

Henry VI

Nice guy,
terrible king

Henry VI was merciful and generous. But what English kings required most during the Wars of the Roses was a core of steel - and Henry's lack of one would make him easy prey for his foes.

Lauren Johnson tells the story of a monarch who was simply too soft to lead his troubled nation

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As a child king, Henry VI - shown in a c16th-century portrait - learned the lessons of kingship from books. Unfortunately, those books didn't extol the merits of ruthlessness and practising realpolitik



Henry VI: calamitous king

By the time he was killed in 1471, Henry had the distinction of having lost two kingdoms – one of them twice

On the morning of 22 May 1455, King Henry VI heard the tolling of the bells of St Albans in the shade of his battle standard, surrounded by armed followers. For the first time, at the age of 33, he was about to experience battle – against his own subjects.

Yet Henry was no bellicose tyrant. He was devoted to peace, and even now, with a Yorkist army at the gates, led by his greatest enemies, he was so confident that matters could be resolved peacefully that he and his bodyguard failed to don armour. But as the bells fell silent, the distant sounds of violence shattered the king's complacency.

The Yorkists had abandoned negotiations with Henry's commanders and forced an entry through the gardens on the edge of the city. Henry's refuge in St Albans marketplace was suddenly overrun with enemy soldiers, arrows whistling through the air, his attendants clustering around the horrified king as they faced an opposing army unarmoured. The result was inevitable. Henry's escort was slaughtered, defensive wounds to the face and arms attesting to their inferior preparations. The king was wounded in the neck and dragged into a tanner's cottage to save him from the hail of arrows. Within half an hour the town, and Henry, were in Yorkist hands.

The battle of St Albans was a contest for control of the king – and, as such, is widely regarded as the opening clash of the Wars of the Roses. The result was that England collapsed into a state of civil war – between supporters of Henry's Lancastrian dynasty and his Yorkist rivals – from which it would not recover for 30 years.

Henry VI's reign is rightly remembered as a nadir in English history and 1455 signalled the beginning of the end. But defeat at St Albans was not the first calamity to assail the king. Between 1450 and 1453, Henry had lost the majority of his continental kingdom, as it tumbled to a resurgent French army. By 1453 the English had been expelled from every corner of the realm but Calais. That collapse inspired rebellion in England. Within six months, four of Henry's chief advisers had been butchered by his vengeful subjects. Even worse, these events prompted the arrival on the domestic scene of a man capable of rallying the growing opposition to Henry: the king's distant cousin Richard, Duke of York.

In his struggle to retain control of at least one kingdom, and to reject rival Yorkist aspirations for government, Henry exhausted himself physically and mentally. In 1453 he collapsed into a profound mental breakdown from which he had only just recovered when his forces were routed at St Albans.

In 1461, six years after St Albans, Henry's Lancastrians suffered an even more damaging defeat, at the battle of Towton. Here, in the Yorkshire snow, 28,000 men were slaughtered in what is the bloodiest battle in English military history.

Even that was not the end of Henry's troubles. He was twice deposed by Edward IV, son of the Duke of York, so that by the time Henry died at the age of 49 in 1471 he had the unfortunate distinction of having lost two kingdoms – one of them twice. He had also lost his only child, Edward, in battle, and his liberty to the Tower of London. He was murdered there, on Edward IV's command, on the night of 21 May 1471. One source claimed that, by the end, he had retreated into mystical visions and hallucinations, perhaps once again suffering from the mental ill health that had troubled him for two decades.

Son of a war hero

How had it come to this? Henry VI had seemed to be in a formidable position when he inherited the 'dual monarchy' of France and England in 1422. His father was Henry V, the victor of Agincourt, whose right to the French throne had been confirmed in the Treaty of Troyes in 1420, which it was hoped would end the long war between England and France. The Lancastrian dynasty was replete with capable, experienced statesmen, chief among them Henry V's brothers John, Duke of Bedford and Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester. Henry VI had every advantage then, except his youth. For when Henry V died – having never met his only child – Henry VI was only nine months old.

The example of previous child kings was disheartening: Henry III (who inherited his throne at nine in 1216) had faced prolonged civil war with his own barons; Edward III (who acceded, aged 14, in 1327) had endured a faction-ridden infancy as his mother and her lover controlled the kingdom; Richard II (king at 10 in 1377) had been deposed by



An illustration showing the English army's disastrous defeat by the French at the battle of Formigny, April 1450. England's military collapse in Normandy triggered a major rebellion back home and seriously undermined Henry VI's authority

TIMELINE Henry's disastrous reign

1422

Before his first birthday, **Henry VI inherits the thrones of England and France**. His uncles rule on his behalf.



