

Why did Yorkshire and Cornwall rise?

A more serious challenge came later in 1486, this time from Lambert Simnel (see page 13). However, dynastic challenges were not the only cause of unrest in the early years and Henry was to face two taxation rebellions, the Yorkshire rising in 1489 and the Cornish rising in 1497. These rebellions, although geographically a long way apart, had much in common.

The Yorkshire Rebellion

The Yorkshire rising was the result of Henry's attempts to raise money to aid Brittany in its struggle against France (see Chapter 2). Although parliament had granted Henry a subsidy of £100,000, very little was actually raised. Yorkshire was particularly annoyed as not only had they suffered from a bad harvest in 1488, but other northern counties had been exempted from the tax because they were expected to defend the northern border against Scottish attacks. The area was also less concerned about the problem of France than more southerly counties which might be invaded or attacked, an indication of the localism and regionalism, rather than national feeling, that affected politics at this time.

Despite the complaints, Henry refused to negotiate, but when the Earl of Northumberland tried to collect the tax he was murdered. His death might have been the result of his apparent support for the tax, but there is also some evidence that the unrest was orchestrated by Yorkists. The rebellion was led by Sir John Egremont, a Yorkist supporter and an illegitimate member of the Percy family. However, the murder of a royal official trying to implement an unpopular policy was not unusual as it was often the only way for protestors to vent their feelings. Although the rising was easily crushed by a royal army, the money was not collected. It was a clear sign that ruling the north required compromise as royal authority was weak and could soon be challenged. This was recognised by Henry as he appointed the Earl of Surrey as his representative in the north, a man with no vested interest there and whose loyalty was secure because the restoration of his own estates depended upon his success in the region.

The Cornish Rebellion

The Cornish rising of 1497 was more serious, but was caused by the same factors as the Yorkshire rising: Henry's need for money and the subsequent parliamentary vote. This time the threat was from Scotland as James IV sought to aid Perkin Warbeck (see pages 14–15) and invade the north of England. However, as in Yorkshire, the Cornish had little interest in events so geographically remote and saw little reason why they should pay taxes to fund a war on England's northern border. The rebels assembled at the Cornish county town of Bodmin in May 1497 and their numbers swelled as they marched through the county. As the rebellion continued into Devon, though, it attracted little support due to the antagonism between the two counties and it was only when they reached Somerset that the numbers increased again.

The rebellion attracted some 15,000 supporters, a sign of the unpopularity of the tax, but also that there was some cross-class support for the rising among minor gentry, although it attracted only one noble, the impoverished Lord Audley. Numbers did decline as the rebels approached London, perhaps fearful of facing a large royal force. The rebels made it clear that their complaints were against 'evil counsellors', such as Morton and Bray, who were blamed for the tax demands, rather than the king. Henry took no chances and assembled a royal army of 25,000 men which easily crushed the rebel force at Blackheath in June 1497.

Percy family

The largest landowners in the north of England who ruled the area as virtual kings. Their authority was more important than that of the king's.

Earl of Surrey, 1443–1524

The son of the Duke of Norfolk who had fought for Richard at Bosworth and was therefore a Yorkist. Although he was imprisoned after the battle and his lands confiscated, he was soon released and some of his lands restored. He was sent to the north following the murder of Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland, in 1489 and proved his loyalty to the Tudors, successfully running the Council of the North before returning to London in 1499 and becoming Lord Treasurer in 1503.

Morton and Bray

John Morton (c1420–1500) had resisted Richard's usurpation and been a leading figure in Buckingham's failed rebellion. After that he fled to join Henry in exile. When Henry became king he became Lord Chancellor and in 1486 Archbishop of Canterbury. He was a leading councillor until his death, but was best known for his harsh taxation policies, particularly benevolences.

Sir Reginald Bray (c1440–1503) was appointed to Henry's Council in 1492 as his chief financial advisor, having been a member of Henry's mother's household. As Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster he was responsible for the successful exploitation of the revenues of the lands held by the Duchy. As a result, he was entrusted with introducing new auditing methods.