

Did the Tudors invent the Wars of the Roses?

It was in Henry VII's interests to propagate the concept of a titanic clash of dynasties in the 15th century – and for 500 years we've bought the lie, according to Dan Jones...



- [Dan Jones](#)

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On an early spring day in 1592, The Rose – a theatre in the London suburb of Southwark – filled with one of the largest crowds seen that year. The men and women who crossed London Bridge and scurried into the theatre from the dirty streets lined with brothels and bear pits had come to see *Harey the vjth*, performed by Lord Strange's Men. Today we call it *Henry VI, Part I*, by [William Shakespeare](#)

Harey the vjth was a hot ticket. Its exciting storyline – noble intrigue and monarchy in peril – echoed the uncertain spirit of the 1590s. Its battle scenes made full use of the Rose's wide stage, thrilling the audience with melées and slaughter, explosions and duels. It was tender, too: Lord Strange's actors could move theatregoers to tears.

But there was another thrill to this new drama. *Harey the vjth* belonged to a new genre of 'history' plays, which depicted – or claimed to depict – England's recent past. In this case, the subject was the period of upheaval we now call the [Wars of the Roses](#).

"I'll find friends to wear my bleeding roses," cries Edmund Beaufort, Duke of Somerset, in *Harey the vjth*. Standing in a rose garden, he has plucked a red flower from a great bush that stands between him and his nemesis, Richard Plantagenet, Duke of York. York has selected a white rose – "with this

maiden blossom in my hand/I scorn thee,” he spits – and the noblemen standing by have followed suit, choosing the colour of their rose to advertise their allegiance.

In 1592, this image made perfect sense. This was how the Wars of the Roses were generally understood. Against the backdrop of weak kingship and disastrous military defeat in France, two rival branches of the [Plantagenet](#) dynasty – [Lancaster and York](#) – had gone to war for the throne, using red and white roses as emblems of their causes. The war had shattered the country, causing tens of thousands of deaths and incalculable misery.

Only after decades of chaos had the family rift been healed by the victory of a Lancastrian, Henry Tudor, over a Yorkist, [Richard III](#), at the [battle of Bosworth](#) in 1485. Henry’s victory, and his subsequent marriage to [Elizabeth of York](#), reconciled the warring factions. Thus had been created the red-and-white ‘Tudor rose’ that seemed to be painted everywhere, reminding the populace that [the Tudors](#) stood for unity, reconciliation, peace and the incontestable right to rule.

It was a powerful and easily grasped story that, by Shakespeare’s day, had already been in circulation for 100 years. And, in part thanks to the success of Shakespeare’s brilliant cycle of history plays, this vision of the Wars of the Roses remains in circulation – on television, in film and in popular historical fiction. Lancaster versus York, red versus white: it is a story as easy to grasp as a football match at the end of which everyone swaps shirts. Yet it is misleading, distorted, oversimplified and – in parts – deliberately false.

In England, the 14th century ended badly – with regicide. Richard II, having been deposed by his cousin, Henry Bolingbroke, was murdered in prison during the early days of 1400. The usurper [Henry IV](#) endured a troubled reign, but his son, [Henry V](#), achieved stunning successes in the wars with France – notably the [battle of Agincourt](#) in 1415 and the [treaty of Troyes](#) in 1420, by which Henry V laid claim to the French crown for his descendants.

But in 1422 Henry V died of dysentery. His heir was a nine-month-old son, [Henry VI](#), whose birthright – the dual monarchy – required the men around him both to pursue an expensive defensive war in France and also to keep order in an England that was fairly groaning with dukes, earls and bishops of royal blood. Disaster surely loomed.

Or did it? It is often assumed that the Wars of the Roses began simply because, by the 15th century, there were too many men of royal blood clustering around the crown, vying for power and influence over a weak-willed king. Yet if that were the case, civil war would have broken out straight after Henry V’s death.

The baby king was watched over by two charismatic and extremely ‘royal’ uncles, John, Duke of Bedford, and Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester. In addition, many more adult relatives of royal descent were expecting a stake in power, including Cardinal Henry Beaufort, bishop of Winchester, who maintained a bitter feud with Gloucester.

Yet the 1420s saw no serious unrest. Rather than fighting one another, the English nobles showed a remarkable unity of purpose at the moment of greatest royal weakness. They did not hive off into dynastic factions, but stuck together, kept the peace and attempted to preserve a normal system of royal government. Even when men came to blows, as Beaufort and Humphrey did in 1424, the violence was quickly stopped and the protagonists reprimanded. There were no roses. There was no blood. And this peace lasted a long time.

The trouble with Henry VI

But Henry VI grew up a very strange man. Perhaps this was unsurprising: denied the apprenticeship of princedom, child kings tended not to become very able rulers – witness [Henry III](#) and Richard II. Yet no medieval English king was ever as weak as the adult [Henry VI](#).

