

The invasion of '85 – how did Henry VII become king?

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

It was during a period of great instability in the later fifteenth century that a little-known boy, Henry Tudor, was born. Often imprisoned or on the run, this virtual orphan managed to achieve one of the most unlikely successes in British history by defeating Richard III at Bosworth and becoming King Henry VII. But who was he? How did he get away with it? And what were the Wars of the Roses – the events that provided the backdrop to Henry's dramatic bid for power?

In this chapter the following questions will be answered:

- A** What did Henry VII have to learn from the Wars of the Roses? (pp. 11–16)
- B** How strong was Henry VII's claim to the throne? (p. 17)
- C** How well did Henry VII's background prepare him for kingship? (pp. 18–19)
- D** Should Henry have won the battle of Bosworth? (pp. 20–24)
- E** Review: The invasion of '85 – how did Henry VII become king? (p. 25)

FOCUS ROUTE

This symbol represents Henry VII. When you see it

- note how Henry was involved in
- consider what action he should have taken or what he should have learned from



the Wars of the Roses.

A What did Henry VII have to learn from the Wars of the Roses?

The phrase 'Wars of the Roses' is one that still rings with meaning today. It conjures up images of destruction, lawlessness and irreparable division. The Wars of the Roses were a long series of civil conflicts as the Houses of York and Lancaster battled for the Crown. The Wars of the Roses provide the crucial context for Henry VII's successful usurpation in 1485, and it is important to understand the wars if we are to assess both the reception and the task that Henry would face when he became king.

2A What were the Wars of the Roses?

- 1 It was essentially a period of political instability at the top of the ruling system, involving the king and the NOBILITY.
- 2 The instability flared into open civil war on a number of occasions. The principal outbreaks were:
 - 1459–64
 - 1469–71
 - 1483–87.
 Note that the third period of civil war lasted two years into Henry VII's reign.
- 3 The participants cannot be clearly divided into Yorkists and Lancastrians; many members of the senior nobility were involved and some changed sides. Henry VII was a Lancastrian on his mother's side, although he bore the Tudor name from his father.
- 4 Henry VII played no active role in the conflict until his first invasion attempt in 1483.



NOBILITY

Nobles, or peers, had titles and could sit in the House of Lords. The five ranks of the nobility in descending order are: dukes, marquises, earls, viscounts and barons.

ACTIVITY

How many kings had lost their thrones through natural deaths

- (a) in the 160 years
(b) in the 30 years



before Henry VII came to the throne?
What obvious lesson did Henry VII need to learn from these statistics?

FOCUS ROUTE

Copy Chart 2C and, as you read through pages 12–16, identify the causes of the Wars of the Roses and list examples to support each cause.

MINORITY

A minority exists when a monarch has not yet come of age. Until that happens, the government is run by a regent or a regency council.

OVERMIGHTY SUBJECTS

'Overmighty' subjects were members of the nobility whose power and wealth had grown so great that they could challenge the position of the king.

ACTIVITY

How would bastard feudalism affect Henry VII?

- 1 According to Pollard (Source 2.1), what kind of personality would Henry VII need if he were to control the nobility successfully?
- 2 What level of loyalty and security should Henry VII assume he has from the nobility?
- 3 If he wanted to increase his control over the nobility, what would he need to do?
- 4 Does recent historical revision of bastard feudalism worsen or improve Henry VII's position as regards the nobility?

■ 2B An uncomfortable throne?

King	Reign	Fate
Edward II	1307–27	Deposed by Parliament. Murdered by being disembowelled with a red-hot iron.
Edward III	1327–77	Died peacefully.
Richard II	1377–99	Usurped by Henry. Died in prison.
Henry IV	1399–1413	Died peacefully.
Henry V	1413–22	Died peacefully.
Henry VI	1422–61	Usurped by Edward.
Edward IV	1461–70	Usurped by the Lancastrians.
Henry VI	1470–71	Usurped by Edward. Murdered by stabbing in the Tower of London.
Edward IV	1471–83	Died peacefully.
Edward V	1483	Usurped by Richard. Murdered in the Tower of London.
Richard III	1483–85	Killed at the battle of Bosworth.