Henry VI is crowned king of France in Paris in 1431, a move that provoked the French

1426

The infant Henry presides over the 'Parliament of Bats' as **warring factions struggle for supremacy**, members of each side hiding wooden bats in their clothing.

1440

To celebrate attaining his adult rule, **Henry founds Eton College**. The following year he establishes King's College, Cambridge.

1445

Hoping for a peace treaty to end the Hundred Years' War, **Henry marries Margaret of Anjou**, a French princess (below).



1447



Henry's uncle the **Duke of Gloucester (above) is arrested for treason** and dies in royal custody. Rumours persist that he was killed by Henry's leading councillors.

1450

Most of France is lost. Cade's Revolt seizes London. Four of Henry's councillors are murdered and the **Duke of York returns from Ireland to assert his right to lead the government**.

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1453

Henry suffers a mental breakdown so profound he cannot recognise, nor respond, to his family. The 'sickness' lasts 17 months, during which time Henry's only child is born. York serves as Protector.

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Richard, Duke of York became the most powerful man in England in 1455

1455

At St Albans, York and his supporters attack Henry. A number of Henry's attendants are killed and he is injured, possibly again falling ill. **York seizes control of government**.



1456

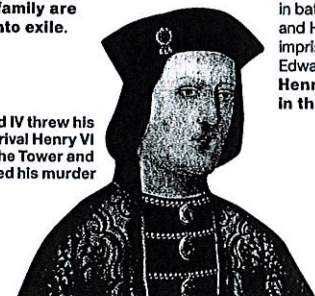
To undermine York's authority, **Queen Margaret removes Henry and the Lancastrian court to Coventry**.

1461

York's son Edward IV deposes Henry VI. After Edward's victory at the bloody battle of Towton in Yorkshire, **Henry and his family are forced into exile**.

1465

Henry is captured by Edward's supporters and imprisoned in the Tower of London.