He was indecisive, absent, vague and naïve, an impossibly innocent and squeamish king whose flaws could be explained by embarrassed courtiers only in terms of his great personal piousness. But this was of little use in winning a war with France, and Henry's gentle, bovine incompetence and lack of military leadership soon became a terrible problem.

Henry was anointed king of France in 1431, but never fought for his crown. At home, meanwhile, he was hopeless: unable to offer any direction to government, unable to keep the peace between noble families who fell out (such as the Bonville and Courtenay families in south-west England, and the Neville and Percy clans in the north) and incapable of choosing wisely between competing counsellors.

Yet Henry's weak kingship did not immediately cause a dynastic war. England coped for a remarkably long time – thanks chiefly to the efforts of William de la Pole, Duke of Suffolk. With offices in the royal household, a post on the royal council, a close personal relationship with Henry VI and a substantial array of landholdings across southern and eastern England, Suffolk directed royal government from behind the scenes to an increasing extent through the 1440s, tacitly supported by a large group of other nobles. By the time Suffolk fell from power (impeached by parliament and murdered by rebellious sailors off the coast of Kent in May 1450), Henry VI's reign was 28 years old – yet still there had been no civil war.

What had happened, however, was a devastating English collapse in France. It began around 1429 with the arrival of [Joan of Arc](#) before the walls of Orléans, continued with the gradual loss of Normandy to the forces of Charles VII of France, and ended on 17 July 1453 with humiliation and defeat at the battle of Castillon, when the renowned captain John Talbot, Earl of Shrewsbury, was killed.

This war rocked English pride, wrought havoc on royal finances and created personal feuds (but not dynastic rivalry) between men such as Richard, Duke of York, and Edmund, Duke of Somerset. It also sent Henry VI mad.

Henry's illness rendered him catatonic. It came in bouts, the first in 1453–54, and it emboldened his enemies, resulting in civil war. At the first battle of St Albans on 22 May 1455, the king's cousin, Richard of York, and his allies including [Richard Neville](#), Earl of Warwick – the 'Kingmaker' – defeated forces led by Somerset. What followed, it's usually suggested, was 30 years of intermittent civil war in which York fought Lancaster, the crown changed hands and eventually the Tudors won at the [battle of Bosworth](#). But it wasn't quite that simple.

Understanding the Wars of the Roses

We will understand the Wars of the Roses better if we divide them into four phases. During the first, from 1455 to 1460, there was a confused attempt to vie for control of government. Richard of York argued that his great aristocratic lineage and proximity to the king in blood (as third cousin, once removed, on his mother's side) gave him the right to steer government during the king's incapacity. [Margaret of Anjou](#), though, jealously defended her own rights and those of her infant son, Edward, Prince of Wales, by allying with the Beaufort family and others. This was not chiefly a dynastic conflict, though all protagonists had royal blood, but a tussle for political dominance.

This phase came to an abrupt end in 1460 when York, having been defeated in battle at Ludford Bridge the previous year, realised he could now never be reconciled with the indignant queen, and assumed that his only hope for survival lay in escalating the argument. Fatally, he decided to claim the crown itself. When Neville defeated a royal army at Northampton, Henry VI was forced to disinherit Prince Edward and appoint York and his descendants to the royal succession.

Then – and only then – the wars became dynastic. And it is worth noting that, though the white rose was one of a number of badges used by York and his family, the ‘Lancastrian’ royal family never used the red rose as a symbol during the conflict.

This second phase lasted about a decade. York died at the battle of Wakefield in 1460, but his son Edward took up his royal claim and, after victories at the battle of Mortimer’s Cross and the [battle of Towton](#) in 1461, took the throne as [Edward IV](#). Yet he had neither killed nor captured Henry VI or Prince Edward, so spent the first 10 years of his reign fighting to secure his crown.

He won battles at Hexham and Hedgeley Moor, and wed a ‘Lancastrian’ – a widowed minor noblewoman, [Elizabeth Woodville](#) – pre-empting Henry VII’s inter-factional marriage by more than 20 years. Alas, no intertwined roses were produced – and Edward’s omission would be the [Tudors’](#) gain.

Edward’s reign was not straightforward. He was forced from the throne in 1470, when the disgruntled Warwick defected to Queen Margaret and helped her restore the moth-eaten Henry VI. But Edward struck back – conclusively. In 1471 he killed Warwick at the [battle of Barnet](#) and Prince Edward at the [battle of Tewkesbury](#), and had [Henry VI murdered](#) in the [Tower of London](#). This marked an end to this truly ‘dynastic’ phase of the Wars of the Roses: one side was comprehensively defeated, and the other had comprehensively won.