What caused the Wars of the Roses?**■ 2C Causes of the Wars of the Roses**

	Long term	Short term	Immediate
First and Second Civil Wars, 1459–71	Bastard feudalism Change in balance of power between king and nobility	Economic and financial pressures on the Crown and the nobility Faction fighting and feuding among the nobility Defeat in the Hundred Years War	Weak character of Henry VI
Third Civil War, 1483–87		Weakness of MINORITY rule	Political ambition of Richard III

How did relations between the king and the nobility cause problems in medieval England?

The relationship between the Crown and the nobility was at the crux of the problems leading to the Wars of the Roses. To understand the changing relationship between the Crown and the nobility it is necessary to examine the wider social and economic forces that were gradually shifting power away from the monarchy. In particular, it is important to establish the nature and significance of bastard feudalism. And to understand the origins of bastard feudalism, the historian must look back to the creation of feudalism after the Norman Conquest.

Some historians have seen bastard feudalism as the root cause of the Wars of the Roses, since it allowed nobles to increase their power. These OVERMIGHTY SUBJECTS were then able to take the law into their own hands. According to R. L. Storey, 'The civil wars were the outcome of this collapse of law and order' (*The Reign of Henry VII*). This interpretation has since undergone some revision. It recognised that bastard feudalism was rife under Henry V and Henry VI, but it suggested that it would not inevitably lead to conflict. Indentured retaining did not necessarily create large private armies, since many of the retainers were administrators and not soldiers.



After the Norman Conquest, the legal and social system was known as feudalism. Under feudalism, the king ultimately held all landed property. The land was granted in turn to the tenants-in-chief, then to the knights and then to the serfs. In reciprocal arrangements, each group was obliged to perform duties for the group above it.



By the thirteenth century, feudalism had been replaced by bastard feudalism. This was a contract system in which annuities (annual payments) were given instead of land grants by the tenants-in-chief to knights in order to retain them. In times of need, the knights would be employed to give advice or military service.



Some retainers were kept in service by an indenture. This was a contract in which both parties kept half of the parchment, which had been cut along an indented line.

The replacement of permanent land deals (feudalism) with temporary financial ones (bastard feudalism) was a crucial factor in the changing relationship between the Crown and the nobility, for two reasons.



1 It would allow the nobles to build up an affinity (a following of men), which gave them wide influence in both politics and society.

SOURCE 2.1 A. J. Pollard, *Wars of the Roses*, 1988, p. 53

Bastard feudalism was in essence neutral. It could be a force for stability or for instability; it could be a vehicle for disorder and corruption or for order and legality. It very much depended on the local circumstances, on the personality of the lord and above all on the power and authority of the monarch. A commanding and inspiring monarch such as Henry V could co-ordinate and channel the energies of lords and their affinities into directions which were not self-destructive. A feeble and ineffective king like Henry VI stood by hopelessly as lords and their affinities turned on one another.



2 It would allow the nobles to raise an army quickly in time of war or rebellion, which might ultimately be used to threaten the king.

How did the Wars of the Roses begin?

Fourteenth-century politics was dominated by the long reign of Edward III (1327–77). He brought success and harmony to the country through his victories against the French in the Hundred Years War and through his policy of granting concessions to the nobility in order to win their support. This harmony, though, was bought at a price.

Edward's policy of conciliation towards the nobility was to result in problems for future monarchs. His successor, his grandson Richard II, tried to rule in a more autocratic fashion, but never succeeded in winning the trust of the nobility. Richard II was deposed by Henry, Duke of Lancaster, who became Henry IV.

Henry IV's son, Henry V, was successful because of his inspirational victories against the French. He returned as a hero after the overwhelming defeat that his archers inflicted on the French at Agincourt. But even he was not successful in restoring a balance of power that was more favourable to the Crown than to the nobility.

