From the battles of Henry VI and the tyranny of Henry VIII to the reign of Elizabeth I: how the House of Tudor shaped Britain

**Henry VII**
August 22, 1485 is one of the most important dates in the history of the British monarchy. It is the day Henry VII — as he became — defeated Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth Field and took the throne. The crown has remained in the line of his heirs ever since.

Tall, with striking blue eyes, Henry was the only child of Edmund Tudor, Earl of Richmond, and Margaret Beaufort. His paternal grandparents were Owen Tudor, a Welsh squire, and Queen Catherine, the French-born widow of Henry V. On his mother’s side he was descended from the bastard line of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster.

In 1471, at the age of 14, with his life in danger, Henry had been forced to flee England to France during the Wars of the Roses and spent most of his next 14 years exiled in Brittany before returning to defeat Richard.

Henry was the last man standing as a potential Lancastrian king, but males from the Yorkist line — especially the four nephews of Edward IV — had a stronger hereditary right. Consequently, he claimed the throne not just by bloodline, but (as he saw it) by God’s judgment on the field of battle.

His marriage to 19-year-old Elizabeth of York, the eldest daughter of Edward IV, won over many doubters among the nobility and was praised for uniting the houses of Lancaster (the red rose) and York (the white rose). Nonetheless, Henry had to face dynastic challenges.

The first of these came from Lambert Simnel. Simnel was a ten-year-old commoner groomed by a priest with Yorkist sympathies to impersonate Edward IV’s nephew, Edward, Earl of Warwick, then a prisoner in the Tower of London. After crowning him King Edward VI in Ireland, Yorkist loyalists landed in England with mercenary troops and an Irish army, hoping to raise the North against Henry.

On June 16, 1487, in effectively the final engagement of the Wars of the Roses, the 8,000-strong Yorkist army was slaughtered at Stoke by Henry’s superior forces. Simnel was captured and sent to work in the royal kitchens.

Henry later faced another impostor. A Flemish youth, Perkin Warbeck, professed to be Richard, Duke of York, the younger of the two missing “Princes in the Tower’’, the imprisoned sons of Edward IV. Until Warbeck’s capture and confession in 1497, virtually no one could be certain that he was not the Yorkist king’s heir. He was later beheaded.

Still, Henry did not feel secure. Three royal deaths within three years — those of his youngest son Edmund, his first-born Arthur, and his wife Elizabeth — meant that the future of his dynasty after 1503 rested on the life of his second son, Prince Henry. The increased use, during his last years, of bonds and recognizances (tying great nobles into a set of obligations, including heavy financial ones) may well have been due to this troubling concern rather than pure greed.

Henry’s worries were overblown. In 1509, at the age of 17, Henry VIII became the first king to succeed to the English throne peaceably for more than 85 years.

**Henry VIII (1509-47)**
Very tall (6ft 2in), athletic, a fluent Latin and French speaker and a talented musician, Henry VIII has been described as “a Renaissance prince to his fingertips”. He was also ruthless and constantly sought scapegoats. His contemporary, the Italian Machiavelli, described him as “rich, ferocious and greedy for glory”; others compared him to the Roman emperors Nero and Tiberius.

On his deathbed Henry VII had advised his son to marry his brother Arthur’s widow, the graceful 23-year-old Catherine of Aragon. Henry was captivated by her when they married, but they grew apart. She conceived at least six times, but only two children were born alive. On New Year’s Day 1511 she delivered a boy who survived just two months. In 1516 she gave birth to Mary.

With a girl as his only direct heir, Henry worried that a usurper might seize the throne on his death. His anxiety on this score explains the execution of Edward Stafford, Duke of Buckingham, another descendant of Edward III, in 1521. Told that Buckingham was listening to prophecies that he might one day be king, Henry had him put on trial for treason. It was a foretaste of Henry’s later acts of tyranny.

By now the king had fallen for Anne Boleyn, an earl’s daughter, and was determined to marry her. In 1527 he publicly questioned the validity of his marriage to Catherine, claiming that their failure to produce a son was God’s punishment for disobeying the scriptural prohibition against taking to bed a brother’s wife.

After spending two years unsuccessfully pressing the Pope for the annulment case to be judged in England, Henry’s first chief minister Cardinal Wolsey fell from power. Henry first turned to the most prestigious universities in Europe for support, before eventually severing links with Rome and taking command of the Church himself.

In May 1533 Henry secured his annulment — from Thomas Cranmer, the new Archbishop of Canterbury. By then he had already secretly married Anne Boleyn and in September 1533 she had a daughter, Elizabeth, whom most people thought was a bastard.

After two subsequent miscarriages, Anne came to be seen as disposable. In May 1536 she was accused of adultery with members of the king’s privy chamber, incest with her brother, George, and high treason. Anne and George were beheaded after their trial — no witnesses were called against them.

