them a degree of power suitable for the role he expected of them. By about 1506, noble title, status or inherited rights were no longer enough to command major influence within a region. When the Stanley family was given stewardships and mining rights in Lancashire in 1504, the grant was limited by strict conditions that included tax collection. This emphasised that Stanleys were answerable to the crown. The king's control of this system of lordship became more centralised and structured than it had been. It was also policed in a new way.

## **Bonds and Recognisances**

Henry VII's reliance on the policies of his Yorkist predecessors is well known. It is most obvious in his reliance on the royal chamber as the financial engine house of the reign. In his use of bonds Henry also followed existing practice but expanded this normal legal procedure to become the foundation on which all other reforms were built.

Most historians agree that the reliance on these instruments increased after 1500, when they helped to enforce Henry's feudal superiority. Bonds were accepted as part payment of fines upon inheritance to aristocratic lands, to buy the king's pardon or favour, or to secure lucrative grants. Bonds were aimed specifically at the nobility only because they had the strongest feudal connection to the crown. Yet by 1500, most of the major political crises had been overcome and the Tudor dynasty seemed secure: bonds enforced rather than achieved security. No historian has so far explained how Henry VII gained a foothold on power long enough to exploit the few advantages he held in 1485, or how he withstood the very serious early threats to his dynasty. My research in analysing hundreds of new bonds begins to explain how Henry's regime came to be successfully established, despite its shaky start.

Henry VII began to use these tools on a large scale to enforce loyalty during the conspiracies of the first decade of Tudor rule. The backlash to the Tudor accession arose in the heartland of Richard III's support in Yorkshire. Initially, Henry had to rely on the experience of those who had served his enemy. When the leaders of this group, such as Sir John Conyers, flirted with rebellion after 1485, they were deprived of local office and hauled before the king. Conyers and many of his gentry friends were placed under massive bonds with restrictive conditions. Re-admittance of suspected men to the local networks they had previously dominated depended on observance of oaths of loyalty; forced residence in the royal household; and reporting of conspiracy to the king's councillors. To keep their status these men became agents of the Tudor crown.

Bonds were effective because the crown screened the selection of other men to guarantee that conditions were met. These sureties were not only other suspected conspirators, but also the crown officials, stewards and constables newly installed around the country. For example, the king's constables at Sheriff Hutton, Pontefract and Penrith castles became entangled in a mesh of shared responsibility after three rebellions emerged in Yorkshire by 1489. Henry quickly acted on forfeitures and called in the enormous fines when necessary. When this happened, payments were scaled down to ensure that offenders were restored on the king's terms. Thomas Metcalfe, Richard III's leading administrator in Yorkshire, forfeited and paid over £650 in 1488. By 1493 he was a Justice of the Peace and loyal Tudor servant.

This system was also self-perpetuating. As more people within a community became responsible for their own collective loyalty, the links of marriage, service and landholding, which created that community in the first place, soon forced it to remain loyal. If people were provoked into rebellion they did so in increasing isolation. Sir John Egremont's attempt to raise a rebellion in Yorkshire after the earl of Northumberland's murder in 1489 attracted no prominent supporters because most possible rebels had too much to lose once Henry's bonds threatened their estates. Many of these bonds were also never cancelled. Sureties were replaced often decades after the original agreement.

This system had rational and straightforward rules. If all parties obeyed the conditions of the bonds then they were free to develop careers as crown servants. If the system worked as Henry VII intended it to, then little revenue would be generated from this source. The extent to which this aspect of the use of bonds was developed has been hidden from most Tudor historians. It has been overlooked because of the emphasis on Edmund Dudley's use of barely-legal obligations in the search for feudal income and lapsed fines that marked Henry's vulnerable reign after the queen's death in 1503. The existence of this more constructive use of bonds to shape allegiance proves that Henry VII's successes in reforming government were hard earned by effort and vigilance within a clear programme.

This evidence of an early Tudor ideology of absolute loyalty provides an excellent opportunity to look again at Henry VII's reign as the basis of more modern forms of government. The peace he achieved may have been 'smooth-faced' but it required constant awareness, a vast personal knowledge of landholders and their connections, and a mastery of archived documents at a level not reached by previous rulers. Henry VII's reign therefore remains an intriguing period to study. With several historians now working exclusively on Henry, we can expect a major growth in our level of understanding of the first Tudor reign in the near future.



### Issues to Debate:

- In what ways did Henry VII's experiences before 1485 influence the ways he ruled England?
- To what extent do you think Henry VII introduced a specifically Tudor ruling ideology after 1485?
- How did Henry VII try to ensure his own security through the use of bonds and recognisances?

### Further Reading:

- C. Carpenter, *The Wars of the Roses: Politics and the Constitution in England, c.1437-1509* (CUP, 1997)
- P. Corrigan and D. Sayer, *The Great Arch: English State Formation as Cultural Revolution* (Blackwell, 1985)
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- G.R. Elton, *England under the Tudors* (3rd edn Routledge, 1991)
- S.J. Gunn, 'The Courtiers of Henry VII', *English Historical Review*, 108 (1993)
- M. Horowitz, "'Agree with the King": Henry VII, Edmund Dudley and the Strange Case of Thomas Sunnyff', *Historical Research* (forthcoming).
- N. Pronay, 'The Chancellor, the Chancery and the Council at the End of the Fifteenth Century' in H. Hearder and H. R. Lyon, eds., *British Government and Administration: Studies Presented to S.B. Chrimes* (Cardiff, 1974)
- J.L. Watts, "'A New Ffundacion is the Crowne": Monarchy in the Age of Henry VII', in B. Thompson (ed.), *The Reign of Henry VII* (Paul Watkins, Stamford, 1995)

Dr Sean Cunningham is an Assistant Keeper of Public Records at the National Archives in Kew, where he helps to look after medieval and early modern documents. He has written a Ph.D. on how Henry VII used finance to control his subjects.