■ 2E The two sides

Lancastrians	Yorkists
HENRY VI	Richard, Duke of York
Margaret of Anjou (wife of Henry VI)	EDWARD IV (son of Richard of York)
Edward (son of Henry VI)	Richard, Duke of Gloucester (son of Richard of York; the future RICHARD III)
	George, Duke of Clarence (son of Richard of York)*
	The Earl of Salisbury
Lady Margaret Beaufort (mother of Henry VII)	The Earl of Warwick (son of Earl of Salisbury)*
HENRY VII (Earl of Richmond)	EDWARD V (son of Edward IV)
	Richard (son of Edward IV)

*Changed sides.

The story of the Wars of the Roses themselves must start with the Lancastrians and Henry V's only son, Henry VI. He inherited the throne when he was only nine months old. The Government was well run by the regency council during the period of his minority rule. The real problems began when Henry took personal control in 1437. He was a weak and vacillating monarch, easily dominated by his advisers, by the nobility and by his strong-willed and formidable wife, Margaret of Anjou. Henry VI's failure to provide leadership at the centre of government left a power vacuum that members of the nobility at court attempted to fill. This instability was heightened by the fact that, until the birth of Edward in 1453, Henry had no heir.

This tense political situation finally reached breaking point with two events in 1453:

- The French defeated the English at Castillon in France, effectively bringing the Hundred Years War to a humiliating end.
- Henry began suffering from a mental illness, catatonic schizophrenia, and was unable to communicate with anyone.

Although Henry VI recovered physically in 1455, he was not able to establish control. The court was now dominated by Queen Margaret and she was locked in rivalry with Richard, Duke of York, the leader of the Yorkist family. This tension spilled over on 22 May 1455 with the battle of St Albans. This battle is



best seen as a murderous preliminary round in the conflict. But the war itself began when Richard of York was forced to flee abroad with the powerful Nevilles (the Earl of Salisbury (father) and the Earl of Warwick (son)).

It was into this political storm that Henry Tudor, the future Henry VII, was born in 1457.

Stages of the war

The war can be divided into three stages.

Stage 1: 1459-61

The Yorkists returned to England and marched successfully to London, where Richard of York claimed the Crown. A quick series of fierce battles followed. During the battle of Wakefield, Richard, Duke of York, was killed and his son, after winning the battle of Mortimer Cross, seized the initiative and marched on London. He took the throne to become Edward IV.



After this Henry Tudor was separated from his mother and put under the guardianship of a Yorkist, William Herbert.

Stage 2: 1469-71

Edward IV established himself on the throne and successfully resisted the early challenges to his Crown. However, a powerful and very unlikely coalition of Lancastrians and former Yorkists (Margaret of Anjou, the Earl of Warwick and George, Duke of Clarence) unseated him in 1470. The pathetic Henry VI was reinstated as the figurehead monarch.

Edward IV returned in 1471 and the royal Lancastrian line was extinguished when the seventeen-year-old Lancastrian Prince Edward was murdered on the battlefield at Tewkesbury and his father, Henry VI, was stabbed to death in the Tower of London.



The only remaining Lancastrian candidate was the relatively insignificant Earl of Richmond, Henry Tudor. He had to flee to Brittany with his uncle, Jasper Tudor.

Stage 3: 1483-87

Edward IV's reign from his restoration in 1471 was one of achievement and consolidation. His position was strong for a number of reasons:

- His acquisition of the lands of the duchies of York and Lancaster and the confiscated lands of the Earl of Warwick made him the pre-eminent landowner in the country, so he had nothing to fear from other mighty nobles.
- An heir, Edward, was born in 1470.
- Lady Margaret Beaufort and her son, Henry Tudor (later Henry VII), were the only 'Lancastrians', but Edward had no reason to regard them as a serious threat because of the weakness of their claim.
- He provided law and order, and effective, authoritative government.
- He was sufficiently wealthy to have the means to 'live of his own', and so he was able to avoid introducing unpopular, heavy taxation.
- He governed through a council of his own choosing and stamped his personality upon the Government.
- He was a man of great stature (6ft 4in) and had an imposing presence. He had two sons and five daughters, and so there seemed to be no threat to his inheritance.



By 1483 Henry Tudor had been in Brittany for twelve years. As he looked across the Channel, what hope could he have had of deposing the formidable Edward IV?

