

The reign of Henry VI has strong claims to be considered the most calamitous in the whole of English history.

B. P. Wolff, 'The personal rule of Henry VI', in S. B. Chrimes, C. D. Ross and R. A. Griffiths (eds.), *Fifteenth-century England 1399–1509*, Stroud, 1972

Henry VI (1421–71) was the third and last of the Lancastrian monarchs, king of England and, for a time, France. The first, Henry IV, had been the duke of Lancaster – hence the adjective 'Lancastrian' which is used to describe his

dynasty and its supporters.

The first misfortune of Henry VI's reign was that it began in 1422 in his early infancy, although his formal coronation was delayed until 1429, shortly before his eighth birthday. A strong council of 17 nevertheless governed effectively during Henry's minority in spite of 'protector' duke of Gloucester's attempts to extend his own authority. On coming of age in 1437, however, Henry proved inept. He was too forgiving towards high-profile offenders, showed too much favouritism to the ruling elite and he imposed high levels of taxation. All these faults were listed among the king's shortcomings by his contemporaries. The contrast between the stability of Henry's minority and the disasters of the reign after he came of age is striking. From 1437 to 1450 he played the central role in creating a situation in which once-loyal subjects were driven to contemplating that most terrible of crimes – the deposition of their anointed king.

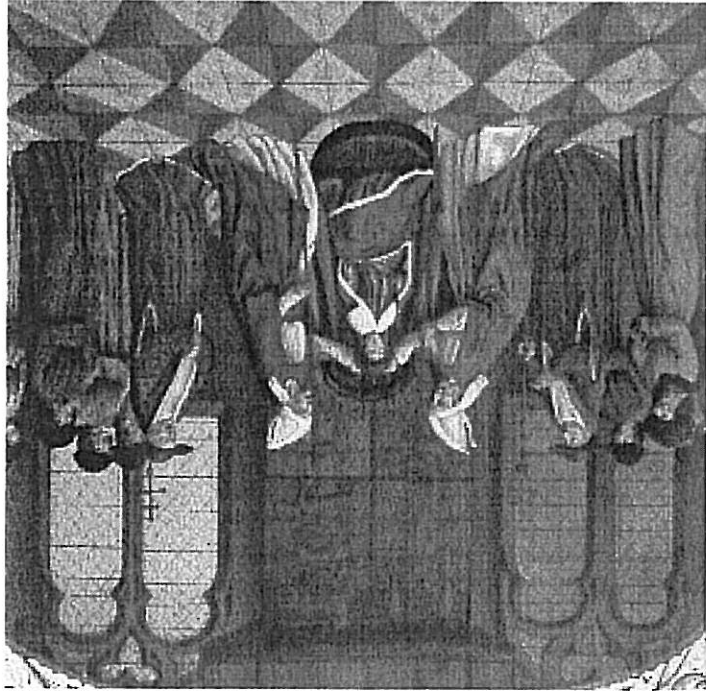
Worst of all, perhaps, Henry VI was blamed for undoing Henry V's greatest achievement by losing almost all of the huge French empire his father had

gained after his victory at Agincourt in 1415.

Henry VI became king of France on the death of his maternal grandfather, Charles VI of France, whose daughter, Catherine, had married Henry V in accordance with the terms of the Treaty of Troyes of 1420. He only made one single boyhood visit to this troubled second kingdom in which, from about 1429, the spirit of French nationalism threatened to cast out the English presence. In May 1430, both Henry and the recently captured Joan of Arc were in English-held Rouen. Henry made his way to Paris and Notre Dame Cathedral to be crowned king of France while Joan of Arc, convicted as a witch, stayed in Rouen to face execution by burning at the stake. Henry's formal coronation was an attempt to counter the crowning of a French claimant to the throne, Charles VII, in the previous year. For 15 years, Charles VII was accepted only in the south and centre while the English king retained Paris, Aquitaine and much of the north.

Two humiliating defeats, Formigny in 1450 and Castillon in 1453, helped push the English out of Aquitaine and Normandy. By 1461 a single outpost,

protector whereas regents were granted virtually full authority to act as king, protectors were more accountable for their actions. Henry VI's youth made it necessary to create this office and his first protectors were his uncles, John of Lancaster and Humphrey of Gloucester, between 1422 and 1429. During his breakdown from 1454 to 1455, Richard of York claimed the position. When Edward IV died in 1483 Richard of Gloucester stepped in as protector for his brother's son, Edward V, prior to usurping the throne.



On the death of his grandfather, Charles VI of France, in October 1422, Henry VI was proclaimed king Henry II of France. This painting shows his coronation eight years later.

Calais and its Pale, remained. It was finally relinquished in 1558 during the reign of Mary I, although English monarchs continued to claim a title to the French throne until 1802.

Careless in his use of the royal **patronage**, Henry showed particular favour to the dukes of Somerset and Suffolk, giving them titles, land and favours, while denying the same to other great and powerful families. Among these was Richard, duke of York, a descendant of Edward III, who, before the birth of Henry's son in 1453, was regarded by many as the legitimate heir to the throne.

The fact that Richard of York was ignored in this way, together with the king's general misfortunes and personal weaknesses, resulted in rebellion. Thus began the first of the **Wars of the Roses** – 30 years of intermittent warfare which, in 1461, ended the reign of Henry VI and, finally, in 1485, destroyed the Lancastrian dynasty.

Wars of the Roses The term 'Wars of the Roses' was coined in the nineteenth century by Sir Walter Scott. War between 1455 and 1485 was not continuous and historians now see these events as a series of separate wars rather than a single lasting conflict.

Patronage A patron is one who holds the power of appointing others to offices or titles, many of which have privileges attached to them. The king, as patron, could use his powers of patronage by giving offices and titles to his friends or supporters.