

How strong was  
henry vii's position on  
the throne in 1485



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Henry VII ascended to the throne of England after nearly one hundred years of civil war, unrest and multiple Kings of varying political skill.

Much of the nobility had learned to operate outside of the monarchy, and the feudalism principles (every noble owing patronage to the sovereign) installed by William I had gone awry. The Wars of the Roses were caused by the descendents of Edward III's sons; Lionel Duke of Clarence and John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster. The rival factions of Lancaster and York were formed and in conjunction with various noble families, fought over who they wanted to be the King of England. Although the Wars of the Roses did not begin until 1455, the fighting started when Henry Bolingbroke, who became Henry IV, deposed Richard II in 1399. The line of King Henry IV reigned until 1461, and the line descended from John of Gaunt's first marriage became extinct in 1471 when Edward, Prince of Wales and his father Henry VI were executed by Edward IV; the first Yorkist King.

Therefore, when Henry VII was born to Margaret Beaufort and Edmund Tudor, in 1457, it seemed unlikely that his vague claim to the throne would ever amount to anything. Henry's mother, Margaret Beaufort was descended from John of Gaunt's second marriage to Catherine Swynford. It is arguable, that Catherine and John's son John Beaufort was a bastard (conceived before the marriage took place), and therefore illegitimate. However, in 1396, after the marriage of John of Gaunt and Catherine Swynford had taken place, their children were legitimised by a papal bull, which was recognised by an act of Parliament in 1397. Unfortunately for Henry Tudor, when Henry IV became King, he passed an act banning any of Catherine Swynford's descendents from ascending to the throne, further weakening Henry's claim.

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Furthermore, Henry's grandfather Owen Tudor's marriage to Catherine of France may never have taken place, although if it did it is believed to have been in secret around about 1431. The chance that the descendants of the Tudor line could perhaps be illegitimate also adds to the weakness of Henry's claim. When the Wars of the Roses commenced, one by one the Lancastrian claimants died, and the crown passed to the House of York. Edward IV had Henry VI and his son Prince Edward executed, and scared for his life, Henry and his uncle Jasper fled to exile in Brittany. Edward IV reigned for fourteen years, but on his death in 1483, his younger brother Richard, who had remained loyal throughout the duration of Edward's reign, made a move to seize the throne for himself. Edward IV's sons; Edward V and Richard Duke of York were placed in the tower, and their sister Elizabeth of York fled to France with her mother Elizabeth Woodville.

Richard III assumed the throne, and it was believed by many that the two young sons of Edward IV were murdered in the tower on the orders of Richard III. As a result, Richard was not a popular King, and it became apparent that there was a possibility of Henry Tudor returning from exile and replacing the Yorkist with a branch of the house of Lancaster. With help from the King of France, Henry raised an army of mercenaries, and landed at Milford Haven on the 7th August 1485. He was outnumbered around two to one on the battlefield, and neither Henry nor Richard could be sure of the support of the Stanley family, who commanded an influential four thousand men. Fortunately for Henry, the Stanley's fought and probably won the battle for him, Richard was killed and Henry became King by right of conquest. However, the Wars of the Roses had a lasting effect on the English.

There was very little respect for the monarchy – and no particular reason for people to believe that Henry Tudor would remain King for any longer than his Lancastrian predecessors. The fact that Henry was King through right of conquest meant little if he could not enforce loyalty throughout the country and gain the support of his nobles. But Henry had not had much support from English nobles during the battle of Bosworth, and the York family lived on through the de la Pole brothers, whose mother was sister to Edward IV. The brother's claim to the throne was not strong, but probably just as valid as Henry's own. Furthermore, Edward IV's sister Margaret of Burgundy (married to the Duke of Burgundy) was prepared to use her husband's resources to further the Yorkist cause, and famously supported Perkin Warbeck's pretence to be Richard Duke of York.

Not only did Henry's lack of support from the English nobles weaken him, but his lack of a standing army could also be seen as an issue. Henry landed in Milford Haven with mercenaries paid for by the French King; conversely, his nobles had forces upon whom they could rely on to fight for them. Moreover, as the nobility learned to work outside of the monarchy, they became 'overmighty' and many of them believed they could place whoever they pleased on the throne by sheer force. This did not bode well for Henry – if he could not secure loyalty from his nobles then it seemed likely they would try to replace him; Henry became King in battle – there was no reason he could not lose his position in the same way. Three of England's last four Kings had been killed; Richard III died in battle at Bosworth 1485, Edward V was presumed to have died in the tower 1483, Henry VI and his heir died in the tower 1471.

The Wars of the Roses were not the only factor contributing to possible instability at the start of Henry VII's reign. Henry was not just a relative unknown in England; he was seen by many as a Frenchman. French was his first language; he had spent fourteen years in Brittany and hired an army at the expense of a French King. This did not appeal to many nobles - who did not like the French. Henry also had no experience in kingship.

He had never ruled over people and so was not expected to be the able tactician he was. He had no heir, and so no one to succeed him should there be an uprising of any kind, or if he died a natural death. There was strong opposition to Henry by people like Margaret of Burgundy, who spoke out against Henry as a usurper with a weak claim to the throne. By the rights of primogeniture, the de la Pole brothers, who were directly descended from the second son of Edward III, had a stronger claim than Henry, who was descended from his third son.

None the less, Henry did possess many advantages. He was King through right of conquest, implying that God wanted Henry to become King and so made sure he won the battle. Therefore, if God wanted Henry to be King, then the nobles had no right to try and depose him. The suspected regicide of Richard III was a positive aspect for Henry; the sons of Edward IV were believed to be dead and so could not claim the throne.

