

Chapter Twenty-One

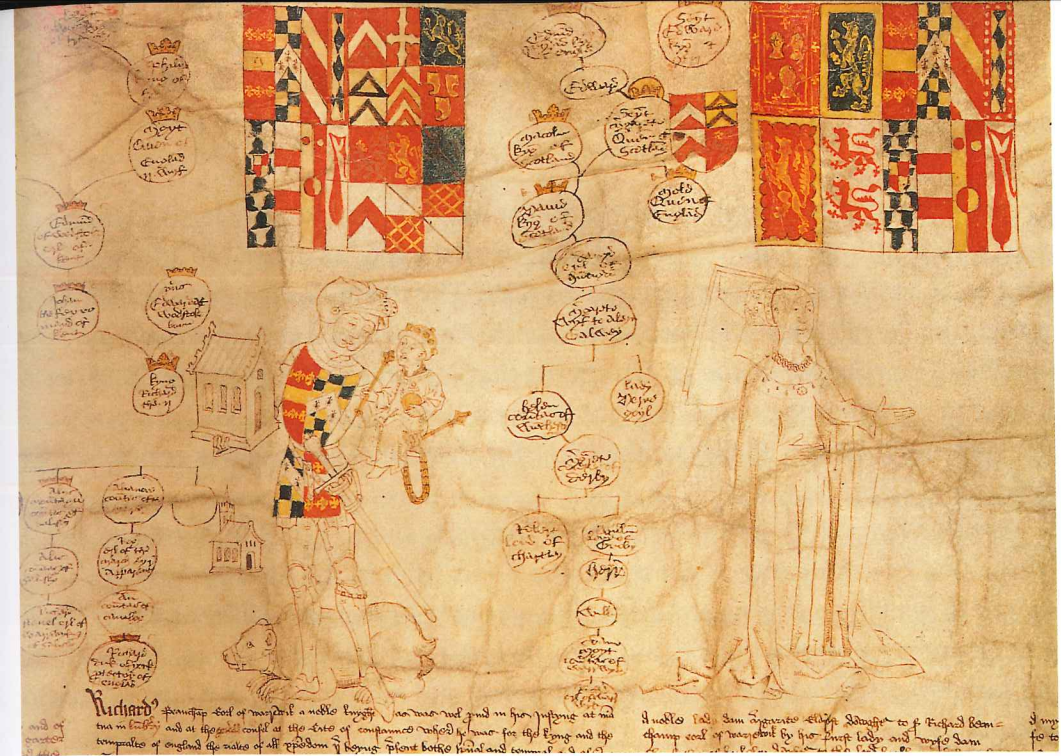
THE WARS OF THE ROSES

HENRY VI was only nine months old when he came to the throne but by the age of three he had opened Parliament (where he 'shrieked and cried and sprang'), and at ten he was crowned in Paris as Henry II, king of France. Although a child king always presented problems there seemed no reason to fear disaster, for the king's two uncles, Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester and John, Duke of Bedford, guided the state. Both were politically astute and cultured, and Bedford was a successful regent of France. But in 1435 he died. Then, when the king reached the age of twenty, Gloucester fell from favour.

What no one had foreseen was that Henry VI was to grow up a simpleton. The whole running of the country depended on having a forceful and intelligent king.



The birth of Henry VI on 6 December 1421. A drawing from a series made c. 1485-90 called *The Pageant of the Birth, Life and Death of Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick*.



Henry inherited his father's name without any of his abilities. John Blacman, a Carthusian monk who was one of the king's chaplains, described him thus:

'A diligent and sincere worshipper of God was this king, more given to God and devout prayer than to handling worldly and temporal things . . .'

A medieval king had to lead both in peace and war.

Henry did neither. He was a saint in the making, pious, peace-loving, easily influenced, a faithful husband and a loving father – but a hopeless king. He went to battle not to fight but to stand clutching his prayer-book ready to be taken by whichever side won. After a nervous breakdown in 1453 he became the pawn of whoever seized power, the victim of the rival parties who took sides in what we call the Wars of the Roses.

These civil wars would never have happened if the character of Henry VI had been otherwise. Law and justice at the time depended on the king making effective use of his nobles, because there was no army or police force. To make the system work, the king had skilfully to choose the right allies within the ranks of the nobility and reward them with titles, lands and offices. His failure to do so meant that people could no longer look to the crown for the exercise of law and justice and, as a result, were forced to turn to the next best thing, the great lord whose power in the locality in which they lived would protect them. In return they would wear his livery and badge and, if necessary, fight for him. This meant that gradually the whole of England

Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick, known as the Kingmaker, was entrusted with the upbringing of the young Henry VI. Here he holds the infant monarch crowned and carrying the orb and sceptre in his arms. A drawing from the *Rous Roll*, c. 1480-85.

became divided up into groups loyal to this or that lord; in turn the lords themselves became split into factions supporting this or that party at court. To this must be added local feuds and rivalries between families. The north, for instance, was divided between the Nevilles and the Percys, the south-west between the Courtneys and the Bonvilles. The collapse of the crown meant that law and justice were gradually perverted and criminals were not brought to book because they had the protection of some great lord. Worse, all this set the scene for civil war. The prize was control of the crown and government, with all that that meant in terms of power and rewards.

The only real solution to the country's problems was to get rid of the king; and it is surprising how long it took for that to be done. Men in the Middle Ages devoutly believed that a king was a sacred being set apart at his coronation. It took thirty years for someone to seize the throne, but even then the nobility were uneasy. It was only after forty years and Henry's murder that a new and strong king, Edward IV, could successfully rule.

