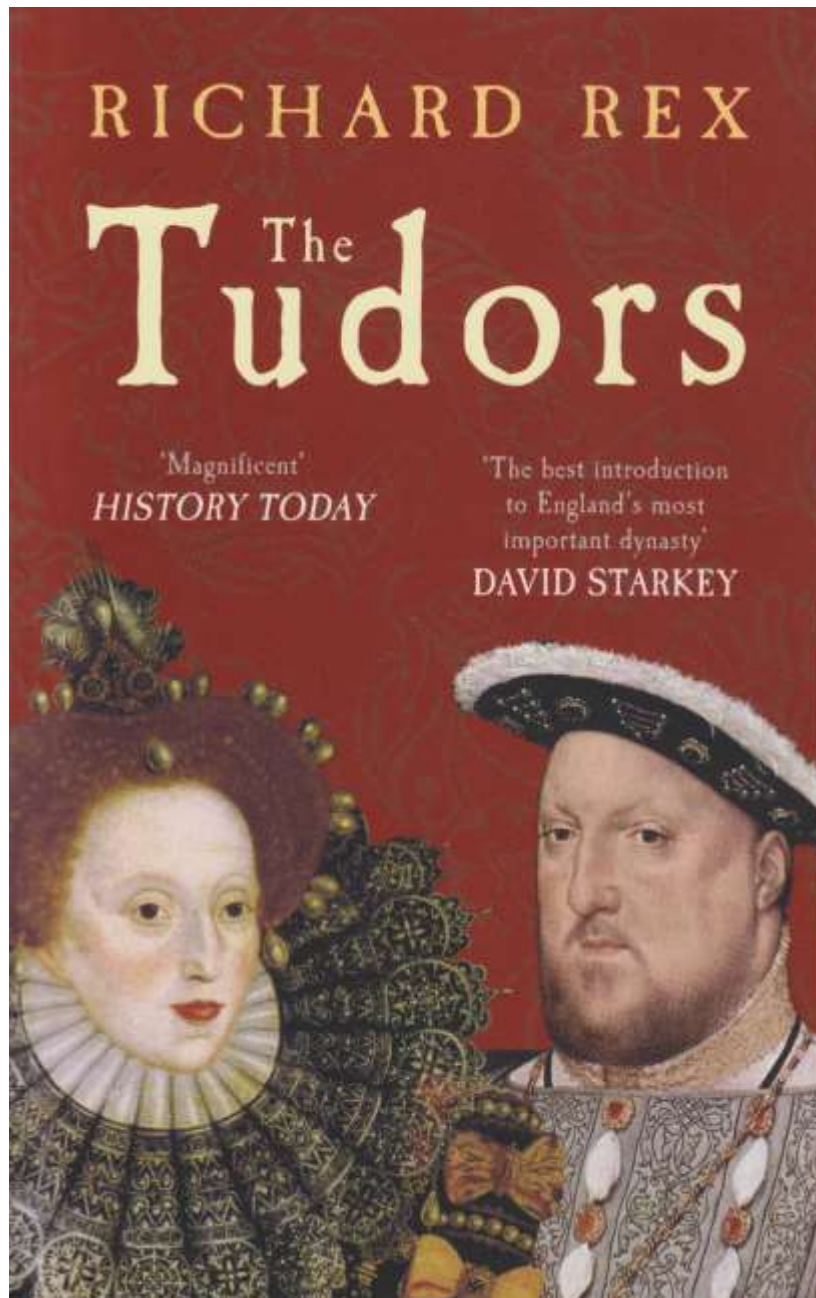


Rex, R. (2002), *The Tudors*, Amberley Publishing, Gloucestershire.



## 1 HENRY VII

### ACCESSION

Henry Tudor was one of the unlikeliest men ever to ascend the throne of England. Royal blood ran thin in his veins – drawn ultimately from illegitimate origins and filtered through the female line – and he was one of the few men in late medieval England with absolutely no claim to the throne whatsoever: his Beaufort ancestors, John of Gaunt's bastards by Catherine Swynford, had been legitimised by an Act of Parliament, but had subsequently been specifically excluded from the succession. Nevertheless, this trickle of Lancastrian blood was a valuable political asset in that intermittent series of dynastic struggles we call the 'Wars of the Roses', especially once the blood of the last direct heir of the House of Lancaster, the young Prince Edward, had been spilled on Tewkesbury Field in 1471.

After that final and catastrophic defeat for the Lancastrian cause, Henry's powerful and ambitious mother, Lady Margaret Beaufort, had spirited him away from England. For the next dozen years he was sheltered in the relative security of the court of Brittany, over which presided Duke Francis, a prince almost independent of his notional sovereign, the king of France. The insecurity of Henry's early life, measured out in plot and intrigue, left a permanent mark on him. By the time he launched what would turn out to be his triumphant bid for the throne in 1485, he was for all the world a sorry figure, a nobleman long separated from his domains, a refugee who knew more of France than of his native Wales or of the England he hoped to rule. His accession owed less to the innate strength of his claim or of his position than to the staggering ineptitude of his predecessor, Richard III, in dissipating within just a couple of years the legacy of political consensus which Edward IV had painstakingly accumulated for the Yorkist dynasty.