Yet, as we know, that was not the end. A third phase began in 1483 after Edward IV’s death when [Richard III](#) usurped the throne, reopening the old wounds of 1460–71. Whatever his arguments for seizing the crown – almost uniformly specious – the new Yorkist king’s brutal power-grab and the dreadful fate met by the Princes in the Tower created a huge faction of implacable opponents who preferred to see anyone but Richard in charge. It was in this context that they turned to Henry Tudor, a Welshman who had lived much of his life under house arrest in Brittany.

This brief third phase of 1483–85 was also not dynastic. It was confused, desperate, opportunistic and lucky. Henry Tudor’s Lancastrian royal lineage was threadbare (he had a better claim to the French throne than the English), and his main attraction was his promise to marry Edward IV’s daughter, [Elizabeth of York](#), and continue the ‘true’ legacy of the old king. This made him useful to the angry Yorkists, and earned him just enough support from exiled Edwardians to make invasion possible.

In 1485, Henry won at Bosworth. It was a close-run battle that could easily have gone the other way, but he killed Richard III and took the crown – and then, true to his word, he married Elizabeth of York. The Tudors subsequently devoted a great deal of energy and propaganda to portraying Bosworth as the end of the story – but in a sense it was only the beginning.

[Henry VII](#) was acutely aware of how hard he would have to fight to keep his crown. His success at Bosworth was impressive, but it also encouraged others to see the English crown as a bauble, a thing so denuded that anyone with a drop of royal blood could raise an army and take it. One by one, they tried. So began the fourth phase of the Wars of the Roses in 1485; it lasted for at least 30 years.

In 1487 John de la Pole, Earl of Lincoln invaded England with the pretender [Lambert Simnel](#) (who claimed to be Edward IV's nephew Edward, Earl of Warwick) and a gang of Swiss mercenaries. Henry defeated them at the [battle of Stoke Field](#), but others continued to plague him. [Perkin Warbeck](#) pretended to be Edward IV's younger son, Prince Richard; he was sponsored by Edward IV's sister Margaret, Duchess of Burgundy, and raised an army that disrupted the whole of south-west England before he was captured in 1497.

Warbeck was executed in 1499, alongside the real Edward, Earl of Warwick, who had lived his whole life in prison and certainly offered no genuine threat to Henry beyond his potential as a figurehead for further rebellion. Yet these deaths did little to calm Tudor minds. As [Henry VII](#)'s reign progressed, he devoted much time and money to continuing to fight the Wars of the Roses.

Tudor paranoia

The Tudor rose appeared everywhere, its implied narrative of 'families reunited' popping up in cathedral doorways, the margins of prayerbooks and manuscripts in the royal library. The king's second son, Prince Henry, was created Duke of York in 1494 to try to shut down all other claims to that family's legacy. Potential rivals, however minor, were mercilessly hunted. Edmund de la Pole, a nephew of Edward IV who had fled the realm, was captured in 1506 and remained imprisoned for life. The warning to others was clear.

This paranoia outlived Henry VII. His son [Henry VIII](#) grew up fearing the spectral 'Yorkists' and, like his father, treated them mercilessly. Henry had Edmund de la Pole summarily beheaded in 1513. He hounded Edmund's brother, Richard de la Pole, across Europe, and celebrated heartily on learning of his death at the battle of Pavia in 1525. In 1541, the 67-year-old Margaret Pole, one of the last living nieces of Edward IV, was hacked to death in the Tower by a novice axeman, a spectacle that shocked Europe. Margaret was branded a potentially rebellious Catholic, but her fate was almost certainly decided by the fact that she was – in theory, at least – a Yorkist.

By the time Margaret Pole died, the Wars of the Roses had all but sputtered out. Yet for half a century they had been a vital part of the Tudors' programme of self-justification. It was this part of the war that had been the most overtly 'dynastic', and it is no surprise that historians writing in the mid-16th century viewed the 15th century through that lens. Edward Hall's huge chronicle history of England called (to give it its short title) *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancastre and Yorke* gave a decidedly 'Tudor' version of events. Hall was followed by writers such as Raphael Holinshed, who provided source material for Shakespeare. By the 1590s, history had been determined – even if it had been somewhat warped in the process.

A middle-aged theatregoer watching *Harey the vjth* in 1592 might have remembered the coronation of [Elizabeth I](#). Perhaps, as they watched York and Somerset pluck white and red roses from a bush, they recalled a stage that stood on Fenchurch Street during the coronation. On it was representations of English royal history as an intertwining rose, with branches of red and white blooms writhing together and emerging as one plant in the person of Henry VIII.

They could have reflected on how poetically neat English history in the 15th century had been, and how consistent it had been in the telling ever since. It is testament to the power of that original Tudor myth that it persists to this day.

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