Suddenly, though, in March 1483 Edward IV fell ill with pneumonia (a French chronicler at the time attributed his illness to the consumption of too much fruit at the Lenten dinner). He died from a massive stroke on 9 April, aged only 40. His young son, Edward V, succeeded him, but within three months Richard III had become king.

So why did Richard become king?

Edward IV's death should not have threatened the stability of the Yorkist inheritance. He had an heir (his son, Edward V, who was twelve years old) and a reliable regent (his brother, Richard, Duke of Gloucester, who had proved himself to be a loyal and effective servant for Edward IV in the north).

The explanation of why the Wars of the Roses flared up again in 1485 must lie with Richard. No one predicted Richard's next moves. In a devastating three-month period he:

- took the young Edward V into custody
- executed Lord Hastings (a loyal servant of Edward IV and the strongest supporter of Edward V)
- gained possession of Richard, Duke of York (the nine-year-old brother of Edward V)
- made Parliament proclaim him King Richard III
- probably ordered the murder of the two princes (Edward V and his brother, Richard) in the Tower of London.

The usurpation and, in particular, the widely held belief that he had murdered the princes took him beyond what was seen as acceptable political behaviour. Contemporaries were horrified by what he had done and he made many enemies, lost crucial friends and brought plans for rebellion into being. This made it harder for him to survive and throughout his reign he was waiting for the challenges that he knew would come.



One important conclusion that can be drawn from the reign of Richard III is that Henry's triumph in 1485 had as much to do with the lack of support for Richard as it had to do with the appeal and strengths of the would-be usurper.

Lessons for Henry

Henry VII did not just follow the Wars of the Roses and have to deal with their aftermath; the early years of his reign were *part* of the civil war. Henry Tudor used his Lancastrian credentials to help to stake his claim to the throne and through his usurpation he reopened the Wars of the Roses. Henry knew that the dynastic instability that he had helped to perpetuate might haunt him in his reign. It is therefore vital that we establish the lessons Henry had to learn from the Wars of the Roses if he were to govern successfully.

