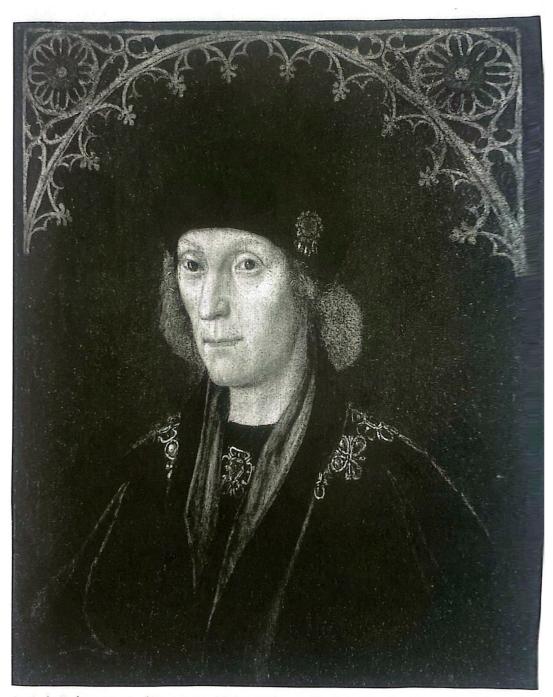# 3 Henry VII: 1485–1509

An early Tudor portrait of King Henry VII in middle age (English School, sixteenth century). Did the beginning of his reign mark the end of medieval England or could Henry VII claim to be the most efficient of late medieval monarchs?

The foundation of the Tudor dynasty

The Battle of Bosworth has traditionally been thought of as a landmark that divides the medieval from the modern in English history. But, as far as central and local government, and the economic and social aspects of life were concerned, the reign of the first Tudor, Henry VII, was little different from that of his immediate predecessors. He inherited all the institutions of government, together with their personnel, that had operated under Edward IV. Henry's aims and methods were also those of Edward and, because they had similar problems, Henry adopted similar policies. Henry's use of the council through a body of close advisers and frequent meetings made the council the effective centre of government and administration. His problems, as those of the Yorkists had been, were centred around his claim to the throne, and the inevitable challenges to this; his efforts to consolidate royal power; his promotion of a harder-working nobility and gentry; the struggle to build up royal finances (which necessarily entailed the use of parliament); and the avoidance of costly wars abroad. Like his predecessors, his relations with Scotland, Ireland and Wales were inextricably mixed up with the attempts to secure and consolidate his own power and the future of the Tudor dynasty. In these respects, and especially in his business-like qualities, Henry could be considered the most efficient of the late medieval monarchs.

Henry VII: his character and abilities

Henry Tudor was the son of Edmund Tudor, earl of Richmond, and Margaret Beaufort, the heiress of John of Gaunt. He was brought up in Wales by his uncle, Jasper Tudor. His mother, Margaret, was widowed at the age of thirteen, three months before the birth of Henry, her only child, at Pembroke Castle on 27 January 1457. Henry became head of the house of Lancaster in 1471 on the death (or murder) of Henry VI, but during Edward IV's reign he became a refugee in Brittany. Apart from his innate ability and good fortune, Henry owed much of his success in securing the throne to the determination and political sense of his mother Margaret. She helped to arrange his marriage to Elizabeth of York, kept him well supplied with money and, in effect, helped to organise the 1483 rebellion. Strictly speaking, she was the true Lancastrian heir, but she took little part in politics once her son was securely on the throne.

Polydore Vergil, the court historian, who knew Henry well, described his appearance towards the end of his life – he was only fifty-two when he died:

> His body was slender but well built and strong; his height above the average. His appearance was remarkably attractive and his face was cheerful especially when speaking; his eyes were small and blue; his teeth few, poor and blackish; his hair was thin and grey; his complexion pale.

