

How innovative was henry viis kingship history essay



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Henry VII was King of England from 1485-1509, winning the crown at the Battle of Bosworth Field, which ended the Wars of the Roses. According to John Guy, "few in English history have ascended the throne with less experience of government than Henry VII"; this makes it remarkable that Henry was able to found a dynasty that would last until the death of his granddaughter in 1603. Henry's reign can be seen as a transition between the medieval and early modern periods, so it is important to look at whether the English monarchy had changed accordingly during Henry's time on the throne. This essay will look at Henry's kingship, the new ideas that he brought to enable him to stay in power, and in some cases, how he built on and improved the ideas of his predecessors. The level of innovation in Henry's financial policy, attitude towards the nobility, and how he presented himself and his family will all be topics that will be discussed, as well as the possible influence of Edward IV; a monarch whose kingship seems similar in several ways to that of Henry VII.

Due to the nature of Henry's accession to the throne, his immediate aim in 1485 and the years that followed was to create a secure state. He wanted to remain in London, so therefore had to extend his rule; he did this by increasing the power of the Justices of the Peace, and by the end of Henry's reign they had surpassed Sheriffs to become the chief local government officers.[2] These Justices depended upon Henry for their position, and through them he was able to exercise his will across most of the country without having to leave London. By comparison, Henry's French contemporaries exercised very little authority outside of Paris, as the powerful French dukes and other nobility controlled large swathes of France.

[3] In order to implement his policies, Henry would need a certain amount of control over Parliament, something which his predecessors had not realised, or were not skillful enough to obtain. Henry VI's reign was characterised by too great a dependence on Parliament, leaving the legacy of a weak ruler, whereas Edward IV and Richard III were inclined to treat Parliament with contempt.[4] Henry was able to find a middle ground between these two extremes, and gave him great influence over the House of Commons. Henry effectively controlled the appointment of the Speaker of the Commons, and therefore selected people who he knew would be loyal to him, and channel his interests through Parliament.[5] Henry was able to rule effectively without much assistance from Parliament; from 1485 to 1509 Parliament met on only seven occasions, and five of these occasions were in the first decade of Henry's reign.[6] This would suggest that once Henry believed that he had secured his position as king, he felt that he no longer had to consult with parliament, his preference being to use the Council for Learned Law, which allowed him to avoid parliament.[7] Under Henry parliament became a 'rubber stamp', an official seal of approval for Henry's policies, indicating the control he wielded over the Commons.

At the beginning of Henry's reign the Exchequer was in control of royal finances, a system which was largely free from corruption, but was crippling slow, and left Henry short of money. He needed money to finance a royal army, in order to survive on the throne, and establish himself as king. It is here that the influence of Edward IV can be seen; Henry reinstated the King's Chamber, an institution that was more streamlined and more efficient than the Exchequer.[8] Henry developed Edward's system, and it was a mixture of

innovation and improving on existing ideas that earned Henry the reputation as a master financier.[9]The men who held the post of Treasurer of the Chamber, Sir Thomas Lovell and Sir John Heron, became two of Henry's most trusted aides, and working with expert advisors such as Sir Reginald Bray, the Crown became extremely accomplished at maximising profits from its lands.[10]It could be argued that Henry's policy of centralisation was forced rather than an innovation, as it was necessary for him to exercise control over the whole country in order to prevent a threat to his kingship. In a European context, the policy could be considered innovative, but in a English context, the government was already more established than much of Europe, and it would seem to be the next logical step by any monarch in a position to do so, in this case, Henry VII. The King's Chamber was certainly an innovation, as it helped to improve the efficiency of Henry's finances, but it could certainly be argued that the innovation was Edward IV's, and it was borrowed and developed by Henry.

Considering the way he had taken the throne, Henry could not afford to ignore the power and influence possessed by the local nobility. Henry therefore needed to exercise a certain amount of control over these nobles. Henry outlawed retaining, the practice of nobles raising a private army, which significantly reduced the chances of any noble being able to challenge the king. By pursuing a policy of appointing members of the gentry to the important local and regional roles, this prevented already powerful nobles from dominating an area. This was a clever policy, as by promoting members of the gentry to administrative posts; it improved their social standing, and tied them to Henry, making it likely they would be loyal to him. Henry liked

to keep the older nobility around the court as it made it easier for him to keep an eye on them; he grew suspicious if any member was absent for any significant period of time.[11] Henry limited the number of new lords that he appointed. This heightened the status of the title, as so few lordships were awarded, the recipients would be particularly grateful to Henry that they had been singled out for social elevation, and were loyal to him. During his reign, he appointed one Earl and five Barons, in contrast to Edward IV, who created nine Earls and thirteen barons.[12] The number of peers dropped from fifty-five to forty-two, as Henry did not replace some of the families that had died out.[13] Henry was quite happy to reward noblemen that he trusted, but he handed out responsibility less often than previous kings. Many of the grandest offices that had previously been targets for noble ambition were now kept by the king, or granted to his sons, preventing the nobility from wielding any great power.[14] Henry viewed the nobles that he trusted as weapons in enforcing his rule across all regions, placing loyal nobles in areas of the country that he considered disloyal. The House of Lords was to echo the Commons in expressing the views of the king, as Henry filled it with spiritual peers, who were dependent upon him for their status.[15] These men occupied positions in Henry's Star Chamber and Privy Council, which grew in importance during Henry's reign, and acted in the best interests of the king. Henry was perhaps allowed to be slightly more innovative in the way he dealt with the nobility, and had more room to manoeuvre, as the Wars of the Roses had wiped out many of the powerful noble families, which previous kings such as Edward IV had to deal with.[16] Nonetheless, Henry managed the threat of the nobility very effectively, and there were no uprisings that were a major threat to Henry's rule. Henry incorporated the

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gentry into local government and the merchant classes into administration, creating a loyal, functional and effective state, that was under his control.