Both of Henry’s ex-wives were dead when, in 1537, his third wife, Jane Seymour, gave him what he craved — an indisputable male heir, Edward. Sadly, she died from complications from the birth of their son, and two short-lived marriages followed. The first, to the German Anne of Cleves, was annulled, and the second, to Catherine Howard, who was hardly more than a teenager when Henry married her, ended after she was caught in an adulterous relationship and executed.

The king wept and complained of his “ill luck in meeting with such ill-conditioned wives”. Finally, he wed 30-year-old Catherine Parr, twice widowed, lively, attractive and clever. By now Henry was troubled by an ulcerous leg and very fat. In his last few years he was pushed around his chambers in special (wheel)chairs called “trams”.

**Edward VI (1547-53) and Lady Jane Grey (July 10-19, 1553)**
Only nine years old when his reign began, Edward VI was arguably England’s best-educated king. Like his father, he enjoyed music, jousts and entertainments. He was also a zealous Protestant and his last words were said to be: “Oh my lord God, defend this realm from papistry.” Though short, his reign was notable for introducing Protestantism to England.

A crisis arose on his death because the young king had decided to overturn his father’s 1544 statute and remove his half-sisters from the succession. Knowing Mary would reintroduce Catholicism and fearing Elizabeth might marry a Catholic, Edward’s concern had been to protect his recent Protestant settlement. He justified his sisters’ exclusion on the grounds that they were bastards.

Initially Edward planned to bar all women from the throne. But when his health was failing, he amended his “Devise for the Succession”, bequeathing the crown to the unimpeachably Protestant Lady Jane Grey (the daughter of Frances, Duchess of Suffolk).

Edward died before parliament could legitimise Jane’s succession. Meanwhile, Mary — alerted by a friendly councillor — escaped capture by refusing to obey the privy council’s summons to London. Slipping away from her manor at Hunsdon in Hertfordshire, she made her way by night towards her estates in East Anglia. She proclaimed herself Queen on July 9, wrote to the privy council in London demanding its allegiance, and made her base in Framlingham Castle. Catholics rallied behind her, forming an impressive army.

Jane ruled for just nine days. At first she attracted support in strong Protestant areas of the country, but many thought she was a usurper. She didn’t disagree. “The crown is not my right . . . and pleaseth me not,” she said. “The Lady Mary is the rightful heir.”

Confronted with the prospect of civil war, her supporters in the privy council defected and on July 19 it formally recognised Mary as queen. By that evening Jane and her husband were prisoners in the Tower. Mary wisely restricted her reprisals, but Jane Grey was eventually executed, aged 16.

**Mary (1553-58)**
Apart from Lady Jane Grey, Mary was England’s first female ruler. As a young princess she had received a sound classical education, and as a devout Catholic she had refused to stop celebrating Mass in her own household during Edward’s reign.

Once Queen, she married Philip, then Prince and later King of Spain, but they had no children. Her reign is best remembered for the loss of Calais, England’s last territory in France, and the burning of Protestants.

Local gentry and townsfolk who had been compliant in accepting the Edwardian reforms also collaborated in the arrest and burning of some 300 Protestants between 1555 and 1558. Among the victims was Thomas Cranmer, who was sent to the stake despite signing a statement recanting his Protestant beliefs. Just before taking his position on the pyre, Cranmer recanted his recantation and stretched his hand into the flames saying: “This hand hath offended.”

**Elizabeth (1558-1603)**
When Elizabeth was born on September 7, 1533, her birth was a great disappointment to her father, Henry VIII, and a catastrophe for her mother, Anne Boleyn. Astrologers, doctors and midwives had assured them that their first child would be a boy.

After her mother’s execution, Elizabeth — like her half-sister — was declared a bastard. Brought up a Protestant, she was treated as an object of suspicion under Mary. Aged 20, she was taken as a prisoner to the Tower of London for two months, then transferred to Woodstock, with 60 soldiers standing guard. She etched on her windowpane with a diamond: “Much suspected of me, nothing proved can be. Quoth Elizabeth, prisoner.”

In the first 18 months of her reign Elizabeth’s intimacy with Robert Dudley was a source of gossip: Dudley was already married and in 1560 his wife was found dead at the foot of a small stone staircase.

Elizabeth remained very close to him even after his second marriage in 1578. There is no evidence, however, that Elizabeth had a sexual relationship with him or anyone else.

Hated by devout Catholics and denounced by successive popes, Elizabeth was never allowed to be on her own outdoors and warned to be wary of any clothing designed to be worn against her “body bare” in case it had been deliberately contaminated with plague. She is said to have slept with an old sword beside her bed.

**War with France**
After years of intermittent warfare, relations with France were at their nadir by the time Elizabeth came to the throne. She patched up a peace at Cateau-Cambrésis in 1559, but Calais — lost to France in Mary’s reign — stayed in French hands, Scotland remained a French puppet state, and Henry II, the French king, supported the claim to the English throne of his daughter-in-law Mary, the surviving legitimate child of King James V of Scotland.

However, Henry II’s death in July 1559 crippled France. Riven by internal conflict, the government in Paris had to agree to the evacuation of all foreign soldiers from Scotland. Once safe from continental intervention, the Scottish parliament introduced a Protestant Reformation in 1560.