Francis Bacon tells us that his countenance was 'reverend, and a little like a churchman' and that the only two women in his life were his mother 'whom he reverenced much' and that 'towards his queen he was nothing uxorious, nor

scarce indulgent; but companionable and respective, and without jealousy'. Unlike her mother, Elizabeth Woodville, the queen did not indulge in political intrigue.

Henry's administration: law and order and finance

Contemporaries agree that Henry VII loved justice, repressed violence, ended internal faction and won a reputation in Europe for the wisdom of his statecraft. He enjoyed the business of government and apparently supervised most departments. This was especially true of the nation's accounts, for he initialled many of the financial records himself. It is not clear, however, to what extent his agents, Sir Richard Empson and Edmund Dudley, used extortion on the king's behalf to build up a healthy treasury. Henry may very well have kept the trust and faith of his parliaments by not asking them to grant taxes too often, but he made up for this by fully exploiting all traditional sources of the royal revenue. Dudley became a tireless tax collector and, while so doing, feathered his own nest. Henry VII did not feel secure unless he was rich. A full treasury helps to explain why he was successful in quelling the rebellions against him; and it took him 15 years before he could feel safe from rival claimants.

Abroad, Margaret of Burgundy, sister to Edward IV, encouraged revolts. In 1487 Lambert Simnel announced that he was Edward, earl of Warwick, then in the Tower. He was crowned 'Edward VI' in Dublin because of the overwhelming support for the Yorkists in Ireland, but Henry put down his supporters at the Battle of Stoke in 1487.[1] Perkin Warbeck's claim to be Richard, duke of York, the younger son of Edward IV, supposedly murdered by his uncle Richard III, was more dangerous to Henry VII. This was because he was supported by the Scottish king, James IV, in 1496. Warbeck's landing in Cornwall in 1497 failed; he was captured, but not executed until 1499. This was the last notable attempt to rebel against Henry VII.

Most historians agree that Henry was a genius at organisation. The ways in which he consolidated the monarchy, laying the foundations of Tudor power, clearly demonstrate that ability. His breaking-up of the feudal power of the nobility, often referred to as 'bastard feudalism', was made easier to some degree by the extinction of some noble lines in the wars.[2] The king took over their estates and the lands of those attainted for having fought for Richard III. He forbade the practices of livery and maintenance and, when the local courts proved too weak to enforce fines, Henry set up a council 'Learned in the Law' in 1495 to deal with influential lords. This court, not to be confused with the celebrated Star Chamber Court, was a small body of a dozen members who saw to the collection of all feudal dues and debts owed to the crown and brought defaulters to justice.[3] Because he had a monopoly of gunpowder, Henry could take even more drastic measures, such as levelling keeps and castles if the barons persisted in opposing the monarch. The result was that Henry Tudor was the first English monarch not to be surrounded by barons whose united wealth and power were greater than his own. But this aspect of his rule must not be exaggerated – many nobles still owned great estates and therefore kept political influence.

It is often stated that Henry promoted 'the new middle-class country gentlemen' to counterbalance the power of the nobility; this too, must not be overstated. Henry's council had a mixture of nobles, clerics, lawyers and country gentlemen, many of whom were related to the great families of the land. Indeed, half of Henry's councillors had served Edward IV. While there was a mercantile middle class on the move and on the make – Empson, for example – it was very small and still had to make its way into the corridors of power.

Furthermore, while Henry also used every means at his disposal to increase royal wealth there was nothing new about his financial methods. Like Edward IV, he husbanded the proceeds from royal estates and exacted the full feudal dues from his rights of Wardship, Marriage, Promotions and Death incidents and he levied Forced Loans and Benevolences. He cleverly manipulated trade and foreign policy to his own financial advantage. Finally, he could also manage to get 'extraordinary' supplies from parliament. However, parliament was only called seven times during his reign. In fact, in every department of government Henry simply used the old institutions of council and of parliament more efficiently than his Yorkist predecessors. In that sense he did not create a 'new system of government'; it was rather the amount of crown wealth which he amassed, not its government or institutions, which is the most innovatory aspect of the new Tudor monarchy. He revived former provincial councils which had decayed to control rebellious areas, for example the Council in the Marches of Wales and the Council of the North. Overall the king's council was the centre of administration, the instrument of policy making and the final means for dispensing royal justice, and it was, therefore, the chief arena of political conflict.