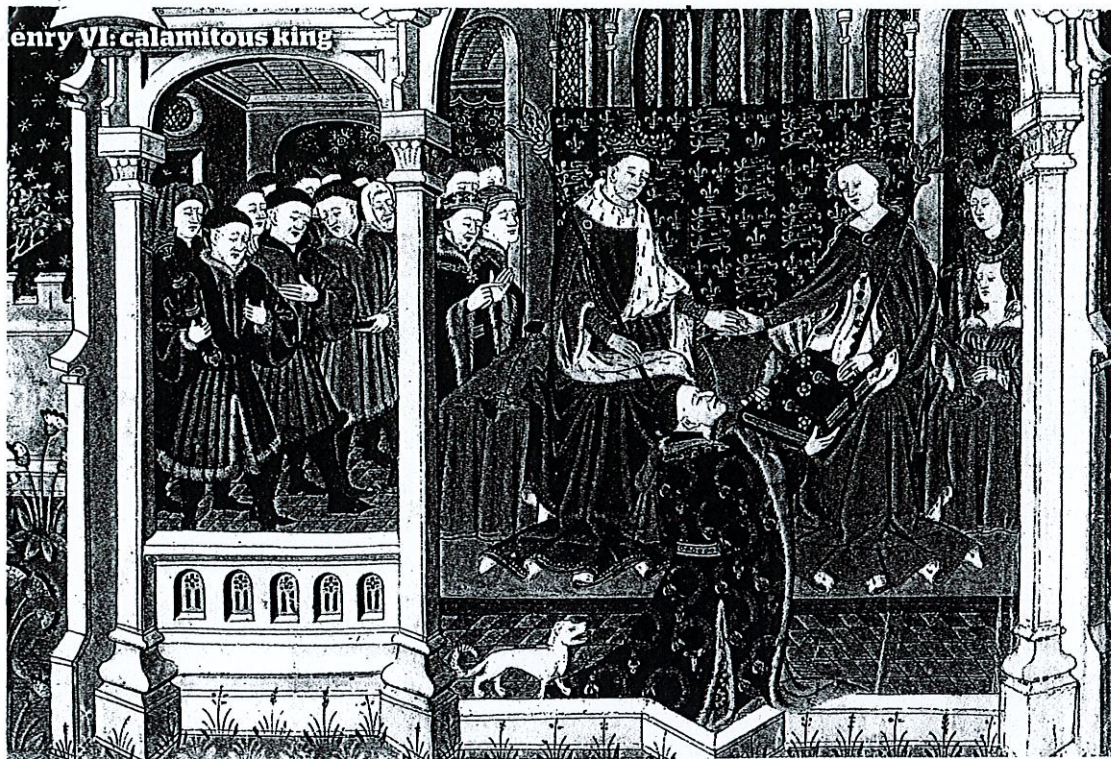


Edward IV threw his great rival Henry VI in the Tower and ordered his murder

1471

After Margaret briefly secures Henry's restoration, the Lancastrian regime is again toppled. Henry's son is killed in battle. Margaret and Henry are imprisoned. At Edward's command, **Henry is murdered in the Tower**.

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Henry VI with Margaret of Anjou. The English king may not have possessed an iron will but his wife certainly did, leading the resistance when Henry was deposed by Edward IV in 1461

Henry VI's Lancastrian forebears. However, when Henry V died, the English political system rallied around their baby king, his uncles Bedford and Gloucester stepping in to rule the dual monarchy with the help of a royal council until Henry VI was old enough to do so himself.

Henry's minority is remembered as a period of relative calm, but it only appears so because his later years were so turbulent. In fact, the root of many of Henry's troubles can be found in his childhood. His uncles were ambitious men who blighted Henry's youth with their sometimes violent disputes. Time and again Henry was called upon, despite his youth and inexperience, to resolve their quarrels, expected to serve as final arbiter of complex, adult dynamics that had taken form before he was born. As he was a sensitive, serious child, it is little wonder that he shrank from conflict in later life.

Worse; the war in France had not ended with the deaths of Henry V and the French king Charles VI, both in 1422. Henry VI's right to rule there was now violently contested by his maternal uncle, Charles VII, requiring constant supplies of men and money be churned from an already denuded English treasury. In an attempt to undermine

As a sensitive child surrounded by warring advisers, it is little wonder that Henry shrank from conflict in later life

Charles's claims, in 1431 (at the grand old age of 10) Henry VI was crowned king in Paris, the only time he ever visited his French patrimony. His coronation proved a costly error, committing the English to further campaigns and nudging Henry towards real rule before he was ready for it.

A lack of foresight

On his return to England in 1432, Henry first agitated for control of government (or was persuaded to do so by his uncle, the Duke of Gloucester, who had more to gain by dominating the young king than he did by accepting continued shared rule with his rival

kinsman). But despite having been crowned in both England and France, Henry's attempts were rebuffed by his councillors, who told him he had not yet developed the necessary "foresight and discretion" for independent rule. The accusation that he lacked discretion undermined Henry's confidence. To avoid censure he cultivated the habit of delegating power to others and in the years ahead Henry was dominated by one leading adviser after another: first Gloucester, then William de la Pole, Duke of Suffolk, who became something of a father figure to Henry. Most famously, Henry was influenced by his wife, Margaret of Anjou, the French princess whom he married in 1445 in hopes of securing an Anglo-French peace and a much-needed heir to the throne.

Because of his need for a firm guiding hand to transform his vacillating will into action, Henry has been accused of lacking a policy of his own. But Henry's guiding principle is clear: he sought peace, sometimes to the detriment of domestic security. For the first decade of his adult rule, his efforts were clearly directed towards achieving a treaty with France so that he could unite Europe and pacify the factions then dividing the Catholic church. To the cause of peace, he sacrificed his popular uncle Gloucester, who was ostracised

by Henry's willingness to compromise with France. Despite Gloucester's noisy protests, Henry defied his father's will and liberated the Duke of Orléans, a French prince who had been imprisoned in England since 1415.

Henry was content, too, to hand the English-held territory of Maine back to French control on his marriage to Queen Margaret. In 1447, with Henry's acquiescence, Gloucester was arrested on charges of treason. He died in royal custody, leaving Henry's regime open to accusations of murder. (Gloucester's ex-wife, Eleanor Cobham, had already been arrested and condemned to lifelong imprisonment for treasonably colluding with necromancers and witches to supplant Henry.)

Blind faith in the French

Despite these experiences, Henry retained a child-like faith in the good of his fellow man. He believed Charles VII's devotion to peace was as earnest as his own, a trust that his English councillors knew was woefully misplaced. As his errors in judgment multiplied and his reputation for open-handed liberality at court spread, Henry's own subjects accused him of political folly, even of mental illness: in 1446 a London draper claimed Henry was "not steadfast of wit as other kings have been before".