For all the trouble Henry took to bolster his dubious legitimacy, his reign was always overshadowed by the fact that he was little more than a noble adventurer who got lucky: the first dozen years of his reign were spent scheming and fighting against pretenders whose claims were only slightly more ridiculous than his own.

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Henry VII was haunted by an awareness of the political realities of his own success, as we can see in the suspicion, verging at times on paranoia, with which he viewed the governing class of his own country.

The family name of Tudor was of course Welsh, and the male line which Henry represented was of princely descent. After the destruction of the Glendowers (thanks to their disastrous revolt against Henry IV), the Tudors became the focus of the almost messianic political hopes and dreams (still preserved in a mass of bardic literature) with which the Welsh compensated themselves for military defeat and political impotence. Henry's Welsh ancestry, though of doubtful worth in English politics, was to prove invaluable in his bid for power in 1485. It was no accident that Henry landed in Milford Haven, and that Welshmen were numerous in his army. The troops brought to his banner by his uncle, Jasper Tudor, and by the Welsh magnate Rhys ap Thomas were the core of the force which faced Richard III at Bosworth Field. Indeed, much of the general success of the Tudor regime in Wales can be attributed to the Welsh origins of the new dynasty, and this loyalty, subsequently bolstered by the twin processes of union with England and religious reformation, was maintained under the Stuarts. Welsh troops were a major factor in the Wars of the Roses, and Henry's Welsh ancestry certainly helped him recruit the support of this crucial military constituency. Much later, Welsh troops were to be the core of Charles I's army in the first English Civil War, from the recourse to arms in 1642 to final defeat at Naseby in 1645.

Welshness was less of a recommendation to Henry's English constituency, although the evergreen Arthurian legends provided a useful way of bridging the cultural gap. 'Arthur' was a well-chosen name for his eldest son. Thomas Malory's hugely popular *Morte d'Arthur* had recently revived the Arthurian cycle's appeal to an English audience. Nor, thanks to his long exile, did Henry in fact bring with him the sort of personal following of Welsh hangers-on that might have offended English sensibilities in the way that James VI and I's band of Scottish freeloaders and carpetbaggers managed in the early seventeenth century. All Henry brought with him was a handful of English exiles.

Richard's reckless squandering of the political resources carefully built up by his brother opened the door to Henry. His first raid, launched from Brittany in 1484, achieved nothing more than to cause Richard to pursue his elimination through diplomatic manoeuvres. Henry had to flee Brittany for France. But in 1485 he had another go. His mother, whose various marriages had brought her a huge personal fortune along with a vast web of useful family connections, had negotiated an informal agreement with Edward IV's widow, Elizabeth Woodville, by which elements of the Yorkist connection would support Henry Tudor on the understanding that he would take Edward's daughter, Princess Elizabeth, as his wife. Encouraged at least by the evident lack of enthusiasm for Richard's regime, Henry set sail with a small band of loyal friends and mercenaries.

Landing in Milford Haven on 7 August 1485, Henry moved north and east through Wales, calling upon the Tudor connection in Pembrokeshire but also recruiting from

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the clients of the late Duke of Buckingham (executed by Richard III in 1483) and eventually securing the allegiance of the powerful Welsh magnate Rhys ap Thomas, who held Carmarthen Castle. His large Welsh force came together at Shrewsbury and then marched across the Midlands, encountering Richard's predominantly northern army near Market Bosworth in Leicestershire. Although most of the English peerage refrained from committing itself to either side, two large forces from the north also converged on this area: Yorkshiremen and Borderers under Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland, and men from Lancashire led by Thomas Lord Stanley (Margaret Beaufort's third husband and thus Henry Tudor's stepfather). In the ensuing battle, Stanley's decision to support Henry was no great surprise. Percy's refusal to commit himself to Richard was the decisive moment. It cost not only the king's but also his own life. Four years later the Earl of Northumberland, left conspicuously undefended by his own retainers, was lynched at Topcliffe in Yorkshire by a mob protesting against tax assessments. The underlying bitterness of the north against his betrayal of a man who, for all his faults, was certainly a northerner's king fuelled both the rage of the mob and the indifference of the retainers.