Henry VII and Wales

By 1415, Wales had been irreversibly conquered, but the conquest did not bring political or governmental unity. Wales remained a mixture of private lordships and royal shires until well into the sixteenth century. In R. R. Davies's words, 'It was treated, in effect, as a collection of colonial annexes dependent on the crown and higher aristocracy of England.'[4] And yet it preserved its linguistic unity and literary traditions and a continued self-awareness among its peoples. The Council in the Marches of Wales was a development from the Council of the Prince of Wales. This had been set up to administer the prince's estates in Wales in the reign of Edward IV but it later lapsed. Henry VII made it a permanent institution for his son Prince Arthur and, after Arthur's death in 1502, it continued as the Council in the Marches of Wales. It was not given statutory powers until the Act of Union with Wales in 1536 and then had power to appoint sheriffs and justices of the peace. Through it, the semi-independent Marcher lords had to acknowledge the authority of the English crown. In time, the Tudor policy in Wales would see a fairly successful replacement of traditional Welsh landholding systems based on kinship and gavelkind[5] with an English-style squirearchy of freeholders.

The Council of the North

Edward IV and Richard III had appointed a Council of the North of England where the great border families of Percy, Neville, Scrope and Dacre ruled like independent princes with their own forces and with aristocratic authority. But Henry VII gradually made the intermittent Council of the North a virtual offshoot of his own council. He had to defend the country against the vigilant foe to the north and, like the Lancastrians and Yorkists before him, he had to entrust the defence of the frontier to the men of the frontier. He thus faced the dilemma of what to do should frontiersmen turn their arms against the government. Henry soon realised that to govern the north of England he needed a Percy, hence he had to release the great earl of Northumberland from the Tower and restore him as Lord Warden of the East and Middle Marches.[6] If possible, the council was to meet at York once a quarter to 'order and examine' all bills of complaint; it had powers to deal with 'riots, forcible entries, distress takings (robberies) and all other misbehaviours, against our laws and peace' and offenders were to be lodged in one of the royal castles. Finally, all orders coming from the council were to be headed 'By the king' and endorsed at the end 'And by his council'. It seems that Henry's mother, the countess of Richmond, and her circle had a strong influence on the North and in the Council of the North, and that Empson, his notorious tax-collector, also had some special authority in the North.[7]

Henry's concern for law and order can also be seen in his revival of the justices of the peace in local government; they were mostly landed gentry but their authority had dwindled; the king was determined to reward loyalty and so gain willing servants to restore sound government and economic prosperity. However, some of the 'newer' appointees proved to be as corrupt as the professional lawyer class with whom they came into conflict.[8]

Foreign affairs

Relations abroad were subordinated to the need for the new dynasty to be recognised and respected, a necessity which usurpers had long realised. Traditional hostility to France was still strong in England despite the help given by Charles VIII in financing the expedition that had led to Bosworth. It flared up again over French ambitions to annexe Brittany. Henry announced his intention to assert his claim to the French crown, yet cut short his expensive expedition to France in October 1492 in order to secure a favourable treaty with France at Etaples. In that treaty Charles VIII secured England's neutrality in his wars in Italy but he paid £150,000 to Henry for the privilege. It did not end English claims on France as they were revived in Henry VIII's time.

Henry VII's more famous foreign alliance, however, was the 1489 Treaty of Medina del Campo with Spain. This treaty provided for the marriage of his eldest son, Prince Arthur, with the young Spanish princess, Catherine of Aragon, when they both reached marriageable age, greatly enhancing Henry's prestige abroad.

