

**Henry VI, King of England and France** (*b: 6 December, 1421, d: 21 May, 1471*)



The only son of Henry V, one of England's greatest Warrior-Kings, Prince Henry acceded to the thrones of England and France at the tender age of 9 months.

During his minority there was great hope among the populace – Henry VI was tall, in fine health, serious of mind, fluent in both English and French, interested in reading, and enjoyed hunting. There was no reason to suspect that he would end his days maligned as one of England's worst Kings.

His inability to govern effectively, coupled with his weakness and insanity, and later, a controlling and determined Queen, made his reign a disastrous one for England.

But his minority passed without major incident, with his mother remarrying (in secret) a Welsh gentleman Owen Tudor (Owain Twdwr), providing the king with a half-sister and three half-brothers. Henry was crowned at

Westminster in 1429 and at Notre Dame in Paris in 1431.

In 1437 he was declared to be of full age to assume the duties of King, and his first acts were to found Eton College in 1439 and King's College (Cambridge) in 1441. Henry was said to be prudish, generous to a fault, oversensitive in the pardoning of offenders, and totally uninterested in military matters. But it is for his role in the loss of possessions in France and the later series of conflicts known as the "Wars of The Roses" for which he is widely remembered.

In 1445, Henry married Margaret of Anjou, aged just 15 years. He was soon devoted to his young wife, though they did not have a child for the first 8 years of the marriage, leading to restlessness among possible successors, who included the Beauforts and Richard, Duke of York. The rivalry between Beaufort and York would shape the course of court politics for years to come.

In 1450, Henry's reign began its downward spiral. Beaufort, who had replaced York as commander in France, was badly beaten and lost most of Normandy to the French. Suffolk, the King's chief minister, was impeached by the commons and was forced to flee to the continent. He was murdered and the body tossed, rather unceremoniously (and totally naked), into the English Channel before he could reach safety, however. A Rebel army of Kentish men led by Jack Cade occupied London, forcing the King and Queen to flee to Kenilworth for safety. And to make matters worse still, France began the conquest of Gascony.

In 1453, the English suffered a crushing defeat at Castillon, and the loss of Gascony became inevitable. Talbot, the Earl of Shrewsbury, was killed during the battle. On hearing the news of the death of Talbot and the loss of Gascony, the King went mad. He maternal grandfather, Charles VI of France, had been subject to bouts of

“ungovernable insanity”. During Henry’s madness, it is said that he was unable to walk or converse, and that he recognized no one.

It is fortunate then, that the Queen bore Henry VI a son and heir at last in October of that year. Henry did recover his senses to a degree, but he would always suffer and would remain from that time on, a passive observer to his own misfortunes. During his impairment, the leadership of the court faction had fallen on the Queen, and it was a mantle she was eager, and well-suited, to take up.

Henry’s illness provided Richard of York an opportunity to run the country and to try and fix the problems Henry’s rule (or lack thereof) had caused. In March 1454 he became Lord Protector, an office he held until Henry recovered in 1455. His first act was to imprison his rival Somerset, who had lost France for England. He would have liked to have him executed, but he still lacked that level of support. When the King recovered in 1455, and Henry restored Somerset, York resorted to arms.

The first battle, at St. Albans, north of London, caught the royalist army unprepared, and York gained a victory after a short skirmish, during which Henry VI was captured and Somerset was killed. This cleared the way for York’s second go as Protector. In 1456, the second protectorate was ended by parliament.

In 1459, fighting again broke out, with York, supported by the Earl of Salisbury and his son, the powerful and influential Earl of Warwick, were cornered at Ludlow in the Welsh Marches and were forced to flee the country. Warwick returned in 1460 and won a resounding victory at Northampton through the use of treachery, and once again, the King was a captive. York later returned from his own exile in Ireland and jeopardized the alliance by claiming the throne himself.

Parliament could not bring itself to depose Henry VI and so offered a compromise in the Act of Accord, which disinherited Prince Edward and named York and his children as successors. This was perhaps York’s biggest blunder, as it changed the conflict from a fight to restore good government to England into a fight for succession itself. Queen Margaret was not about to let her son’s hereditary rights be usurped.

With the help of the Scots, Margaret invaded England and made her way south. York moved his army north to meet them, wintering at Wakefield. He sent his oldest son Edward off to the Welsh marches to intercept any Lancastrian help from the King’s half-brothers.

It was at Wakefield that York met his end. Having been surrounded, he sent for assistance from a local lord, and when that lord arrived, he sallied forth from the protection of his castle, only to discover too late that the lord he had summoned was a Lancastrian sympathizer. With York dead, the Queen moved further south and met Warwick at St. Albans, this time brushing his forces aside and liberating her husband.

The victory was short-lived, however, as Edward had defeated the Welsh Lancastrians at Mortimer’s Cross and was now moving to intercept Margaret near London. Instead they met at a place called Towton. The battle is known as “England’s Bloodiest Day”. It is estimated by some historians that more than 40,000 men took part in the battle. Henry, Margaret, and Prince Edward were forced into exile by the defeat.

Over the next four years, Margaret would try to gather support for the Lancastrian cause from foreign sources. In 1465, Henry was captured and taken to the Tower, where he was spared by King Edward IV, on the grounds that he was less an asset and more a liability for the Lancastrians.

In 1470, Warwick, who had quarreled with Edward IV over policies and had run afoul of Edward's in-laws the Woodvilles (Wydville), mounted an invasion with Margaret's help, forcing Edward to flee and placing Henry back in power. Edward returned in short order however, and in 1471, defeated Warwick at Barnet and capturing Henry yet again. Later that year he would defeat the Queen and Prince Edward at Tewkesbury, killing the Prince and capturing the Queen. Within the month Henry was dead in the Tower.

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