Richard III's death in action (outcome of a characteristic recklessness) made Bosworth Field a decisive battle. Henry took possession of London, summoned Parliament, and backdated his reign to the day before Bosworth: a legislative sleight of hand which enabled him to pass an 'act of attainder' against those who had opposed him. (An act of attainder was a statute declaring named individuals guilty of treason, and subjecting them to a range of penalties, most importantly the confiscation of all their property and goods.) The vast majority of the peerage had studiously held aloof from the Bosworth campaign. The Wars of the Roses had taught them that the risks of fighting on the losing side outweighed the benefits of fighting on the winning side. But they now thronged to demonstrate their loyalty by attending Henry's coronation on Sunday 30 October 1485.

Throughout his reign Henry was anxious to establish continuity with both of the preceding dynasties, the Yorkist as well as the Lancastrian. His marriage to Elizabeth of York, celebrated on 18 January 1486, sealed the loyalty of many of those Yorkists who had supported him against Richard III. More importantly, it added considerably to the perceived legitimacy of their children. The reconciliation of Lancaster and York in Tudor through this royal marriage was a recurring note of Tudor propaganda, vividly expressed in the full title of Edward Hall's chronicle, *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancaster and York*, and ultimately canonised in Shakespeare's history plays.

Henry also emphasised his affiliation with the Lancastrian house by encouraging the cult and canonisation of Henry VI (who, like Charles I after him, was far more esteemed after his tragic death than he had ever been in his lifetime: bad kings make good martyrs, and the incessant stream of miracles reported by his hagiographer, John Blacman, contrasts strangely with Henry's lifetime record of passivity and detachment). Indeed, the story was put about that when the young Henry Tudor was paying a visit to Henry VI's court, the saintly king prophesied that one day the

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A drawing of Henry VII by a French or Flemish artist.

boy would wear the crown. Perhaps the most remarkable feature of Henry's own presentation of his claim to the throne was that it was principally founded not upon his genetic, but legally questionable, descent from John of Gaunt through his mother, Lady Margaret, but upon a more tenuous family connection with an altogether more impressive royal figure, Henry V, through his father, Edmund Tudor. For Edmund was the son of Owen Tudor, a Welsh gentleman, by Queen Catherine de Valois, the daughter of Charles VI of France, the widow of Henry V, and the mother of Henry VI. Henry VII liked to refer to Henry VI as his uncle, which was strictly true (his father was Henry VI's half-brother), but tended to suggest a blood link to the Plantagenets through the male line – which was not true.

Henry devoted enormous energies to buttressing his flimsy dynastic status. Right of conquest, or at least trial by battle, constituted his initial title to the throne, and this violent foundation was at once glossed over and indirectly acknowledged in the declaration of his first Parliament that his reign had commenced the day before Bosworth Field. The fact that Parliament was the recognised organ of national consent thus lent further weight to his claim. At the same time, Henry sought sanction from the highest accessible authority. If God's decision had been given in battle, the decision of his vicar on earth, Pope Innocent VIII, was deemed almost equally valuable, not least in securing the obedience of the clergy, who still commanded considerable landed wealth and thus the political power which accompanied land in medieval society. Henry's appeal for papal confirmation of his title, incidentally, though far from an acknowledgement of the more extreme formulations of papal

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*[A block of Latin text from a papal bull, likely the one mentioned in the text below.]*

Papal support for Henry VII publicised in an official broadside, probably issued when Perkin Warbeck landed in Cornwall in 1497. Innocent VIII and Alexander VI had formally confirmed Henry VII's right to the crown, and this notice summarises their decree of excommunication against his enemies and their grant of indulgences to his supporters.

authority which still commanded some theoretical support in the papal curia, is nevertheless a more than adequate answer to those who, despite two generations of modern research, still insist on the outdated notion that medieval England resented and where possible resisted the claims of the papacy.

But Henry also had to convince his own people that he was their rightful king, and one of the traditional means of doing this was by displaying the king in person before his people on a royal progress. So on 10 March 1486 he set off on the first, and perhaps the greatest, Tudor royal progress. The first leg took him up to York, roughly following the line of the Great North Road, and calling at most of the major towns on or close to that route, such as Cambridge, Stamford, Lincoln, Nottingham and Doncaster. The second leg swept down across the Midlands to Bristol, by way of Nottingham, Birmingham, Worcester and Gloucester. The third and final leg took him across the country down the Thames Valley to London, by way of Abingdon. He was back at Westminster by June. The receptions in the greater towns were an opportunity for his new subjects to demonstrate their loyalty, and for the king to give earnest of his goodwill by confirming civic privileges and offering redress to grievances. They were also an opportunity for the king to make a timely demonstration of his power. In April 1486, Viscount Lovel and two gentlemen named Humphrey and Thomas Stafford, who had availed themselves of ecclesiastical sanctuary after fighting on the wrong side at Bosworth, broke out and tried to raise Yorkist support against Henry in Yorkshire and Worcestershire. Henry spent a good few days at both York and Worcester on his tour. Finally, visits to shrines en route saw him set up many votive candles in thanksgiving for his victory at Bosworth and in hope of the safe delivery of his wife, who was already pregnant with their first child.