Catherine's dowry to the prince on their marriage in 1501 was retained when she later married the future Henry VIII. Spain also made commercial concessions and Henry's treasury benefited from the increased trade which followed. Part of the agreement was war with France and, believing Henry's threats to wage war in 1492, Charles VIII made peace, as we have seen, on payment of a huge indemnity. Furthermore, since parliament had already voted money for the war, Henry virtually doubled his money.

By 1496, both France and the Emperor Maximilian courted English support for their Italian wars and, once again, Henry allowed himself to be bought off by the emperor, who agreed to a trade treaty between the ruler of the Netherlands, Philip of Burgundy, and Henry VII. This was the *Magnus Intercursus*, which was highly favourable to England. English merchants would be able to sell their goods wholesale anywhere in the duke of Burgundy's lands (except Flanders) without paying any tolls or customs. Henry went further to promote trade by agreement with other foreign powers such as Florence in 1490 and Denmark in 1496. In 1506, he negotiated yet another commercial treaty with Philip of Burgundy. But, even so, he had to confirm the privileges of the German Hanseatic League merchants in England in 1486 and again in 1504.

Henry hardly realised the future impact that his letters patent in 1496 to John Cabot and his sons would have. These were Genoese merchant adventurers, who had settled in Bristol, and were planning a voyage westwards across the North Atlantic. They were required to return any goods to Bristol, and were granted a monopoly of any trade they developed in the course of their maritime enterprises.

Marriage alliances and trade were both made instruments of policy; Henry's daughter Margaret married King James IV of Scotland – a union which cut across the ancient and dangerous alliance between France and Scotland – the 'Auld Alliance'. This marriage ensured a period of peace between England and her northern neighbour. James IV was strong and well loved in Scotland but he had to rid himself of the baronial factions that had opposed his father. Scottish forays into northern England continued the menace of lawlessness. It was not until the union of the two crowns under James VI and I that border anarchy abated.

Henry VII and Ireland

From 1470 to 1534, three successive earls of Kildare, Old English in origin, that is to say, descendants of the original Anglo-Norman, twelfth-century settlers, virtually ruled those areas of Ireland subject to the English crown. These consisted mainly of the Pale, which, by the sixteenth century, was a territory stretching in a thirty-mile radius from Dublin and certain garrison towns throughout the island. The delegation of royal authority to the earls of Kildare – the Fitzgeralds – meant that the English monarch need not concern himself directly with Ireland. The eighth earl of Kildare, Garret (Gearóid Mór in the Celtic sources) Fitzgerald was pardoned by Henry for his support of the Yorkist

pretenders and his restoration as Lord Deputy in 1496 began a period of uninterrupted Kildare rule in Ireland that lasted until 1519. The main reason was financial, as the Kildares were able to govern in the king's name without calls on the English revenue. This was because, after 1496, the major portion of royal revenues in Ireland was paid directly to Kildare for his civil and military administration in the defence of English interests. There is no evidence that the 'great earl', as he was called, wished to sever his links with the English crown and rule Ireland as a separate entity, nor is there any evidence that Henry VII wanted to abandon his reliance on Kildare as his agent of royal authority. The great earl and his son married into the English aristocracy; his second wife was Elizabeth St John, a relative of Henry Tudor – but five of their surviving sons and a nephew, Thomas (Silken Thomas), were to die on the scaffold in 1537. His son, Gearóid Óg, the ninth earl of Kildare, returned to Ireland in 1503, aged sixteen, already married to Elizabeth Zouche, but she died in 1517. Three years later, he married Elizabeth Gray, daughter of the marquis of Dorset. In this way the Fitzgeralds of Kildare were part of the circle of the English nobility.