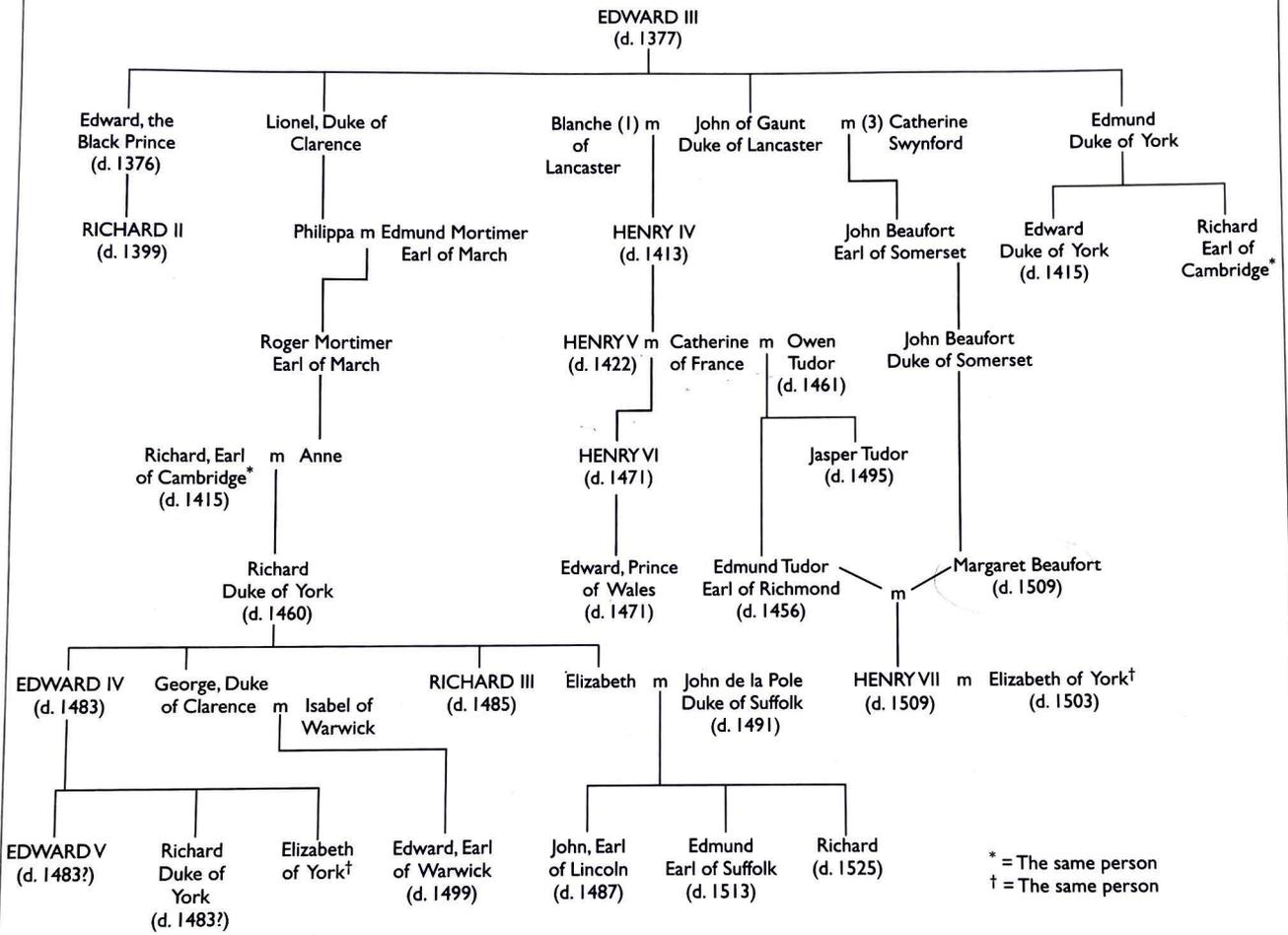
ACTIVITY

Use the text you have just read to find examples from the Wars of the Roses to support the points in the table below. Look particularly at the reigns of Edward IV and Richard III.

Lessons for Henry VII to learn from the Wars of the Roses	Supporting example or explanation
1 Support is very fragile, even among the monarch's close family and advisers.	
2 The monarch's position is insecure.	
3 It is important that the monarch has a strong personality and is a strong ruler.	
4 It is important to establish a strong and legitimate claim to the throne.	
5 The king must create an effective working relationship with the nobility.	
6 Actions and decisions must be taken carefully because the political situation is tense, unpredictable and unstable.	
7 The feelings, anger and ambitions of both sides run very deep.	

B How strong was Henry VII's claim to the throne?

ACTIVITY



* = The same person
† = The same person

To assess the strength of Henry's claim to the throne in 1485, read the hereditary rules for monarchs and then answer the questions that follow.

Hereditary rules for monarchs

- 1 The claim descends lineally to the legitimate issue of the sovereign. Because of this, sons of the monarch's eldest son have priority over the monarch's other sons and their children.
- 2 Males are preferred to females. (Females were not prohibited from being monarchs, but the last queen regnant had been Matilda in the early twelfth century and the result had been civil war.)
- 3 Male issues of subsequent marriages of the sovereign take precedence over daughters of previous marriages.

Questions on the family tree

- 1 To understand the competing claims to the throne in the fifteenth century, it is necessary to go back to Edward III and his sons. Although none of Edward's sons became king himself, the descendants of four of them eventually became kings. In the following table, which kings were descended from each son of Edward III?

Sons	Kings
Edward, the Black Prince	
Lionel, Duke of Clarence	
John of Gaunt	
Edmund, Duke of York	

- 2 From which of Edward III's sons did Henry VII's royal blood come?
- 3 Why was Henry VII's claim to the throne made stronger in 1471?
- 4 What would a marriage of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York bring together?
- 5 How strong was Henry's claim to the throne? Consider the following points:
 - Is his claim direct and unchallengeable?
 - Does he descend in a clear and obvious way from a previous monarch?
 - Was he always an obvious and strong claimant?
 - Did other people have stronger claims?

Answers to these questions are given on page 321.