Mary Queen of Scots’ return to her native land in August 1561 reawakened fears in England that the “auld alliance” between France and Scotland would be renewed. In reality, Mary wanted an entente with England to safeguard her place in the succession and had no immediate ambitions to return Scotland to Rome. Moreover, Mary’s kin, the powerful Guise family, were preoccupied with problems in France.

After Mary’s deposition, Charles IX of France demanded her reinstatement and release from captivity. For several years Elizabeth did try — albeit unsuccessfully — to negotiate Mary’s restoration on terms that would be in England’s interests. But at the same time she gave military and diplomatic support to the Protestant lords in the civil war that had engulfed Scotland after Mary’s overthrow.

She never met her Scottish cousin Mary Stuart (the Queen of Scots), yet their relationship dominated English politics from 1558 to Mary’s execution in early 1587. Robert Cecil, Elizabeth’s adviser, worried constantly about the “SQ”, as he referred to her. It is said he couldn’t bear to speak her name.

**War with Spain**
Most Elizabethan Protestants feared and hated the Catholic Philip II, and a martial maritime group with powerful patrons at court wanted to break through the Spanish monopoly in the Americas. But Elizabeth and councillors such as Cecil hoped to avoid war.

Nonetheless, Anglo-Spanish relations were fraught. In retaliation for English piracy, Philip banned the import of English goods to the Netherlands, which he controlled, but it was the Protestant revolt in the Netherlands that caused the greatest strain between the two rulers. Philip dispatched a huge army to Brussels, and the Queen feared that after crushing the revolt he would invade England.

Philip rebuffed Elizabeth’s offers of mediation in the conflict; Elizabeth, meanwhile, made diplomatic contact with William of Orange, the leader of the revolt. She also agreed to Francis Drake’s privateering voyage of 1577, which ended with his circumnavigation of the globe.

When Drake returned with ships full of Spanish booty, Elizabeth publicly knighted him. Justifiably angered, Philip sent troops to Smerwick in 1580 to foment unrest in Ireland. He also permitted the Spanish ambassador to enter into conspiracies to overthrow the queen. After his plotting was discovered and he was expelled, no replacement was appointed.

The armada that Spain sent to defeat England, a year after Mary’s execution, was described as the greatest fleet that “ever swam upon the sea”. But England’s ships were nimbler and better commanded, and their cannons more advanced. Before the battle Elizabeth made a famous speech at Tilbury in Essex, saying she was “resolved, in the midst and heat of battle, to live and die amongst you all . . . I know I have the body of a woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too . . .”

The Spanish lost 17,000 of their 30,000 men and dozens of ships. England lost no ships at all. It was a spectacular victory, inspiring a surge of patriotism (reflected in Shakespeare’s history plays) and laying the foundations for the creation of a global empire.

**The role of parliament**
Under the Tudors parliament’s procedures were formalised, with the introduction of clear rules of debate, the reading of a bill three times before voting, and the sending of bills to committees for proper scrutiny. For the first time proceedings were formally recorded.

It is worth remembering , however, Conrad Russell’s famous dictum that the early-modern parliament was an event, not an institution. Parliament met irregularly and only on the initiative of the monarch, who also had the power to dissolve or prorogue it. In her 45-year reign Elizabeth summoned just 13 sessions, each lasting about 10 or 11 weeks.

Although some of Elizabeth’s councillors and courtiers heartily disliked each other — the Earl of Sussex, for example, loathed Leicester, and Essex could not abide Sir Walter Raleigh — there was a strong sense of public duty and responsibility, partly derived from their humanist backgrounds, and they also felt the need to pull together in the face of the Catholic threat. (No one knows precisely what she believed, although she is thought to have been a moderate Protestant.)

Elizabeth frowned upon infighting, and political casualties were rare — the Duke of Norfolk was the only privy councillor to lose his head before 1601.

**The Tudor legacy**
As Janet Dickinson and Neil Younger argue, the 1590s were nothing like as nasty as is often maintained. These years, they rightly pronounce, “witnessed a government working at the peak of its capacity, dealing with serious problems with remarkable efficiency”. Among its achievements was the successful generation of resources to fight a demanding war and an innovative programme of legislation to contain the social problems brought on by four bad harvests in a row and a devastating plague.

Elizabeth’s war-time objectives were met. The Spanish threat to the United Provinces was lifted; Spanish forces left France; France’s Henry IV was secure on his throne; Protestants in France were allowed a measure of toleration. At home she imposed her Protestant settlement while avoiding religious upheaval.

Like all the Tudors, Elizabeth died naturally. On the day of her funeral there was an outpouring of grief that does not appear to have been stage-managed. Given that four monarchs from 1399 to 1485 had been deposed (five if we include one of the princes in the Tower) and two were to lose their thrones during the 17th century, this was no mean achievement and is a sign of the Tudors’ political strength and acumen. Their legacy was a stronger monarchy, a powerful state, and a transformed national Church.
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