It is significant that Kildare tried sporadically to extend his authority into the west and south-west at the expense of leading Gaelic Irish families and especially against the other rival old English families like the O'Briens of Thomond, the Burkes of Connaught and the Butlers, earls of Ormonde.[9] The famous 'Kildare Rental' entitled 'Duties upon Irishmen' shows a long list of Gaelic Irish leaders paying tribute to the Kildares and this adoption of practices from within the Gaelic political system was one of the main reasons for the general success of the Kildares.[10]

However, the Old English colony (also known, less appropriately, as Anglo-Irish), resented the extortionate methods of the Kildares and saw their government as acting against the best interests of the Old English colony in Ireland. This is one reason for a spate of reform plans and treatises originating from London and the Pale calling for the revitalisation of English law, custom and practice within Ireland. Indeed, this would have amounted to nothing less than a programme of Anglicisation, with some limited schemes of recolonisation. These reform plans may also be seen as a reaction to Irish support for Perkin Warbeck which, in turn, led to the appointment of Sir Edward Poynings as Governor and the dismissal of Kildare. The celebrated 'Poynings' Law' of 1494 restricted legislation in the Irish parliament. No bill, for example, could be introduced until it had been approved by London. This was all in very marked contrast to the policies pursued by the Kildares in the previous 40 years. These had favoured working within the Gaelic political system rather than trying radically to change it, thereby reinforcing the Gaelic revival of the earlier fifteenth century which had halted Anglicisation.

Kildare was reinstated as Lord Deputy, and in 1508 he was licensed to summon a parliament, the first since 1499. Its sessions resulted in the renewal of a ten-year subsidy;[11] all other bills including the regulation of trade were suspended on the news of Henry VII's death on 21 April 1509.

Henry's achievements

General assessments of Henry VII and his reign tend to emphasise his practica good sense, statesmanship, financial acuity (if not downright extortion) and all the methods he used to put the future Tudors on a sound footing. He has some claim to be regarded as the greatest of his dynasty. He kept the crown seized from the head of a rival slain in battle. He built a strong orderly government out of chaos, but by using existing institutions. He handed on to his son a secure throne, an undisputed succession, a full treasury, established prestige abroad and a prosperous foreign trade. Ironically, while Henry VII carefully avoided basing his claim on his marriage to Edward IV's daughter, his successor, Henry VIII, a son of Elizabeth of York, could claim to be king of England on perfectly legitimist Yorkist principles.

Document case study

Henry VII

3.1 A portrait of the king

From Polydore Vergil's English history, *an important source for the reign of Henry*

Henry reigned twenty-three years and seven months. He lived fifty-two years. By his wife Elizabeth he had eight children, four boys and the same number of girls. Three survived him, an only son, Henry prince of Wales and two daughters, Margaret marrie to James king of Scotland, and Mary betrothed to Charles, prince of Castile . . . He was distinguished, wise, and prudent in character . . . He had a most tenacious memory an was not devoid of scholarship . . . in government he was shrewd . . . none got the bett of him by deceit or sharp practice . . . by nature he preferred peace to war. Above all h cherished justice so that he punished with the utmost vigour, robberies, murders, and every other kind of crime . . . in his later days all these virtues were obscured by avaric . . . and in a monarch it is the worst of all vices, since it hurts everyone, and distorts those qualities of trust, justice and integrity with which a kingdom should be governe

Source: Polydore Vergil, *Anglica historia* (1485–1537), ed. and tr. by D Hay, Camden Series vol. 74, London, 1950, pp. 142–46

3.2 Henry VII's methods of collecting his royal dues

A Commission from the patent rolls, 7 August, 1486

Commission to John Fisher, serjeant at law, John Mordaunte, Richard Godfrey, Richa Sheldon, John Stanford and William Collet, to enquire in the county of Bedford of all concealed lands, goods and chattels, and of lands given in mortmain without licence [transferred to religious houses or corporations without royal permit]; and of all land acquired by Edward IV and Richard III and who were enfeoffed of them to the use of those kings . . . and to certify the king hereof in the Exchequer; also of all lands which the persons named in a schedule annexed held at their death in the said county.

Source: *Calendar of patent rolls*, Henry VII, vol. 1, 1485–1494, no. 133, HMSO, London

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