But the fault lay in Henry's minority, not in madness. He had learnt the lessons of kingship from books. He knew that kings must take counsel, reward their attendants, behave lavishly and seek peace. But, having never seen a real ruler at work, he did not realise that these ideals had to be tempered with realpolitik. Royal willpower was the vital lubricant of successful government machinery, but Henry appeared to offer patronage whenever asked, and without discretion, with dire financial repercussions for a cash-strapped nation at war. His preference for peace could be mistaken for cowardice. What a medieval king needed above all else was a core of steel, and Henry never developed one.

If Henry's marriage to Margaret of Anjou had quickly produced children to restock the dwindling Lancastrian dynasty, Henry might have led an army to France as his father had done. But until 1453, Henry's heir was either his uncle Gloucester or Richard, Duke of York. Henry could fully trust neither – especially York, who was tainted with the rebellion that devastated Henry's regime in 1450.

When a son was finally born to Henry in October 1453, he arrived at the worst possible moment, during the king's mental collapse. Royal recognition of the prince was impossible, making it all too easy for Yorkists to insinuate his illegitimacy. Henry's mental breakdown from 1453–54 thus undermined

Just how saintly was Henry?

Was the tragic monarch truly above worldly sin?

A child dragged from the Thames half-drowned; a girl impaled on a pitchfork; a prisoner rescued by angels; an epileptic nun. These were among 300 people who reported being miraculously preserved by King Henry VI (pictured below) after his death. Their stories were painstakingly recorded by the monks of Windsor as proof of the late king's sanctity.

The cult of 'Saint Henry' took off within years of his murder: embarrassingly for the Yorkist Edward IV, his namesake northern city was among its earliest proponents in the 1470s. Henry's suffering during deposition, and violent death, made him seem a sympathetic intercessor to his former subjects. During life he had been famously pious and generous, concerned for education and, according to a papal collector who visited England in 1437, "more religious than a man of religion".

But was Henry really the holy innocent he was cracked up to be? Many of our ideas about this 'Second Job' come from his confessor and biographer, John Blacman, who wrote when Henry's cult was in full force. Blacman was determined to present the king as a latter-day saint, claiming that Henry only wore farmer's boots and black clothes, that he lived chastely, and that he despised "vain sports and pursuits" like plays and hunting.

In truth, however, Henry had recognised the importance of dressing

magnificently, once meeting French ambassadors in a tapestry-bedecked chamber, wearing a floor-length gold-embroidered crimson gown. He also showed a worldly concern for his potential wife's appearance, insisting that three possible foreign brides should be painted in "their kirtles simple" – that is, half-dressed, so he could determine which one he fancied best (in the end, none of them).

And while he never took a mistress, Henry wasn't celibate, producing an heir with Queen Margaret: Edward of Lancaster. There is also ample evidence that, although Henry avoided human bloodshed, he enjoyed hunting, and the occasional play.



a regime already susceptible to criticism.

One of Henry's subjects blamed witchcraft for the royal illness, while modern authors have suggested schizophrenia inherited from Henry's maternal grandfather, Charles VI. Neither theory is satisfactory. Given the trauma and strain of Henry's reign, a complex interplay of stresses and serious depression seem likelier culprits. In any case, the reason for Henry's illness was less important than its effect: in 1454 the Duke of York was named Protector, hardening the divisions of Henry's court so that a 'Yorkist' faction rivalled the 'Lancastrian'. Henry's recovery in 1455 only exacerbated the feud, for his clumsy attempts to restore Lancastrian courtiers to power incited Yorkist violence.

The battle of St Albans was the result, confirming Lancastrian suspicion of York and hindering Henry's recovery. In the last six years before his deposition in 1461 Henry retreated further into political irrelevance, the Lancastrian cause increasingly commanded by Queen Margaret, who would continue to lead the resistance after the royal family was

usurped by the Yorkists in 1461. Henry's only real effort to assert himself – the 'Love Day' of 1458 that attempted to reconcile the warring parties with a public procession – was a farcical failure.

The challenges Henry VI faced as an infant king of two realms were unique and, as incidents like the 'Love Day' debacle prove, the chief reason that Henry failed to overcome them was that he was himself far from exceptional. Merciful, charitable, loyal and generous to a fault, there is much to admire in Henry as a man. But, as a king it is impossible to consider him anything but a failure. ■

Lauren Johnson's latest book, *Shadow King: The Life and Death of Henry VI*, is published in March by Head of Zeus

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