It could be argued that Henry's greatest innovations came in the field of the economy. Henry was meticulous in his administration of the country's finances, and took a more prominent role than arguably any king before him in their management.[17] He was able to accumulate and exploit crown lands in a way not done by previous kings. The first act of Parliament in Henry's reign was the Act of Resumption, which restored all lands taken from the crown since the 2nd of October 1455.[18] Similar acts followed, allowing Henry to confiscate the land of his enemies, which was absorbed into the crown estates, adding to Henry's personal revenue. Parliament also restored some property lost by the crown as far back as the reigns of Richard II and Edward III, showing the degree of influence Henry had over Parliament, and how they were willing to work in the best interests of the crown.[19] Henry possessed a greater swath of crown lands than any English monarch before him, which allowed him to collect large amounts of rent, adding to the wealth of the crown. There was little that was new in the structure of Henry's financial administration; much of it was derived from the Yorkist precedent, especially the ideas of Edward IV.[20] Henry's innovation was his hard work and dedication toward rehabilitating the royal revenues of England, something no previous English king had done with such vigor. The Yorkist model was unquestionably improved upon by Henry, although it can only be speculated how Edward IV would have fared had he been given the time on the throne that Henry had. Henry VII was heavily involved in the expansion of the navy, strengthening it by building a greater number of warships, which

created more opportunities. In times of peace he hired out warships to traders in times of peace, with merchants using Henry's ships to journey as far as the Levant.[21] Henry revolutionised the navy, turning from a means of transporting troops, into a weapon of offence. He built a dry dock in Portsmouth in 1496, an innovation which had not yet been seen in France or Spain.[22] Henry was able to increase royal revenue to over £100, 000 per annum, compared to the £70, 000 per annum of Edward IV's reign. [23] However, although Francis Bacon talks of Henry's financial prowess, he was still poor in relation to other monarchs; in 1509 Henry's income was £113, 000, whilst the income of the King of France in the same year was £800, 000.[24] Overall, Henry's main innovation in crown finances was himself; it was his hard work and determination that allowed him to leave his son a full treasury, which was used by Henry VIII and later Elizabeth I to cement England's status as a European power.

Henry won the crown in battle, and he would need to act quickly to silence any questions relating to his claim to the throne. His use of imagery was crucial to this, a trait that was passed down to the future Tudor monarchs. Edward IV and Richard III had used the white rose as a symbol of the house of York, and perhaps as a response to this Henry and the house of Lancaster began to associate themselves with the red rose.[25] Once Henry had become king, the red rose was a symbol among many; Henry's great innovation was to combine the white rose and the red when he married Elizabeth of York. The Tudor rose symbolised the joining together of the houses of York and Lancaster, and gave the Tudor dynasty a symbol and an image they could be associated with. The first issue of Henry VII coinage

included the double rose, in a clear contrast to the single rose which appeared on the coinage of Edward IV.[26]Henry's use of the Tudor rose on his great seal set a precedent for his successors, all of whom copied it into their own designs.[27]There is no indication to suggest that Henry designed the rose, but he certainly adopted it and used it widely, and it was used by his successors to strengthen their hereditary claim to the throne. Henry's widespread use of his dynastic badges on buildings, documents proclaimed his inherited right to rule.[28]Henry's use of imagery is perhaps his most important innovation; it created a legacy that his Tudor successors could build upon and use to their advantage.

Henry is described by Polydore Vergil as generous to foreign visitors, and was lavish in his hospitality towards them.[29]It is likely that Henry was keen to project himself as a great European monarch, and by impressing foreign guests he hoped they would tell tales of Henry's grandeur in their homeland. Henry rebuilt some of the royal palaces, and his favourite, Richmond was styled in the fashion of the Burgundian court which fitted in with the European style of kingship he was attempting to present. He built new towers with royal lodgings at Windsor and the Tower of London, and constructed a new house at Greenwich, closely following the style of the brick urban houses of the Burgundian Netherlands.[30]Henry was not able to completely transform the English monarchy into an early modern European monarchy, but he certainly laid the foundations that allowed the more celebrated Henry VIII to perform on the European stage.

In conclusion, although there were innovations in Henry's kingship, most notably the adoption of the Tudor rose, overall his reign and legacy was built
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on hard work rather than innovative policy. Much of his financial reform was built upon innovations and ideas of his Yorkist predecessors. Edward IV introduced the King's Chamber to the English monarchy, and Henry reinstated it at the start of his reign, and by working hard, with meticulous attention to detail, he was able to transform the fortunes of the English crown's finances. Temperley describes Henry as "the maker of modern England, the forerunner of our naval greatness", and this is a fair assessment, as his reign left a solid foundation on which Henry VIII and Elizabeth I could build. It is no criticism of Henry to say that his kingship was not particularly innovative, he was successful by using common sense and working hard. He reduced the power of the nobility, a job made slightly easier by the fall of many of his enemies in the Wars of the Roses, centralised the government, and nursed the finances of the crown back to health. His use of imagery and heraldry created the idea of a Tudor dynasty, and did much to legitimise his claim to the throne. He could be called an opportunist, in the sense that many of the reforms he implemented were not his, but it could also be argued that he worked hard to create the opportunity, and was therefore entitled to it. There were innovations in Henry's kingship, and although most of them were not his, he worked as hard as any monarch before or after him to ensure the success of the English monarchy.

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