Richard III's son Edward died in 1484, and with Richard's death in battle, his line had become extinct, which further strengthened Henry's claim. The house of York was marred by Richard's actions and the only other Lancastrian claimant was Jasper Tudor, Henry's uncle who swore his

allegiance and remained loyal to Henry until his death in 1495. Henry's marriage to Elizabeth of York was seen by many as a move to unite the warring houses, as their children would be of Edward III's blood on both sides; if Henry could remain on the throne long enough for Elizabeth to produce an heir, then their children would have had an undisputable claim to the throne. However, Henry made sure his marriage took place after his coronation, so that there was no possibility of his critics saying he only achieved the throne because of his wife. The marriage took place in January 1486, and Prince Arthur was born in September of that year, giving a sense of permanence to Henry's reign and hope to the people.

During the Wars of the Roses many of the nobles were bent on engaging in mutual destruction; their subsequent deaths had returned lands and titles to the crown. Those beneath the nobility in the class system were willing to welcome Henry and his promise of peace and stability; many of the noble's retinues were prepared to support Henry after a generation of political change and instability. Henry's exile in France and obscure Welsh ancestors could also be seen to work in his favour; it resulted in him having very few enemies in high places. Bosworth had given him the opportunity to prove himself as a good soldier and strong leader.

His time in France allowed him to develop a strong political skill; he had been penniless, lived in exile at the pleasure of the Duke of Brittany, convinced the King of France to pay for him to raise an army of mercenaries. The combination and volume of such factors were likely to lessen the opposition to Henry's claim to the crown. Following the battle at Bosworth and the subsequent actions of Henry VII, there were very few 'super nobles' who had

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the power to depose Henry. By 1485, most of them had been killed in battle or executed by the various Yorkist and Lancastrian Kings.

The fact that Henry had received very little support from nobles on the battlefield could also be seen as a positive after the battle was won. Henry owed nothing to the majority of the nobility; it was only the Stanley family who were instrumental in Henry's victory - and they have been regarded as opportunists. They were not prepared to outright support Henry from the beginning of the battle. (However, Richard III, knowing he could not rely on the Stanley family, took George Lord Strange (eldest son of Lord Stanley) hostage as a means of securing their loyalty during the battle.) Therefore, once he was King, Henry owed very little in the way of patronage to his nobles.

Henry backdated his reign to the 21st August 1485 - the day before the battle took place. This meant that Richard III and all those who fought for him could be attainted (declared to have committed treason by an act of Parliament) and so their lands and titles reverted to the crown. Henry imprisoned the Yorkists with a stronger claim to the throne than his own; he put the Earl of Warwick (son of George Duke of Clarence) and William de la Pole in the tower of London and left them there. The Earl of Northumberland (who had been present at Bosworth but had not engaged in the battle) was imprisoned soon after Henry was crowned, but had been released by December 1485 and given the opportunity to prove his loyalty to Henry's government. Henry insisted that the Earl's son be brought up at court so a royal eye could be kept on him. It was not until 1499 that he was allowed to return to his family's lands.

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John de la Pole, Earl of Lincoln (nephew of Richard III and Yorkist claimant to the throne) and his father Duke of Suffolk professed loyalty to King Henry, which he accepted and invited John de la Pole to join his council. Henry, although he treated Richard's supporters with suspicion, was prepared to give a second chance. The Duke of Norfolk died at Bosworth, and Henry imprisoned his son the Earl of Surrey until 1489 when he became convinced of the Earl's loyalty. Henry also tried to ensure the loyalty of the Viscount Beaumont by asking for financial surety, and he kept the heir of the Earl of Westmorland at court along with the heir to the Earl of Northumberland.

The treatment of key Yorkists gave Henry another opportunity to demonstrate his innate shrewdness and political skill. Henry recognised that his lenience would earn the gratitude of key families, and if they remained loyal to him then there was no reason why they could not reenter royal favour. Henry was not only lenient with Richard III's supporters; he was also quick to reward his supporters. Jasper Tudor became Duke of Bedford, and representative of royal authority in Wales. Sir William Stanley was granted the office of Lord Chamberlain, Lord Stanley was honoured with the hand of Margaret Beaufort and the title Earl of Derby.

John de Vere, who travelled over from France with England was rewarded with the title Earl of Oxford. Henry's generosity, like his lenience was a manoeuvre to inspire loyalty and encourage the nobility to work towards the success of his reign. Henry was establishing himself as a talented tactician by the way he handled the nobility and quickly cemented his authority throughout the country. When Henry Tudor became Henry VII in 1485, his reign was not expected to last greatly longer than a year.

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He united the factions of York and Lancaster within three months of his coronation by his marriage to Elizabeth of York. He inspired loyalty in the nobles who had led the Yorkist cause, he promised peace and stability to the lower classes, and he secured his dynasty with an heir within eleven months of being crowned. There were numerous obstacles working against Henry; there were Yorkists with a claim to the throne at least as strong as his own, he was seen as a Frenchman, he had little support from English noblemen, he had no standing army and the nobility believed they could place whomever they pleased on the throne. But despite numerous reasons that should weaken his position on the throne, Henry VII managed to secure himself quickly and gain control of England and the respect and loyalty of its nobles by sheer political skill, a shrewd mind and decisive merciful action, gaining not only patronage but also respect.

There may have been uprisings, pretenders and people determined to undermine Henry's control later in his reign, but he, a relative unknown, ended civil war in England and secured a dynasty lasting almost one hundred and twenty years.