There was no lack of claimants to the throne, because Edward III, the king's great grandfather, had so many sons. Henry VI was descended from his third son, John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster. When he became of age, the king made the terrible mistake of excluding from the government the one man who had perhaps a better claim than he did, being descended from both Edward's second and fourth son. He was Richard, Duke of York, a man of immense ambition. In 1450 Richard began to demand a place in the government of the kingdom. At first he failed to get it and then, when the king fell ill, he was made Protector of England and set about exerting power.

This inaugurated the long period of instability known as the Wars of the Roses during which the government became the victim of whoever could wield enough strength to seize control. There were those who had been in power earlier in the reign headed by the king's strong-willed queen, Margaret of Anjou. Henry had married her in 1445. She was by nature tempestuous and the first to resort to arms in defence of her husband and of her only son, Edward, Prince of Wales. On the other side there was York and those who had been excluded like the Nevilles. Both could muster armies and when the king recovered his health in 1455 the Yorkists had to take to arms and capture him at the first Battle of St. Albans to re-establish their hold on government. That hold, however, was to be short-lived for royalist forces not long after regained it. There then followed a tumultuous period in which first one side and then the other gained control of this pathetically weak king, but ending finally in the defeat of the Yorkists who were forced to flee the country.

During a period of twenty-five years the crown was to change hands no less than six times. The great break came with the decision that the king should be replaced.

That only came slowly. When Richard, Duke of York, landed at Chester in 1460 it was clear that this time he had come to claim the throne, and he marched on London with that intent. When he got there, the most the lords would do was recognise him as heir apparent, passing over Henry VI's own son. York's triumph was short-lived for the Lancastrians defeated him at the Battle of Wakefield Bridge, the duke being killed and his head cruelly adorned with a paper crown and set on the gates of the city of York. But he had an able, energetic and handsome heir in Edward, Earl of March. He led a new Yorkist army to victory at Mortimer's Cross, during which three suns prophetically appeared in the sky, and after which he marched on London and was installed as King Edward IV.

It was, however, to take him ten years to establish himself as king. That was due not only to renewed efforts by the Lancastrians to restore Henry VI but because Edward's greatest ally, Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick, known as 'the kingmaker', was to prove treacherous. Edward was driven into exile again and owed his restoration as much as anything to his brother-in-law, the Duke of Burgundy. In March 1471 he landed in England eventually reaching London which opened its gates. There then followed a whirlwind campaign. At the Battle of Barnet in April Warwick was slain. A month later at Tewkesbury the Prince of Wales was killed. Soon after Henry VI was murdered and Margaret of Anjou eventually went into exile in France. This wiped out the Lancastrians and signalled the real end of the Wars of the Roses.

Today we see these wars through Shakespeare's plays written over a century later in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. It was natural then, of course, to depict the previous century as a turbulent one from which her grandfather, the Lancastrian Henry VII, had rescued the country by defeating the tyrant Richard III and marrying the Yorkist princess, Elizabeth. In this way writers in the sixteenth century re-wrote the history of the previous one, presenting it as a bloody battlefield littered with dead in thousands, fought over by two parties whose badges were the white rose of York and the red one of Lancaster. The reality of fifteenth century England was very different. A French chronicler records:

'England enjoyed this peculiar mercy above all other kingdoms, that neither the country nor the people, nor the houses were wasted, destroyed or demolished; but the calamities and misfortunes of the war fell only upon the soldiers, and especially upon the nobility.'



Livery badges were a feature of the Wars of the Roses, worn by followers of particular persons as expressions of loyalty. The white swan was the badge of Henry VI's queen, Margaret of Anjou. This jewel would have been worn by someone of rank and was found near the site of the Battle of St. Albans.

In short, normal life went on. Towns and cities tried to keep out of the war by avoiding taking sides or hedging their bets. In fact they were so little affected that they rarely bothered to repair their walls and certainly did not build new ones. Trade continued as usual. Many of the officers of government stayed in their posts regardless of who was in power. Most of the country in fact saw no fighting at all. The war was also remarkable in that on only one occasion was there plunder and pillaging.

Surprisingly, there was a new sense of security which was reflected in building. Castles became transformed into houses with large windows to let in the light, where comfort and not defence was the key consideration. Large numbers of beautiful churches were built all over the country in the delicate airy style named Perpendicular. Eton College Chapel, Windsor, and King's College Chapel, Cambridge, are two of the most famous.

So the bewildering changes of who was or was not in power and the long list of battles gives a very misleading picture of the age. There were only thirteen weeks of real fighting during thirty-two years. Numbers killed ran into hundreds and not thousands. As the same French chronicler wrote:

'It is a custom in England that the victors in battle kill nobody, especially none of the ordinary soldiers, because everyone wants to please them . . .'

The reason why there was no such thing as a prolonged war was because no one knew how to keep an army supplied. In addition, apart from the professional soldiers, the army was made up of people like farmers and yeomen who worked on the land and were always anxious to get home to their crops. The war was also indecisive because like was fighting like.

Both sides had cavalry, foot soldiers, archers and artillery. Due to the fact that the arrows killed the horses the knights would dismount and fight on foot with swords, maces or battle axes. Even this they found difficult because their armour was so heavy and hot in summer. The huge loss of life by the nobility was due to their role in battle, that of leading their retainers. Attended by their standard bearers they stood out as targets to be cut down.

What really brought the main period of the Wars of the Roses to an end was everyone's realisation that a strong king was needed. As the war progressed the nobility gradually came to be aware that little was to be gained by this perpetual turmoil in which the lives of members of their families were lost and their lands taken from them by the rival party. More and more they avoided joining either side. The growth of that attitude was to ensure the success of the rule of first Edward IV and later that of Henry VII.